

EXISTENTIALISM IN ANITA DESAI'S FIRE ON THE MOUNTAIN

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Existentialism as a philosophy is historically and culturally of European origin. Ever since it was recognised as the dominating philosophy of the West in the mid-twentieth century, it has left "its impact on literature [which] has both been substantial and significant" (Chatterji 10). Existentialism does not offer a set of doctrines or a single philosophy system. It has been diversely defined and interpreted by various thinkers over the years. As a result, "as a philosophy, existentialism by its very nature defies and abhors systematisation" (Ahmad 10). Nevertheless, it is possible to identify certain traits of this school of thought. All the existentialists "emphasise the importance of the individual as well as his freedom and responsibility for being what he is" (Das 423).

In their attempt to describe man's "existence and its conflicts, the origin of its conflicts, and the anticipation of overcoming them" (Ahmad 13), existentialists focus their attention on certain aspects of human existence. Srivastava enumerates them as follows:

- b) it is never safe and ever at the mercy of chance,
- c) it is full of suffering, of one variety or other,
- d) it is full of conflict,
- e) it is rotted in guilt,
- f) it cannot escape from the final situation of death (185).

These tenets of existentialism have been widely reflected in the literature of the world since the advent of Sartre who established an interaction between literature and philosophy in his writings. John Macquarrie sums up the essence of existentialism as, "On the whole, it has been the tragic sense of life... that has been prevalent among the existentialists" (Macquarrie 164). Almost all great writers of the present generation have handled the doctrines of existentialism in their works. This is the main reason why "man's alienation, dread, absurdity, bad faith, responsibility, commitment to freedom, anguish are the very hallmarks of 20th century literature" (Ahmad 5).

As a novelist, Anita Desai exhibits a strong inclination towards the existentialist interpretation of the human predicament. In particular, she voices "the mute miseries and helplessness of married women tormented by existentialist problems and predicaments" (Prasad 139). A woman novelist, Desai has won a niche by exploring the emotional world of women, bringing to light the various deeper forces at work in feminine sensibility as well as psychology. This predilection leads her to examine the psyche of her women protagonists when they are confronted with the absurdity of life. This draws her attention to the darker side of life. She projects a tragic vision in her novels by placing her female protagonists in hostile situations. Desai further examines her women protagonists as individuals who find themselves forced into uncongenial environments, fighting against the odds. This problem of the

tragic tension between the individual and their unfavourable environment acquires the dimensions of existential angst.

Starting from her first novel *Cry the Peacock* to the latest Baumgartner's *Bombay*, all her novels highlight the existentialist's predilection for portraying the predicament of man. Many critics have traced shades of existentialist thought in the novel of Anita Desai. Time and again her themes and characters have been interpreted in the light of existential philosophy. In this regard it has been pointed out:

Desai's chief concern is human relationship. Her central theme is the existential predicament of an individual, which she projects through incompatible couples- very sensitive wives and ill matched husbands. She is a minute observer and perceives everything mutely, minutely and delicately. Whenever she creates a poetical situation, she gives it a perfect poetic treatment to every detail (Singh 12)

Anita Desai's characters are self-conscious of the reality around them and they carry a sense of loneliness, alienation and pessimism. She adds a new dimension turning inward into the realities of life and plunges into the deep-depths of the human psyche to score out its mysteries and chaos in the minds of characters.

Particularly *Fire on the Mountain* has been identified as "the lyrical fictionalization of the quintessence of existentialism" (Gupta 185). A close study of the texture and theme of the novel in relation to the tenets of existentialism justifies the above observation. It has been noted that "Fire on the Mountain displays skillful dramatisation of experiences of certain women embroiled by the cross way of life" (Choudhury 77). This novel deals with the existential angst experienced by the female protagonist Nanda Kaul, an old lady living in isolation. It also projects the inner turmoil of a small girl, Raka, who is haunted by a sense of futility. Thirdly, it presents the plight of a helpless woman, Ila Das who is in conflict with forces that are too powerful to be encountered, resulting in her tragic death. Thus, the existential themes of solitude, alienation, the futility of human existence and struggle for survival form the major themes of the novel.

Fire on the Mountain falls into three sections, each further divided into several short chapters of unequal length. The first section titled "Nand Kaul at Carignano" runs into ten chapters. This section deals with Nanda Kaul, the main protagonist's lonely life in Kasauli. "Raka comes to Carignano" forms the second section and it contains twenty one chapters. It portrays Nanda Kaul's change of attitude towards Raka, her great granddaughter. The final section "Ila Das leaves Carignano" is divided into thirteen chapters. This section presents the tragic end of Ila Da, Nanda Kaul's childhood friend. In all, the book runs to 145 pages. The structural unity, as suggested by the section captions is offered by Carignano, Nanda Kaul and Raka, running counter to one another complemented by that of Ila Das also provide unity of structure. Like the other works of Anita Desai, the present novel contains neither any story value nor events that are interesting by themselves. The entire novel revolves round the existential angst experienced by the women protagonists.

In this novel, "the story element is very thin and there is practically no action except for the tragic end" (Indira 96). The story revolves round the inner lives of the two female protagonists, Nand Kaul and Raka. Nanda Kaul is the wife of Mr.Kaul, the Vice-Chancellor of the Punjab University. When the novel begins, Nanda

Kaul is living in Carignano, far from the madding crowd. She is leading a life of isolation and introspection. She shuns all human company. Even the postman's arrival to deliver the letter is frowned upon by her. But this seeming quietude does not last long. Raka arrives at Carignano to convalesce after her typhoid attack. The old woman and the young girl live in double singleness. But as days pass by, Nanda Kaul finds herself drawn towards Raka, something she had not expected. But the little girl refuses to be befriended and escapes into the hills looking for company in solitude.

Ila Das, Nanda Kaul's childhood friend visits Carignano to meet Raka. A one time lecturer in the Punjab University, Ila Das had lost her job subsequent to Mr. Kaul's retirement. She has come to Kasauli now in her new capacity as an officer in the social welfare department. She fights against child marriage by enlightening the local people about the evils of this practice. This invites the wrath of many of the villagers of whom Preet Singh is one. His attempts to barter his little daughter for a tiny piece of land and a few goats have been successfully thwarted by Ila Das. He is lying in wait to settle his score with her. One evening, when Ila Das returns late from Carignano to her humble house in the valleys, he waylays her, rapes and murders her. When the news of Ila Das's death is conveyed to Nanda Kaul over the phone, she is rudely shocked and falls dead. Raka unaware of her great grandmother's death, rushes into the house proclaiming wildly that she has set the forest of fire.

Nanda Kaul, Raka and to some extent Ila Das, are embodiments of the existential predicament experienced by the individual in an un-understanding and even hostile universe. A detailed examination of the characters of these protagonists brings to light how Anita Desai has succeeded in giving expression to her existentialist world-view through these characters and by a subtle use of imagery and symbols.

When the novel begins, Nanda Kaul is presented as a recluse. Living all alone, except for the company of the servants who dare not disturb her privacy, she brooks no human presence. "She wanted no one and nothing else. Whatever else came, or happened here, would be unwelcome intrusion and distraction"(FM 3). She spends her days in isolation, musing about her past and experiencing the existential ennui. "From the musings of her agitated mind it appears that as the wife of the vice-chancellor for the Punjab University and the mother of several children, she has lived a very busy and tiring life "(Raizada 44). Anita Desai unfurls her past in the form of long interior monologues punctuated by authorial interruptions, Nanda Kaul had witnessed only betrayals and demands in life before her retirement to Kasauli. She had lived a monotonous life receiving and treating the endless stream of visitors who used to call on her vice-chancellor husband. Her husband had carried on a life-long affair with his mathematics mistress Miss David, whom he would have married, had she not been a Christian. Again, the memories of her children make Nanda Kaul shudder at the very thought of her past. As a mother of several children, all demanding and unaccommodative, she had been given too many anxious moments. Now all alone in Carignano, a house associated with many weird stories, Nanda Kaul feels that loneliness is the only essential condition of human life. Whenever she looks at the tall pine trees that stand out from among the underwood, she is reminded of her own alienation. Not exactly conscious of what she is waiting for, nonetheless, she is awaiting the inevitable end to all human existence: death. She is haunted by the existential angst which has led her to conclude that human life is basically a lonely struggle against the odds of life. In her case the odds have manifested themselves in the form of an adulterous husband and cantankerous children. Strongly convinced

that life and dealt a raw deal to her, she has resolved to find the meaning, if any, of her existence in isolation. "She treasures her freedom, her privacy, glad her responsibilities towards her family are over, glad she needs nobody and nobody now needs her" (Krishnaswamy 260). This has coloured her outlook on life to a large extent. Her reaction to the arrival of the postman and Raka, her invalid great granddaughter, makes it appear that she has become a misanthrope. But the truth seems to be that she is a sensitive person preoccupied with the real nature of her existence as opposed to the illusory life of her past as a vice-chancellor's wife and mother to children.

"If Nanda Kaul was a recluse out of vengeance for a long life of duty and obligation, her great grand daughter was a recluse by nature, by instinct. She had not arrived at this condition by a long route of rejection and sacrifice [like Nanda Kaul], she was born to it, simply" (FM 48). Desai's above observation about Raka's character at once brings out the similarity and difference with that of Nanda Kaul's in their mental make up. Raka's character has been introduced by the novelist as a foil to Nanda Kaul's. If Nanda Kaul symbolises a particular aspect of existentialism, which is examined elsewhere in this chapter, Raka epitomises another aspect of the existential predicament: the influence of her parents on her life. Anita Desai makes Raka both young temperamentally and solitude-loving. When Raka is first introduced, the reader is informed that she is the granddaughter of Asha, the most problematic of Nanda Kaul's daughters. That she is an unwelcome intruder into Nanda Kaul's life is suggested by an image. As Nanda Kaul first looks at her great-grand daughter who is walking towards her, she reminds the old lady of an insect:

Raka slowed down, dragged her foot, then came towards her great grandmother with something despairing in her attitude.. She turned a pair of extravagantly large and somewhat bulging eyes about in a way that made the old lady feel more than ever her resemblance to an insect. (FM 39).

However, the old lady is shocked to see the pale and gaunt little girl and is moved to pity. But "to Nanda Kaul she was still an intruder, an outsider, a mosquito flown up from the plains to tease and worry" (FM 40). Raka herself does not bother much about the "blatant lack of warmth"(FM 40) exhibited by her great grandmother. She prefers to stay away from company. Like a wild animal newly caged, she keeps prowling barefoot in her room, looking at the stone heaps. She is not interested in flowers or playing as children of her age normally tend to do. By using two reptile images successively in a span of two pages, and by a suggestive hint about Raka's lack of interest in play and flowers, Desai impliedly establishes that there is something weird about her. Soon through several interior monologues enacted in Raka's subconscious mind, the reason for the abnormality in her is unfolded.

The daughter of an ill-matched couple, Raka has been witness to the brutality and futility of human existence. She is haunted by the recollections of the nightmarish nights that have made her almost a child-stoic.

Somewhere behind them, behind it all was her father, home from a party, stumbling and crashing through the curtains of the 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 that made Raka cower under her bedclothes and wet her mattress in fright, feeling the stream of urine warm and weakening between her legs like a stream of blood, and her mother lay down on the floor and shut her eyes and wept. Under her

feet, in the dark, Raka felt that flat, wet jelly of her mother's being squelching and quivering, so that she didn't know where to put her feet and wept as she tried to get free of it. Ahead of her, no longer on the ground but at some distance now, her mother was crying. Then it was a jackal crying. (FM 72)

The sudden shift from the interior monologue about her bitter past to the present observation of the jackal crying, the latter superimposed on the former brings out Raka's predicament. By doing this, the novelist likens the haunting memories to the crying jackals. So Raka's life is a close encounter with things that are wild and frightful- be it the memories of her mother beaten to pulp by a drunkard father or the chilling cry of the jackals. Instead of trying to escape from this harsh and unnerving experiences and memories, Raka goes farther and deeper into them as if to fathom the bottom of such wild realities. After some initial hesitation, she ventures deep down the ravine to the Monkey Point- a place not frequented by others and from where the cries of the jackals are heard:

No one ever came here but Raka and the cuckoos that sang invisibly. These [the cuckoos] were not the dutiful domestic birds that called Nanda Kaul to attention at Carignano. They were the demented birds that raved and beckoned Raka on to a land where there was no sound, only silence, no light, only shade, and skeletons kept in beds of ash on which the

footprints of jackals flowered in gray. (FM 90)

This passage effectively conveys Raka's plight and significance. She is at once a little girl with a splintered psyche and an unmistakable symbol of the individual's quest for meaning. The jackals are symbols of the mystery of life and Raka's walk to the Monkey Point is symbolic of her search for something unknown, yet inevitable and indispensable. Not all children would dare to brave the rough terrains of the ravines and impending menace of the jackals. Similarly, not all human beings are conscious of the futility of human existence nor are they in search of newer values. The existential theme of quest for meaning undertaken by those who refuse to remain merely as members of the multitude is well brought out in the lonely and mystified wanderings of Raka. In this respect it has been pointed out by Shantha Krishnaswamy:

Her [Raka's] childhood has hardened her into a little core of solitary self-sufficiency and now, a young girl up here in the mountains.. her spirit is defiant enough to go chanting 'I don't care, I don't care, I can't care of anything' (FM 73). The conventional sweet smells and sounds of girlhood are ignored, she feels drawn by scenes of devastation and failure. The forest fires tingle her and she bursts from the shell of Carignano like a sharp, keen edged explosive to set fire to the mountainside. (Krishnaswamy 261, 262)

The concluding part of the foregoing observation concerning Raka's predilection for the forest fires needs elaborate analysis for it has symbolic overtones. Ever since her arrival at Carignano, Raka evinces a keen interest in wild fire. This obsession with the forest fire provides yet another dimension with the forest fire provides to her existentialist preoccupations. Immediately after her arrival at Carignano, on witnessing a fire in the forest she becomes obsessed with forest fires for they seem to her the empirical manifestation of her inner conflict: whether to continue with her mediocre and painful and aimless existence imposed upon her by heredity and environment or to revolt against their dictates and attempt to create her own values.

By an elaborate expression of her free will and demonstration of her ability to choose and act, she sets the forest on fire towards the end of the novel. The fire created by her is the result and manifestation of her existential angst to destroy the old and meaningless to make room for the new and significant. It is an affirmation of her search for values in an otherwise futile existence.

Ila Das is the third female protagonist of the novel. Unlike Nanda Kaul and Raka who are central to the story, her role is only marginal. Nonetheless, Anita Desai has projected yet another aspect of the existentialist philosophy through her character. "Her life suggests another dimension of misery and meaningless existence" (Jena 30). She is first introduced to the readers, when she calls Nanda Kaul on the phone and informs her of her intended visit to Kasauli to meet Raka. She speaks in a "hideous voice" (FM 21) and is rather plain in her looks. Through a long interior monologue in Nanda Kaul's mind, the readers are informed of her past. She was Nanda Kaul's childhood friend. She had also served in the university as a lecturer, thanks to Nanda Kaul's good offices. But soon after the death of Mr. Kaul she had been ousted and had struggled a lot before finding the present employment as a social welfare officer. A poverty stricken loner of aristocratic of child marriage, a practice rampant among the tribals. This lands her in an unenviable situation. She finds herself fighting a lonely battle against a mindless multitude. But she is not cowed down by adversity. She remains steadfast in her conviction and refuses to make any compromises. Though she is aware of the dire consequences that she might be forced to encounter, she remains faithful to her cause. She succeeds in stooping several such child-marriage, the prominent one being the marriage of Preet Singh's seven year old daughter. Sustaining herself on a meagre pay and putting up with the inevitable condition of loneliness, she wages a valiant battle against the dictates of the society. Finally, she pays a dear price for her convictions and refusal to compromise. She is raped and murdered by Preet Singh who has been dying for revenge.

Though Ila Das plays a minor role in the novel, she is also an allegorical figure. She not only lives in isolation but also braves the brute majority with conviction and commitment as her tools. True, she meets with a tragic end but has made her existence significant in exhibiting courage and determination in the face of stiff resistance and threat to life. "Her real involvement in people's welfare assumes tremendous symbolic significance" (Jena 30). She epitomises the existentialist concept of struggle against the odds of life. "For the existentialist, man is never just part of the cosmos but always stands to it in a relationship of tension with possibilities of tragic conflict" (Macquarrie 17). She stands for the thinking individual who dares to exercise her free will and act according to her choice rather than submit meekly to the odds of life. The mindless tribal society in general, and Preet Singh in particular, represent the malevolent aspect to human existence-forces that are bent upon thwarting the individual's purpose and undoing her. "One of the many ways of defining tragedy sees it as a clash between the aspiration of human freedom and creativity with a cosmic order that is stronger and defeats man" (Macquarrie 189). Though Ila Das loses her chastity and life in the process of her struggle with such brute forces, her life has nonetheless become meaningful by virtue of the fact that she chooses a cause, fights for it and sacrifices herself in trying to accomplish her task.

An examination of the use of symbolism and imagery in the novel proves beyond doubt the novelist's existential concern. She portrays a tragic world where no compromises are made, no epiphanies are exploded, to be totally destroyed, as the

sensitive, the visionary suffer nothing but suffocation and oppression. So, the content of the novel is sheer violence. The lives of the principal characters are 'unloved' and 'unlived'. (Indira 95,96).

In keeping with this concept, Anita Desai resorts to the effective employment of imagery and symbolism in *Fire on the Mountain*. Her predilection for prey-predator imagery abounds in this novel also. Images of ugliness, loneliness, destruction and annihilation are consistently used in order to reflect the existential tone of the novel. An atmosphere of solitary introspection is created with the help of several images. For example, when she receives a call from Ila Das, Nanda Kaul "turned her head this way and that in an escape. She watched the white hen drag out a worm inch by resisting inch from the ground till it snapped in two. She felt like the worm herself, she winced at its mutilation" (FM 21). The same is continued in the next page also: "Still starting at the hen which was greedily gulping down bits of worm, she thought of her husband's face and the way he would plait his fingers across his stomach..." (FM 22). This prey-predator image of hen pecking at a worm is suggestive of Nanda Kaul's present inner turmoil. Her past suffering at the hands of the adulterous husband and her present awareness about the harsh realities of life are both successfully established by this image.

Another important image employed recurrently is that of the pine tree that stands burnt and alone, which is often an object of attraction for Nanda Kaul: "She was grey, tall and thin ... she fancied she could merge with the pine tree and be mistaken for one. To be a tree, no more and no less, was prepared to undertake" (FM 4). Again, this image also contributes to the existentialist theme of the novel. "Nanda's sense of identification with the pine trees suggests her desire for absolute stillness and withdrawal from life" (Indira 97).

The image of the charred pine tree is repeatedly employed in the novel. Raka is reminded of the futility of existence while she looks at the lonely hills and charred pine trees: "This hill, with its one destroyed house and one unbuilt one, on the ridge under the fire-singed pines, appealed to Raka... There was something about it- illegitimate, uncompromising and lawless.... The sense of devastation and failure drew her, inspired her" (FM 90). Images of insects like lizards, birds like eagles and parrots, and "the thematic image of the 'fire' with its connotations of violence and urgency occur at regular intervals, warning the reader of the impending tragedy" (Indira 96).

The critic S.Indira sums up the significance of imagery in *Fire on the Mountain* quoting D.H.Lawrence and the novelist herself: It is the charming mosaic of imagery woven so skillfully by the novelist that makes the Novel

a work of art. Quoting D.H.Lawrence who said 'If I eat an apple, I like to eat it with my senses,' Anita Desai herself stated that the novel in which she attempted this closeness of man and beast, earth and vegetable was *Fire on the Mountain*. Imagery alone makes it possible and, in the process, the novel gains a richer texture and greater depth. As a critic says, "this novel deprived of its imagery, would be an ugly skeleton, chilling the reader" ... The significant house imagery, the images of plants, colour, atmosphere and moon- all contribute to the textual density and symbolic centrality of the novel. (Indira 96)

Another important aspect of this novel's narrative technique is its symbolism. There are several symbols that deepen the philosophic implications of

the novel. To start with, Carignano, Nanda Kaul's present abode, is symbolic of the loneliness and barrenness of human life in general and Nanda Kaul in particular:

What pleased and satisfied her so, here at Carignano, was its barrenness. This was the chief virtue of Kasauli, of course- its starkness...Occasionally an eagle swam through this clear undoubted mass of light and air .(FM 4)

The lonely house is symbolic of the lonely life of Nanda Kaul and Raka. The barrenness and starkness associated with its symbolise an essential human condition –alienation which is the key note of all existential philosophy.

The eagle symbol, like the house symbol, is repeatedly used in the course of the novel to highlight another aspect of existential philosophy, namely quest. The sight of the eagle flying high, makes Nanda long to be able to soar like the bird: "An eagle swept over... its wings outspread, gliding on currents of air without once moving its great muscular wings which remained in repose, in control, She [Nanda Kaul] had wished, it occurred to her, to imitate the eagle-gliding, with eyes closed" (FM 19). This longing for soaring above the reach of deterministic confines is the hall mark of Raka's characters. To emphasise this aspect, the novelist employs the eagle symbol while describing Raka's walk to the Monkey Point. "She was higher than the eagles, higher than Kasauli and Sanwar and all the other hills..."(FM 61). Thus Nanda Kaul's wish and Raka's attempt merge in the eagle-symbol, which denoted their existential angst and quest for values.

The forest fire scene has symbolic overtones. Like the "The Fire Sermon" in T.S.Eliot's *The Waste Land*, the fire in *Fire on the Mountain* " ... is a destroyer. It is also a purifier" (Brown 557). By making use of the universal fire symbol. Anita Desai endows Raka's character with allegorical implications. Raka, the invalid restless little girl who is the product of a broken home, becomes the symbol of the existentialist's perception of the individual who finds herself in this hostile and futile world. Yet out of compulsion, she strives to find or create values and significance for her existence. In this regard it has been observed that the symbolic implication of the forest fire is reinforced by the title of the novel, *Fire on the Mountain* is highly significant from the thematic point of view. The mountain symbolises Nanda Kaul and the fire is symbolic of Raka's wild nature. "Nanda is the 'rocky belt', dry, hardened by time and age. Raka is silent, swift and threatening like forest fire... The novel, thus [sic] may be noted as a story of inabilities of human beings to ignore the world, to place oneself in another's position"(Choudhury 79).

Another factor that adds to the philosophical implications of the novel is the frequent allusions to books and poems. As in other novels in *Fire on the Mountain* too Anita Desai uses poetry, and this time it is a poem by Hopkins:

I have desired to go
Where springs not fail
To fields where files no sharp and sided hail
And a few lilies below
And I have asked to be

Where no storms come,
Where the green swell is in the havens dumb,
And out of the swing to the sea.(FM 87).

This poem has some connection with the character of Nanda Kaul who quotes it and the poem signifies her desire to be away from the humdrum of life, to a heaven of nature far from the madding crowd. By introducing this poignant stanza from Hopkin's poem, Anita Desai highlights the theme of alienation which is the central theme of the novel. The same effect is achieved by introducing an allusion to a passage from *The Pillow Book* of Sei Shonagon which begins with a title 'When a Woman lives Alone' and through the image of a dilapidated house "with a poignantly desolate look" (FM 27). This image has symbolic overtones as it suggests the lonely and desolate life of Nanda Kaul herself. Again, when Nanda Kaul is in the company of Raka, there is an allusion to *The Travels of Marco Polo* (FM 87). The reference to this book reminds the 'Cape of Good Hope'. This also adds to the symbolism of the novel. This is miniature adventure like the one Marco Polo undertook in search of something new and promising.

Thus, the characters of Nanda Kaul, Raka and Ila Das are studies of women in isolation. Essentially a writer of existential inclinations, Anita Desai examines three important aspects of this school of thought through her protagonists. The predominant traits of existentialism are alienation, quest and conflict. These three aspects are epitomised in the lives of three female protagonists. Nanda Kaul is a study in alienation and existential angst. Raka symbolises the individual's quest for meaning in an otherwise futile life. Ila Das stands for the eternal conflict enacted in the human drama between the individual and the forces of determinism. One common ground for these three characters is that they are women who live in isolation both out of choice and compulsion. Desai has examined the predicament of women in wilderness by placing these three characters Kasauli, a place surrounded by hills and valleys, far removed from civilisation. She has consciously done it to examine the predicament and psyche of women in isolation. By placing her female protagonists with nature herself as the backdrop, Anita Desai has endowed a symbolic and universal significance to the plight of her protagonists. In this regard it has been pointed out:

Essentially, Desai is a novelist of existentialist concerns, chiefly considering what F.H.Heinaman described as 'the enduring human condition.' In her novels, she has ably dwelt upon such existentialist themes as maladjustment, alienation, absurdity of human existence, quest for the ultimate meaning in life, decision, detachment, isolation and time as the fourth dimension, focussing on how women in the contemporary urban milieu are bravely struggling against or helplessly submitting to the relentless forces of absurd life (Prasad 140)

To sum up, *Fire on the Mountain* invites comparison with Shakespeare's *King Lear*. In this great tragedy, when he dramatises the agony of betrayed father, Shakespeare removes Lear from the palace and places him in the wild heath- a hostile place- to suggest that the plight of Lear is identical with the suffering of every wronged father. Shakespeare employs animal imagery to indicate the rotten and corrupt world of the dramatis personae of *King Lear*. Images of ugly and evil animals like jackals and wolves are recurrently used creating an animal imagery that reinforces the thematic concern of the play, namely the tragedy of human life,

personified in the life of Lear, a victim of indifference in old age. Anita Desai's use of imagery of King Lear. By making use of the images of insects and animals like mosquitoes, lizard and jackals, Desai hints at how her female protagonists despise the absurdity of their existence. They either withdraw into a shell like Nanda Kaul or like Raka, long for something new or is made miserable by the environment as in the case of Ila Das. Similarly, by making Kasauli the location of her novel, Desai has endowed it with a wider appeal where the boundaries of region, religion and time cease to exist. This novel contains the core of the novelist's existential world-view in that all the three characters are nothing but the manifestations of her alter ego that gives expression to her outlook on life. It may not be an exaggeration to her outlook on life. It may not be an exaggeration to say that Fire on the Mountain merits a place in the galaxy of existential masterpieces like Kafka Trial, Camus' The Plague and Sartre's Nausea.

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