

Postcolonial Elements in *Fire on the Mountain* by Anita Desai

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Abstract

Postcolonial refers to the political, economic, social and cultural condition of a society after being colonised. The impact of colonization is seen in the postcolonial society. The immediate effect is the change in people's way of thinking. The novel taken for study is *Fire on the Mountain*. This paper attempts to bring out the postcolonial elements present in the novel. The protagonist of this novel, Nanda Kaul faces oppression, loss of power and struggle for independence in her life is portrayed vividly. The condition of women in the patriarchal society is seen through the characters of Nanda Kaul, Raka and Ila Das.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Dominance, power, Struggle for independence.

Indian writing in English is a newly emerged literature after the invasion of British East India Company. This brings the necessity for Indians to learn and write in English. Indian Writing in English refers to the writings of Indian writers in English. Indian writers started using English as a medium to convey their ideas, views and condition of the Indian society. Firstly, writers used English to bring out the social conditions including freedom struggle, social reform, plight of the poor people, nationalism and patriotism. Though Indian Writing in English is a newly emerged field of literature, it has laid its foundation in the world literature.

Anita Desai was born in 1937 in Mussoorie. Her mother is a German woman and her father is Bengali. This gives a way for Anita Desai to know German, Bengali, Hindi, English and Urdu. Her notable works include *Cry*, *The Peacock* (1963), *Fire on the Mountain* (1977), *Clear Light of the Day* (1980), *The Village by the Sea* (1982), *In Custody* (1984), *Journey to Ithaca* (1995) and *The Zigzag Way* (2004). Her writings evoke characters, events and moods.

It has high visual imagery with artistic language and carefully crafted words adds beauty to her writings. As a novelist Anita Desai is often considered as psychological and feminist novelist who deals with major themes of isolation, lack of communication, inner struggle, man-woman relationship and marital discords. Her protagonists are women characters.

Among Desai's famous novels, *Fire on the mountain* (1977) won Winfred Holtby Memorial Prize, Sahitya Academy Award and also received the National Academy of Letters award in India. It focus on the life of an elderly widow Mrs. Nanda Kaul who lives in Kasauli. She wants to live a life without any family interference. So, She moved to Kasauli at the later stage of her life after completing her family duties as a daughter, mother and wife, and also as grandmother. She wants to live in solitude because she wants to spend the remaining time of her life in her own companionship. In the course of her regular life in Kasauli, the visit of her great granddaughter Raka creates an impact in Nanda Kaul's life. Further, death of her friend Ila Das leaves a great impact in her life.

Fire on the Mountain is set in Postcolonial India. This novel has many postcolonial elements that includes Oppression of Women, Patriarchy, Struggle for independence, Control, Power, Dominance, Marginalization and Childhood. Through the characters of Nanda Kaul, Raka and Ila Das the postcolonial elements are clearly portrayed.

The three female characters Nanda Kaul, Raka and Ila Das face oppression in their lives. Nanda Kaul is a wife of University Vice-chancellor but she has no rights in her own house to take any decision because she is expected to behave in a way that her husband wants. This oppression of the female characters happens due to patriarchy existing in the postcolonial society. Mr. Kaul uses Nanda Kaul as an agent in fulfilling the primary needs as a wife. She prepares food, takes care of her children, entertains the guests and she stands as a 'ready to be' women in her family. She is expected to satisfy the demands of her husband. Nanda Kaul's granddaughter Tara also faces oppression in her family. She was married to Rakesh, a diplomat and drunkard. Everyday Rakesh gets drunk, beats and taunts Tara. Though she wants to leave her house, her mother Asha believes that Rakesh is a good man because he is a diplomat. Asha wants Tara to give way to husband and learn to behave well as a good wife. Tara's struggle is that she is oppressed by her husband and not supported by her own mother. The direct victim of

patriarchal society is Ila Das. She is a friend of Nanda Kaul they attended same school and college. Ila Das is a short woman with an unlikely voice. Though she was born in a wealthy family yet no man married her. Her own brothers lost all the family wealth and left her all alone with her poor mother and sister. She worked at Social Welfare Office. She protests against the child marriage prevailing in the place. Kasauli is a mountain area, so many people are illiterate and the priest in the village advised the people not to take any western medicine because it is a sin. Though Ila Das gives awareness to people, people are not ready to accept her point of view and advise. She protested against the child marriage of Preet Singh's daughter who is merely a child. Preet Singh wants his daughter to marry an old man who is a father of six children. The good intention of Ila Das is not supported by anyone. Enraged by her protests, one day Preet Singh rapes and killed Ila Das. She became a victim to the patriarchal society because she is expected to act according to the demands of men. If a woman acts against it, she becomes a victim like Ila Das.

'Control', 'Power' and 'Dominance' are other prominent postcolonial themes. All the male characters in the novel have the power to control the female characters in the name of dominance. This novel is set in a postcolonial society. Mr. Kaul, Rakesh and Preet Singh show their power and control the female characters because of male dominance. After going to Kasauli, Raka, Nanda Kaul's great granddaughter is the only female that acts according to her own wish because there is no man to control her. Ramlal who works as a cook at Nanda Kaul's home, supports Raka and guides her about the place. In the novel, Raka also faced the male dominance at one place. Her father Rakesh who is a drunkard beats her mother everyday. Seeing this she has lost interest in life and finds comfort in nature. She needs no man to comfort and support her. Her actions are completely based on her own wish and wants. When Raka got the power to do whatever she wants, she sets fire to the forest which implements that she sets fire to the patriarchal society. She emerged as a modern woman, unlike her mother and grandmother who accepted their fate in patriarchal society.

In the Postcolonial countries 'Marginalization' takes place not only in race but also in gender. Women characters in this novel are marginalized in the name of gender. It is not completely marginalized, women have the right to speak and take decisions but they speak in favour of men and take decisions that are accepted by the male counterparts. It is evident

through the character like Asha who wants her daughter Tara to accept her drunkard husband and behaves as a good wife.

Struggle for independence is another postcolonial element. Female characters in the novel tried to get their independence not from the male dominance but from the regular normal life routine of women. The struggle for independence does not refer to the independence of a country, it refers to independence from family bounds. Nanda Kaul's life is a great example of struggle for independence because she spent all her life serving her husband and taking care of her children. At the elderly age, she wants to retire from all the family duties and get her independence to live a quiet and peaceful life in Kasauli. After moving to Kasauli, she becomes careful of not to let one interfere in her quiet life. She likes the peaceful life in Kasauli which women of postcolonial society desires.

The 'Childhood' is an important element that determines the later part of life of people. The traumatized childhood of Raka after seeing the struggle of her mother being beaten by her father everyday, she lost interest in her life and dwells in the companionship of nature. The time she spends at Kasauli gives her a period of comfort. When Nanda Kaul offers to send her to a boarding school, Raka moves away from that place to avoid the idea of losing her peace. Ila Das also faced a lot of problems in her childhood because of her short body structure and unlikely voice. No one likes to be her except Nanda Kaul. Though Ila Das was born in a wealthy family, she could never have the opportunity to enjoy her childhood. Other children hated her for her physical appearance. Her own brothers left her to live alone without supporting her. Unlike Ila Das, Raka is a representative of modern woman. Being a very young girl, Raka also faced physical issues and mental problems. She is ready to come out of the traumatizing past and finds comfort and safe in nature.

In Conclusion, *Fire on the Mountain* incorporates all the postcolonial elements. Through the female characters, attitude of the people living in the postcolonial society and condition of women is clearly seen. The protagonist of this novel, Nanda Kaul, represents the general nature of women. She never fails to complete her duty to the family and society. Though she faced difficulties, she fulfilled her duties as a woman. Only after completing her duties as a wife, mother and grandmother, she decided to have a life for her own. She satisfied

the demands of postcolonial society. Her decision of living alone was not interfered by anyone in her family because they do not need any help from her anymore. Everyone has their own family to take care of. Raka raises as a revolt against the postcolonial society. At the end of the novel, she sets fire to the forest. Fire acts as a purifier and destroyer. It destroys the unlikely norms of society and purifies the thoughts of people.

References

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