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Existentialism in “Fire on the Mountain”

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Abstract: “Fire on the Mountain” by Anita Desai is set at the backdrop of the Simla hills wonderfully portraying the Indian life and the stages of old age. The intricacies of relationship, the palpation of kinship gain an enunciation in this novel. The novel deals with the existential angst experienced by the female protagonist Nanda Kaul, an old lady lying in isolation. It also projects the inner turmoil of a small girl, Raka, who is haunted by the sense of futility. Thirdly, it presents the plight of a helpless woman, Ila Das who is in conflict with forces that are too powerful to be encountered, resulting in her tragic death. Marital disharmony a completed motherhood and great grand motherhood are the prime concerns of Anita Desai’s “Fire on the Mountain”.

Existentialism in “Fire on the Mountain”

In “Fire on the Mountain”, Nanda Kaul, an elderly lady, decides to live a secluded life in Carignano in Kasauli. She spends all her life in the care for others, her three daughters and her husband. Her own choice, her own world was gone some-where. And in this process she suffered from nimity, the disorder caused by the fluctuating and unpredictable excess of the presence of family members, friends and acquaintances. When one day Nanda Kaul receives a letter from her daughter Asha asking her to take care of her great-grand daughter Raka, a feeling of anger, disappointment and loathing arises in her. Raka comes in Nanda Kaul’s life and things start changing in a different way.

Nanda Kaul is a recluse out of vengeance for a long line of duty and obligation; Raka is a recluse by nature and instinct. Her parents have long given up trying to socialize her. But after coming to Carignano slowly the child has the capacity to change things and Nanda Kaul discovers new needs within herself. But when finally violence explodes, she has to face the truth. This fiction is a sad tale of three women whose stories have a resemblance of a large number of women of the society.

Nanda Kaul and her husband Prof. Kaul do not have a warm relationship. He has had a lifelong affair with another woman. As a mother of several children, all demanding and unaccommodative, she had given too many anxious moments. But all alone in Carignano, she feels that loneliness is the only essential condition of human life.

And Raka the daughter of an ill-matched couple has been a witness to the brutality and futility of human existence. Her life is a close encounter with things that are wild and frightful. Raka’s character brings out the similarity and difference with that of Nanda Kaul’s mental make-up. If Nanda Kaul symbolizes the character as a particular aspect of existentialism, Raka epitomizes another aspect of the existential predicament.

The lonely house is symbolic of the lonely life of Nanda Kaul and Raka. The barrenness and starkness associated with it is symbolizing an essential human condition-alienation which is the key note of all existential philosophy.

Nanda Kaul, Raka and to some extent her friend Ila Das, are embodiments of the existential predicament experienced by the

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individual in an un-understanding and even hostile universe. They are self-conscious of the reality around them and they carry a sense of loneliness, alienation and pessimism.

Nanda Kaul at first feels hesitated to welcome her great-granddaughter, because she thought that the girl would become a hindrance for her lonely life. But when she finds that her great-granddaughter is not like other children of her age, she likes to be in solitude, because of her psychological problem created by her parents Nanda had an attachment towards her, because she more or less proves to be with her. And the loneliness and disattachment of her great-granddaughter made her feel move closer towards her.

Unable to throw away the societal and psychological dogmas, Nanda Kaul pulls along in the roles of wife, mother and grandmother. In this novel, Anita Desai probes the feminine sensibility and a woman's inherent desire to know herself in terms of not only her relationship with her family but also in terms of her individual identity and its relationship with the little for his wife and family.

Nanda Kaul reveals her own nature in the end of the novel. She pours out all her feelings, drives herself upon the present criteria, making to uncover herself and faints. There is an imaginative possibility of her recovery. The novel shows the victims of dislikes, vanities, prejudices, eccentricities and jealousies and how they struggle hard to hold together.

"Fire on the Mountain" is principally the story of the agonized cries of Nanda Kaul, Raka and Ila Das. The whole novel is built on the attempt to give central focus to what is marginal. First of all, an old woman, representing the marginalized of society, becomes the main protagonist of the story. Secondary characters like Raka and Ila Das introduce other stories of violence within the main narrative. And both Nanda Kaul and Raka have been excluded from human relationships.

Actually, the novel concludes that she has made up of all fantasies and stories, while Raka confess that she has set those same stories on fire. Thus all the explosions of violence are put to end by a huge fire.

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