

FIRE ON THE MOUNTAIN : A PLURIVOCAL FEMINIST DISCOURSE

Fire On The Mountain (1977), Anita Desai's fifth novel, is a woman centred narrative, portraying three women characters – Nanda Kaul, the widow of a university Vice-Chancellor, her great-granddaughter Raka and her life-long friend Illa Das. So far its criticism has tended to focus on Anita Desai's detailed study of these three female characters and particularly on her presentation of Nanda Kaul, the protagonist of the novel, although Ralph J. Crane, on the other hand, has focused on 'the patriarchal oppression' and considered it as 'the antagonist of the novel' (Ralph J. Crane in A. L. McLeod (ed.) 1996:94) Again, adopting a psychoanalytic feminist approach, Bettina L. Knapp has focused on the novelist's characterization and drawing upon Hindu mythology provided an interesting insight into Desai's naming of her characters and the novel's symbolism and imagery (Parker & Starkey (eds.) 1995 : 177-193). However, in a Foucauldian feminist perspective, the novel may be considered as a plurivocal feminist discourse, emerging out of the struggles of the three women characters against different forms of patriarchal oppression. In power relations they first experience oppression and then create resistance to it. In other words, they recreate the history of their oppressive life from their own standpoint and thereby assert their own subjecthood. While asserting their subjecthood, they take different positions of resistance to the oppressive forms of patriarchal power.

Like *Cry, The Peacock* and *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*, this novel has triptyche structure, focusing on each of the three female characters in turn. Initially Nanda Kaul is shown to be at Carignano with which Raka and Illa Das come to be associated with the progress of the narrative. Carignano is a house in Kasauli on the Himalayan range. It was initially built by a British colonel with a concern for his wife's ill-health. Eventually, it came to be used by the neurotic maiden British ladies. After independence it became a haunted house as the British ladies were hurriedly shipped back to England in order to save them from rapes by the natives. The deserted house was up for sale and Nanda Kaul bought

it to give herself shelter from the oppressive demands of patriarchal family. Nanda has withdrawn into Carignano where she finds everything she wanted in her life. Residing in this quiet house, she fancies she could merge with pine trees and be mistaken for one :

To be a tree, no more and no less, was all she was prepared to undertake (4).

Her desire for identification with nature may be construed as her protest against the oppressive patriarchal ideology that forced her in the roles of daughter, wife and mother. She no longer considers the roles joyful. In the inner structure of her mind we find the indelible impression of the injuries she sustained in her roles as daughter, wife and mother.

Nanda Kaul's past is like 'a great, heavy, difficult book' (30) that tells us of a woman suffering from stranglehold of family ties : 'from nimiety, the disorder, the fluctuating and unpredictable excess' (Ibid). The wives of the professors and others would think 'the Vice-Chancellor is lucky to have a wife who can run everything as she does' (18), but it was beyond their understanding that the house she stalked through was 'his house, never hers' (Ibid). In spite of her discharge of all duties and responsibilities in 'his house', she had to bear a life of total neglect and lovelessness. One might visualise in her a perfect follower of Manu's code : 'obedience to husband is the beginning, middle and the end of female duty'. Marriage was a commitment to her. Whatever be its traumas, she left no stone unturned to fulfil the demands of her husband and his children. Her life was used up in cooking, sewing washing and mothering. She was not paid for the great service she rendered to her husband. A masculinist critic may argue that her husband paid her great attention by consulting her in respect of certain family matters. But for a feminist critic, the Vice-Chancellor's consultation with his wife was nothing but an eye-wash. The motive behind it was to divert her attention away from his liaison with Miss David and to cajole her into the prescribed roles of wifhood and motherhood.

As S. Indira puts it, Nanda Kaul's loveless conjugal life is suggested by the image of 'badminton court'. In her view, the badminton court evokes tension, anger, disapproval and distaste in Nanda Kaul. As the court is the place where her husband played games with his mistress, it becomes the symbol of treachery, and 'the broken and discarded shuttlecock'

suggests her loveless plight (S. Indira, 1994:103). Anyway, as a protest against her husband's perfidy towards her, she shifted her husband's bed from their shared room to a small dressing room, though her protest could not break the liaison. Besides that protest, she made no other attempt at breaking the liaison because of her consideration of certain factors. First, sagacious Nanda Kaul thought it beneath her dignity to question her husband's extra-marital sexuality. Secondly, she could not break the marriage bond lest she should lose the social status of a Vice-Chancellor's wife and plunge herself into straitened circumstances. Thirdly, her love for life forbade her to commit suicide to come out of the patriarchal oppression. However, in delineating this sort of husband-wife relationship Anita Desai makes us aware of the contradiction in patriarchal ideology. Desai exposes that monogamy in Hindu patriarchal society is meant for women only, but not for men because, according to middle class Hindu morality, the women's extra-marital affairs with other men are considered as an act of infidelity whereas the men's extra-marital affairs are in no way considered as an act of treachery towards their wives.

Nanda's relationship with her children was equally ungratifying. For her, motherhood was not a joy. This is why the years when her children were small now look to her 'like the gorge, cluttered, choked and blackened with the heads of children and grandchildren' (17). She was so fed up with them in the past that she now groans :

Discharge me ... I've discharged all my duties, discharge (30).

Actually, too much societal demands upon her forced her to choose a life of isolation at Carignano. This seems to indicate that 'there is no space beyond those of daughter, wife and mother that a woman in India can occupy' (Ralph J. Crane in A. L. McLeod (ed.) 1996:95).

However, after her self-imposed isolation at Carignano, Nanda Kaul tries to be a selfish woman. She does not want anybody or anything to intrude into her quiet life. Her selfishness may be construed as a protest against her previous selfless life. She craves no attachment except 'to be alone, to have Carignano to herself, in this period of life when stillness and calm were all she wished to entertain' (17).

But her quest for perfect stillness is thwarted with the sudden arrival of a letter from Asha, her elder daughter :

Darling Mama, ... Now I've persuaded Tara into going to Geneva and Rakesh into taking her ... I had a long talk with him, he is not really so bad as Tara might make you believe, she simply doesn't understand him, does not understand men, and she really is the wrong type of wife for a man like him so I can't blame him entirely although it is true that he does drink— well, I have to get Tara ready ... But there is one problem ... the problem is, of course, Raka ... Tara thought I could take Raka with me. But that is quite out of question ... she is very weak ... so Tara and I have decided it will be best to send her to you for the summer. And I know how happy it will make you to have your great-grandchild for company in that lonely house (15-16).

The discourse in the form of a letter affects her subjectivity because of two things : first, Asha's attitude to Tara and second, Raka's imminent presence at Carignano. Asha's attitude to Tara suggests that not only a man but also a woman can be the enemy of another woman. Anita Desai never forgets to notice this fact too. She traces a compliant woman in Asha who colludes with a woman's oppressor and thereby contributes towards the perpetuation of male hegemony. Instead of a protest against her daughter's victimization by her son-in-law, she takes sides with him and holds Tara responsible for the failure of their marriage. Again, Anita Desai delineates the male characters like Ram Lal and the grain-seller who are sympathetic towards Raka and Illa Das respectively, but not the oppressors of women. Thus Desai subverts the simple man/woman binary opposition in this fiction. However, Nanda Kaul is in dilemma. She cannot be unsympathetic and indifferent to Tara's predicament. Again she cannot allow Raka to intrude into her private life that hitherto eluded her. Finally, out of sympathy towards Tara she reluctantly accepts Raka.

Raka is unlike the other ordinary children in our society. Unlike them, she does not feel attracted towards the cheerful and gay aspects of Nature, but towards the uncanny places and things. Besides this, her love for freedom, privacy and seclusion makes her different from the other ordinary children. She is such stuff as recluses are made of :

If Nanda Kaul was a recluse out of vengeance for a long life of duty and obligation, her great-granddaughter was a recluse by nature, by instinct. She had not arrived at this condition by a long route of rejection and sacrifice – she was born to it, simply (48).

But Usha Pathania argues that 'Raka is not a born recluse. She becomes an introvert because of the abnormal circumstances around her. She is the victim of a broken home' (Usha Pathania in R. K. Dhawan (ed.) set I Vol-III 1991 : 208). Usha Pathania is right in her argument because Raka is not a born-recluse, but has grown into a recluse out of her knowledge of the ambiguous life in diplomatic society and her experience of the patriarchal oppression in her parental home. Her observation of her mother's constant living in a fear-psychotic situation, her experience of her father's total negligence towards her for being a girl and her grandmother's collusion with her oppressor-father are also the factors that have developed in her a sense of rejection of human company and their so-called safe, cosy and civilized patriarchal society.

Solitude, therefore, never disturbs her. She is happy in Kasauli with its charred house on the ridge, with its fire-blasted hill-top where nothing sounds mercifully, but the creaking of the pines in the wind and the demented cuckoos. She remains absorbed in a world of her own and avoids human company and conversation and even Nanda Kaul's. Strangely Raka's indifference to Nanda Kaul makes the latter powerless. As a result, it becomes a goad, a challenge to her to exercise power over Raka by any means. She applies the age-old great-grandmother's or grandmother's technique of story-telling to the children. But the fantasy tales relating to her childhood and her father fail to catch the interest of Raka. Rather Raka rejects her friendly overtures and affection and prizes loneliness :

She would have to break out into freedom again. She could not bear to be confined to the old lady's fantasy world when the reality outside appealed so strongly ... And here she was hedged, smothered, stifled inside the old lady's words, dreams and more words (100).

What is noticeable in Nanda's life is that in her husband's family she was dependent on her husband, but after his death she adopts a separatist's position by plunging herself into a self-imposed isolation at Carignano where she asserts her selfhood not in relation to her

children, but in relation to quiet Nature. But with the arrival of Raka, a change begins to take place in her. She makes an attempt at relating her self to that of Raka and thereby tries to get hold on Raka. Raka is not willing to move an inch from her radical position which she maintains by shunning her father, grandmother, great-grandmother and even almost all human companionships. The feminist in Raka visualises an oppressor of woman in her sovereign-father. 'All the caged, clawed, tailed headless male and female monsters and the song of parental love in the club' oppress her mind so vehemently that she figures her father behind them :

Somewhere behind them, behind it all, was her father, home from a party, stumbling and crushing 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 (71).

Not only this, the whole of the patriarchal world appears to her to be replete with animality.

After the club incident, Raka shifts her role position from the observer of the patriarchal oppression to the sympathizer of the oppressed. Symbolically, she plays the role of a sympathizer of the oppressed through her request to Ram Lal not to throw stone at the young monkey, 'pinched and anxious' (78). Identifying her position with that of the young monkey, she flings her feminist rage and anger through untimely north-wind against the oppressive patriarchal world :

A high wind whined through pine trees all afternoon, lashing the branches and scattering the cones... small white butterflies were being blown about like scraps of paper over the bleached grass (81).

Illa Das, a typical christian spinster with the symptoms of misery and misfortune on her face, is now a social welfare officer fighting against the ills of society. She stands foil to Nanda Kaul. With her arrival at Carignano, Nanda Kaul begins to feel as if 'the entire weight of the overloaded past seemed to pour onto her like liquid cement that immediately set solid, incarcerating her in its stiff gloom' (117). But as Ralph J. Crane argues, 'Illa Das's arrival at Carignano turns out to be more than the interruption Nanda envisages : it is,

in fact, a call to battle against a patriarchal system that has brutally oppressed all three women since birth” (A. L. McLeod (ed.) 1996 : 94).

However, Illa Das looks back to her past to see that she too lived a life of luxury and abundance in her parental home. Initially it appears to her that she was well-treated by her father who paid for ‘the very best, French lessons, piano lessons, English governesses’ (127) for his daughters. But she realises with hindsight that her expensive education left her ‘helpless, positively handicapped’ (Ibid). The critic like Ralph J. Crane points out, ‘it is an education that does nothing to prepare Illa for life outside the patriarchally acceptable sphere of female life – as daughter, wife and then mother’ (McLeod (ed.) 1996:100). The cruel treatment Illa Das receives from her brothers, which leaves her in poverty forces her to work, first as a lecturer and then as a social welfare officer. In both jobs she organises battle against patriarchal oppression. She resigns the job of a lecturership as she finds a junior promoted to the post of Principal over her head. Her resignation may be construed as a protest against the injustice meted out to her and the hegemony of another Vice-Chancellor. Illa Das is such a woman who is ready to face the dire consequences but never to bow to humiliation, corruption and injustice. So as a social welfare officer, she again tries to organise a struggle against the ills of society and male hegemony by educating the village women about the superstitious social practices and ill-health. She takes this step because she observes that ‘the women are willing ... to try and change their dreadful lives by an effort’ (129), although their efforts are stymied by their dominant husbands. Illa Das also gears up her fighting against child-marriage. A girl of mere seven years old is being given in marriage to an old widower with six children. What is indicated here is that a female child in patriarchal society is nothing but a commodity or a sex object. Her fight against the child-marriage brings her in direct confrontation with the village priest and Preet Singh, the father of the child. Here it is pertinent to note Rosenwasser’s observation :

Illa Das is an example of women’s courage and strength when confronted by male dominance in terms of inheritance and education which perpetuate dependency. From her own experience, Illa Das realises the importance of an education that will prepare woman for the world outside of home and the need for women to look after their own well-being. By challenging male authority, Illa Das espouses the feminist cause through her conscious

But her feminist voice is gagged by murdering and raping her, and the violent patriarchal power manifests itself through Preet Singh who rapes and murders her.

The discourse of Illa's murder and rape makes a tremendous pressure upon Nanda Kaul's protective self. The whole imaginative edifice that she has so far woven with the help of fantasy tales about her father crumbles down. She comes upon reality and confesses :

Her father had never been to Tibet—he had bought the little Buddha from a travelling pedlar. They had not had bears and leopards in their home, nothing but overfed dogs and bad-tempered parrots (145).

Nanda Kaul cannot remain detached and serene like the statue of Lord Buddha while Illa's rape makes her feel that the chastity of the entire woman community is ravished. Her confession about her father can be construed as a symbolic expression of feminist rage against the victimization of daughters by their patriarch fathers. Despite this, Nanda Kaul suffers from guilt consciousness that she is also involved in her friend's murder and rape because she refused to respond to Illa Das's unspoken, yet nevertheless clearly understood plea for a shelter at Carignano. This sense of guilt makes a tremendous pressure on her heart and she dies of heart attack before her cry for another battle against violent phallic power.

But Raka reacts to Illa's murder and rape in a radical way. She now moves to an action like violence for violence. She counters the violent patriarchal power by setting the forest on fire. Raka's setting the forest on fire may be taken as being symbolic of destruction and regeneration. By setting the forest on fire, she symbolically destroys the violent phallic power with the hope of regenerating a holistic and life-affirming women's world.

Thus three women take different positions of resistance to the oppressive form of patriarchal power. Nanda's fight is for her personal power and autonomy; Illa's for social transformation and Raka's for a new world based on women's ethics. So if Nanda's voice is regarded as that of an individual feminist, Illa's is akin to that of a socialist and Raka's is that of a radical feminist. These three different feminist voices are finally interrelated by another stout feminist voice raised against rape that is, after all, an omnipresent terror to all women of any class, race or caste. Thus *Fire on the Mountain* emerges as a plurivocal feminist discourse on women's victimization by men in different forms of patriarchy.