

Critical Appraisal of Female Consciousness in Anita Desai's *The Fire on The Mountain*

Saleem Dhobi, PhD

Asst. Professor of English, Patan Multiple Campus

Tribhuvan University

saleemphd.tu12@gmail.com

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Abstract

This paper assesses the consciousness of female characters who represent women in Indian society. By using the feminist perspective, Desai's work, Fire on the Mountain is analyzed to explain why and how women suffer oppression, confinement, slavery and obedience in marriage system that is guided by the principles of patriarchy. The novel portrays Nanda Kaul's consciousness that is missing in the beginning but gradually confinement, oppression and exploitation teach her to become aware of her individuality. Her life is deeply impacted by societal limitations and patriarchal norms and values. The sufferings lead her to seeking for solitude and peace that is possible in the wilderness. Finally, her consciousness of being an individual with personal feelings and emotions causes transition in Nanda's life. Her life journey demonstrates the course of women in the marriage institution in patriarchy as depicted in the novel.

The exploration of female consciousness by analyzing diverse modes of Nanda's life implies the consciousness that comes to those who contemplate on their existence and subjectivity ignored in the world controlled and led by men. The subjugation of female characters represents the subordinated life of women in Indian society. When women begin to question the system created for the vested interests of men, they are likely to understand the discriminatory structure in which women are mostly on the margin. By using the approach to content analysis, the paper has been accomplished highlighting the female consciousness in the novel.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Oppression, Resistance, Independence, Consciousness

Introduction

This article examines consciousness of female characters in Anita Desai's *The Fire on the Mountain* by employing psychoanalysis as a theoretical tool. The paper analyzes the image of representation of female characters and their consciousness in Desai's fictional writing. It makes a comparative study by putting the fictional characters and the glorified characters of the Holy Scripture of Hinduism. Desai narrates the story of Nanda Kaul, an elderly widow

who lives in an isolated house. She has experienced a life-long of adversity due to her husband's infidelity. All through her life, Nanda complies with the wishes of her husband and responsibly submits to the requirements of his social status. Nevertheless, she never receives the love she deserves. Similarly, Raka, Nanda's granddaughter is uncommunicative, discreet, and quite submerged in her own world. Her strange and odd actions are ascribed from the fact that she comes from a shattered family. She has an alcoholic father and a mother who is always in poor health. Due to this behavior, Nanda tries to communicate with Raka by telling her some stories. Ila Das, Nanda's old friend comes to visit her in Carignano. She has a high-pitched voice that makes her a subject of joy and happiness wherever she goes. She has been raised in splendor and magnificence, but has been left poverty-stricken after her brothers mispend their family money and die. However, she meets a terrible end that she is raped and murdered because she has raised a voice against patriarchal norms by trying to stop the marriage of a seven-year-old girl to a widower. The novel successfully breaks the stereotype of selfless woman, through the character of Nanda Kaul and in her denial to live with the memories.

The novel depicts female characters that leave ineradicable marks on the memory of people. In *The Mahabharata*, the female characters play the stereotypical roles as expected in the benefits of strengthening patriarchy. They are devoted wives, virtuous mothers and obedient daughters. Each of them can be characterized by unquestioning obedience to a man whether he is a father or a husband. However, it is not a mere mindless obedience: they are raised in such a way that it has become natural for them. *The Mahabharata* contains instructions and examples of true stories of Indian wives, who despite the loss of the husband do not leave the patriarchal tradition. The problem of getting married is mostly decided by parents: Satyawati's father sets up the marriage conditions, Kashi princesses are kidnapped by Bhishma and the parents do not object, Gandhari's parents, having thought it over, choose to marry her to a blind Dhritarashtra, and Madri is simply bought by Bhishma. However, there are other ways of choosing a husband –Swayamvara where the girl is sometimes given the option to choose her husband (e.g., Kunti chooses Pandu herself). Nevertheless, Kunti and her daughter-in-law Draupadi have to suffer numerous challenges in the kingdom of Dhritarashtra, injustice against sons and husbands respectively.

Moreover, Draupadi is used as a commodity when *pasa* is played between Pandus and Kauravs. These incidents represent women not more than mere objects in patriarchy. Draupadi is depicted most vividly. Beautiful Draupadi is of vivid and violent nature as the fire from which she was born; she is regarded as an ideal Indian woman; she is well educated, conscious of the responsibilities of a wife; she is a true decoration of her spouses.

Gandhari and Kunti do not look like Queens, but as simple people in saris for modesty and asceticism. These representations reveal that women in the ancient India are not independent. They are largely submissive to the patriarchal system. Nevertheless, the female characters in Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* are revolutionary and seek changes in the traditional set-ups. Their consciousness of women's existence leads to challenging the traditional notion of society.

Review of Literature

Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* has been received in numerous ways. However, most of the scholars have focused on the women's existence in Indian society as depicted in the text. Manjit Kaur claims that within patriarchy, hierarchies and divisions in the relationships between men and women arise from stereotypes or fixed perceptions through which they attempt to comprehend themselves and others. By holding a dominant position and being at the center of social structures, males allocate limited space to females. The human inclination to dominate and control, along with thinking in terms of binary classifications such as superior/inferior, culture/nature, and normal/abnormal, assigns inferior traits to women who exist on the margins of society. Stereotypes, which are "largely the reflection of culture" (2009, p. 49) rather than inherently empirical, assume the form of knowledge as defined by Foucault. These represent the expressions of biased attitudes of individuals fostering negative evaluations of the opposite sex. Such beliefs perpetuate in society through institutions like family, education, and media, becoming an essential part of the socialization process, thereby causing women to be both victims of oppression tactics and agents of their own subjugation. Only the examination of women's oppression and their submissive roles in society has been discussed so far. Nevertheless, the critic has yet to explore the issue of female consciousness as demonstrated in the behaviors and actions of female characters in the writings, which is intended to be the central focus of this paper.

The novel illustrates the Indian society and its patterns of living for a woman long before she is born by establishing fixed identities for her. It restricts her existence through binary divisions between the general perceptions of men and women, categorizing her as feminine in contrast to the masculine, which are traits defined in the construction of gender by society. The linking of negativity with the characteristics that belong to the female category, such as passivity, infantilism, emotionality, and irrationality, as opposed to adventure, decisiveness, and rationality in males, regarded as positive traits, greatly harms her self-esteem and personal development. Furthermore, the private sphere designated to women within the patriarchal framework limits her roles as daughter, sister, wife, and mother, and

also enables the control of her body by the opposite gender (Kaur, 2009, p. 49). Kaur's analysis reveals that women who assume different roles, such as daughter, wife, and mother, experience varying degrees of oppression. Her viewpoint focuses on the depiction of submissive women.

Fire on the Mountain presents how oppressive practices linked to patriarchal society operate forcefully on levels of gender and environment. Especially in India, the identification of feminine principle with nature has its own relevance. The link between the world of women and the natural environment has been central to the activity and thinking of eco-feminists for years (Maharana, 2019, p. 116). The argument is that the "other" in the form of women and animals is central to the novel as women and animals are portrayed in a compatible way. Furthermore, the woman becomes the mediator through which animals can be read, while, in turn, the politics and relationships between men and women are mediated through the figure of the animal (Maharana, 2019, p. 117). Desai's female characters carry on a dual life; the inner and the outer. The protagonists are trapped in dualistic pattern in which man symbolizes brutality, dominance and violence. *Fire on the Mountain* addresses and unfolds an amazing variety of issues: motherhood, femininity, isolation, death, exile, violence, patriarchal domination and exploitation of nature. It also embodies dualistic issues; nature versus civilization, wilderness versus domesticity and free will versus fate. By re-reading and re-interpreting the novel, the women's ambivalent position emerges in Desai's work.

Both Raka and Annie cannot be said to be romantically aligned with nature and the natural sphere. The notion of violence has been the key in exploring patriarchal oppressions of both women and animals, where violence exposes the patriarchal instrumentalist mindset regarding both women and animals. Women's and animals' suffering due to this violence is then inextricably linked to pay attention to wrongs against women as well as animals (Maharana, 2019, p. 119). The scholar has only focused on the interconnectedness between the women and animals to make an eco-feminist reading of the novel.

Emmadi Shailaja (2023) has critiqued *Fire on the Mountain* from the feminist perspective. For her, from the very beginning patriarchy has been the foundation of women's oppression. In fact, and naturally, man is an integral part of a woman and vice versa. However, patriarchy does not accept it. Patriarchy is nothing but male dominated system. Therefore, women feel subordinated, neglected and exploited in male-dominated society. Society imposed identity for it has been a major tool for restraining women. Indian society portrays the women as a supervision of remarkable moral dignity incorporated with devotion and sacrifice. From their very childhood, girls are ordered to involve in household chores rather

than in rational activities that can pay them money. Gradually women internalize gender-based hierarchy that women are inferior to men in society. Indeed, women do have brains and rational faculty. Nevertheless, they are made more emotional through socialization. They have emotions, intellectual and spiritual needs. The hand that rocks the cradle can rule the world. Obviously, women are half of the sky. Therefore, the custom of patriarchy needs to transform into equality of men and women (p. 72). The representation of female characters implies the fragile situation of women in traditional India that imposes patriarchal principles on them and compel them to lead submissive lives.

Debabrata Sardar (2023) highlights the fallacy of the feminist understanding and explains the reasons women keep their bodies visible as represented in the Indian novels. The scholar clarifies the way women have altered their psychosomatic status that identifies the paradox of the feminist reading (p. 30). The critic observes Indian novels in a sarcastic manner and remarks about the role of feminists in advocating the rights for women. The generalized understanding of the Indian novels does not reflect the actual condition of women depicted in Desai's *Fire on the Mountain*.

In *Fire on the Mountain*, Nanda Kaul's path transitions from adult life to the old age experiences of the protagonist. The text explores how severe methods related to a patriarchal society significantly impact levels of climate and gender. It conveys a skillful arrangement of zoological, botanical, atmospheric, and color imagery to communicate the symbolic significance of the narrative and the various analogies of the darker aspects of nature and the murkier facets of femininity. She depicts the image of a tormented woman absorbed in her inner realm, her sulking discontent and the storm within; the existential dilemma of a woman in a patriarchal society. She not only highlights the silent struggles, suffering, despair, and vulnerability of women tormented by daily challenges but also subtly conducts an exploration of the situation, thus enhancing the readers' understanding of the root cause of the issue. In postcolonial Indian society, women are perceived as mere "objects" and "others" (Hassan, 2023, p. 2). Desai depicts the internal psychological struggle of Nanda Kaul who experiences a life of discontent and can never find joy in her married existence. She is aware of her husband's extramarital relationship with a coworker. Nanda seeks solitude, distancing herself from her insignificant existence. Desai showcases the continuing mental struggle of women in traditional India (Hassan, 2023, pp. 3—4). The psychological aspect of the text as heightened in this reading demonstrates the interconnectedness between women's image and societal perception towards female sex in Indian society. The commodification of women as depicted in the novel sarcastically attacks at the hypocrisy of Indian traditions and values.

Desai's writings are marked by their reflective depictions of characters and their skill in encapsulating the spirit of Indian culture. Her writing style features vivid imagery, keen attention to detail, and a profound grasp of human psychology. Whether examining the disagreements between tradition and advancement or the battles of people in repressive societies, Desai's writings provide a fascinating perspective on the intricacies of human life (Paul, 2023, p. 6). Nanda Kaul grapples with her identity and purpose after finding herself alone in her later years. Throughout her journey, Nanda examines her wants and goals, distancing herself from societal pressures and finding a renewed sense of self-value. Desai highlights that self-exploration is an essential aspect of shaping feminine identity, enabling women to uncover their voices and affirm their uniqueness. Finally, she underscores the quest for independence as a crucial element of feminine identity (Paul, 2023, p. 7). Desai relates independence with the women's existence in traditional society. Without freedom, women find difficult to lead lives in patriarchy. Despite numerous studies of *Fire on the Mountain*, no scholar has yet examined the revolutionary aspect of the female characters that this paper highlights.

Theoretical Framework

I employ the Indian feminist perspective as a theoretical framework to analyze the novel to examine the female consciousness among the characters especially in the protagonist. I use the perspective of Ketu H. Katrak who emphasizes the intricate network of power dynamics in her work, *Politics of the Female Body* (2006). Kartak has asserted, "This conceptualization of body politics is situated within the broader body politic which, ultimately, upholds systems of power" (2006, p.16). Katrak highlights the power dynamics that function to ensure the position of women in patriarchy. Men uphold economic, social and cultural powers in Indian society. Female body becomes the object of attention for men. The power holders dominate this body for their vested interests. 'Feminist body politics' examines the condition of each woman and the place of women in the broader networks of authority that both maintains its dominance over the female body and develops new forms of sexual politics. However, the challenge of this feminist analysis of the structure that is positioned within various power relations such as language, education, and convention, which govern the whole framework of the female body.

The challenge that feminism faces in reshaping body image is an inherent internal resistance referred to by Kartak as "female responsibility". The misconception within feminist perspectives on the body that partially correlates with this notion of "female responsibility." Women absorb the ideals of perfect female beauty, generous provider, caregiver of the

family, etc., and become confined by these notions. To a large extent, women in a male-dominated society endeavor to meet the standards by hook or crook. Those who fail to achieve the goal set so far lose both confidence and self-esteem. With the low-esteem, they are forced to lead a vulnerable life. This notion of feminist reading is applicable in analyzing the plight of female characters in *Fire on the Mountain*.

Analysis

This article investigates female consciousness among characters in Desai's fiction. The female characters seek a setting that fulfills their desire for "refusal" against patriarchy. The garden, the house, the city, and the Island serve as symbols of elusion and rejection in the novel. Nanda Kaul, the protagonist undertakes a definitive, lasting departure from the chaos and rigidity of societal existence as she gets conscious about her individuality. The woman is not only "out outside time" but by deciding to reside at Carignano "she is beyond the city". In the beginning in the urban settlement, she finds herself lonely and stranger to the world around. Her life is meaningless as her essence is not recognized. When she resides with her family members including her spouse and children, she experiences the urban life foreign to her essence. Being outdoors, a man's world, the female characters declare the necessity for a woman's time. For Nanda Kaul is understood during old age. What is guaranteed in the process is allegedly a clash of conflicting emotions, of ethical and physical struggles, and of human constraints.

Fire on the Mountain is a theme linked to the notion of loneliness. Nanda Kaul resides in Carignano located in Kagauli. She is wedded to a vice-chancellor. As she is married to a high-profile man, her life should be better. Nevertheless, she leads a slavish life because she is constantly trapped in endless and unappreciated domestic tasks. She is the mother of three kids. She recalls the experiences of raising children and family limitations. She is a homemaker who is not paid anything. She is forced to compromise with her identity. The sense of individuality is missing in her family circle. Nanda's spouse has additional military-like connections with Miss Davich, the Math Teacher. It is a significant injustice that Nanda mentions in her married life. Marriage becomes a source of pain and suffering. She is exploited in the marriage institution that is considered sacred and pious in Hindu social system. In contrary, it terribly affects her life. Finally, she arrives in Carignano and resides here. She seeks total solitude. This is the reason she remains in Carignano. As a sequential portrayal of the woman who declines and dies, followed by the one who declines and comes back, Nanda Kaul represents the individual who rejects society in her later years, once her obligations are completed and duties fulfilled. She becomes conscious of her existence and

begins to lead a life that is free from societal exploitation and familial chain. As long as she is in the family, she is oppressed and devalued. The novel portrays marginalization, insecurity, and segregation faced by women in the Indo Anglian tradition. Desai illustrates the various aspects of women's experiences as exemplified in the case of Nanda Kaul in order to highlight the struggles and challenges of women in a male-dominated society. The protagonist raises voices against social injustice and evils of the marriage institution as she realizes that only revolutionary spirit can help to get empowered. The psychological strength is imperative for women's empowerment in patriarchy.

Nanda Kaul's longing for solitude, wishing to spend her later years in Kasauli, distant from the city and her relatives, can be connected to both her physical and psychological states. The geographical location, the area where her body resides, and the biological location, her physical body where Nanda Kaul as an individual exists, are intricately connected. She lives her whole life as a reliant housewife. Her spouse, an autonomous individual and Vice Chancellor of Punjab University, shows minimal concern for Nanda's personal needs. He almost ignores her and does not respect her individuality. However, she maintains the facade of a cheerful and satisfied spouse in the public sphere, even at home where she resides with her husband and his relatives. Her intellect is disregarded by confining her to household tasks and she is simplified to a physical existence solely. Their marital life barely varies from what one encounters in a patriarchal household. Besides, her children do not show much interest in her. Although she has been sacrificing her personal desires and needs, she is discarded in her circle.

However, the ultimate emotional invasion that transforms Nanda's inner self is her unexpected realization of her husband's infidelity. The vice-chancellor keeps a connection with his university instructor Miss Davidson without her awareness. This infidelity, the utter disregard that her husband shows towards their relationship, frustrates Nanda greatly. Beneath the story of a joyful family life filled with wealth and social standing, she consequently endures for numerous reasons. She chooses to depart from the tiny town of Punjab, where she has lived her whole life. She leads her to settle in Kasauli amidst the wilderness at the base of the Himalayas. Hence, her transition from the physical realm of her body connected to the tranquil isolation of Kasauli from her in-law's residence in Punjab reveals her consciousness. As a homemaker, her physical tasks and obligatory wifely duties weigh heavily on her mind. The body that stays compliant with the demands of her husband and his family does not leave any personal space for herself in that surrounding. Therefore, she escapes from that labyrinth for freedom and mental satisfaction.

The physical area where Nanda's body exists transforms into a territory of subjugation. Her journey to Kasauli represents her refusal to perpetuating a slavish life in patriarchy. She dismisses the physical environment that confines her and opts for total solitude within the wild, surrounded by nature. This segregation leads her to blissful life as she can choose what she wants to do. Societal pressure upon Nanda becomes unbearable and tormenting. She eventually takes over her life that was earlier controlled by society especially by her husband. Her in-laws' house has confined her to submit her to the injustices and oppression. Her body remains the center of exploitation as long as she resides with the relatives including husband and children. The social identity of Desai's female characters is linked to home. The psychological assessment of the protagonist implies the in-depth study of women in Indian society.

Conclusion

This paper has significantly raised the issue of female rights in patriarchy. By using the approach to content analysis in interacting with Desai's *Fire on the Mountain*, the journey from innocence of Nanda Kaul to her consciousness about subjectivity has been explored. The personality of the protagonist reveals the subjectivity of women in patriarchal society especially in Indian society that imposes patriarchal values on women. The victimization of women in marriage institution has been illustrated through the life journey of Nanda who represents innocent women in Indian society. Nanda's quest for independence by departing from her in-laws' house to a place of loneliness where nobody is to control her life implies the pursuit of freedom wished all women who are confined to the household chores. The major finding of the research is women have tremendous potentials to lead an independent life provided that they depart from the house of others especially men and own their houses free from external control. Despite the fact that women are intellectual and talented, they get forced to suffer oppression and exploitation in marriage institution as it is highly patriarchal. Desai has conveyed a lesson to all women who seek for independence and respect for their subjectivity that they should not depend on men financially, socially and culturally. Financial dependency paralyzes women's potentials for growth and success.

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