Existential Predicament of Nanda Kaul, Raka and Ila Das in Anita Desai’s “Fire on the Mountain”

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Abstract

Anita Desai’s characters in Fire on the Mountain expresses the Existential Predicament through the characters Nanda Kaul, Raka and Ila Das and it reflects the exact image of contemporary women in India. In the male dominated society women always exile because of their irresponsible family circumstances. Anita Desai characters are self-conscious of the reality around them and they carry a sense of loneliness, alienation and pessimism. She adds a new dimension to the realities of life and plunges the deep depth of the human psyche to score out its mysteries and chaos in the minds of character. Fire on the Mountain has been identified the lyrical fictionalization of the existentialism.

(Key words: existential, predicament, contemporary, irresponsible)

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Introduction

Anita Desai’s Fire on the Mountain presents a psychological study of three women characters, each of whom had their own Fire of ideas which propelled them on the uncharted course of life. The truth that is revealed in this novel is that the Destiny places, persons of conviction in such circumstances as force them to pass through Fire of ordeals to test their mettle and to make the Fire inside intense. Nanda Kaul, the main character in this novel had apparently a very happy time all the way but she had courage that filled her desire to escape from the materialistic world into world of nature beauty. But her devotion to duty tied her to the worldly affairs. In the worldly sense she had a glorious childhood and a superb married life yet she pined for freedom.
Existential Predicament

Existentialism is a primarily twentieth-century philosophy that is concerned with the analysis of existing in the world. Although the existentialists themselves differ markedly in doctrine and attitude, most are agreed that man is totally free and responsible to himself alone, and that reality is grounded in existence or the experience of existence. As a novelist, Anita Desai displays a strong inclination towards the existentialism interpretation of human existence, voice the mute miseries and helplessness of married women tormented by existentialist problem and predicaments.

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When her children become independent and her husband died, she took the opportunity to retire to the Kasauli hills to live a life of a recluse. It was high drama as she performed her duties with great aplomb in spite of her seething desire for freedom. Everybody saw that the Vice-chancellor’s wife, that she was an adept administrator of the household affairs.

Really Vice chancellor is lucky to have a wife who can run everything as she does. But nobody peeked at her soul, her eyes had flashed when she heard, like a pave of black blades
wanting to cut them, despising them, crawling grey bugs about her fastidious feet. There was the look no one had dared catch or return. She did not being praised for household–keeping qualities.

She was happy when she was made free from her household duties because she had suffered from nimiety, the disorder the fluctuating and unpredictable excess. She had been too glad when it was over. She had been glad to leave it all behind, in the plains, like a great heavy difficult book she had read through and was not required to read again. When she was retired from this worldly affair, she tried to forget all about it. She desired to be something of a hermit, having nothing to do with this world.

She received the letter from her daughter Asha informing that she was sending her granddaughter Raka to her since Raka’s mother Tara was going to Geneva in a bid to salvage her marital relationship which was in the process of dilapidation. Raka, who had suffered from typhoid, was not considered fit to accompany her mother. This information upset Nanda Kaul, who had got freedom after a whole life’s waiting. To her it was sipping the noose once again on her neck.

Nandu Kaul was further perturbed to see that Raka always raised hungry from the teatable and that her evening rambles were also forages for food that she searched for berries and pine nuts along the paths to allay the hunger that grew and growled inside her small flat belly. She made no demands not even for food. Nanda Kaul become restless and jealous at times to see that Raka had rapport with Ram Lal and evidenced no interest in her.

Raka was a recluse, a lover of nature and a humanitarian. when she heard the music of cricket, she was surprised beyond measure. She felt, they sang in same difficult tongue she had not met before not in Geneva or in New York, nor anywhere in the polyglot world she had once been led through. It was complicated, shrill, and incessant and Raka shook her head to get the buzz out, such emotional reactions were unfailing evidence of her love for animals.

As against Raka’s love of nature, Nanda Kaul’s love of nature is more of an environmentalist than of a lover of nature. When she went out with Raka, she showed her Pasteur Institute saying that it was once a beautiful cottage. She further told her regretfully that the tennis court was turned into a chicken run, end the Garden House across that road had once the most
beautiful garden in Kasauli, but it was turned into an Army billet. She further told her that the tourists scratched their names and dates on the blades of wild trees. She lamented, too many tourists, too much army. How they are running this quiet place. She felt concerned for the environment, while Raka loved nature for itself.

Ila Das is the name of both misery and persecution combined. She was born in a rich family with high connection but Fate, for reasons unknown, mocked at her high birth. Her father, she recollected used to wear fawn waist coat with the gold watch chain cascading out of pocket and brought up her children in great comfort and care. They were groomed by a long line of governesses and ayahs. Nanda Kaul was reminded, as Ila shook hands with Raka, of Ila Das father, who was a little whiskered gentleman in smoking jacket and used to insist on shaking hands with every little girl that came to Ila Das party, making them stumble backwards and titter.

Ila Das had three brothers and sister. It was just quirk of fate that the brothers were healthy and strong while the two sisters, Ila Das and Rima were deformed children. Ila Das was short in size of about the same size as Raka, scarcely taller and often became an object of ridicule due to her small size. At Carignano, Ram Lal offered her the lowest chair, yet her feet flew up in the air, when she threw herself backwards while sitting on the chair. Even Raka’s low chair was too high for those short legs. An inch or two above the ground those cracked old court shoes swung to and fro, as if five years old and at a party once more.

Ila Das ran into trouble because she tried to stop child marriages. There was one Preet Singh who was going to marry his minor daughter with a landowner because he owned a quarter of an acre of land and two goats. Ila Das tried to explain to him that child marriage was ultra vires and detrimental to the health of the girl.

Nanda Kaul had sympathy with her after she did unheard unsung. Ila Das’s visit to Carignano revealed a new phase of Raka’s character. She heard the whole story of Ila Das was persecuted all her life for her physical disabilities. But thing became unbearable when she came to know that Ila Das was raped and killed by one, whose daughter she wanted to save from the trauma of child marriage.

She was worried about the safety of Ila since she had seen the horrors of the afternoon she arrived at the carignano. The boys booed and jeered at her. She said in sympathy with her,
there had never been anyone more doomed, more menaced than she when she heard the news of her rape and death, she was shell-shocked, lost confidence in everything, including herself.

She thought everything in this world was false and wicked, she included. Raka had love for trees, and animals, but now she had sympathy with human beings like Ila Das whose mission of life was to emancipate people from the clutches of conservative and reactionary priest church. When Ila Das was murdered brutally by Preet Singh, whose welfare was the mission of her life, Raka was deeply hurt. She set fire to the forest, and had it been possible for her, she would have set fire to the world which had such people as Preet Singh.

Raka’s new image that emerged after this incident was that of a hermit-like person who is in love with nature, animals and human beings. When the telephone rings late evening informing Nanda Kaul of the rape and brutal murder of Ila Das, she strips herself of all delusion, all dream house, all the myths she had so carefully adorned her stories with. She stands face to face with the naked truth. In her zeal, she picked up gauntlet against the priest who was doing great harm to the people due to his orthodox and conservative ideas.

She died a heroine’s death. All the three women characters had fires burning in their hearts, Raka made a bonfire of the world around her. Ila Das epitomizes the existentialist struggle against the odds of life. For the existentialist, man is never just part of the cosmos but always stands to it in a relationship of tension with the possibilities of tragic conflict. Ila Das stands for thinking individual who dare and to exercise her free will and act according to her choice rather than submit meekly to odds of life.

The mindless tribal society in generals, Preet Singh in particular, respects the malevolent aspects to human existence forces that are bent upon thwarting the individual’s purpose and undoing her. Through Ila Das loses her chastity and life in the process of her struggle with such brute forces her life has nonetheless become meaningful by virtue of the fact that she chooses a cause, fight for it and sacrifices herself in typing to accomplish her task.

Conclusion

This novel gives the message through the character of Nanda Kaul that one should not take a prejudiced view about anything. As she got the news about Raka’s arrival, she made false
notions about child. She thought the noose was being slipped round her neck and feared that the waiting and bawling of the child would destroy the peace of her house, the child would scatter her toys all over the house, the child would have to be coaxed to eat eggs, and take milk, that she would require her to talk when she wanted to be quite, so on and so forth, while in reality the girl needed no attention and disturbed none.

Ila Das gives the message of making untiring efforts for human welfare. She was herself in abject states, yet she had pity for her poor persons of her area. She fought against the reactionary religious forces at the risk of her life and met a martyr’s death. But these messages have been present in an artistic manner. A Fire on the Mountain is written in clear, beautifulshape and infinite moving. The story of this novel is narrated by the novelist herself, but she has made it credible by her intimate knowledge of the situations and the character.

It is also symbolic of a fire burning in the heart of Raka. Again, at the end of the novel Raka put a match box in her pocket with the desire to set fire to the forest. She had heard the story of trials and travails of Ila finally of her rape and murder. She had seen that Ila was brutally raped and murdered by one whose welfare was the mission of her life. She must have felt the agony in her heart and might have felt like setting such evil world on fire.

The woman who had been an object of ridicule and hard all her life came to pity the mountain dwellers. She was raped and killed by one whose welfare was her sole concern. The tragic event agitated even ascetic persons, Nanda Kaul and Raka, the latter went to the extent of setting the forest on fire or rather the world around her.

**Works Cited**


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