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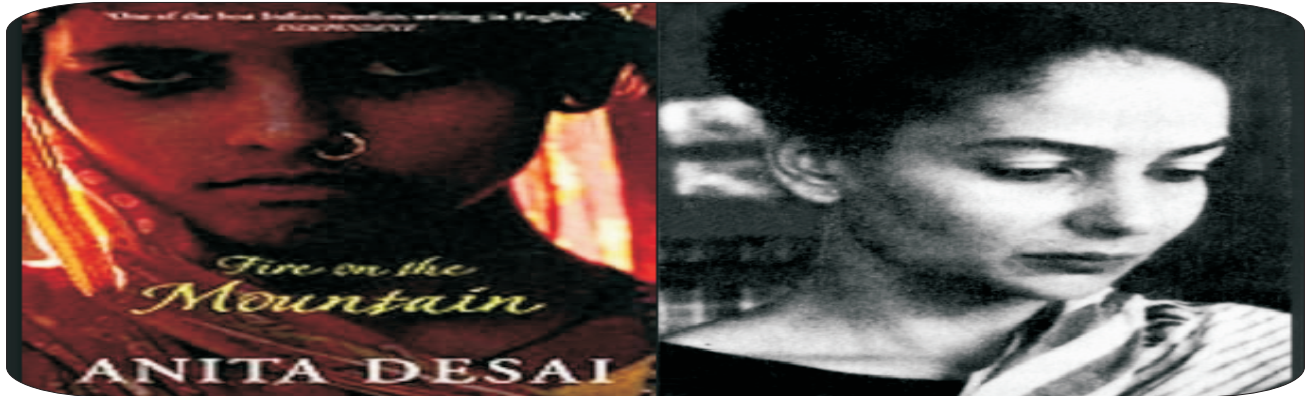
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## MARGINALIZED VOICES IN ANITA DESAI'S FIRE ON THE MOUNTAIN



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### ABSTRACT

Centuries have come, and centuries have gone, but the plight of women is not likely to change. Time has helplessly watched women suffering in the form of discrimination, oppression, exploitation, degradation, aggression, humiliation. In Indian society, woman occupies a vital position and venerable place. The Vedas glorified woman as the mother, the creator, one who gives life and worshipped her as a 'Devi' or Goddess. But her glorification was rather mythical for at the same time, in India woman found herself totally suppressed and subjugated in a patriarchal society.

**KEYWORDS** :Marginalized Voices , Anita Desai's Fire ,degradation, aggression.

### INTRODUCTION

Anita Desai is indisputably one of the most highly acclaimed Indian English writers whose works have been admired both in India and abroad. She commands immense popularity as a novelist of human predicament, of frustration; loneliness and anxiety in insensitive world. Anita Desai's novels are a manifesto of female predicament. Her writings reveal inner realities and psychological reverberations of her female characters. Through her themes, Anita Desai has raised important questions regarding the status and role of women in society. Anita Desai's women protagonists long for freedom. They are against being treated as individuals without individuality and have raised their voice against forces which are out to throttle their freedom to make their own choice. The present paper will study how stifling home environment and sterile relationship leave deep scars in minds of

the female characters and force them to fight out the hostile forces of the patriarchal world in Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain*.

*Fire on the Mountain* is the story of Nanda Kaul who spends the last years of her life in utter isolation in the mountains of Kasauli in a bungalow, named Carignano. She is free from the claims and demands of her family. Carignano has offered her the peace of not having diverse people to deal with in diverse ingenious ways. It has offered her solitude—pure, balmy, unobtrusive, inostensible and soothing solitude.

She has spent all her life for the welfare of her family, catering to her husband's needs, bringing up her children and exhausting all her energy in performing her duties as a wife and a mother respectively. She ignores her desires, crushes, ambitions, and sacrifices her friends; and relatives etc. and merges with the family losing her identity.

Nanda discharged all the roles assigned to her with utmost sincerity and devotion. She led a very busy life as the wife of a Vice-Chancellor of the Punjab University. Like Clarissa Dalloway in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, Nanda Kaul's life as Vice-Chancellor's wife though crowded and full of social activities was meaningless and unsatisfying. In an attempt to fulfill all her responsibilities, she failed to get mentally involved anywhere and consequently every act has become a routine. Her trauma as housewife is presented as;

The old house, the full house, of that period of her life when she was the Vice-Chancellor's wife and at the hub of a small but intense busy world, had not pleased her. Its crowding had stifled her....too many trays of tea would have to be made and carried to her husband's duty, to her mother-in-law's bedroom, to the veranda that was the gathering-place for all, at all times of the day. Too many meals, too many dishes on the table, too much to wash up after. (FOM, pp.29-30)

Unfortunately her relationship with her husband was scarred and a source of agony throughout her life due to his extra marital relationship with Miss David, a member of the teaching staff. Nanda Kaul had pined for her husband's love but was instead reduced to a mere decorative and useful instrument needed for the efficient running of his household. The traumatic married life of Nanda Kaul is sketched in these lines;

Nor had her husband loved and cherished her and kept her like a queen—he had only done enough to keep her quiet while he carried on a life-long affair with Miss David...And her children were all alien to her nature... She did not live here by choice—she lived here alone because that was what she was forced to do, reduced to doing. (FOM, p.145)

Though she enjoyed the comforts and social status of the wife of a dignitary, but she felt lonely and neglected inside. She could not identify with the house because she did not feel it was her house. In a marriage it is the woman who leaves behind her dear ones to live with her husband and his family in his house. It is therefore, the responsibility of the husband to make her feel at home with his love and care. Sadly Nanda Kaul remained devoid of the love and respect that a wife expects from her husband. She was mercilessly reduced to being a show piece in Mr. Kaul's household.

Externally everything appeared to be free from harshness but internally Nanda Kaul burnt with a fire of frustration. Mr Kaul used to invite Miss David for badminton parties, and compelled her to stay at night and later secretly moved to her bedroom. Grieving the loss of trust in the relationship can manifest itself in the victim in various emotions Feelings of insignificance, anxiety and depression may

be mixed with frustration, anger and self-deprecating behavior. The betrayed spouse may withdraw from those around her in order to avoid the pain of confronting the reality of the circumstances. How detrimental the person's mental health when she finds out that the person she trusted enough to share a life with has been hiding his true feelings and has essentially replaced her with some other person. Victims often ask themselves what that person has that they don't, but the answers are never satisfying. Nanda's distrust for all attachments and affairs is the outcome of her husband's infidelity that constantly reminded her that she was not the queen of Mr. Kaul's house but just a symbol of social respectability. "After the death of her husband she has been so glad when it was over...Discharge me. I have discharged all my duties. Discharge" (FOM, p.30). She tolerated the viciousness of her husband for the healthy growth of her children. For Nanda Kaul, marriage had great social values and for its sake she made all necessary adjustment. Adultery is a strong ground for divorce but Nanda Kaul never gave it a thought, may be due to social stigma attached to it. Therefore resentment keeps building up in her incessantly. Emotional deprivation becomes the root cause of Nanda Kaul's disillusionment with human bonds. For her every attachment was a preface to a new betrayal and all socialization fake. Under these circumstances, the choice before Nanda Kaul was either to fight it or bear it silently. She chose the second alternative.

She preferred seclusion to rest her pain-filled psyche, her stagnated pulses, bits and pieces of identity that she tried to get in the shelter of Carignano. Her isolation is a rebellion and protest; she longs to spend some time of her life for herself, in peace and solitude. Usually at this stage of life women and men are contended with life, children and wish to cherish the time with their grandchildren. Contrary to this Nanda wishes solace of tranquility because she could not attain any kind of gratification as a wife and a mother.. Nanda Kaul has developed total bitterness, because she is aggrieved, she is victimized.

Anita Desai strongly believed in childhood experiences shaping the personality and attitude of the individual. Psychologists attach great significance to the parent-child relationship, because, according to them the patterning of emotion takes place particularly during childhood. They argue that socialization of the child begins in the family in the company of the parents who are the first individuals with whom the child interacts. Raka, the great grand daughter of Nanda Kaul, is the only child in the novel .She arrives at Carignano to recuperate from typhoid.Sadly,the child had strange childhood experiences. Through several interior monologues enacted in Raka's subconscious mind, Anita Desai unfolds the cause of Raka's abnormal behaviour. The daughter of an ill-matched couple, Raka has been subjected to brutality and futility of human existence. The stifling home environment leaves a deep scar upon the tender psyche of Raka. She has witnessed her father returning home from a party, stumbling and crashing through the curtains of night beating her mother that made Raka cover under her bed clothes and wet the mattress in fright. The behavior of her parents in front of her has a deep influence on her tender mind.According to the psychologists, children who witness domestic violence experience emotional, mental and social damage as diverse as withdrawal, low self esteem and aggression against peers and family members.

Raka's parents have no time or inclination to cater to the emotional needs of their child. Her father is a drunkard who always abuses and beats his wife. The mother is in such unhappy condition that she cannot do anything for her child. The inspiring force of the home is the woman. The woman illumines the home through the glory of motherhood. Good habits, right conduct and formation of good character are created in children spontaneously in a well regulated home under the personal influence of the mother. The loving kindness and the cultured gentleness of the mother help the children to unfold their native talents and dormant capacities quickly. Children absorb ideas by

suggestion and imitation. The mother at home can do the formation of character very efficiently. Therefore, home is the most beautiful training ground for the building of character in children under the personal guidance of the mother and father. Consequently, Raka's traumatic experience deprived her of a child's trust and feelings of joy in the company of others. She shuns all tenderness viciously. Unlike children of her age who gets attracted to fairy tales, adventure stories the colorful and gay aspect of the world, Raka possesses a weird imagination and is drawn to uncanny places and things.

Nanda Kaul who resented the arrival of Raka and was wary of showing any motherly affection to the child, found that Raka resembled her in terms of her desire to be isolated. The maternal instinct which she had suppressed for so long raises its head. Nanda craves for her company. When Nanda Kaul tries to attract Raka towards herself by narrating the stories of her childhood, Raka twists restlessly in her stool. Since in her parents' home Raka has not been the center of attention like other normal children, she is not interested in stories about people and relations. She is, therefore happy in Kasauli with its charred house on the ridge, with its fire-blasted hilltop where nothing sounds good, but the creaking of the pines in the wind. Raka refuses human company. The chaos in the life of her parents makes Raka averse to belongingness. From all the evidences we can get the impression that the seeds of neurotic drives are sown during one's childhood. The quality of interactions between Raka and her parents, and the disturbing home environment combined together to exert a lasting influence on her tender psyche. Anita Desai calls her a natural recluse and compares her with Nanda Kaul who was a recluse out of vengeance for a long-life of duty and obligation.

Raka becomes an introvert because of the abnormal circumstances around her. Raka has witnessed all the repercussions of an abusive home, torn apart by drunkenness and domestic violence. Raka is a victim of emotional deprivation. Her embarrassing loveless childhood fills her heart with distrust and suspicion. As a result, she turns her back upon human beings and their so called safe, cozy and civilized world and develops a strong fascination for the ugly, lonely, rugged and desolate aspects of nature. Raka's act of setting fire to the forest is symbolic of her revolt against the cruelty and violence rampant in our society.

Ila Das, the third female character, is the childhood friend of Nanda Kaul. She not only represents the oppression of women in India, but at the same time represents how independent and strong they can be. Ila Das is a refined and well-bred lady. She is born and brought up in a well to do family but soon all the prosperity came to an end when her father died of stroke and mother lay sick. She and her sister, Rima, were overlooked as heirs to their father's estate despite the fact that they are clever and industrious; the estate is instead given to their worthless brothers who squander it away and leave their mother and sisters to suffer.

A one time lecturer in Punjab University, Ila Das lost her job subsequent to Mr. Kaul's retirement. She resigns from the job owing to the injustice meted out to her. Thus Ila Das rebels against the system. She is soon appointed as an officer in the social welfare department. She raises her voice against cruelty, injustice and atrocities against women. She fights against child marriage by enlightening the local people about the evils of this practice. This invites the wrath of many villagers and Preet Singh is one among them. Ila Das successfully thwarts his attempt to barter his daughter for a piece of land and few goats. Preet Singh is lying in wait to settle his score with her. One evening, when Ila Das returns late from Carignano to her humble house in the valley, Preet Singh rapes and murders her. Ila Das shows how insignificant women are seen to be by men, whether they have a high station in society or not. She is not only used as an example of this oppression, but she is also used as a tool for giving information about it through the stories she tells Nanda about the women in the village where she lives. The women in her village are forced to watch their children die because "their men" want them to listen to the

village priest who tells them not to take their young ones to any hospitals.

Ila Das is an example of women's courage and strength when confronted with male domination in terms of inheritance, subjugation and education. Thus her passion to fight against the norms and make society better makes her iconic and ideal as well as symbolic and important.

Ila Das' character serves as a contrast to the other characters in the novel. While Nanda Kaul and Raka are presumed to be strong and independent characters, they seek solitude to hide their pain and damages from the world. In a sense they are weak and quite the opposite of what they try to portray. Ila Das on the other hand has suffered many injustices not only physically but emotionally and financially. Every day she is taunted by strangers and reminded of her misfortunes. Yet she gets up everyday and plunges herself into the world of the living with no malice. Unlike Raka who sets her internal world of illusion into fire as a radical act of destruction, Ila Das keeps the constructive fire of aspiration and revolution burning within her. It is fire of rebirth and resurrection, a symbol of unexpected free will and human desire. She fulfils the desire for independent selfhood which Nanda can only imagine in an abstract form. Nanda's search for identity by retreating into a life of seclusion is nothing more than an illusion, bound to end in disillusionment

Thus Fire on the Mountain reveals women's struggle against patriarchal forces. Desai subtly bares the multiple levels of gender differentiation and oppression, including sexual oppression experienced by a new woman in our society. She tries to define freedom for Indian Woman within the Indian socio-cultural value system and institution. They become the embodiment of revolt, questioning restrictions and limitations of marriage and reinforce a belief in education, financial independence and self-fulfillment.

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