

RAKA AS A VICTIM OF AN UNWHOLESOME, EMPTY AND RUINED CHILDHOOD: A PSYCHO-ANALYTICAL STUDY

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“My writing is an effort to discover, underline and convey the significance of things. I must seize upon that incomplete and seemingly meaningless mass of reality around me and try and discover the significance by plunging below the surface and plumbing the depths, then illuminating those depths till they become a more lucid, brilliant and explicable reflection of the variable world” (Anita Desai)

Anita Desai's preoccupation as a novelist has been the destination of characters. Each of her novels presents one or two memorable characters. In the character portrayal again, she is primarily interested in the projection of female protagonists living in separate, closed, sequestered worlds of existential problems and passions, loves and hates. Unlike most of the Indo-English novelists, Anita Desai does something unique by portraying each of her individuals as an unsolved mystery. Her concern for the character delineation enables her to offer an unexpected glimpse into the deeper psychic state of her protagonists. She aims at exploring their psychological crisis and struggles. In some of her novels she portrays the usual psyche of children too. 'Fire on the mountain' is one such novel, and Desai seems to assert in it, if a child is denied love and affection owing to negligence and irresponsibility on the part of the parents, he or she may turn out to be a problematic, maladjusted child.

'Raka' of 'Fire on the mountain' is perhaps the most complicated and mysterious child character in the entire gamut of Indian-fiction in English. She presents an intriguing picture to the readers by her unusual behavior. "Raka meant the moon, but Raka the character is not round faced, calm or radiant"³⁹⁽¹⁾. In fact animal imagery is professedly used to describe her in the novel. To her great grandmother Nanda kaul, she appears like "One of those dark crickets that leap up in fright but do not sing or a mosquito minute and fine, on thin precarious legs"³⁹. Raka's 'Extravagantly large and somewhat bulging eyes'² make Nand kaul feel more than ever resemblance to an insect. Besides she has "Large and protruding ears"²

Fire on the mountain deals with the detrimental effect of stifling home environment upon the tender psyche of young child. Raka is not a normal child by any standard, she shuns all

tenderness viciously, children of her age are often attracted towards the beauties of existence; fairy tales, adventure stories, flowers, butterflies- the colourful and gay aspects of the world. Raka on the contrary, possesses a wild imagination and is drawn to uncanny places and things. No wonder then, the caretaker of the burnt house aptly thinks of her as ‘the crazy one from Carignano.’² Even as child she loves privacy and seclusion, unlike Nanda Kaul.

The novelist compares her mental level with that of her nani for the higher vision of life; “If Nanda Kaul was a recluse out of vengeance for a long line of duty and obligation, her great grand daughter was a recluse by nature, by instinct. She had not arrived at this condition by a long rout of rejection and sacrifice she was born to it, simply.”⁴⁸

Nanda is a recluse by rejection and vengeance, While Raka opts a reclusive life through her inborn traits. Even Nanda acknowledges the greatness of Raka as a recluse, Anita Desai, like George Eliot, analyses Raka for her hidden and unseen motives of life, unlike Nanda Kaul, Raka does not have ‘a dog’s slavishness’³. She is an explorer who dislikes a duty bound code of life. She strives constantly to realize her ‘self’, she also desires to accomplish her own identity as an individual in society: “Raka had all the jealous, guarded instincts of an explorer a discoverer.”³ Like a discoverer, she analyses each and every object with a keen intensity of a scientist.

Childhood is formative period when a person has intrinsic desires for spiritual health. He discovers the beauties and sweetness of human relationships through love. Raka’s parents have no time to cater to the emotional needs of their child.

It is however, arguable that Raka is not a born recluse; she becomes an introvert because of the abnormal circumstances. She is a victim of a broken home. In her eight years she has witnessed enough of the ambiguity of life. She has seen bitterness, distrust and violence. Her parents do not love each other. Her grandmother Asha is worried about Tara’s relationship with her husband, Rakesh.

“The capacity to interact warmly and creatively with other human beings is generally the product of early emotional learning in interaction with a warmly dependable and understanding nutrient ‘mothering one’.” Raka is a victim of ‘Emotional deprivation’,⁴ to use phrase of Leland H.Scott. Usha Pathania also rightly says that Raka’s “embarrassing, loveless childhood fill her heart with distrust and suspicion. She, therefore, 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 desolated aspect of nature”.⁵

The spontaneous detachment and withdrawal in case of Raka is the outcome of a tortured childhood. The traumatic experience she has had as a child still comes to her in dream or like a vision. Her father return home from a party “Stumbling and crashing through the curtain of night”.¹ He abuses her mother in a filthy language and beats her up which makes Raka cover under her bed clothes. She wet the mattress In fright. As the stream of urine passes through her legs, she feels like stream of blood passing down her legs. Her mother lies down on the floor and closes her eyes and weeps. In the darkness, under her flat Raka feels: “The wet jelly of her mother’s being squelching and quivering so that she did not know where to put her feet and wept as she tried to get free of it.”¹ If a child’s mother is beaten into pulp before her by her father like this, the child is bound to become maladjusted and hate company, as company of man is so heartless and cruel. She must find better companions in the winds and the rocks and the thorny bushes and the uninhabited wilderness. The background of her emotional experience made her what she is –The shadowy, dark, gloomy embodiment of privations; she seems to be more a being inhabiting the shady regions of the underworld; she is a nightmarish pathetic fairy frequenting the areas of the unconscious.

Raka does everything so silently that Nanda cannot discover what she does with herself all day long. “She would be gone, totally, not to return for hours.” 45

On being encouraged by Ramlal, Raka goes to the club to have the vision of “Ladies dress as queens and men as princess”². But when she peeps into the ballroom, she is shocked. She thinks that the scene is lunacy rampant. The drumming of the band and blowing of paper horns frighten her: “She wished, she could close her eyes. She wished she were a million miles away from the band. She tried to think she was asleep and this was a nightmare”⁶⁹.

The prevented acts of the people dressed in a bizarre fashion unlock the hidden memories of her own father and his wild behavior at home.

Raka is a victim of an unwholesome, empty and hopeless childhood environment. She spends her childhood and develops her consciousness in a home which wrecks of disease and moral decay. Her mother is sick forever and father is found drinking at all hours. They are just not worried about the emotional growth and adjustment of Raka.

Such an unhappy home environment creates fear, insecurity, distrust and anxiety in growing children. For a healthy growth, a child needs an orderly and secure world. For creating order, parents –child exchange of ideas is essential. Discussing the positive influence of a harmonious familial interactions upon the psyche of a growing child, Sudhir Kakkar comments: “An individual’s identity and merits are both enhanced if he or she has the good fortune to belong to a large, harmonious and close knit family.”⁶ For Raka childhood means a nightmare, violence and terror, because she has seen them taking place in her house and they have left an indelible impression of her tender consciousness. It is because of this, when Nanda Kaul tells about her childhood as being happy and her father being affectionate, Raka concludes that they are perfect lies.

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