

The Theme of Alienation in Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain*

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Abstract

*The concept of alienation identifies a distinct kind of psychological or social illness which involves a problematic separation between a self and other that properly belong together. So understood, it appears to play a largely diagnostic role, perhaps showing that something is awry with liberal societies and liberal political philosophy. Theories of alienation typically pick out a subset of these problematic separations as being of particular importance, and then offer explanatory accounts of the extent of, and prognosis for, alienation, so understood. Discussions of alienation are especially, but not uniquely, associated with Hegelian and Marxist intellectual traditions. This paper attempts to explore the study of alienation in Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain*.*

Keywords: *alienation, separation, isolation, psychology, existentialism*

The present entry clarifies the basic idea of alienation. It distinguishes alienation from some adjacent concepts; in particular, from 'fetishism' and 'objectification'. And it elucidates some conceptual and normative complexities, including: the distinction between subjective and objective alienation; the need for a criterion by which candidate separations can be identified as problematic; and (some aspects of) the relation between alienation and ethical value. The empirical difficulties often generated by ostensibly philosophical accounts of alienation are acknowledged, but not resolved.

In modern times, man feels more uprooted, insecure and alienated from society than previously. There are certain factors which compel man to think about himself and about his relations with others in this modern world of chaotic nature. Modern man's fate is well described by Kafka when he wrote of himself: "I am separated from all things by a hollow space and I do not reach to its boundaries." (Pauperheim, 34). This shows the separation of a man from a man on the earth.

The theme of alienation is very close to the theme of existentialism which has been widely seen in the literature of the world since the advent of Sartre who established an interaction between literature and

philosophy in his writings. No emotional problem is more threatening to a novelist today than the problem of portraying the predicament of modern man in this world. Conditions in India are also taking a dismal turn. The moral confusion of modern Indians who live on an ad-hoc basis and show a dual code of behavior is alarming. The rise of opportunism, treachery, cowardice, hypocrisy is due to their moral inertia and flabbiness which created in them all the emptiness of a hypnotized people. A few Indian novelists in English, especially Anita Desai, have made significant efforts to delineate the existential dimensions of the modern men and women consequently in the pages of their novels. There appears 'anti-hero' endowed with all the complexes and fears devoid of any trust in people and in the future.

Desai's chief concern is human relationship. Her central theme is the isolated predicament of an individual, which she projects through incompatible couples, very sensitive wives and ill matched husbands. She is a minute observer and perceives everything mutely, minutely and delicately. Whenever she creates a poetical situation, she gives it a perfect poetic treatment to every detail. Anita Desai's characters are self-conscious of the reality around them and they carry a sense of loneliness, alienation and pessimism. She adds a new dimension turning inward into the realities of life and plunges into the deep-depths of the human psyche to the chaos in the minds of characters.

Particularly, 'Fire on The Mountain' has been identified as "the lyrical fictionization of the quintessence of existentialism." (Gupta, 185). A close study of the texture and theme of the novel in relation to the tenets of existentialism justifies the above observation. It has been noted that "Fire on the Mountain displays skillful dramatization of experiences of certain women embroiled by the cross way of life." (Chaudhary, 77). This novel deals with the existential angst experienced by the female protagonist Nanda Kaul, an old lady living in isolation. It also projects the inner turmoil of a small girl, Raka, who is haunted by a sense of futility. Thirdly, it presents the plight of a helpless woman. Ila Das who is in conflict with forces that is too powerful to be encountered,

resulting in her tragic death. Thus, the existential themes of solitude, alienation, the futility of human existence and struggle for survival form the major themes of the novel.

Anita Desai says she writes on the principle of an iceberg only one tenth of which is above water. In this percept and practice of her art she is almost at one with Earnest Hemingway who also employed in the device of the unsaid and writing between the lines. In *Fire on the Mountain*, Anita Desai makes use of the themes of the underworld and delineates emotional deprivations to substantiate the theme in a language and imagery suggestive of submerged symbolical associations and giving work a poetic tone. The novel presents a kind of emotional Waste Land in which hardly anything good or happy takes place. In *Waste Land* rains are awaited and hardly ever come; in *Fire on the Mountain* also rains are awaited longingly. The protagonist has led a life of deprivations of fulfillment in a house of a Vice-Chancellor, apparently teeming with plenty - plenty with everything but love.

When the novel begins, Nanda Kaul is presented as a recluse. Living all alone, expects for the company of the servants who dare not disturb her privacy, she brooks no human presence. "She wanted no one and nothing else. Whatever else came, or happened here, would be unwelcome intrusion and distraction." (F.M, 3). She spends her days in isolation, musing about her past and experiencing the existential ennui. Anita Desai unfurls her past in the form of long interior monologues punctuated by authorial interruptions, Nanda Kaul had witnessed only betrayals and demands in life before her retirement to Kasauli. She had lived a monotonous life receiving and treating the endless stream of visitors who used to call on her Vice-chancellor husband. Her husband had carried on a lifelong affair with his mathematics mistress Miss David, whom he would have married, had she not been a Christian. Nanda Kaul feels that loneliness is the only essential condition of human life. Whenever she looks at the tall pine trees that stand out from among and underworld, she is reminded of her own alienation. Not exactly conscious of what she is waiting for, nonetheless, she is awaiting the inevitable end to all human existence: death. She is haunted by the existential angst which has led her to conclude that human life is basically a lonely struggle against the odds of life. In her case the odds have manifested themselves in the form of adulterous husband cantankerous children. Strongly convinced that life has dealt a raw deal to her, she has resolved to find the meaning, if any of her existence in isolation. "She treasures her freedom, her privacy, glad her responsibilities towards her family are over, glad she

needs nobody and nobody now needs her' (Krishnaswamy 260)

The title of the novel '*Fire on the Mountain*', however implies deep set sense of irony and this also suggests the existential dimension of the modern man in this modern Waste land where there is a chaos of values. Mountains were usually hovels, calm places, associated with holiness and divinity particularly the Himalayan Mountain ranges of Kasauli. All the three female characters in the novel choose their own values system towards themselves from reality. Raka refuses to relate herself to the world and regales in being ruined. "I am shipwrecked and alone, she clung to a rock my boat, alone in my boat on the sea....." (F. M., 61-62). Ila Das claims in venerability by endowing herself with superiority even in the loneliness. She says to Nanda Kaul: "I am always alone. I am never afraid." (F. M. 138). Nanda Kaul has a small spell of self discovery, but the truth about herself is too bitter to endure.

We can find many examples of the use of symbolism and imagery in her novels prove beyond doubt the novelist's existential concern. She portrays a tragic world where no compromises are made, no epiphanies are exploded, to be totally destroyed, as the sensitive, the visionary suffer nothing but suffocation and oppression. So, the contents of her novels are sheer violence. The lives of the principal characters are 'unloved' and 'unlived'. Quoting D. H. Lawrence, who said 'If I eat an apple, I like to eat it with my senses.' Anita Desai herself stated that in her novels she attempted to show the closeness of man and beast, earth and vegetable which we can see in *Fire on the Mountain*. Imagery alone makes it possible and, in the process, the novel gains a richer texture and greater depths. As a critic says, "this novel (*Fire on the Mountain*) deprived of its imagery, would be an ugly skeleton, chilling the reader." (Indira, 96). The significant house imagery, the images of plants, color, atmosphere and moon all contribute to the textual density and symbolic centrality of the novel.

Anita Desai's protagonists are highly sensitive and terribly bewildered to the burden of living helplessly in the society with the broken realities. Therefore, her fictional world is full of imperfection and unfulfillment, hankering and helplessness, agony and anger, struggle and surrender. She is essentially a novelist of isolation and separation. She is highly influenced with Kierkegaard, Sartre, Camus, Proust, Heidegger and Becket, and hence we can see a storm of turbulent passions and emotions in her novels.

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