

**THE TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN IN ANITA DESAI'S  
*FIRE ON THE MOUNTAIN***

**Miss Sumit**

Assistant Professor,  
Department of English  
Government College for Women,  
Rohtak -124001, Haryana

**Abstract**

Feminism is essentially linked to the political and social movement for equality of sexes and end to discrimination against women. The root cause of this discrimination and domination is the patriarchal set – up of our society. This patriarchal power regulates the way people perceive their lives and act in different situations. Therefore, the present paper aims at analyzing Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* (1977) from a feministic perspective. And at the same time it reveals the disasters of the worst system of patriarchy.

**Keywords:** Patriarchy, domination, exploitation, duties and violence.

Anita Desai was awarded the Sahitya Academy Award for *Fire on the Mountain* (1977) the year, 1978. The novel was written and published, when Anita Desai had crossed forty. She seems to reflect her own experience through her protagonists, Nanda and Ila Das, who are mature in age like the writer. The novel brings forth various issues and conflicts like alienation, detachment but patriarchal oppression and exploitation comes out as the theme of the novel.

Mr. Kaul, the Vice-Chancellor of Punjab University, and the husband of Nanda, is a totally self-centered person. He is not concerned about his wife and children, but his affairs. He, like Gautama, doesn't try to understand the feelings, needs and desires of his wife, Nanda Kaul. She, living in a big joint family, always remains busy in her household chores, performing all the other household duties arduously. She spends her whole life serving this family. All her day is spent in the service of other family members. She remembers, "Too many trays of tea would have to be made and carried to her husband's study, to her mother-in-law's bed-room, to the veranda that was the gathering-place for all, at all times of day. Too many meals, too many dishes on the table, too much to wash up after" (Desai 29). Further, she says, "They had had so many children, they had gone to so many different schools and colleges at different times of the day, and had so many tutors . . . Then there had been their friends, all of different ages and sizes and families"(29-30). It seems that she is a lady, not she, but all the ladies, who have been made only for worldly obligations, i.e. domestic chores, nurturing and caring children, hosting the guests; preparing food and tea for them. This is the single responsibility of which credit is given to a woman, no credit other than this. In Patriarchal tradition women are expected to nurture and serve others. This

responsibility cum burden, is defined as, “ She had had her cane chair and she had set there, not still and emptily, but mending clothes, sewing on strings and buttons and letting out hems, at her feet a small charcoal brazier on which a pot of *kheer* bubbled, . . . (17). Every day she gets a lot of guests. “Into this din, a tonga had driven up and disgorged a flurry of guests . . . the wives and daughters of the lecturers and professors over whom her husband ruled” (18). After doing so much, she doesn’t even get the company of her husband. Instead of providing her a relieving company, he, Mr. Kaul, behaves very rudely with her. She feels a threat to her existence and freedom. This crowded life has left no space for Nanda herself. It is this Patriarchal system which treats woman as a machine, i.e. an instrument without emotions, feelings and desires.

The worst thing that happens in Nanda's life is that Mr. Kaul engages himself in an extramarital affair. He has a life-long affair with Miss David, a Mathematics teacher . . . whom he had not married because she was a Christian but to whom he had loved, all his life loved" (145). While Nanda, his own wife, could never get the love which actually belonged to her. She is the rightful owner of this love but she remains devoid of it throughout her life. As Bidulata Choudhury in her article, “The Role and Reaction of Women in Modern Indian Society” observes, “Her conjugal life was not peaceful. It was not all love and sincerity but the terrible betrayal of her husband prompted her to a life of silence” (81). Here, Patriarchy is practised through polygamy, where a man being married, is free to have a spouse. It is this Patriarchal ideology which has made man’s life easy, free from all boundations and restrictions, full of enjoyment, whereas a woman’s life difficult, unenjoying, burdened, restricted i. e. limited to the four walls of a house. On one hand, a man is free to have extramarital affairs, but on the other hand, for a woman, even to think about that is a sin. She cannot go out of her marriage. If somehow, she takes a step, she is either discarded from the society or declared as characterless.

It is generally opinionated that domination varies according to one's class, caste, religion or culture. But in this novel, one encounters an opposite view of this generalized belief. Mr. Kaul, “an academic man” (85), occupying an honorable position as the Vice Chancellor of a renowned University, indulges himself in an extramarital affair and misbehaves with his wife, Nanda. She, being his wife, is forced to live a pitiable life. She can not even question her husband about his illicit relationship. When he comes home, fully drunk, she looks at him hiding herself behind a pillar in the house. All this shows that exploitation level is increased with status. Her husband’s rude and oppressive behavior pushes Nanda to lead a secluded life. And because of this, she has lost all faith in humanity.

Even being faced with so many difficulties in her marital life what matters to Nanda is the fulfillment of the needs and desires of her husband and children. She ignores her own needs and yields according to the pattern of society submitting herself to the wishes, demands and needs of her husband's status. She does not even have time to think about herself. On the contrary, her husband never tries to understand and get knowledge of his wife's inner feelings and desires. As Rama Kundu observes, “Nanda Kaul had developed the habit of caring, a Patriarchal value, which is automatically internalized by Indian women. They are born to, and brought within the strong hold and strange hold of this Patriarchal culture” (71).

Like Maya, in *Cry The Peacock*, Nanda too, is not loved by the other members of Kaul family. She does so much for so many people of the family. She accepts every responsibility, whether it is of a daughter-in-law, of a wife or of a mother. She tells Raka, her great granddaughter, remembering her life in her in-law’s house, “The house I had in the plains was crowded, too crowded . . .” (Desai 86). All her life she tries to feel wanted and loved. But, she remains a "queen beggar" who longs for the love of her husband and his family. She calls this house, "his

house", not hers or theirs. Facing rejection by her husband and his family, brings disappointment in her life and as a result of this she moves towards Carignano, a house situated in Kasauli hills. But as the novel proceeds, the reader comes to know that it is a forced exile, not chosen by Nanda herself. If a woman is deprived of the support of her husband, she moves towards her children. But, Nanda, even in this case is unlucky. She turns out to be a completely tragic figure. Her husband's behavior has made her so aloof, undesired and empty that being the mother of a lot of children, she doesn't understand them. Later on, the death of her husband brings the family together but after getting share in their property, the children depart to mind their respective families, responsibilities and jobs; none of them have time to stay with her. It is true that she has sacrificed her whole life for the welfare of this family. What about all that she has done for the same people? What about her requirements? "The amount she has jettisoned from her life might take another's breath away" (32). All this goes in vain and she finds herself with nobody and nothing. After vacating the campus house, she has no other alternative except to withdraw to Kasauli.

Mr. Kaul doesn't give the love and respect to her, which she deserves. She receives the guests with a stare which creates awe in them and out of fear they follow the course of flattery saying " 'Isn't she splendid ? Really Vice –Chancellor is lucky to have a wife who can run everything as she does', . . ." (18). Her sufferings do not end here, as Mr Kaul treats her as an object, on which desires are imposed. Mr. Kaul ". . . had wanted her always in silk, at the head of the long rosewood table in the dining-room, entertaining his guests" (18). Nanda has come to Carignano to forget this bitterness of her past. She has been fed up so much with the burdened able life that she has spent in her husband's house. That's why she feels very bad when she gets the news of Raka's arrival at Carignano. She mumbles, "Would Raka's coming mean the opening of that old, troublesome ledger again?" (30). She wants no one and nothing else. She ". . . had no wish for letters" (1). "What pleased and satisfied her so, here at Carignano, was its barrenness" (2). Later on realizing this exhausted feeling towards life, she sighs, "Have I not done enough and had enough? I want no more. I want nothing" (17). Nanda's life has been ravaged completely because of this system of Patriarchy, where her existence is never valued. And even after all this, she admires her husband in front of her great grand-daughter, Raka. Nanda's friend, Ila, says that she has spent a luxurious life, like a queen, with all the facilities. But it is not the reality, reality was never known to anyone, but to Nanda alone. Nobody could find her sorrow and her helplessness that lied behind the smiling face and flashing eyes. "That was the look no one had dared catch or return" (18). R. A. Singh rightly observes, "The reality of [her] life is: she is not the queen of his home, just an unloved woman, mother of his children, a social symbol of his respectability" (99). In the end, realizing this domination, she, before taking her last breath says, "Nor had her husband loved and cherished her and kept her like a queen- he had only done enough to keep her quite . . ." (Desai 145).

Rakesh, another male character, husband of Nanda's grand-daughter, Tara. He suffers from the illness of male superiority in comparison of female. He, after getting drunk, beats and abuses his wife, Tara. In Patriarchy to beat a wife is considered the courageousness and a virtue of the husband. Raka, his daughter, reminds her father:

. . . home from a party, stumbling and crashing through the curtains of night, his mouth opening to let out a flood of rotten stench, beating at her mother with hammers and fists of abuse- harsh, filthy abuse that made Raka cover under her bedclothes and wet the mattress in fright, . . . and

her mother lay down on the floor and shut her eyes and wept. (Desai 71-72)

Tara is a silent and helpless receiver of all this cruelty of her husband. She speaks not a single word. She can do nothing instead of weeping.

On one hand, the husband does not even hesitate to beat his wife, considering her an animal, and on the other hand, she, a wife is ready to kiss the hand that beats her, a Patriarchal expectation from the side of a wife. After having happened so much, Tara is persuaded to go to live again with that brutal man. Asha, her mother, says, “. . . he’s not really so bad . . . she simply doesn’t understand him, doesn’t understand *men*, . . .” (15). Here, Asha, tries to make her daughter understand the condition and creates the fear of the result which might be a broken marriage. She, in a letter to her mother, tells her that “Mama, you know all I want is Tara to be happy and lead a good life” (15). And, Tara bearing the cruelty of her husband is ready to go with him again. Finally, she is forced to be “a successful diplomat’s wife” (14). Tara is a woman who, like her grandmother, contributes towards the ideological construct of Patriarchy and assumes a position suitable for her husband. It is true that life for a woman is a series of obligations and toleration. Why all adjustments are made only from the side of females? Why she has to think and compromise all the time? Here, Patriarchy results in compulsive marriages.

Raka’s father, Rakesh, is a dominant figure, a true Patriarch. It seems that Raka’s freedom, like Maya’s, has been restricted by her father, as reflected from the words of Nanda, when she says, “She walked about as the newly caged, the newly tamed wild ones do, . . .” (40-41). Her father has destroyed her natural thirst for life and makes her a “ubiquitous creature”. Raka has become an introvert due to the abnormal familial circumstances, caused by her father. She is the victim of a home which is on the verge of breaking. During her short span of life, she has seen enough bitterness, distrust and violence, and loss of love between her parents. The violence used by her father towards her mother, fills her heart with suspicion and distrust. She gets shocked with the violent actions at home. In this house, because of his father’s brutal activities, even her health is not cared. Here, her father forces her to search the vast treasures of love, understanding, companionship and pleasure through healthy human relationships.

Raka has witnessed only failure of love, companionship and cordial relationship in the life of her parents. As a result of this, she instead of talking with human beings, prefers the company of lizards and spiders. She has a soft corner for the motherly figures in general. Because she has seen her mother’s helplessness in front of her father’s brutal behavior. This is the reason that she requests Ramlal, the cook of her nani’s house, to spare the mother langur with the baby. And, she feels very bad when she hears about her mother’s illness.

Raka, for this short span of her life has lived under the command of her father, which has killed her questioning and demanding self. She has lived her life in fear, fear of being beaten by her father. The oppressive and disturbing atmosphere of her house has damaged her childhood completely and has changed her completely. Nanda says, “. . . she appeared a freak by virtue of never making a demand. She appeared to have no needs” (47). She never makes any demand on any one as if she is devoid of needs. She touches nothing in the house due to her unconcern about this world and its belongingness. She has lived so much restricted and fearful life that, “She was never able to eat enough at a meal to last her till the next. Nor could she bear to ask for a biscuit” (55). She has never lived a life like other children do. She has never gone to parks or clubs for enjoying her childhood, which could have given her an atmosphere to let out her inner feelings. That’s why she is surprised when Ramlal advises her to go to the clubs and parks.

Raka's ill experiences at home has moulded her personality in altogether different way. Her nani, Nanda, tries to grab her attention by telling her about the stories of her own father and also shows her the items brought by him. But, Raka shows no interest. She ignores all this as she can not imagine having affectionate fathers as her own father has disappointed her. Thus, Nanda fails to woo her attention for long. Raka hates the club as it reminds her of her father, his violence and ruthlessness which has created life-long fear in her towards fatherly figures and hatred for the club in her mind. She has seen her father's cruelty with open eyes. All this has made her to be afraid and hate man. When Nanda asks her to take a ride on a pony, she replies, " 'It's no fun : that man always comes along' "(74). She has devoid of all of her funs in her father's house. " Raka wanted only one thing- to be left alone and pursue her own secret life amongst the rocks and pines of Kasauli" (48).

Exploited and dominated so much by the males of their own house, in one way or the other, both Nanda and Raka keep themselves away from communication, company and involvement which are necessary for life. Nanda declares, "Raka, you really are a great-grandchild of mine, aren't you? You are more like me than *any* of my children or grandchildren. You are exactly like me, Raka" (64).

In this Patriarchal world only beautiful women are praised. Here ugly women are abused or teased. In case of Ila, Nanda's best friend, a short-heighten lady, not so beautiful, is teased every time. Nanda says, "All her life mobs had taunted and derided her" (110) from a little child to an adult and even aged men. She is not beautiful, that's why she does not get the chance to get married. Ugly women are also called 'churails' (77), as Ramlal tells Raka.

Ila's voice is sharp, which is considered 'anti-social'. According to Patriarchal construct, everything related to a woman should be social means limited, where as there is not any condition like this for males. Her voice is supposed to be sweet, soft and slow, in other words not able to oppose man at all, and man's voice should be hard means 'ruling'. Ila is mocked and insulted due to her short stature and uncommon voice. But, she, knowingly unaware of all this remains busy in social works. She is not bothered about this humiliation, for the sake of welfare of society.

In Patriarchy, education or 'getting gyan' is the birth right of boys and not of girls. In ancient times only boys were sent to 'gurukuls' or 'ashramas' for getting education. Ila's father sends his three sons to foreign universities, ". . . to Heidelberg, Cambridge, Harvard . . ." (123), where they do not even think about this and remain busy in enjoying their life. All his father's property is sold to pay their debts; "his own horses, his carriage, his house, his land. When he died, not one of them came to the funeral" (123-124), meaning by this they turn out to be completely irresponsible after having spent so much money on them by their father. And nothing was left for the mother and two sisters. In order to complete their education Ila's and Rima's education is withheld or they are provided the education or less costly courses which are of no use. And because of this partiality, they both have to struggle for the whole life for earning their little livelihood. And in spite of all this, both the sisters take care of their parents especially their bed-ridden mother. They ". . . had given piano lessons, going from house to house and then coming home to nurse the mother with the rotten hip" (124). Here, in Patriarchal system of society, boys' education is given more importance considering them 'ekmatra sahara' of their parents. And girls' education is considered less important rather unimportant. The reason behind this is that since birth she is considered as some other's wealth. It is considered that daughter's birth brings poverty to the family. That's why to spend more on her i.e. on education, health, food is mere a folly. The root cause of all this is the pain-giving and disasterring ideology of Patriarchy. Ila Das definitely realizes this and says to Nanda, " 'how helpless our upbringing made us, Nanda. We thought we were

being equipped with the very best- French lessons, piano lessons, English governess- my, all that only to find it left us helpless, positively *handicapped*' ” (127).

Ila, a social worker and bearer of all this through her talks with Nanda tells that “. . . the women are willing, poor dears, to try and change their dreadful lives by an effort, but do you think their men will let them? Nooo, not one bit” (129). Here, it is suggested that women want to be educated, want to change their lives, want to come out of this fearful existence, but, this worst and forcing ideology doesn't let them come out to live their lives on their own. It shows that they are completely helpless in front of this dominating system of Patriarchy. They cannot even think to come out of this system and if they think, they have nothing to do on their own. For whole life, they remain puppets at the hands of males; father, brother, husband and later on sons. All their life is spent following the commands given to them.

Worst of all this is child-marriage. In Patriarchal system, it is considered that a girl should be married by the age of thirteen or fourteen otherwise it would become a curse for her father. And for getting release of this burden, they are married in their childhood, an age of playing and getting education. Ila says, “. . . what it is for a girl to be married and bear children at the age of twelve . . .” (129). She tells Nanda about a villager, Preet Singh, who is trying “. . . marrying off his daughter to a rich landowner who had made a good offer for her” (138). This shows how the life of a little girl is at the stake for the sake of her father's own profits, and here, even, her small age is not concerned. Many a time they, the little girls, are married to the man twice of their age. Ila tells Nanda that Preet Singh's family “. . . is planning to marry their little girl, who is only just seven, to an old man in the next village because he owns a quarter of an acre of land and two goats. He's a widower and has six children . . .” (129-130). In this critical situation what she, a little girl can do and, she is not enough able to think about this drama. What a bad condition of this system, it is very easy to marry a girl with a widower but at the same time widowed girls are not accepted easily by the same society, in other words are not married and, moreover, they are considered 'unlucky' for both the families. All this indicates towards the 'fate' of girls, which is finalized by Patriarchy

Preet Singh, belongs to the category of males, who want a complete control over the females of their house, and think that it is the male who is right, and a female can never be right. It is the duty of a male to regulate the society, where there is no need to take the guidance and advice from a female. It is the man who is the final authority to make rules and take right decisions. Ila's sincere attempt for the welfare of the society is considered a blot to the superiority of male. Because Patriarchy does not allow them to put their nose in the matters of males or to oppose them. They cannot challenge male authority. As C. V. George observes, “ In the Indian society women are not allowed to play any active role in decision-making. They are ignored or brushed aside” (159).

Ila Das tries to prevent the life of a little girl by stopping her marriage with an aged man. But she does not have any idea about its disastrous results. She has to pay her chastity and life for this. When Ila, late in the evening passes through the market, she is advised by a grain-seller that “ 'It is not good for a memsahib to walk alone in the dark' ” (Desai 138). This indicates towards the social insecurity of females that they cannot even move freely. All the time they live under the fear of losing their chastity. At this Ila thinks, why she should be afraid? She has not done anything wrong, but, she is totally unaware of the wicked designs of Preet Singh. She replies, “ 'I am always alone. I am never afraid' ” (138). But all this courage is shattered very soon. Ila, who is unable to judge her enemy passes away her time unnecessarily in bazaar providing an opportunity to Preet Singh to commit the heinous crime of rape.

Ila's involvement in other's affairs ultimately proves dangerous to her when she invokes the anger and enmity of Preet Singh. In her whim as well as a duty of a social worker to improve the village, she has tried to prevent the evil of child- marriage. In her zeal for the welfare of the village, she ignores the warnings of her well wishers too, and invokes the brutal wrath of Preet Singh, who rapes and consequently murders her by strangulating. Preet Singh takes this action in order to prove this point that men rule women, and they have the power to destroy them completely, and Ila, “. . . lay raped, broken, still and finished. Now it was dark” (143). This rape is a sheer act of revenge which is symbolic of the death of goodness and values in the society. It is a way of aggression to overpower a woman who stood for justice and social welfare. Ila is an innocent lady who could not understand the tricks of the society and from beginning till the end remains a genial, warm and caring personality. “Ujwala Patil attributes Ila Das's rape and murder in *Fire On the Mountain* to “Preet Singh's desire to humiliate her for the injury she had caused to his male ego; but it is rather a manifestation of an individual's cannibalistic and canine existence. It is an assertion of male chauvinism on the part of Preet Singh” (Swain 170). Overall, it comes out as a punishment for a woman for interfering in man's matters and decisions.

Another male, a diplomat, with whom Asha, the beautiful daughter of Nanda, who “. . . had dedicated her life to the cultivation of long glossy hair and unwrinkled skin . . .” (Desai 14) is married. That brutal man's ill-treatment of her, the extramarital affairs he had, his drinking and brutality changes Asha completely from a beauty-conscious lady to a society-conscious lady. Next irresponsible male, Nanda's father, leaves them alone in Kashmir, without informing them never to return. It is another way of males to get rid of familial responsibilities. And, even after this, she admires him a lot and feels proud of being his daughter. She invents fantastic stories about his adventure and courage.

Nanda's cook, Ramlal, is an exception. He, a father figure, takes care of her and Raka's each and every need. But, as Nanda feels, he, by his over-caring nature doesn't let Raka come near to her nani. Nanda feels jealous of this behavior of Ramlal. It is because of Ramlal, she doesn't like her nani's company. She, bored by the talks of Nanda and Ila escapes to the hills and puts the mountain on fire. Here, 'Fire' on the mountain is symbolic of the fire which burns in the hearts of the characters of the novel, especially females. This act of putting the mountain on fire is her desire to destroy this dominating and oppressive world of males which has made the life of females, a hell, where it becomes a compulsion for females to live in this world. R. A. Singh in his essay, further argues:

It is expressive of Raka's resolve to destroy a world where a woman can not hope to be happy without being unnatural. . . . It is also symbolic burning of all that is traditional and defunct. . . . Actually Raka's action shows her resolve to destroy the world which promises no hope to women in society where she is always enslave, ensnared and entangled. (108)

Here, in this novel, all the females are innocent and silent victims of Patriarchal system of society. They neither can live nor can die. They just have to surrender themselves and accept the ways of life and society.

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