

ASPHYXIATING RUDIMENTS OF LIFE FOUND IN ‘FIRE ON THE MOUNTAIN’ AND ‘THE STONE ANGEL’

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Abstract

Anita Desai and Margaret Laurence, celebrated writers of India and Canada fiction are interested in exploring the emotional bionetwork of their protagonists who are all in a feud with the bare and suppressing realities. Both the writers have created protagonists of all the ages and varied social classes with peculiarities living in chaos. They try to explore the facts that forbid bliss and harmony in the human lives. This paper environs two nonagenarians who have come a full round of life and the strangulating effects of life on them. Old age has its own discomforts and problems. Nanda Kaul and Hagar Shipley are in their ninety's with peculiar life styles. Both these ladies are shown stone hearted and stubborn but in reality they are not so. The complexities of their conjugal life have rendered them unendurable.

Life is a process of becoming which reckons passing through different stages and old age is an extremely complex and a multifactorial process. Ageing is not only the accumulation of deleterious changes that occurs in the body but also the psychological vicissitudes. This paper attempts a comparative study between the isolated lives of the old age people in India and Canada through Anita Desai's 'Fire on the Mountain' and Margaret Laurence's 'The Stone Angel'. Desai and Laurence have the inner realms of their characters as their canvass where they paint their novels with distinctions.

Nanda Kaul's life projects the intricacies of relationship and the problems that arise due to kinsmen. Nanda is projected as a proud wife of Mr. Kaul, the vice chancellor, living a royal life, ruling the household with a legacy. But in reality she never feels that she ever belongs to this ambience as she is betrayed by her husband and his secret mistress. Now at the age of ninety she leads a life of recluse in *Kasauli* in the foot hills of Simla.

“She wanted no one and nothing else. Whatever else came, or happened here, would be unwelcome intrusion and distraction” (Fire on the Mountain. 3).

She wants no one around her and her stoic life is disturbed by a letter from her Granddaughter *Asha* stating that her great granddaughter *Raka* will soon join her for her vacation, moreover the child is advised to stay in a hilly area so that she might easily recuperate of Typhoid.

“Would Raka’s coming mean the opening of that old, troublesome ledger again? Sighing, she went off to bed, dragging one foot uncharacteristically. Discharge me, she groaned. I’ve discharged all my duties. Discharge.”(Fire on the Mountain. 32-33).

Initially Nanda is not interested in the child but soon she understands that she is leading a life of falsity. This falsity has branched out of the double crossed conjugal relationship. Though her husband lived with her he loved only his secret mistress Miss.David. He married Nanda not out of love and compassion but out of compulsion. It was marriage of convenience for him to uphold his culture, unfortunately Nanda becomes the prey.

She as his wife lives majestically with superior social status and she appears always in silk attire.

‘Isn’t she splendid? Isn’t she like a queen? Really, Vice-Chancellor is lucky to have a wife who can run everything as she does,’ (Fire on the Mountain. 09).

She has lots to do every day, take of the children, pacify them at their quarrels, attend them when they are wounded or bruised, plan the course of meals that are to be served in the party that night, should always be conscious that the people at the kitchen do not smoke *biri’s*, take account of washing and ironing etc., but all this she does without sense of belonging. She knows that no guest is hers and she never thinks of the house as her own. She works extensively and is fed up with the long ordeal.

To keep the girl happy and engaged she starts spinning her own story through which Nanda drags herself into the past. The beautiful part of it is, she spins her yarn so fantastically that the fabrication is so silky but in reality it was so rugged. She becomes conscious that Raka needs care but she does not wants to get into yet another exploitative relationship and in that mood she rejects her friend Ila Das another nonagenarian of the novel to stay with her for that night which leads to her rape and murder. Nanda Kaul’s realization about her falsity that she had not actually derived any pleasure out of being alone; rejecting her caring and nurturing behavior is the crux of the story.

Hagar Shipley suffers from a low grade depression and the acute effects are seen on the lives of others that she touches upon. Her isolation branches out of her disconnection with her relations and this becomes the root cause for her violation against the roles assigned by the patriarchal society. As the story opens Hagar Shipley is ninety two and lives with her son Marvin and daughter-in-law Doris but she can never tolerate them. She is ninety two now and is rampant with memory. She recalls her past; her first loss is the death of her mother during her birth. The mother-less-ness is the foremost reason for her psychological problems. She is more attached with her tyrant father and she tries to model herself upon him. But both of these two, the father and the daughter are too prideful to condescend and they never show their need for each other, Jason Currie dies without reconciling to her daughter. Hagar is given the best education possible to make her a lady of fortune but she takes a hasty decision of Marrying Bram Shipley a man ‘as common as Dirt’, delineated in the words of her Father and neighbor Lottie Dressier. Soon she finds that he is not the right person,

“Love, I fancied, must consists of words and deeds delicate as lavender sachets not like the things he sprawled on the high white bed stead that rattled like a train.” (SA 80)

So, she moves away from him with her second Son John and works as a housekeeper of Mr. Oatley where she introduces herself as a widow. She hates Marvin for he is so clumsy like

his father and loves John as she identifies him with Jason Currie. Her pride is so strong that she tells others that her brother is dead When Bram dies. To her dismay John loves Arleen which she hates and plans with Lottie, Arleen's Mother and that leads to the death of John and Arleen. Hagar remembers those days where she never cried even at the death of her own loving son. Hagar recalls the night when John died and the nurse who pursued her to cry, the best healing therapy,

“I shoved her arm away. I straightened my spine, and that was the hardest thing I've ever had to do in my entire life, to stand straight then. I wouldn't cry in front of strangers, whatever it cost me. The night my son died I was transformed to a stone and never wept at all.” (The Stone Angel 242 – 243)

Marvin and Doris take care of her but she could never be close to their hearts. She feels she might thank them and tell them that they are so kind and perfect but she was unable to communicate. As the couple they themselves are old they decide to leave her in Silver Threads, an old age home but she refuses. To avoid being sent there she takes a flight to Shadow Point where once she lived with her husband. She meets Murray Ferney Lees who brings out the inner conscious to the surface level and she gets relieved of her stress. Hagar's transformation begins with her confrontation with Lees and it helps her come out of her complexities; her transformation completes with her realization of motherhood. She opens up to Marvin,

“It's in my mind to ask his pardon, but that's not what he wants from me
“you've not been cranky, Marvin. You've been good to me, always. A better son than John.” (The Stone Angel 304)

Soon her health deteriorates and is admitted in a hospital. The co-patients act as surrogate mothers and help her come out of her veils completely. She starts understanding life as to love and to be loved. Even then she could not reconcile completely and she dies resisting a glass of water from Doris and dies.

Hagar as a mother, lost her dearest son due to her pride and tormented her son and daughter-in-law. The problem of Hagar is bare; she has an inability to accept her motherhood and maternal instincts. But towards the end a realization occurs and she lies to Marvin that she loved him so dearly and he was the best. This realization is the culminating point of her motherhood.

Both these old ladies are not in god terms with their husband. Nanda could not do anything about her husband's illegal activity and she is so docile to voice her problems even. Her children also betrayed her and she could never accomplish a sense of belonging. But at the later stage she shows her protest by staying alone like a sage in a mountain. Similarly Hagar could not reconcile with Bram Shipley and she separates herself from him. Unlike Nanda she has a good son and his family to take care of her, even then she could have the bliss of living a happy life. Towards the end she understands life as 'to love and to be loved' but was too late a recognition. Desai and Laurence lament on the limitations placed upon personality by life.

The world today advocates Joint family system wherein the old people will act as the soul mentors of the young at the home, India has been a pioneer in this aspect but slowly it deteriorates and these two novels project the dissolution of the young regarding the care towards the old people. Both these ladies would have lived a happier life if at all if their children would have instilled in them a ray of hope.

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