

FIRE ON THE MOUNTAIN by Anita Desai

The protagonist of the novel FOTM by Anita Desai, Nanda Kaul is an elderly woman, living in the hills of Kausali, in a house called CARIGNANO. She decides to live a life of a recluse after having lived a life choked with activities. She perfectly fulfils her multiple responsibilities of running a household, looking after a brood of children, and maintaining the social status of her Vice Chancellor husband. After such a hectic life, she feels no sense of achievement or fulfillment. Rather she is left with a sense of being betrayed, or used. Her children leave her as soon as her services ended; her husband was unfaithful towards her and her friends sought her simply for their own benefits. Her decision to retire to the hills was not compelled by an urge to seek peace or indulge in spiritual pursuits, it was simply to keep herself aloof from society and hide among the pine trees and be like one of them. She likes the emptiness of CARIGNANO and the starkness of the town. She has lost all urge for living and therefore leaves her house unkempt and shabby. Anita Desai represents in her the silent, sacrificing woman of Indian households, who are expected to carry out their duties silently and stifle their own needs, desires and emotions. Throughout her life, Nanda Kaul has been an object of servitude, deprived of recognition, love, respect or gratitude. She had willingly carried out her roles to perfection, believing herself to be the queen of the house and was waiting for applause for her services, but the rude realization jostled her that she was no better than a doormat.

In her frustration, Nanda frantically searches for detachment, because life has not honoured her claims. Her withdrawal is a sign of her rebellion and the title of the novel projects this rebellion in her as well in her great grand daughter, Raka. Nanda has been a complaint individual, valuing love as the most essential part of life. She was certain that her loving and dutiful nature would be rewarded with love. But the realities of life gave her a raw deal. Her husband's infidelity, his indifference towards her, the callous attitude of her children, were humiliating for her. Yet she engages herself in the discharge of her family duties, presenting the picture of a silent sufferer or a martyr. The novelist portrays her defenselessness through the imagery of the bird, lapwing, which is disturbed, agitated and unable to fight to defend herself. Nanda also thinks of herself as a cat in the night, silently prowling alone in the dark.

When Nanda's responsibilities of a wife, mother and hostess get over, there is no feeling of achievement but only a sense of relief, at being released from a bondage. When she goes to the hills it was not by choice to live a relaxed and happy life, but she is compelled to do so since there is no other alternative. Life has reduced her to a bitter woman who withdraws to lick her wounds alone. She therefore retires to a place where the past would not mock or haunt her. She wants to sever all ties with the past, even her family and friends. She decides that she would not allow others to use her again. But the past comes back to her in the form of Raka, her great granddaughter and Ila Das her friend. Raka is sent to her by her granddaughter, Tara because she wants to keep her away from the disturbing and violent

atmosphere in her house. Ila Das is a social worker, reduced to penury and having nowhere to go, was seeking refuge in the house of Nanda. Ila's request was politely refused but Raka stayed on with her and revived feelings of love and attachment in Nanda. The novel ends with Nanda Kaul holding on to the receiver of the telephone and collapsing, at the news that Ila Das had been brutally raped and murdered in the village. A powerful surge of guilt sweeps over Nanda, because she has refused shelter to an old friend. Self-realisation dawned on her that by refusing compassion and kindness to fellow human beings she has degenerated herself towards inhumanity. Nanda herself is pushed towards a slow degenerative death because of her guilt and failure in life's karma.

Nanda Kaul has been presented as a person with a split personality. There is a desire in her to recoil from all contact and yet having the urge to reach out to others. She vacillates between the two contradictory forces--- withdrawal and involvement; detachment and attachment. The need to withdraw arrives from her desire to preserve her wholeness and sanity. Whereas her urge to be involved, is arrived at from her innate feelings of compassion. This conflict within Nanda, make her take recourse to self-destructive isolation. The same conflict can also be seen in the young Raka. She too has turned into a withdrawn child, having witnessed her father beating her mother. Nanda Kaul makes attempts to befriend her great granddaughter by telling her stories, real and fictitious and trying to shower her with love. These attempts on Nanda's part, make her sleep well at night. Raka however does not open up to Nanda. She prefers to wander on the hillside alone. Raka presents a picture of terrified child, trying to shut out the agony of experiences. Nanda, on the other hand has a tendency to look back to her past and regret with pain. Both Raka and Nanda offer the patterns of self-alienation of the severest kind, leading them towards neuroses. Metaphysically, they point to the futility of human existence and the inevitability of human suffering. The agony of both, arise from a sense of insecurity developed in the claustrophobic atmosphere they both had lived in. Raka's predicament is identified in her confrontation with the sordid reality of her home. Nanda's difficulties arise out of her intense self- contempt generated from her dismal failure in life.