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## The Problem of Alienation and Search for Identity in Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain*

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### ABSTRACT

“Man suffers not only from war, persecution, famine and rain but from inner problem ... a conviction of isolation, randomness and meaninglessness in his existence.” as Auden calls the modern era as an age of anxiety. (Singh)

Anita Desai in her *Fire on the Mountain* has shown us the concept of alienation and the issues of existentialism have been competently employed by the novelist in this novel. The two central characters Raka and Nanda Kaul are shown having some self- alienating characteristics that lead themselves to self- viciousness. As a weaker sex, she feels herself trapped and oppressed in front of the more powerful male sex, i.e. her husband here. She considers herself merely an object, which has ‘nothing’ of her own and thus she says that the meaning of her name is ‘nothing’ just like herself who has nothing. Anita Desai has explored profoundly the mental intensity of women like Nanda Kaul. Several images of dreadfulness and terror have been used by Desai to display Nanda Kaul’s lacerated sentiments. In most of her novels, she tries to explore the deplorable and pitiable conditions of women of Indian society, and she has done it successfully. Being a woman she has depicted true picture of women and their plights, their mental struggle and hysterical attacks of theirs.

**Keywords:** *Alienation, Identity, Mental trauma, Society.*

Women characters in Anita Desai’s *Fire on the Mountain* are the ones that undergo a lot mental distresses. It is a magnificent story of disastrous quandary that set amidst the vision of a glaringly terrifying rubric of being is representative of her inspiring literary responsiveness in recitation of credible state of affairs and characters too. Women in the novel are shown being trapped in the mental dilemmas and suffering because of their victimization and a clash with the pronounced values and real values, between modernity and conventions. Nanda Kaul wants to be a queen of her house but ends up being mere a servant. Thus, she quietly engages herself into the duty of the family. Thus, marital bliss turns into a curse for this old woman. The theme, marital disagreement has been presented in all its socio-cultural and psychological implications in an

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existential way. Desai's responsive representation of the individual resistance of anglicized, middle-class women in modern India amidst prohibiting communal traditions bestowed by a retrospective patriarchal culture merits special mention here.

*Fire on The Mountain* is the most popular and unique novel of Anita Desai. The concept of alienation and the issues of existentialism have been competently employed by the novelist in this novel. The two central characters Raka and Nanda Kaul are shown having some self-alienating characteristics that lead them to self-viciousness. They literally fail to make any decision on their own or to take any liability or to lead their lives in a concrete manner. However, they accept compounded resolutions to cope up with their troubles. Both the female characters, Nanda and Raka take refuge in the proximity to nature by avoiding the society or we can say by rejecting the societal and domestic ties. They, in their lives, preserve an outlook of acceptance and alienation from the society. However, the zeal for the calmness and peace of mind lead the characters like Ila Das, Raka and Nanda Kaul to the loss of self-identity, depersonalization and mental trauma. All of them are somewhat the representation of the people with psychological dilemma. The novel has its main theme in the compare and contrast between two diverge generations and their emotional outlooks by the characters while the problematic marriage life of husband and wife is set in the background to make the readers realize the reasons of Nanda Kaul's alienation. The theme of failure in marriage leads to alienation is shrewdly put into the background only to replace it with the fresh one and i.e. 'the difference between two generations'. It is done in order to avoid the persuasions to imaginative monotony.

Unlike Desai's earlier novels where the young people are shown to have faced these problems, here all the age groups are covered by the novelist. The alienated soul of an old lady, her friend and her great granddaughter are presented in the novel in terms of psychological disorder. Nanda Kaul says, "Raka you really are a great grandchild of mine, aren't you? You are a minor like me than any of my children or grand children. You are exactly like me" (pg.5) It makes pretty clear that not only the young, that we have seen in her earlier novels, but also the old ones are shown being alienated in this novel and thus it is different from that of her other novels. Every character has its own quality and they are more often than not shuttle-cock between affection and aloofness. Similarly, their participation and extraction is terminal and pointless.

Anita Desai, being famous for displaying what runs through the minds of her characters, treats Nanda Kaul as alike as her other characters like Ila Das and Raka. Emotional shattering has always been the major aspect in her novels. Being a woman Desai has depicted true picture of women and their plights, their mental struggle and hysterical attacks of theirs. Anita Desai has explored profoundly the mental intensity of women like Nanda Kaul. Several images of dreadfulness and terror have been used by Desai to display Nanda Kaul's lacerated sentiments. Thus, the novel is a perfect example of mental struggle and consequent mental illness. The main character having the psychological disorder is at the surface but the reasons for it are covered.

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Nanda Kaul hardly ever shows these reasons but throughout the novel, they are revealed and the readers can easily understand them.

*Fire on The Mountain* deals with the three characters, their lives and their stories namely Nanda Kaul, Ila Das and Raka. However, it focuses mainly on the agonized soul of Nanda Kaul who happens to be the wife of a former vice-chancellor of Punjab University. Nanda Kaul is a highly sensitive and introvert lady. Because of the existential dilemma, she seeks withdrawal and searches a new meaning of life but all these things make her feel alienated. She has been caught in the web of self-contradiction. However, it is not realized by Kaul that she has a split personality disorder caused by her desire of the self to recoil from all contacts and yet attempts to reach out to the others. She finds herself stuck between two contradictory forces: Withdrawal and involvement, detachment and attachment. Carignano, the place where she finds her solitude, privacy and idealistic views of life, is the one place she always wants to go. In her old age, she tries to find out the real meaning of life as it is believed that this age is the time when the push away of the past takes place. In the Indian tradition, this period calls for the self- assessment by leaving aside materialistic things and the people too. The people seek solitude and detachment. Like others, Nanda Kaul's mindset is something of this sort. She leaves everything in an attempt to seek solitude and peace of mind. In the earlier chapters, Nanda Kaul tries to do this by giving up all the heaped up responsibilities but fails drastically. However, finally she gets success in doing so. Her wish to be alone has been fulfilled as she withdraws to Carignano, a lonely house situated in Kasauli. Unlike traditional Indian senior citizens who seek peace and divinity in the old age, Nanda Kaul goes to Carignano because she likes the tranquility of that place and enjoys the starkness of the town. Nanda Kaul's idea of staying alone with peace is brutally hurt when she gets to know by a letter from her daughter Asha that Raka, her granddaughter is being sent to Carignano because of Asha's illness in Geneva. She sees it as an assault on her peace as Anita Desai says,

“She struggled to suppress her anger and disappointment, her daughter's busy-body ways, her meddling, Raka's arrival at Carignano. Have I not done enough and had enough? I want no more. I want nothing. Can I be left with nothing? But there was no answer and of course she expected none” (pg 17)

As far as Desai's heroines are concerned, Kaul is the oldest. She has the conflict in her mind because of her desire to live alone. However, the world around her never leaves her alone. Being a wife of Vice- Chancellor her life is 'full of people'. There are so many guests, meetings and parties all the time. Her own family, children and relatives all make her furious. Although she is raised financially and socially, she is fed-up of all these emotionally and thus she regards her life at her husband's house as 'a boring affair'. Her life is meaningless with him because there is no involvement of her in it.

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Nanda's voluntarily alienation is the result of her past experiences. She has been sick of all the duties. Her husband's long affair with Miss David also makes her believe in the meaninglessness of life and the importance of attachment has been gone from her life. Her flashbacks reveal that she has bargained with her fate. Her belief in doing good leads her to unbearable mental traumas and suffering. She wants to be a queen of her house but ends up being mere a servant. Thus, she quietly engages herself into the duty of the family.

Thus, Anita Desai has depicted the problems of individuals caught in this changing world. This novel is therefore a treatise on the condition of such women as have the misfortune of having nothing in common with their husbands and their alienation and loss of identity. When the needs of a woman is not satisfied, especially from her husband, a woman cannot tolerate it and her mind becomes stressful that leads to insanity.

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