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*Research Article*

# Spaces of Refusal: Silence, Solitude, and Existential Feminist Agency in Desai's *Fire on the Mountain*

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## Abstract

*This paper examines Anita Desai's* Fire on the Mountain *as a feminist–existentialist narrative in which silence, solitude, and withdrawal function as modes of resistance rather than signs of passivity. Drawing on Simone de Beauvoir's existential feminism, Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, and Hélène Cixous's concept of écriture féminine, the study analyzes the lives of three women-Nanda Kaul, Raka, and Ila Das-to demonstrate how female subjectivity is forged through refusal, non-engagement, and ethical choice. Employing a qualitative textual methodology and close reading, the study argues that Desai reconfigures silence as an active strategy of agency that challenges patriarchal expectations surrounding aging, femininity, and social participation. The findings reveal that the narrative resists normative feminist paradigms of empowerment by foregrounding inward, existential modes of freedom. The study contributes to South Asian feminist literary studies by repositioning Desai's novella within contemporary debates on gender, agency, and existential autonomy.*

**Keywords:** Resistance, female agency, self, autonomy, power of solitude and existential freedom

## Introduction

Anita Desai's novella *Fire on the Mountain (1999)* tells a story of the search for self and discovery. In the narrative, the author asserts the power of solitude concerning aging and emotional detachment. The story follows Nanda Kaul, an elderly widow who retreats to a secluded house called Carignano in the hills of Kasauli, in her attempt to find solitude and peace. However, her solitude is disrupted when her daughter Asha sends Raka, Nanda's great-granddaughter, to live

with her. Raka turns out to be a quiet and withdrawn child. Though in different ways, she mirrors Nanda's desire for loneliness. The only difference between them is that Raka has a deep fascination with the wild nature around her. As their relationship unfolds, the novel subtly reveals themes of trauma, repression, and the contrast between past and present. Through these characters, Desai deals with the theme of isolation. This novel offers a touching meditation on human emotions and the complexities of personal history.

Thus, I examine the lives of three female characters and their quest for freedom from social and gender expectations. These characters are Nanda Kaul, Illa Das, and Nanda's great-granddaughter, Raka. Each woman faces her own struggles in understanding and expressing her self-identity, mother-daughter relationships, and her journey toward self-discovery. The protagonist, Nanda Kaul, lives in the hills of Kausali far from her family, while Illa Das works to find a stable job to support herself, and Raka struggles to fit into her mother's world, which results in her being sent to live with her great-grandmother. At first glance, these three women seem to navigate very different worlds, but upon closer inspection, it becomes clear that they are all quietly resisting social norms surrounding family, stability, and socialization in their own ways.

The novel, *Fire on the Mountain,* is a subtle and deeply psychological novel that examines the inner lives of three women-Nanda Kaul, Ila Das, and Raka. Each of them is negotiating her existence within a patriarchal and socially normative world. The novella is set in the isolated hill station of Kasauli, it unfolds around Nanda Kaul's voluntary retreat from her former life as the Vice-Chancellor's wife. While living there, her great-granddaughter Raka comes to live with her, though she does not like the idea of sharing space, and afterwards, the tragic visit of her childhood friend Ila Das. At the heart of the narrative lies a powerful meditation on female solitude, intergenerational trauma, and the silent resistance that women mount against societal expectations. Desai uses lucid language and symbolic landscape in order to describe the interior world of these characters. Their interior worlds are the result of the burdens of gender, family, and social conformity. Moreover, these characters put up a strong and complex defiance to such conformity. This proposes to explore *Fire on the Mountain* through the lens of existentialist feminism, particularly the ideas proposed by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1949).

The three central female characters in *Fire on the Mountain* thus offer a spectrum of existential resistance. Nanda Kaul, after years of performing her socially ascribed roles as wife and mother, chooses solitude as a way to unmake her identity and reassert control over her life. Her rejection of social rituals, familial bonds, and even emotional ties can be understood as a form of existential rebellion. Raka, the young girl thrust into Nanda's life, emerges as a figure of instinctive resistance. She rejects affection, refuses interaction, and immerses herself in the wilderness. Her wildness is not a developmental flaw but a rejection of the process of socialization itself. Raka is perhaps the most radical embodiment of existential freedom in the novel-a character who never internalizes the performative norms of femininity. In contrast, Ila Das remains actively engaged in social causes and continues to participate in the public sphere. However, her fate-rape and murder-exposes the brutal cost of asserting female agency within an unyielding patriarchal system. Ila's story warns us that the world does not tolerate women who step outside traditional boundaries, thereby reinforcing the existentialist theme that freedom, while desired, is often met with violent resistance.

This paper, then, positions *Fire on the Mountain* as a feminist existentialist text that interrogates how women resist being defined by others and attempt to forge identities of their own choosing. It seeks to address key questions: What does solitude mean for women in a society that

defines them through relationships? How does silence function not as submission but as resistance? How do Desai's characters navigate the tension between personal agency and social conformity? By applying an existentialist feminist methodology, the paper examines how Desai's characters live in a state of tension between social expectation and personal desire. Drawing on the philosophies of de Beauvoir, Butler, and Cixous, it argues that Desai's women do not seek simple emancipation but complex selfhood-a self that is often achieved through withdrawal, rejection, and refusal rather than overt rebellion.

The structure of the paper is organized around a close reading of the three characters. The first chapter examines Nanda Kaul's retreat to Carignano, analyzing her rejection of family and gendered roles in light of de Beauvoir's notion of transcendence. The second chapter focuses on Raka as a symbol of innate resistance, exploring her detachment through Butler's critique of gender performativity. The third chapter interrogates the tragic figure of Ila Das, whose engagement with public life results in brutal punishment, reflecting the dangers of transgressing social norms. Finally, the conclusion synthesizes these perspectives to argue that Desai's novel presents a deeply layered, existentially charged vision of female resistance-one that redefines silence, solitude, and marginality as acts of radical agency.

In exploring how women assert their freedom within a world structured to deny it, *Fire on the Mountain* speaks to the enduring relevance of existentialist feminism. Desai's novel resists simplistic notions of empowerment and instead delves into the psychological and philosophical struggles that shape the female self. Through its minimalist narrative and richly symbolic landscape, it offers a profound meditation on the question: What does it mean to become a woman in one's own right?

**Review of Literature**

A literary and scholarly engagement demonstrates a rich textual and critical perspective on her themes and techniques. She has published more than a dozen books on a variety of subjects and themes. Her first novel-a novella-*Fire on the Mountain* was published in 1977, and the latest novella, *Rosarita* (2024) examines the theme of mother-daughter relations in a changing cultural landscape. From the first book to the latest, her work has garnered critical reviews, scholarly investigations, and intellectual debates about her presentation of characters, themes, and meanings. For example, the death of Nanda Kaul when the narrative concludes has raised a question about the nature of resistance coming from an existential hero. Desai's work has been widely examined through various critical lenses, particularly in relation to language, female identity, psychological depth, and existential themes. The following literature review looks into the responses to Desai's work, focusing on the primary text, *Fire on the Mountain.*

Scholars have explored how her narratives challenge dominant structures and provide a voice to marginalized perspectives. Desai's engagement with linguistic experimentation has been linked to the modernist movement. D'Souza asserts that Desai and other writers challenge conventional language structures to explore women's lives within a patriarchal world, thereby contributing to the evolution of modernist literary traditions. This disruption of traditional language norms allows Desai's work to subvert dominant cultural narratives and reshape literary expression. The reconstruction of female identity in Desai's novels has been widely discussed. Sengupta examines how Desai's female protagonists in *Voices in the City* engage in subversive acts against male-dominated discourse, challenging traditionally sacrosanct authority structures. Saini *Fire on the Mountain* highlights the protagonist's journey toward self-exploration beyond familial roles. Both scholars emphasize the tension between societal expectations and the quest for personal

identity, illustrating how Desai portrays women who resist patriarchal constraints and navigate their sense of self within a rigid socio-cultural framework.

The theme of spatial symbolism in Desai's novels has also been analyzed in depth. Swain discusses the recurring image of the house, noting how it serves as both a place of belonging and alienation. Desai juxtaposes domestic spaces with elements of nature, such as flowers and gardens, to symbolize female displacement. This contrast is particularly evident in *Fire on the Mountain*, where the protagonist's house represents her detachment from conventional domestic life and highlights the broader theme of female estrangement.

Desai's work is deeply psychological, reflecting existential concerns that resonate with readers. Asnani identifies Desai as an authentic Indian voice, emphasizing her exploration of psychological motivations, frustration, and existential dilemmas. The sense of futility and estrangement in her novels mirrors the complexities of Indian culture, positioning Desai as a significant commentator on modern existential struggles. Her focus on the internal conflicts of her characters underscores her role in depicting the uncertainties and paradoxes of contemporary existence. However, in an interview, Libert asserts that "there are other interests certainly" (52) than "Apart from the study of the individual" in Desai's novels.

Similarly, Desai's stories of life grapple with the "intangible realities of life [that] plunge into the innermost depths of human psyche" (44). In other words, Desai has a knack for capturing concealed human emotions through simple looking characters. Similarly, S. P. Swain pays important attention to the house motif in Desai's novels: "The house is concerned with the quest for self-identification" (123). In her novels, Swain further explains that "the house serves as a symbol of consummation" and a locus of "an assertion of [the] self" (123). Swain further elaborates on the house motif: "For most of the protagonists in Desai, the house is the symbol of their decaying and moribund' selves' (123). The protagonists, in her novels by and large, are "Disgruntled with their self-existence," and such "characters have a frantic desire to assert their identity with the forlorn and forsaken house" (123). Other than belittled self, the use of house image brings "the sickening self of the alienated protagonists" where these characters "surface their straying into the world of death and desolation, of illusions and longings, in quest of meaning and value" (123). The house image exposes these characters' inner psychic life. In other words, the house images brings locates their self into a fixed spatio-temporal frame where their dejected and alienated self tries to thrive. The house in Desai's novels is not only "a symbol of shelter and protection but also of incarceration and laceration. It is the house that fails to house the houseless" (123). The situation gives rise to an existential question about the position of women as householders.

Ashish Sengupta evaluates Desai's engagement with the idea of voices in the city where she "juxtaposes the two different orders of cultural discourse, both rooted in Hindu mythology, to create a new site for contemporary Indian women" (185). In her narrative, through empowered female characters, she "brings in alternative, empowering images of Indian femininity to celebrate the transformations of female consciousness" (185). She uses alternative ideas and myths to create new systems of liberalism. It is reasonable to argue that the nature of resistance in Desai's fiction is directed towards challenging traditional norms through extreme measures such as severing all bonds and walking away from social and familial responsibilities.

The women's question comes to be the central point of argument in the novel. The narrative of single women, widows, and other not-so-socially-ideal women characters in her novel stages a strong resentment to the contemporary social structure:

The critique of societal norms implicit in her representations of the mother is set by a rejection of versions of freedom that are either escapist or solipsistic. The female protagonists of these texts are women whose quest for independence leads to a recognition of the futility of the attempt to sever the ties that connect them with others. This knowledge creates a mood of acceptance, facilitating a willingness to resume a responsible role attuned to one's particular circumstances. (Chakravarty 77)

In the novel, aging women and their bodies serve as a site to express feminine attempts to assert one's own identity, where maternal becomes a site for the articulation of the female desire to determine their own identity. Such audacious attempts are in confrontation with patriarchal inscriptions on the mother's body as a tool to use the mother's body as a means of controlling female subjectivity. Omhovere equates *Fire on the Mountain* as an example of landscape writing that brings two painting traditions-ancient Chinese, *Shanshui,* and European landscape painting-to generate a transformative force to "encourage us to imagine alternative to the traditional place of women in Indian society" (Omhovere 146). In other words, the novel argues for the repositioning of women in Indian cultural landscape.

In the novel, three women characters stage resistance through their withdrawal from the social sphere. Nanda Kaul has left her home and is living in the mountain called Kausali. Her reluctance to entertain any of the guests, including her great-granddaughter Raka, shows her utter resentment of social and familial life. Examined and analyzed through feminist existential philosophy, her reticence can be understood as a resistance to patriarchal social expectations on aging women. Her suspension of grandmotherly duties is a way to assert her freedom while Illa Das's constant search for existential position takes her to multiple jobs. On the same vein, Raka's nonchalant attitude makes her a young rebel to patriarchal societal expectations. In short, these three characters resist the patriarchal expectations of aging, growing up, and living. And, to sum up the literature so far, researchers have devoted attention to textual reading, such as Desai's technique in the novel or the house as a symbol to explain the characters and their psychology. Similarly, other researchers' attention is with reading the novels theoretically, such as landscape theory or feminism, where they explore the social and political factors responsible for the lives of these characters.

However, none of the scholars mentioned above have paid attention to the issue of Nanda Kaul's and other characters' silence as a way of their resistance to the mainstream society and its treatment of women in general. In fact, her suspension of familial responsibility and living alone should be viewed as a revolt against patriarchy, its social norms, and expectations from a woman. Thus, it makes a worth of attention in this research.

In *Fire in the Mountain*, silence comes as an act of feminist resistance rather than passivity. Nanda Kaul's retreat into solitude at Carignano is a rejection of social obligations, which functions as a defiance against patriarchal and societal expectations. These choices reflect existentialist notions of freedom, choice, and authenticity. Thus, her silence is not submission but a conscious rejection of life defined by duty and repression. Similarly, Raka embodies a different but a parallel form of resistance: unlike Nanda's disillusionment with society, Raka's resistance is an innate rejection of social norms. This serves as an excellent example of feminist resistance across the generation. Through these characters, Desai challenges the stereotypes of silence as weakness and instead employs it as a powerful assertion of selfhood and agency against oppressive social structures.

**Theoretical Framework**

This study is grounded in existential feminism, drawing primarily on Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) and supplemented by Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) and Hélène Cixous's essay "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1975). Existential feminism understands freedom not as a static possession but as an ongoing ethical project, achieved through conscious choice within historically and materially constraining structures. De Beauvoir's insistence that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" reframes female identity as a process shaped by lived experience and social oppression rather than biological destiny (de Beauvoir 1). Within this framework, Desai's women characters are read as agents negotiating their existence through refusal, withdrawal, and limited forms of intervention, rather than as simply oppressed victims or triumphant heroines.

Beauvoir's distinction between immanence and transcendence provides the principal conceptual lens for interpreting female silence and solitude as potential acts of resistance. Immanence refers to the repetitive, interior, and service-oriented sphere to which women are historically confined, while transcendence denotes creative, world-constituting action typically reserved for men. In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir argues that women are relegated to immanence when they are reduced to wives, mothers, and caregivers, living "for others" rather than as autonomous subjects. This study reads Nanda Kaul's retreat to Carignano, Raka's instinctive detachment, and Ila Das's risky activism as attempts-partial, ambivalent, and uneven-to move from immanence toward forms of transcendence. Nanda's refusal of familial obligations, Raka's rejection of socialization, and Ila's engagement with public life are thus interpreted as existential projects through which each character asserts a measure of selfhood against the grain of patriarchal expectations.

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity further sharpens the analysis of how Desai's women disrupt normative femininity. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler contends that gender is not an inner essence but "an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts" (Butler 191). What appears as a stable "feminine" identity is in fact the effect of repeated gestures, behaviours, and discourses that are socially enforced and policed. This perspective illuminates how Raka's refusal to seek affection, perform obedience, or center herself within family life functions as a disruption of these gendered repetitions. Similarly, Nanda's abandonment of the roles of wife, mother, and grandmother can be read as a refusal to continue performing the "good woman" script that once defined her, while Ila's outspoken activism represents a risky re-signification of femininity in the public sphere. By foregrounding refusal and non-compliance, the study demonstrates how Desai's characters destabilize the performative norms that sustain patriarchal gender identities.

Hélène Cixous's notion of écriture féminine, articulated in "The Laugh of the Medusa," informs the reading of silence and bodily withdrawal as alternative forms of inscription. Cixous urges women to "write [themselves]" into history by reclaiming their bodies and desires through new modes of expression that resist phallocentric language and logic. Although Desai's women do not engage in literal writing, their bodies, absences, and silences become sites where resistance is inscribed: Nanda's self-imposed solitude, Raka's immersion in wild landscapes, and Ila's physically endangered activism "write" forms of dissent that exceed conventional discourse. Instead of treating silence as a void, this framework views it as a dense, embodied signifying practice that challenges patriarchal expectations about how women should speak, care, and appear.

Taken together, Beauvoir, Butler, and Cixous provide a layered theoretical apparatus for reconceptualizing Desai's representations of female withdrawal and quietude. Beauvoir's

immanence/transcendence opposition foregrounds the ethical stakes of women's attempts to move beyond roles defined by others; Butler's performativity exposes how these roles are produced and sustained through repetition; and Cixous's écriture féminine opens space to see silence, bodily seclusion, and affective opacity as modes of inscription rather than mere absence. Through this composite framework, the paper interprets *Fire on the Mountain* as a text in which inward autonomy, refusal, and even apparent passivity can signify radical forms of existential resistance within South Asian patriarchal contexts.

**Results**

The analysis of *Fire on the Mountain* reveals three interlinked findings that collectively reconceptualize silence and solitude as forms of feminist agency rather than markers of defeat. Through the figures of Nanda Kaul, Raka, and Ila Das, Anita Desai articulates distinct yet connected modes of resistance to patriarchal structures. These modes-existential withdrawal, instinctual refusal, and ethical engagement-demonstrate that female agency operates not only through speech and visibility but also through silence, negation, and refusal.

The first major finding concerns Nanda Kaul's withdrawal to Carignano as an existential refusal of patriarchal social roles. After decades of performing the gendered duties of wifehood and motherhood, Nanda consciously rejects relational identity altogether. Her desire for isolation is articulated unambiguously: "She wanted no one and nothing else. Whatever else came or happened here would be an unwelcome intrusion and distraction" (Desai 3). This declaration establishes silence as a deliberate stance rather than a psychological deficit. Nanda's withdrawal functions as a negation of the social economy that defined her worth through service, care, and availability.

Rather than signifying emptiness, Nanda's solitude reflects exhaustion with what the narrative describes as "the nimiety, the disorder, the fluctuating and unpredictable excess" of her former life (Desai 30). The excess here is not material lack but patriarchal abundance-an overdetermined life crowded by obligations and expectations. Her retreat to Carignano allows her to reclaim bodily and spatial autonomy, a moment captured when she "paced the house, proprietorially, feeling the feel of each stone in the paving with bare feet" (Desai 30–31). This embodied interaction with space underscores her transition from immanence to a fragile form of transcendence, aligning with Simone de Beauvoir's insistence that women must move beyond socially imposed repetition to assert subjectivity.

The second finding identifies Raka as a figure of pre-social, instinctual resistance that destabilizes gendered socialization. Unlike Nanda, whose resistance emerges after prolonged compliance, Raka's detachment precedes full social inscription. The narrator explicitly differentiates their forms of solitude: "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" (Desai 48). This distinction is crucial, as it positions Raka's silence not as withdrawal from society but as a refusal to enter it on its terms.

Raka resists the disciplinary structures that shape femininity from childhood, rejecting "school, … discipline, order and obedience" (Desai 59). Her refusal of affection further unsettles normative expectations of girlhood: she is described as "the only child Nanda had ever known who preferred to stand apart and go off and disappear from being loved" (Desai 79). Through Raka, Desai exposes the constructed nature of gendered behavior, echoing Judith Butler's argument that identity is sustained through repeated performance. Raka's silence, secrecy, and affinity for destruction disrupt the assumption that socialization is natural or inevitable. As the text notes, she retreats from overt recognition because she "loved secrecy above all" (Desai 65), suggesting that opacity itself can function as resistance.

The third finding focuses on Ila Das's public activism as a site where the violent limits of patriarchal tolerance are exposed. Unlike Nanda and Raka, Ila chooses engagement over withdrawal, seeking to challenge oppressive practices from within the social sphere. Her activism, particularly against child marriage, represents what Beauvoir terms ethical freedom-freedom realized through action directed toward the liberation of others. Yet the narrative outcome of Ila's resistance reveals that patriarchal society violently polices women who assert agency publicly.

Ila's determination to intervene is grounded in a sense of civic and moral responsibility. She insists on acting because opposing injustice is "one of the laws of the land" and part of her duty as a state worker (Desai 129). However, her vocal presence and mobility render her threatening in ways that Nanda's withdrawal does not. While Nanda's silence allows her to survive on the margins, Ila's speech and visibility provoke retaliation. The analysis thus demonstrates that resistance is not uniformly punished or rewarded; rather, it is differentially regulated based on its form. Desai does not present Ila's fate as a failure of feminist resistance but as an indictment of a system that destroys women who challenge it openly.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that silence and solitude function as strategic modes of feminist resistance in *Fire on the Mountain*. Desai offers no singular model of empowerment; instead, she presents a spectrum of agency shaped by age, history, and social location. Nanda's existential refusal, Raka's instinctual negation, and Ila's ethical engagement reveal that agency cannot be reduced to speech, productivity, or social participation. Silence, in this context, becomes a language of refusal, while solitude becomes a space for self-authorship.

Ultimately, the results affirm that Desai destabilizes dominant feminist assumptions that equate empowerment with visibility. By foregrounding withdrawal, secrecy, and negation, *Fire on the Mountain* redefines resistance as a complex negotiation with power rather than a triumphant escape from it. As Beauvoir reminds us, "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (1); Desai's characters show that this becoming may occur through silence as much as through speech, and through refusal as much as through action.

**Discussion**

Existential feminist theory helps recast Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* as a meditation on inward autonomy rather than on visible empowerment or social mobility. Instead of measuring freedom by access to public voice, institutions, or rights, the novella stages a quieter, more conflicted struggle over the right not to perform prescribed forms of femininity. Nanda Kaul, Raka, and Ila Das each trace different trajectories of refusal that complicate liberal feminist celebrations of voice, visibility, and participation, suggesting that silence itself can become a politically charged practice.

An existential feminist lens foregrounds freedom as a lived project of self-making under constraint rather than as a stable possession guaranteed by formal equality. Simone de Beauvoir insists that women are historically reduced to immanence, confined to service and repetition, and that transcendence begins when a woman ceases to be "a parasite" whose relation to the world is mediated through men (de Beauvoir 689). Desai's narrative takes up this problematic by showing women who do not gain institutional power but nonetheless attempt to reclaim authorship over their existence through withdrawal, non-compliance, and risky intervention. Freedom here is not framed as career, mobility, or representation; it appears as the fragile ability to say "no" to roles that annihilate the self, even when that "no" remains unspoken.

At the same time, existential feminism emphasizes ambiguity: acts of refusal are never pure, and autonomy is always negotiated within structures that push back. Nanda's solitude,

Raka's wildness, and Ila's activism all remain entangled with histories of trauma, dependence, and vulnerability, making it impossible to read any of them as simple success stories of empowerment. Precisely this ambiguity allows Desai to question the assumption that liberation must look like public speech or social participation; her women become most autonomous when they step aside from the very arenas in which liberal feminism locates agency.

Nanda Kaul's withdrawal to Carignano is a pointed disruption of the gendered ethics of care imposed on aging women. After decades as the Vice-Chancellor's wife-"brought up" to manage home, children, and social obligations-she abandons the "old house" and its "crowding that had stifled her" in order to live alone, refusing further demands on her time, affection, and labour. Her rejection of letters, visits, and even the telephone is not simple misanthropy but a refusal to be drawn back into the endless work of caring that defined her previous existence. In existential terms, she moves from being an object-for-others to a subject who sets limits, even if that subjectivity is austere and defensive.

This refusal, however, is uneasy and ethically fraught. When Ila Das arrives, homeless and precarious, Nanda physically restrains herself from saying "Come and stay with me" because she fears it would "ruin her existence here at Carignano," choosing self-preservation over solidarity. The scene exposes a central tension in existential feminism: the same act that secures Nanda's fragile autonomy also reproduces abandonment in another woman's life. Her silence thus both resists and re-enacts the violence of a social order that has long expected women to sacrifice themselves for others.

Raka radicalizes the question of freedom by refusing gendered socialization almost from the outset. The narrator notes that "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," marking her detachment as a pre-emptive refusal rather than a reaction. Unlike the children Nanda has known, who "wanted only to be such a center" of adult attention, "Raka alone did not," resisting the affective circuits through which girls are trained to become caring, compliant subjects. Her silence is not merely the residue of trauma; it operates as a sustained non-participation in the scripts of cuteness, obedience, and gratitude that define "good" girlhood.

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity helps clarify Raka's position: if gender is "fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means," Raka's refusal to perform those signs amounts to a rejection of femininity itself as a coherent identity (Butler 173). Her affinity for "illegitimate, uncompromising, and lawless" landscapes, and her climactic claim-"Look, Nani, I have set the forest on fire"-stage an existential freedom that seeks not to reform the social order but to burn away the very environments that would discipline her into a recognizable woman. In this sense, her silence and wildness constitute a negative, but potent, politics of non-cooperation.

Where Nanda and Raka cultivate forms of inward or marginal autonomy, Ila Das tests the limits of visible resistance in the public sphere. Working as a welfare officer, she goes "from house to house and especially wherever [she] hear[s] there's a child marriage in the offing," confronting patriarchal authority, religious legitimation, and male decision-making. Her speech is loud, morally charged, and explicitly critical of the "oily, oily priest-man" and the men who insist on their right to marry off a "little girl . . . only just seven," marking her as a figure of overt feminist dissent.

The brutal response to this visibility-her rape and murder by Preet Singh and his associates-underscores the risks women face when their resistance becomes legible as such. Drawing on de Beauvoir's *Ethics of Ambiguity*, one might say that Ila embodies the demand that freedom "engage itself in the world," yet the world she engages answers with annihilation rather than recognition. Her silencing militarizes the boundary that Nanda and Raka skirt more obliquely: the closer female

agency moves toward publicly articulated critique, the more violently patriarchal structures reassert themselves. In this way, Ila's fate complicates any straightforward celebration of voice as the primary feminist strategy.

Read together, these trajectories complicate liberal feminist assumptions that equate agency with speaking out and entering public institutions. Nanda's retreat, Raka's anti-social wildness, and Ila's doomed activism are not arranged on a simple scale from "passive" to "empowered"; instead, each exposes a different configuration of constraint and choice. Desai's novel suggests that when speech is punished and care is compulsory, the decision to withhold one's words, labour, or presence can itself become a form of protest. Silence here is not a blank space to be filled with voice but a dense practice of refusal that both protects and imperils the self.

Existential feminist theory helps name this ambiguity without resolving it into victory or failure. Freedom appears as a fragile, often painful insistence on inward autonomy-on the right to stop performing, to stop explaining, to stop appearing-within a world that remains structurally hostile to women's subjectivity. In *Fire on the Mountain*, that insistence is sometimes spoken, sometimes acted, and often simply not enacted; yet in all three cases, Desai reveals how even silence can be charged with a politics that liberal frameworks, focused on visibility, are not fully equipped to recognize.

**Conclusion**

*Fire on the Mountain* ultimately stands as a powerful feminist–existentialist text that reimagines silence as protest and solitude as a hard-won form of agency. Through Nanda Kaul's withdrawal to Carignano, Raka's instinctual detachment, and Ila Das's hazardous public activism, Desai foregrounds modes of resistance that do not fit neatly within liberal narratives of emancipation as visibility, mobility, and institutional power. The novel insists that freedom for women living under entrenched patriarchal structures often takes the form of refusal-refusal to nurture, to perform affective labour, to conform to gendered expectations, or to accept the terms on which "empowerment" is offered. Within an existential feminist framework, these refusals emerge as ethically charged acts of self-definition, even when they remain ambivalent, costly, or incomplete.

By centering inward resistance, Desai challenges dominant critical paradigms that equate agency with speech and public participation. Nanda's defensive solitude, Raka's wild non-compliance, and Ila's fatal outspokenness collectively demonstrate that the line between "agency" and "victimhood" is far less stable than liberal feminist models suggest. Silence in this novel is not simply the mark of oppression to be broken by voice; it is also a chosen strategy that protects a precarious sense of self from further appropriation, even as it risks isolation and ethical compromise. Similarly, solitude is not figured as social failure but as an existential project in which women attempt to move from immanence to transcendence, crafting lives no longer entirely defined by the demands of family, community, or nation. Desai's attention to the psychological and philosophical textures of these choices complicates celebratory narratives of "strong female characters" and instead foregrounds the difficult labour of becoming a subject under conditions that relentlessly deny subjecthood.

This study, by reading *Fire on the Mountain* through the intertwined lenses of existential feminism and South Asian feminist literary criticism, contributes to ongoing debates about how resistance is conceptualized in women's writing. It extends the theoretical vocabulary of feminist critique beyond familiar tropes of speech, rights, and visibility to include negative acts-withdrawal, non-participation, non-communication-as politically meaningful practices. In the South Asian context, where gendered expectations around care, community, and respectability are

especially powerful, such an emphasis on refusal helps illuminate the quieter, less legible forms of dissent enacted by older women, children, and economically vulnerable subjects. At the same time, the study highlights how Desai's use of landscape, domestic spaces, and ecological imagery interweaves questions of female autonomy with environmental desolation and renewal, gesturing toward an emergent conversation between existential feminism and ecocriticism.

The analysis also opens promising avenues for future interdisciplinary work at the intersection of existentialism, trauma studies, and environmental humanities. Raka's attraction to burned forests and ruined structures, Nanda's attachment to the stripped-down austerity of Carignano, and Ila's violent death all invite further exploration of how psychic injury, historical violence, and damaged environments shape-and are shaped by-female subjectivity. Trauma theory could deepen understanding of how silence functions simultaneously as symptom and strategy, while ecocritical approaches might trace how Desai's scorched landscapes encode both the costs and possibilities of women's refusal. More broadly, situating *Fire on the Mountain* alongside other South Asian women's texts that privilege withdrawal, opacity, or interiority over declaration and visibility would help map a regional archive of feminist–existentialist resistance that has yet to be fully theorized. In foregrounding the politics of silence and solitude, this study argues that Desai's novella not only critiques patriarchal structures but also forces feminist criticism itself to rethink what counts as freedom, resistance, and agency.

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