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Struggle for Self-assertion in Desai's *Fire on the Mountain*

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Abstract

Fire on the Mountain by Anita Desai is a novel which depicts the struggle of the protagonist for asserting her individual self by breaking away from the long life of duties and obligation. The main protagonist of the novel, Nanda Kaul, takes recourse to self-destructive isolation as an escape from agitating and calcifying milieu in order to assert her individuality. The core of the novel forms the struggle between the need to alienate and to be involved in the painful process of life. Ultimately, the protagonist chooses the former one because it was necessitated out of humiliation and rejection and frustration and disappointment to assume her wholeness and autonomy.

The protagonist of the novel is seen constantly engaged in a kind of struggle to define herself and her value as a human being. Even in her alienation, she fails to get eternal peace and freedom, let alone while living with the throng. The events like arrival of Raka, her great granddaughter and the visit of Ila Das, her old friend to her lonely villa at Carignano, prove to be the sole obstruction in her journey towards independence. While wrestling with these obstacles, the news of Ila Das's rape and murder, and Raka's setting the mountain on fire, give her a terrible blow. Finally, with her death, all the passions are purged and her crisis for self is resolved.

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Chapter - 1

Struggle for Self-assertion

Desai's novel *Fire on the Mountain* projects the spirit of individuality in an environment shaped by predominance of patriarchy. It is the study of a tormented and self-conflicting female psychology and consequences of her struggle that led to alienation resulting in her terrible death.

Concentrated on the individual's salvation through self-exploration by depicting its motivation the novel focuses primarily on women's emancipation. Beginning with the withdrawal from the world of desires and cares in search for an identity and fulfillment, the novel ends in death of the protagonist demonstrating her struggle for self-assertion.

Residing in the mute milieu of Carignano she seeks an identity different from all worldly values and passions. She desires nothing. She struggles for a life that she had wanted and prepared for all her life. The flash backs that occur in the story display that the physical distance cannot overcome the psychological connection with people and places where a person lives. Even in this isolation, Nanda cannot remain totally unconnected from the past events. She remembers her life with her Vice-Chancellor husband. Though deeply unhappy she puts up with a show of successful marriage. She could do nothing but compromise with harsh realities of life and conceal her helplessness. Mentally exhausted and spiritually starved, she was just able to perform her duties towards her family. Nanda finds life with her husband an intolerable and long drawn out one of need and necessity and frustration and disappointment.

Once Nanda discovers that she has failed to seek any purpose and meaning in her marriage where she is denied individuality and happiness, she chooses to leave

this world behind and pursue the life of asceticism. However, her journey of the quest for meaning and value in life was not so easy. She simply could not do away with this real world. She was torn between two strands of thoughts: the need to withdraw in order to preserve her wholeness and sanity and the need to be involved in the painful process of life. Ultimately she is able to fulfill her desire for non-attachment and non-involvement in the family as well as the societal affairs only after the death of her husband. Her seclusion and withdrawal from the world of duties and responsibilities give an impetus to her. Now her only duty is towards herself and she would like to please herself and not anyone.

Nanda thinks that she has achieved perfection by withdrawing from the world of duties and obligations. But her struggle does not end here. She has failed to realize that what she has achieved is but an illusion. The news of Raka's arrival to Carignano shatters all her hopes and aspiration. It creates ripples in her tranquil life. She receives Raka reluctantly, apprehensive of the responsibilities she brings in and aware of the extent of involvement awaiting. The natural, instinctive aloofness of Raka and the planned, self-imposed withdrawal of Nanda Kaul stand juxtaposed. Both Nanda Kaul and Raka work out a routine by which they would live together avoiding each other. In the quest for aloofness, Raka far outdates Nanda. Strangely, it is this alienation and indifference that draws Nanda Kaul to her. Raka's non-interference with the calm isolated life of her own pleases Nanda and she admits that Raka was like herself. She finds her own image in Raka. Finally Raka's world of illusion shatters when she witnesses a drunken orgy one evening. It shocks her immensely and it is this fear, which leads her to set the forest on fire in order to achieve her identity to assert her individual self.

The sudden and unexpected arrival of her friend Ila Das further shatters Nanda Kaul's bubble of illusion and she has to face the reality once more; the reality of her seclusion and the circumstances forcing her to it. Ila Das's visit to Carignano becomes an unmitigated disaster. Despite her sincere involvement in her job and people she meets a tragic end. Her life suggests another dimension of misery and loneliness and meaningless existence. The news of Ila Das's violent death breaks Nanda Kaul's protective shell exposing the raw and sensitive soul which retreats in pain. Now she realizes that her whole life had been a lie based on falsehoods. Her fragile shell of self-deception crumbles down. She confronts the truth that her loneliness is forced upon her and not of her conscious doing. This wrestling with reality shatters her poise and balance and she collapses. The fire lit on the mountain is suggestive of the inner fire that has consumed Nanda Kaul. Ultimately with the death of Nanda the world of illusion is obliterated and the crisis for identity is resolved. Thus her death is the symbol of wish fulfillment or self-assertion.

In conclusion, the novel projects the sense of individuality constantly engaged in a struggle for the right values of life and more meaningful existence through self-assertion.

Anita Desai, a dominant figure in the twentieth century Indo-Anglian fiction, is a prolific living writer. She was born on June 24, 1937 in India to a German mother and an Indian father. Being an educated woman of half-European descent, Desai records the crisis of Indian colonial bourgeoisie after independence. This crisis leads to drifting lives, a general alienation and nostalgia. Her novels have depicted various changes, which have affected lives since independence. Each of her novels is set in a social context and focused on a life at a particular stage. Her characters strive and aspire to get the goals in a complicated and unsystematic world; one of her recurring

themes is the struggle of women to assert their independent selves in a society shaped by the predominance of patriarchy.

Desai has a tremendous skill to observe and to analyse human life and its subtleties. She analyzes the subtle human psychology and different women's condition in accordance with different socio-cultural values. While depicting human psyche, she becomes conscious of the growing sense of alienation in life because of the communication gap. The failure in accommodating with the immediate world results in aridity and sterility. But her creative mind goes to the exploration of self and assertion of it that heals the alienated self. Examining Desai's novels C.V. George affirms: "in unraveling the mystery of the inner life of her characters, she shows her perpetual interest in their psychic life. Solitude and self- exploration are the recurring themes of her novels" (158). She presents such women who express the mute rebellion against the embarrassing surrounding.

Most of the protagonists in Desai's novels are females and the world they occupy is domestic. In her fiction, Desai depicts women in their traditional roles such as women as wife, as mother, as grand-mother, as grand-daughter. Her attempt is to explore the inner world of sensibility the particular kind of Indian sensibility rather than the outer world of action by the use of style, which is supple and suggestive enough to convey the fever and fretfulness of her principal characters -the stream of consciousness. Her novels are peopled by women who are in perpetual quest of meaning and value in life. The struggle against the oppressive environment assumes the form of a patriarchal domination in one way or the other revealing her feminist predilections. Her characters refuse to surrender their selves. Their inability to compromise and surrender inevitably results in isolation and loneliness. Her women are hypersensitive and highly individualistic. Though "they do not voice their protest

against uncongenial surroundings and insensitive people, their bruised selves let out a silent cry. They refuse to yield and compromise and prefer death and miserable life" (Bai 30). In their existential struggle they suffer intensely but refuse to be crushed. Not able to amalgamate themselves into the society around, they undertake an inner voyage for the purpose of discovering their own selves.

Self refers to an individual's independent soul, which is never commanded by or kept under any influence of other forces. It is the inner being of a person that always tries to come to the fore and always is in conflict with society and culture. Searching for self is going inside one's soul and trying to find one's self. In patriarchal societies marriage is one of the obstacles which one way or the other prevents from realizing the self, especially of a woman and asserting it.

Most women at present are aware of the need to establish their autonomous individual self. Their search for self precedes social relation. They seek their own dreams and desires. Observing the females self, Alison Prentice and Ruth Pierson say: "women have a human need equal to men's for affection and emotional support but that for satisfaction of this need women should not have to make a greater sacrifice of autonomy than men" (164). The autonomous personality attracts them towards self-assertion. Thus the self-assertion encourages them to search for individual respect even in married life.

Strengthening self with the positive image of the self is an internal phenomenon that promotes the features like independence, self-assertion and self-awareness. Consciousness of the self produces the duty and responsibilities towards themselves reminding who they are and what they are. The awareness leads to independence and freedom from the submissive mentality. Elisabeth J Porter affirms that individuality has the sense of "the autonomy of the others as self-respecting

individuals, who are also capable of freely determining their own actions and behaviours" (55). Thus self-assertion is achieved realizing the self, its potentials, its adequacy and acknowledging its inadequacies.

Fire on the Mountain (1977) by Anita Desai has been interpreted diversely by numerous critics since its publication. Commenting on *Fire on the Mountain*, one of the critics, Santha Krishnaswamy says that the novel is an observant study on the effects of old age on Indian women. Highlighting the effects of old age on Indian Sensibility, Krishnaswamy focuses on the sociological overtones in the novel. He examines the depiction of Nanda Kaul

Fire on the Mountain is anything but a motherly soul. Alienated, trying to obliterate a lifetime of humiliation and desolation, she cannot succor poor Raka. The latter, ill and bewildered, comes from a shattered home, her successive nervous breakdowns. There is no mothering to speak of; the mothers themselves are in need of nurture. (258)

Krishnaswamy's remarks on the portrayal of Nanda Kaul, the protagonist, are that she is the perfect picture of a mother in old age in Indian society. He seems to suggest that the mothers- old and weak are generally marginalized, and her opinions are not entertained. Being a woman and an old one she suffers double alienation. Because of her unyielding nature she does not conform but chooses to alienate herself in order to wipe out the life long humiliation and neglect. She does not even want to take charge of her granddaughter suffering from various breakdowns because she herself is in need of care. She wants to discharge all the duties and responsibilities.

Viewing this novel in the same vein as Krishnaswamy has seen Dr. CV

George says *Fire on the Mountain* is exclusively devoted to the study of old age and the trauma that accompanies physical disorders and

sickness living a vegetable life, removed from human hustle and bustle, licking her psychological wounds, Nanda Kaul is confronted by the reality of a great grand daughter, who is as much a recluse and emotionless as the bitter grandmother. The novel *Fire on the Mountain* corresponds with the bonfire of emotions that Nanda Kaul is subjected to by the frail looking Raka who sets the mountain on fire-literally.

(162)

Peeping into the inner recesses of the psyche of Nanda Kaul, C.V.George depicts the problem and trauma of old age woman who has suffered from privation and humiliations, neglect and silence, aloofness and alienation. Nanda Kaul, while living a vegetable life removed from human contacts is driven into herself in order to realize her own self. But her illusory shell is smashed by the arrival of her great grand daughter who sets the mountain on fire literally but symbolically this corresponds the emotions within Nanda, which is expressive of her determination to annihilation.

Similarly, Bruce King in *Contemporary Novelist* quotes:

In *Fire on the Mountain* we are inside the mind of an older woman who, after withdrawing from the family and social pressures of her former life, is unexpectedly made responsible for an independent, interesting great grand daughter with whom ironically she is unable to make contact and who causes her death. (239)

King observes the turmoil of an older isolated woman whose wish to live a peaceful life is thwarted by her great grand daughter because of her inability to communicate. She is forced to take charge of her great grand daughter who is equally independent, undemanding and reckless even in her isolation.

In the same way, regarding *Fire on the Mountain* A Hariprasanna argues:

The search for identity and fulfillment is evident also in the portrayal of Nanda Kaul. Her detachment is a result of her disillusionment at the hands of her Vice-Chancellor husband [...] Nanda Kaul is able to fulfill her desire for non-attachment and non-involvement in the family as well as the societal affairs only after the demise of her husband. (97)

Hariprasanna's interpretation focuses on the crisis of Nanda's identity in the busy mechanical world where she lived as the Vice-Chancellor's wife. By withdrawing from personal relationship after his death, she thinks that she has achieved perfection but fails to realize that what she has achieved is but an illusion.

In the same vein commenting on *Fire on the Mountain* PM Nayak has said.

The fire becomes the symbol of her guilt-ridden traumatic passion which is ultimately annihilated. The fire on the mountain is the symbolic projection of her pent-up emotions, which erupt into volcanic flames [...] ultimately with the death of Nanda, this illusory world is obliterated. Her crisis for identity is resolved. The fire is the desire within Nanda and her death is the symbol of wish fulfillment. The fire within her erupts, at length, manifesting itself in her death. (108-9)

Nayak makes clear that the novel is the study of the protagonist's guilt conscious state of mind. His interpretation is the symbolic reading of Nanda's traumatic experience when she realizes that all her life she was neither a housewife nor a woman. She is driven into guilt conscious death. Dr SP Swain, on the other hand, manifesting Desai's usual vent to existentialism, comments this novel as.

Fire on the Mountain limns out the existentialist problem and predicaments of the middle class people, particularly women. Tired of a life of duties and responsibilities for so long, Nanda seeks refuse in

the sequestered life of an undisturbed privacy [...]. Nanda's problems are the predicament of one exposed to a protracted life of unrelenting routine. She is left with little nerve for anything save a wish to have a sigh of relief in peace. Here, Desai repeats the animalistic existence of the contemporary society despite the progress of civilization. (167)

Swain here exposes the existential crisis of individual's identity especially of a woman. Alienated from the milieu, Nanda withdraws her from the duties towards family, the society and even towards herself. Her existential contradiction results in a state of constant disequilibrium. Emerging as a restless seeker of 'spiritual self' Nanda ultimately comes to find life as mere illusion. When she faces the necked reality of her existence, she emerges as a disillusioned existentialist.

Despite the numerous works done on the text till date, the issue raised in this research project has not been sufficiently explored yet. The research will be an endeavor to analyse the tussle between the need to withdraw in order to presume one's wholeness and autonomy and the need to be involved in the painful process of life in order to assert one's self. Thus, Nanda Kaul's struggle to escape from infernal repetition of hierarchical structure of patriarchal discourse is an effort to assert her individuality. Although critics have talked about identity and self, their observations entail inadequate reasoning in order to show how alienation is inevitable to attain recognition and to assert her individuality. So, in this context the purpose of this dissertation will be to study how Desai's female characters struggle to establish their self revolting against the prevailing norms and values of patriarchal society.

Chapter -2

Feministic Perspective of Self-assertion

The term feminism is a fairly recent one in literature and criticism, which basically draws upon a number of images and ideas concerning women's issues. Although feminism is not a unitary concept and it is very difficult to define it in exact term, thinkers generally agree that it is a social or political theory which advocates for women's rights, gender equality and freedom. It is a doctrine that attempts to redefine women's activities and goals from a woman centered point of view.

Feminist thinkers regard feminism somehow different from the mainstream as innovative, inventive and rebellious which seeks to remove the subordination, oppression, inequalities and injustice. In this sense, feminists start with the assertion that feminism concerns with women's inferior position in society and with discrimination faced by women because of their sex. In other words feminism is a movement primarily informed and motivated by the experience of women. Feminist theory aims to understand the nature of inequalities and focuses on gender politics, power relations and sexuality. Discrimination, stereotyping, objectification, oppression and patriarchy are some of the primary themes explored in feminism. Gender should be independent in determining rights, privileges, status, and duty and obligations is the basis of feminist ideology. It is a movement, which is culturally specific in addressing women's issues, and crosses the boundary of race and class.

In order to arrive at a common clear-cut concept of the term it is necessary to go through some of the definitions regarding feminism. Here are some of the definitions from dictionaries and other books. The Penguin Dictionary of Sociology defines feminism as "a doctrine suggesting that women are systematically disadvantaged in modern society and advocating equal opportunities for men and

women"(Beasley 27). The Penguin Dictionary of Politics considers the main common theoretical assumption as shared by all branches of the movement that there has been an historical tradition of male exploitation of women (Beasley 27). E.Porter defines feminism as a perspective that seeks to eliminate the subordination, oppression, inequalities and injustice women suffer because of their sex (Beasley 27).

Adrienne rich, an outstanding contemporary American poet, asserts feminism as " the place where in the most natural, organic way subjectivity and politics have to come together" (qtd. in Gurein, Handbook of critical Approaches, 196).

On the basis of above mentioned views on feminism it can be agreed that a feminist is someone who holds that women suffer discrimination because of their sex, one who advocates women's rights based on belief in the equality of sexes seeking to end women's subordination in any way and for any reason. Thus feminism calls for the end of all discrimination- social, gender, economic and political.

To define feminism would be more convenient if we trace its roots in terms of its historical origins and development. Women's voice against male domination erupted as a kind of political consciousness of the inferiority of women in comparison to men. They have realized the inferior position of women imprisoned within the narrow domestic world of mothering and house managing. As a result they demanded for proper place and recognition of women in the society. Examining the origin of women's movement Nancy F. Cott observes: " such consciousness of [...] inferiority was the first group consciousness likely to produce a feminist movement because it acknowledged cultural and social determinants of women's capabilities as well as divine and natural ones, and thus allowed for the possibilities of changes" (202). The prominent revolutionary origin gave an impetus to the development of historical

feminist movement and the 'I' asserted in the western civilization has encouraged the women's movement for their rights and existence.

The organized movement of the early feminist personalities is dated from the first women's convention at Seneca Falls, New York in 1848, which raised a strong voice for equality expounded in the American declaration of independence. But even before the emergence of organized suffrage movement, women had been writing about the discrimination, inequalities and injustices about women's social position in an attempt to change it. Mary Wollstonecraft in the eighteenth century attempted to liberate women from male dominating motives hidden in the emphasis of feminine features like meekness, humility and childishness. Wollstonecraft indicates the faults in the process of socialization in an attempt to unraveling the bases of women socialization where by they are taught to be feminine. She despises the then education system that inspired women not to study medicine, business and mathematics. Wollstonecraft's primary concern therefore is with the right education for women. An education that develops the mind, she claims, is essential for any creature. She advocates that women should be educated in a manner similar to that of men and be treated as human beings, not a special subspecies called "feminine". Rosemarie Tong examines Wollstonecraft's view about women's education that they should be provided with a real education, one that sharpens and focuses her mind and gives her a chance to develop her national and moral capacities, her full human potential (15).

In 1792 when Mary Wollstonecraft published *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, women such as Olympe de Gouges and Theroigne de Mericourt were fighting for the extension of the rights promised by the French Revolution to women. It is considered by many to be the manifesto of feminism though many others had tried their hands before her too. The first expression of these ideas, and a powerful

argument for the establishment of legal, political and social equality between men and women. Wollstonecraft wrote this manifesto in response to Rousseau's ideas expressed primarily in his novel *A New System of Education* (1762) and to English conservative philosopher Edmund Burk's criticisms of the French Revolution, which he expressed in *Reflections on the French Revolution* (1790).

There has not been a remarkable achievement in the development of feminism for almost a century after the publication of Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792). *Women in the Nineteenth Century* (1845) by Margaret Fuller and *The Subjection of Women* (1869) by John Stuart Mill were only the two important books on feminism throughout the nineteenth century. Both these works are regarded as steps in the development of feminism though a male wrote the second one.

An important landmark in the evolution of feminist criticism in the twentieth century was the publication of *A Room One's Own* (1929) by Virginia Woolf. It is regarded as a 'classic document' of the feminist critical movement, which contributed greatly for the worldwide emergence of feminism in the first half of the twentieth century. Woolf advocates for the radical change in the conception of family and social life. She focuses on the situation of women authors throughout the history and their cultural, economic and education disabilities within the patriarchal society which had prevented them from realizing their creative potentialities. Woolf refutes the traditional view about women that they are submissive and cries for a separate space for woman in literature and society because they are also independent human beings with similar musings like men.

The feminist trend of Woolf's time was concerned for "absolute equality" and the "erasure of difference" between the sexes. However, Woolf voiced for radical changes.

Hazard Adams Presents Woolf's view regarding women as:

Women are supposed to be very calm generally, but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation [...]; it is narrow minded in their more privileged fellow creatures to say that ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags. (822)

Similarly, speaking of her concerns in *A Room of One's Own*, Hazard Adams further writes: " Her concerns were deeper, as any novelist would be: men's anger at women, misunderstanding between the sexes, and above all the psychological conditions under which women- and men- were brought up" (Adams 817). At once she speaks for absolute equality with men and to erase the differences.

Feminist theories in recent times have been defined to develop at something of a remote from mainstream social and political thought. It is seen not simply as a particular frame work, set of ideas or social analysis or concerning on women and power but also as representing a unique experience.

The literatures so far considered great are pervaded by patriarchal ideology. Most of them have male character in central roles like Oedipus, Hamlet., Ulysses etc. and female characters are given marginal roles. Not only are that woman misrepresented throughout the ages. Most literature written by men presents women only in relation to male protagonists rather than themselves as protagonists. Thus the main interest of feminist critics have been to reconstitute the way we deal with literature so that we can do justice to female point of view.

Simone de Beauvoir, important figure in the post war period, had brought a widespread consciousness on the part of women, pointing at the socio- cultural construction of women. After the publication of *The Second Sex* in 1949, she became one of the most quoted, most translated and most admired women writers in the world. The main theme of the book is that what is masculine and feminine in identity and behaviour are largely cultural constructs that were generated by the pervasive patriarchal biases of our civilization. She speaks for women to be self-assertive and determinate able to cope with the obstacles and liberate from the social construct of femininity. Quoting the lines from Beauvoir, M.H. Abrahams writes " One is not born, but rather becomes a woman[...] It is civilization as a whole that produces this creature[...] which is described as feminine" (89). The whole culture sees women as passive, timid and emotional where as male as active, rational and creative. Thus Beauvoir asserts that neither woman's biological nor psychological make up is responsible for their inferior condition. It is society that has made woman subordinate to man.

Similarly, MH Abrahams in his *Glossary of Literary Terms* mentions some issues indicated in feminism which are briefly mentioned: western society is pervasively patriarchal, male centered and controlled and conducted so as to subordinate women to men all cultural domains: familial, religious, political, economic, social, legal and artistic. What is feminine and what is masculine are merely the cultural constructs generated by the omnipresent patriarchal biases of our civilization.

Beauvoir asserts that while man can think of himself without woman she cannot think of herself without man. Woman is not allowed to act in accordance with her own nature, but in accordance with man's expectations of her. She further claims

that marriage is women's biggest trap. Marriage has become one of the bondages that restrict women from realizing her independent self. Liberation and the assertion of one's self are possible for woman only outside marriage. The first step for liberation for woman is to have employment and be economically independent.

On the other hand, Charlotte Perkins Gilman points out women towards useful works created by modern industry and profession. She refutes the traditional occupation of women in which they limit themselves in childcare and housework, which deprive them of opportunity and the development of their genuine potentiality. She stresses on the economically beneficial occupation for women emphasizing upon women's capacity to work in public spheres. Cott speaks of Gilman;

"she proposed [...] the socialization of remaining home employments such as cooking and laundry and argued that house cleaning and childcare would be better performed by specialized paid employees than by house wives and mothers not necessarily suited and not paid for the tasks ". (The Grounding 41)

In recent time feminism has been viewed as complex theoretical discourse with numerous diversities depending upon multiple orientations. Through the different movements like Suffrage Movement, Civil Right Movement and Liberation Movement from the early twentieth century, feminism in fact was established in the form of a theoretical discourse in the late 1960s as a part of the international women's movement. Recognizing gender as a fundamental category of literary analysis, a theoretical framework completely uncontaminated by the past perspectives or by the history of male domination was established in order to present women reader and critics with different perceptions to their literary experiences.

Mary Ellmann's *Thinking About Women* (1968) is the first book that exposed the sexual stereotyping of women both in literature and literary criticism and demonstrate the inadequacy of established critical schools and methods to deal fairly with works written by women. Feminist criticism very quickly moved beyond merely exposing sexism from one work of literature after another promising to begin to record new choices in a new literary history.

Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (1977) marked an important stage in political feminist writing on literature. Her analysis of sexual politics of literature added a note of urgency to Ellmann's anger. Defining politics as the operation of power relations in society Millett argues that western institutions have manipulated power to establish the dominance of men and subordination of women in society. She used the term 'patriarchy' to describe the women's oppression. Patriarchy is what subordinates the female and treats female as inferior to male. Power, she says, is exerted directly in civil or domestic life to constrain women.

Millett has further added to the women's revolution making a connection between the personal and the private world. Maggie Humm presents her remark: "The personal is political" (195). By scrutinizing the personal level at home we can comprehend suppression on woman at public level. Thus by addressing the issues related with men's power and position we can reconstruct the structure which ultimately influences woman's life in personal level. She does not find any difference between the personal and the public level. The decision made by the public sector on the field of women ultimately affects the private life of women. Kate Millet in *Sexual Politics* also exposes the oppressive representations of sexuality to be found in male fiction. Millette's book also provided a powerful critique of patriarchal culture. Borrowing from social science the important distinction between 'sex' and 'gender',

Jane Freedman says that her 'distinction between biological sex and social creation of eternal feminine' is a precursor of the distinction between sex and gender that is common in much feminist theory (14). She argues that 'sex' is determined biologically but 'gender' is a psychological concept which refers to culturally acquired sexual identity. The acting out of the roles in the unequal relation of domination and subordination is what millett calls "sexual politics".

Recognizing that women have been driven to private spheres, many political activist are in favour of gender parity in representative institutions. In the earlier phase of modern feminist writing on literature the emphasis was often political and the writers are engaged in raising women's political awareness of their oppression by men. Raman Sheldon says that in political theories ideology is reduced to a completely one-dimensional weapon of domination. He notes Millet as believing that ideology is the universal penile club, which men of all classes use to beat women with (Sheldon 138).

Elaine Showalter made a notable contribution to the theoretical work of feminism. She made a kind of loose classification of female literary tradition according to their intensity of female voice. They are 'feminine' feminist' and the 'female', the first dating from 1840-1880 second from 1880-1920 and the third since 1920 till now. The first phase marked the female voice rising in literature though buried in so called feminine substance and got full affected by male ideology. Women writers like G. Eliot and Bronte Sisters internalized the dominant male aesthetic. The main area of their work was their immediate surroundings and domestic activities.

The second phase was concerned with gaining political and social equality and women's literature was able to advocate minority rights and protested against the unjust treatment of women. The writers include Elizabeth Robins, Olive Schreiner

and other whose writings centered on women's inequalities in the areas of family, sexuality and work.

The third phase heralded with Katherine Mansfield, Dorothy Richardson, and Virginia Woolf who ventured to counterbalance the male dominated literary spheres. The dependency on opposition was replaced by a rediscovery of women's texts and aesthetics. However they could not explore the actual physical experience of women. The independent female aesthetics was seen only with the appearance of novelists like Iris Murdock, Muriel Spark, Doris Lessing and Margaret Drabble. They have focused on all areas of female experience.

Feminism has grown into a complex theoretical stream with numerous diversities depending upon multiple orientations. It can therefore be sketched in a continuum in order to provide a general overview of its internal dimensions and to explore the possibilities. There are many strands of feminism depending upon their theoretical orientations. Despite its focus on the entire issues of women, several dimensions of feminism have been shown ranging from liberal attitude to radical one. Liberal and radical feminisms are distinguished in terms of their intensity of demand and arrogance. Along with them other feminists have developed with their affiliation to certain theoretical backgrounds. They include Political feminism, Marxist/ Socialist feminism, Psychoanalytic, French feminism, Bio-feminism, Post modernist feminism, Postcolonial feminism and others.

Liberal feminism is a moderate or mainstream face of feminism that advocates for the equal rights for women within society. It addresses the problems of unequal rights or barriers to women's participation in the public world beyond the family and household. Freedom from unwarranted restrictions and concern for individual autonomy are the chief concerns of liberal feminists. They do not perceive the sexes

to be at war or dismiss that which has been associated with men. Liberal feminism draws on 'welfare liberalism'. Unlike radical feminists, they emphasize on the reform of society rather than revolutionary changes. They work for the formation and development of liberal society that supports equal opportunity between sexes.

Radical feminism is an extreme rebellious stream of feminism which calls for a total rejection of patriarchy. They call patriarchy to be the root cause of the most serious social problems. It has been established as a feminist literary criticism which appears as hostile to patriarchy unlike liberal feminism. It offers a real challenge to and rejection of liberal orientation toward the public world of men. They arrogantly focus on the sister hood of woman. Chris Beasley reports Johnson as defining it as "one of the basic tenets of radical feminism is that any woman...has more in common with any other woman-regardless of class, race, age, ethnic group, nationality than any woman has with any man "(Beasley 54). It encourages some degree of separatism from men. This noting is similar to lesbianism, a practice and belief that erotic or emotional commitment to women is part of resistance to patriarchal domination. The major thesis of radical feminism is that patriarchy ultimately rests on the practice of violence against women.

Radical feminists demand in literature an expression of female sexuality which will burst through the bonds of male logic. They always emphasize on radical change. According to Maria Mikes," feminists are those who dare to break the conspiracy of silence about the oppressive, unequal man-woman relationship and who want to change it " (Mikes 6). This approach shows that without change there cannot be a man women relationship. They have a strong interest in discovering positive elements in femininity asserting in essence that it is good to be a woman and to form bounds with other women.

According to its affiliation with certain theoretical back grounds the umbrella term 'feminism' is briefly studied here by dividing it into the following dimensions.

Socio-Political Feminism

This dimension of feminism is generally known as English model of feminism and has a closer link with Socialism and Marxism. Socio-political feminism analyses the relation between class and gender, emphasizes on popular culture, and provides a feminist critique of Marxist literary theory. Marxist feminists go to the point of defining the position of women in terms of socio-economic basis. Deriving their impetus from the changing socio-economic condition and changing balance of power between the sexes. The leading Marxist and socialist feminists such as Mary Jacobus, Rosalind Loward, Juliet Mitchel and Cora Kaplan combine Marxist theoretical interest in the production and ideology of literature with feminist concern for women's writing.

Socio-political feminists believe that the text is a part of process of the social construction of meaning and subjectivities and literature is one of the ways in which gender relation and gender ideology are produced and reproduced. In their opinion gender is not produced simply by masculinity thought rather it is the product of the circumstance in which women's productive, reproductive and domestic life is organized. They consider the notion of femininity and masculinity as ideologies. Marxist and socialist feminism therefore takes an explicitly and aggressively ideological stance, stressing the important contribution of literature and literary criticism to a radical even revolutionary reformation of culture.

Socio- Historic Feminism

More popularly known as American school of feminism the socio-historic dimension of feminism tries to recover women's historical experiences as readers and

writers. They think that text is the historical experience whether it be emotional, social or psychological. Exclusively developed to the close reading of the text, this model of feminism looks at a text as a product of socio-historic phenomena. It focuses on exploring the awakening feminine consciousness reflected in literature by women. They tend to recover the patriarchal remains in the male author text through close reading and replace them with their own. Such feminists believe that female writers write the literature to expose the female problems to the reader. The American model of feminism has two groups practicing two different ways of feminist criticism. One group practiced 'feminist critique' examining how women characters are portrayed in the so-called classics. In other terms they followed gender concept. Another group practiced 'gynocriticism' studying writings by women and examining the female literary tradition to find out how women writers across the ages have perceived themselves. Some of the prominent socio-historic feminists are Elaine Showalter, Ellen Moers, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar.

Psychoanalytic and Deconstructive Feminism

Popularly known as the French school of feminism, this model of feminism stresses the subtle but essential participation of language in the patriarchal forces of society. They are much more concerned with theoretical aspects with an attempt to find out how female writing is different from male writing or characteristically female. The French feminist critics do not tend to criticize the individual text but create a distinct theory which can evaluate the texts using common trends. They are of the view that female discourse can be used into phallogocentrism by writing or searching blind spots, contradictions and breaks. They believe that femininity does not offer an impossible system for subverting and marginalizing mechanism of power. French

feminists think that language builds human reality. Culture marks sexual and social identities in the bodies and mind of psychological or biological individual.

The major critics of French feminism are Helen Cixous, Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray. They presented specially the feminist approaches on language, fantasy and desire. Julia Kristeva's "*From One Identify to Another*" (1975) and Helen Cixous's "*The Laugh of the Medusa*" (1980) are the two major contributions to psychoanalytic and deconstructive feminism which emphasize women discourse with female morphology speaking their specific experiences. For Kristeva, female discourse that breaks with tradition is apolitical act of dissidence a form of feminist action, and for Helene Cixous, women's writing has genuinely revolutionary force. Kristeva in her essay talks about the marginality dissidence and subversion of women and realizes the necessity of female emancipation. Three elements of Kristeva's thought have been particularly important for feminist theory: her attempt to bring the body back in to discourse in the human sciences; her notion of objection as an explanation for oppression and discrimination; and her focus on signification of the material and prodigal in the constitution of subjectivity. Similarly, Helen Cixos in her essay advised the females to be self-contented in her own body. Focusing on women's body, she says it is self sufficient. She further emphasizes on self writing. She says "write yourself. Your body must be heard, only then will the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth" (Seldon,150). Moreover influenced by Derridian deconstruction, she deconstructs all the hierarchies of the society as male/female, nature/culture, active/passive etc.

Apart from these major dimensions, feminism encompasses many other modes as Black feminism, Lesbianism, Bio-feminism, Post colonial feminism, Existentialist feminism etc. Here I will briefly state about what all these mean.

Black feminist criticism calls for a black feminist aesthetics that would deal with radical issues. The major feminists like Alice Walker, Toni Morrison celebrate the black female literary consciousness and believe that they possess rich cultural and sexual properties as black and as female. They try to situate black women's writing in the context of black history and culture, and explore its thematic and stylistic correspondence with the literature of black.

Lesbian feminists devote their attention especially to the literature written by lesbian writer or that deals with lesbian relationship in a heterosexual culture. They emphasize powerful bonds between women. On the other hand, the bio-feminism raises the issue of women's body as essential part of women's writing because women have more biological experiences than men do. They stress the importance of body as a source of imagery.

The branch of feminism that studies the existence of women in the patriarchal society is called existentialist feminism. It has its base on the Sartrean notion of existentialism "existence precedes the essence." The pioneer of existential feminism, Simone de Beauvoir, strongly refuses the notion of female essence prior to individual existence and attacks the patriarchal myth of women that presumes the false essence. Several essentialist thinkers believe that the woman is doomed to immanence but has a passivity to bestow peace and harmony. Beauvoir's central attack is on the attitude of the scholars and writers towards woman's position. According to them, woman is 'privileged other'. Her work "*The Second Sex*" is the narrative of women's existential otherness.

Post-colonial feminists are concerned with 'double colonization of the third world women under the imperial conditions. They argue that the third-world women become victim of both the imperial ideology and native and foreign patriarchy. They

are ghettoized and secluded from the mainstream culture. Since the western feminists create an inseparable division between them, the non-western women suffer from a sense of isolation and have hard time to express their identity. Gayatri Spivak, one of the important post-colonial feminists, raises her voice in favor of third world women criticizing the mainstream western feminist trend.

Feminism has always been concerned with liberation of women in one way or other. Thus, having diversity in its nature and dimensions, feminism has certain characteristics common to all trends and branches. It is in this context that all feminists call for changes in social, economic, political and cultural order, to reduce and eventually overcome this discrimination against women.

The above discussed feminist discourse will help generate arguments and justify the female protagonist of Anita Desai's novel, *Fire on the Mountain*, Nanda Kaul's struggle for independent self. The discourse has given us a perspective to observe and analyse the novel in a meticulous and scrupulous manner. It has enabled us to understand the psyche, the intellect and the feeling of the protagonist amidst the male dominated society. In the novel, Desai, in order to assert her individual self, has presented such protagonist who withdraws from the world of human experience. She is compelled to alienate herself since she cannot explicitly revolt against the oppressive patriarchy, however, she does not conform to the male dominated society. The whole research in the next chapter will be centered on analyzing what other mechanisms lead the protagonist to assert her independent self.

Chapter - 3

Kaul's Self-assertion

Anita Desai's novel *Fire on the Mountain* projects the subtle sense of individuality. She presents a protagonist who is constantly striving towards asserting her independent self. Exploring the 'emotional ecology' of the protagonist, Desai here presents the conflict between the need to alienate in order to retain one's identity and the wish to be involved in the throes of life.

The character of Nanda Kaul has been portrayed in the novel in such a restrictive socio-cultural circumstance that her desire for emancipation along with the establishment of autonomous self finds easy justification of the steps taken by her. Nanda, wife to a Vice-Chancellor at the university, becomes distressed and alienated even in her own family because of the indifferent and self-centered behaviour of her husband. Other female characters in the novel like Raka and Ila Das in one way or the other bear resemblance with the situations that Nanda is facing with. They are aware of their personal dignity and respect in the family and society they live in. Thus, individuality is largely concerned with their self-fulfillment which enables them to find their value as human beings.

Nanda, the main protagonist of the novel, is a revolutionary woman and the victim of socio-economic realities. She is distinguished by the qualities of introspection, introversion and a refusal to surrender her individual self. Undoubtedly, a strong propensity to be quickly angered is Nanda Kaul's most typical feature. Her straight posture "for she made a point of keeping her back as straight as a rod (11)", reveals her uncompromising character, her uprightness being the distinctive mark of her revolutionary nature, imbued with fierceness. Her refusal to compromise and surrender and her inability to accept the perspectives of her partner as well as of her

society modeled after male selfish ego inevitably results in isolation and loneliness that is inevitable to assert her independent self.

Nanda Kaul's desire for freedom does not erupt accidentally. It is the outcome of her long drawn-out experience in marriage and unfaithful husband. She tries to cope with every responsibility as a wife, a mother and a friend. While carrying out all these responsibilities and duties, she is acutely aware of her individuality and her role as an individual being. Whenever she feels an urgency to explore her self, she finds it imprisoned by patriarchy. Her endeavors end in failure and she silently and gradually breaks all the chains and bars only to arrive at this stage.

Nanda seems to listen to her husband and make no remarks whatever he proposes. She tolerates each and every suggestions and comments regarding her. She manages all the household chores without question. She even tolerates Mr. Kaul's suggestion about maintaining her beauty, his life-long affair with Miss David, the Mathematics mistress. It seemed hard. It seemed unfair. There is a limitation to any endurance. When she finds accumulation of burden and the action that occurs within the house pushing her into more marginal status, she takes a different way to keep her self un insulted. In fact, she longed for an identity which she thought she would find in withdrawal from all human relations. She reasoned that alienation would be the perfect way to rebel against the oppressive patriarchy.

Social surroundings shape the mind and behaviour of the people. The old convictions and stereotypical notions guide most of the members of the society. Only a few try to go against the general current. Because of their choosing the path other than usual one they are branded as whimsical and moody. Each new behaviour, innovation or creativity is suspected and scrutinized to a large extent. Woman is stigmatized as peculiar, delicate and mysterious to understand. This is a deep insult to

the sentiments of a Woman. Patriarchy cannot digest individual thinking of a woman. Woman is not supposed to show any dissatisfaction. Acting not according to the command is dementation in the eye of patriarchy.

Fire on the Mountain displays such kind of male psyche through the character of Mr. Kaul. How a woman's self-respect is doomed and she is reduced into insignificant being and how she is supposed to be a possession of male can be mirrored in Mr. Kaul's treatment of Nanda. Whenever there was a gathering in the house Mr. Kaul is always concerned about the fairness and beauty of Nanda. The narrator says "Mr Kaul had wanted her always in silk, at the head of the long rosewood table in the dinning room, entertaining his guests"(19). Mr Kaul's advice comes automatically from his ego as a husband and he considers himself authorized to his family. He believes that his wife is his property. Moreover a wife is expected to show exaltation on any occasion when her husband is enjoying. In a male-dominated society, woman is not supposed to develop her own interest; she should rather enjoy what her husband enjoys.

The novel begins with Nanda Kaul at Carignano, a solitary retreat where she confined herself to be free from all the duties and responsibilities after her husband's death. She was moving to and fro. This signifies that she is restless in her quest for self. In the context of her society there is no way for Nanda to express her feelings. Her desire, her need for freedom is fully expressed only in isolation. When she finds that she is experiencing solitude in her withdrawal, she thinks she can derive a pleasure of independence. That she does not want anybody to disturb her privacy is reflected in her complete avoidance of the sight of the postman. She does not want him to stop at Carignano: "Instead she turned and climbed up the knoll, the topmost height of her garden, where the wind was keenest and the view widest" (4). Climbing

the hill is the symbol of freedom since it gives one a sense of victory. This is Nanda's silent demand for freedom.

Nanda starts reacting in a quite different manner to grow in to maturity, toward wildness. Her sense of impatience can be seen when she starts rocking to and fro in her cane chair in the veranda of the house after she receives letter from the postman with greater uneasiness. She did not want to open the letter, instead putting it on her lap she averted her eyes to the gray hills and mountains. The narrator says.

She felt an enormous reluctance to open this letter. She looked at it with distaste and foreboding for a long time before she finally tore it open and drew out the bundle of dark blue pages across which Asha's large writing pranced. This writing had none of the writer's loveliness it sprawled and spread and shrieked out loud and aggressive assurance and aplomb. (14)

From the moment on she withdraws from the society which imposed restraints on her identity, preferring instead the natural surrounding like the hill station, a place where she does not have to pretend to be anything or anyone, she can just 'be'. Nanda has created her own world inside where she can freely play and make the world of her own. It is the way Nanda chooses to escape from the stark reality of the outer world. However, Nanda's growing sense of liberation is constantly obstructed by a number of incidents and actions and at the sametime she is engaged in internal conflicts between two selves. She is caught up in the struggle to find a balance between two seemingly opposite pulls, independence and love.

Nanda needs an outlet to express her true self and wants to enjoy the individual right. But she cannot directly express her ideology of her life nor can she defy out rightly the patriarchy imposed canons and rules. She however, responds

amiably to her husband. She is equally aware of her duties towards her children. At the same time she questions if the chains like marriage and children are the obstacles in the quest for self, she finds it so. When she finds life within such milieu an unbearable, she opts for isolation. This is evident when the narrator says "Have I not done enough and had enough? I want no more. I want nothing. Can I not be left with nothing?" (17). This strong remarks reveals that Nanda has done a lot for keeping he household whole. She had managed everything. Though she had done her every duty responsibly, her husband and children never give her any status of human being. She distinguishes life from self and prioritizes the latter over the former.

It is the barrenness and starkness of Carignano that please Nanda. The bare mountains, rocks, the pine trees give her an immense satisfaction. She wishes she could merge with the pine tree and be mistaken for one. She wants to merge her identity with the pine tree, the unyielding, uncompromising. She wants "to be a tree no more and no less" (4). In other words, Nanda's self is born here by contemplation with the aid of 'grey rocks', ' pine trees', 'blue waves of Himalayas' and the sweeping view'. All in all, she is one with the nature.

Nanda's sense of liberation is reflected in her radical refusal of her previous but exhausted role as mother and wife, and her solitary retreat into an inhospitable landscape. She wanted to be free from all worldly cares and desires and "wanted no one and nothing else. Whatever else came or happened here would be an unwelcome intrusion and distraction" (3). She likes to be left alone in her villa at Carignano in the mountainous Kasauli region; she loves solitude and independence, thus showing a proud and unyielding temperament. Immediately after she arrives here, the old protagonist identifies herself with the "barrenness and starkness" (4) of the surrounding landscape and by showing disgust for some nestlings she confines her

long past motherhood to a different time and topography: "The old house, the full house, of that period of her life when she was the Vice-Chancellor's wife and at the hub of a small but intense and busy world, had not pleased her. Its crowding had stifled her" (29).

She treasures her freedom, her privacy, glad her responsibilities towards her family are over, glad that she needs nobody now and nobody needs her. As a housewife, presiding over a large household, she has gone through the process that is so unsettling to a sensitive soul. Now, she has the height of old age and retirement to contemplate upon. In this regard the narrator remarks as:

She had suffered from the nimety the disorder, the fluctuating and unpredictable excess. She had been so glad when it was over. She had been glad to leave it all behind, in the plains, like a great, heavy, difficult book that she had read through and was not required to read it again. (30)

Into this idyllic solitude comes Raka, her great grand child, a strange isolated creature whose own wish for solitude is as intense as the old woman's. Even the news of Raka's visit to Carignano shatters Nanda's hope for privacy and isolation in this place. Nanda makes a parallel between her prior life and the life after the arrival of Raka saying that Raka's coming would mean the opening of that old trouble some ledger again. She is again drawn into her past, which is full of humiliation, disappointment, and frustration, and she groans in agony. "Discharge me; I have discharged all my duties. Discharge" (30).

Raka's visit would pose a threat to her "privacy achieved only at the very end of her life" (36). The image of the "yellow rose-creeper" that "had blossomed so youthfully last month but was now reduced to an exhausted mass of grey creaks and

groans again symbolizes the wilting of her hope for a cloistered life(17). Residing in the mute and desolate milieu of Carignano, she seeks an identity, different from all bewildering passions, the identity of "a charred tree trunk in the forest a broken pillar of marble in the desert a lizard on a stone wall. A tree trunk could not harbor irritation nor a pillar annoyance. She would imitate death, like a lizard. No one would rouse her, since she would dare?" (23).

No one would rouse her, since she would attract no ones' concern for her tense and trying moments. These botanical and zoological images denote the isolation of Nanda. She should prefer total isolation: "She asked to be left to the pines and cicadas alone..." (3).

Nanda Kaul's quest for stillness is thwarted by the unwanted, unwarranted arrival of Raka, her great-grand daughter. Even the sight of the postman irritates her:

"The sight of him, inexorably closing in with his swollen bag, rolled a fat of irritation into the cool cave of her day, blocking it stupidly: bags and letters, messages and demands, requests, promises, she had wanted to be done with them all, at Carignano [...]. She hoped he would not stop." (3)

Nanda, fearful of her solitude being eroded into, chooses to keep herself aloof choosing Raka work her own way. Yet she has to accept the role of "universal educator of the young" which is proper of elderly woman. They work out the means by which they would live together in their mountain retreat. Yet Nanda need not have worried. Raka makes no demands on her for she has no needs. She has mastered the technique of existing and yet appearing as non-existent. She explores the ravines where jackals prowl. She goes on unknown and mysterious expeditions on her own and she broods silently over the fantastic and improbable things she sees. In contrast

to her great grandmother, she is alive to the movements around her. Raka is not wholly alienated. She is detached from the world of her great grandmother but is involved in the splendid beauty of the Himalayan hill station. Nanda's alienation does not come naturally. It is only her struggle for a life of asceticism free from all worldly desires and cares. "It takes her no where. It is a self-imposed and self-willed. Nanda Kaul and Raka posit two polarized temperaments" (Nayak and Swain 105).

Nanda Kaul regards Raka as "an intruder, an outsider"(40). Betrayed by her own children, she refuses to involve herself in a child's world again real or imaginary. She just wants to do away with everything that comes in her way to personal happiness, satisfaction and peace. But Raka lives her own secret life and ignores the people around her. She ignored Nanda so naturally and so calmly that it made her breathless. Her rejection of Nanda and of the world around her is natural and instinctive coming with effortless ease where as Nanda's planned, strained, and willful rejection. In this connection the narrator remarks:"If Nanda Kaul was a recluse out of vengeance for a long life of duty and obligation, her great granddaughter was a recluse by nature, by instinct. She had not arrived at this condition by a long route of rejection and sacrifice-she was born to it simply" (48).

Nanda has plodded through life's miseries. She eyed the child with apprehension, so natural, instinctive and effortless.

Raka does everything so silently and secretly that Nanda cannot discover what she does with herself all day long. She finds out that "The child had a gift for disappearing suddenly. Silently she would be gone, totally, not to return for hours"(45). As long as Raka is out of view Nanda would wait for her arrival. But when she comes, Nanda turns a look on her "that was reproachful rather than welcoming" (47). But Raka never stops to take notice of it. The narrator says: "She

ignored her so calmly, so totally that it made Nanda Kaul breathless. She eyed the child with apprehension now, wondering at this total rejection, so natural, instinctive and effortless when compared with her own planned and willful rejection of the child" (47).

Raka has the gift of avoiding what she regards as dispensable. It is so natural that it gives her a sense of independent being. With her undemanding nature and independent existence, Raka leaves Nanda wondering what an extraordinary child she is. She seems to have given up all childhood pleasures and desires. She entertains in ugliness, danger and destruction. Her imagination is weird and she is irresistibly drawn to strange things. She finds the world hostile and easily withdraws from it. There is no more on her part to participate in life, to strive for achievement and to socialize. She instinctively learns to expect nothing from it. This strange detachment on Raka's part may be interpreted as her way of forgetting all the suffering associated with her home and parents. She has seen the seamy side of life's miseries, crammed into her memory. She has seen her father

stumbling and crashing through the curtains of night, his mouth opening to let out a flood of rotten stench beating at her mother with hammers and fists of abuse-harsh filthy abuse that made Raka cover under her bedclothes and wet the mattress in fright, feeling the stream of wine 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.

(71)

Raka is a victim of an unwholesome, empty and hopeless childhood environment. Raka's parents have no time and inclination to fulfill her emotional needs. Her mother is in such an unhappy predicament that she cannot do anything to

help Raka. Her shattered mental equilibrium and deteriorating physical strength render her helpless. Such an unhappy home environment creates fear, insecurity, distrust and anxiety in Raka. She lacks an orderly and secure world. Her father has not time to look after her well-being. Consequently, Raka's traumatic experiences deprive her of child's innocent trust and feeling of joy in the company of others.

Childhood is a formative period when a person has intrinsic desires for spiritual health. The child discovers the beauty and sweetness of human relation through love. But Raka spends her childhood and develops her consciousness in a home which reeks of disease and moral decay. Her mother is sick forever and father is found drinking at all hours. They are just not worried about the emotional growth and adjustment of Raka. "Her traumatic childhood", says Santha Krishnaswamy "has hardened her into a hard little core of solitary self-sufficiency and now recovering from a bout of typhoid, her spirit is defiant enough to go chanting. Intimidated since birth, anything destructive, lawless, uncompromising and ruthless excites her".

Krishnaswamy continues "The conventional sweet smells and sounds of childhood are ignored, she feels drawn by scenes of devastation and failure. The forest fire tingle her and she bursts from the shell of Carignano like a sharp keen-edged explosive to set fire to the mountain" She is attracted to a land "where there was no sound, only silence, no light only shade"(90).The nurseries and bedrooms of her infancy do not attract her because of their sickly sweet smells of illness, sadness, drink, medication, milk and tension. What attracts Raka is quite different from something normal:

It was the ravaged, destroyed and barren spaces in Kasauli that drew her: the ravine where yellow snakes slept under grey rocks and agaves growing out of the dust and rubble the skeletal pines that rattled in the wind, the wind raveled hill-tops and the seared remains of the safe,

cozy, civilized world in which Raka had no part and to which she owed no attachment.(91)

Raka did not experience anything that is affectionate and kind throughout her childhood. She has grown up with the repulsive and abhorrent feelings. The burnt house on the hill attracts her and the forest fire that can burn everything to ashes hunts her which ultimately leads her to set the forest on fire. As Raka's world consist only of broken, devastated and appalling objects, withdrawal comes to her naturally. It is in this connection that Nanda finds Raka to be "the finished, perfected model of what Nanda Kaul herself was merely a brave, flawed experiment" (47).

Raka's physical presence brings about a dramatic change in Nanda Kaul's identity. Both Nanda and Raka are sick souls. Both of them do not want the company of each others. Raka wants to do everything on her own. She has a strong fascination for being left alone and even takes delight in being not cared for at all. When she is at the top of monkey point she feels "light and exhilarated, airborne as a seed or a blade of grass" (61). Quite extraordinarily, Raka takes delight in imagining that she does not have anyone and she is all alone. "I am shipwrecked, Raka exulted, I'm shipwrecked and alone. She clung to a rock- my boat, alone in my boat on the sea, she sang" (61-62). This quality of Raka's poses a threat to Nanda's identity. She also finds her own image in Raka who is stronger than her. Raka is a part of herself: than any of my children or grand children. You are exactly like me" (64). Nanda Kaul exhibits a sardonic feminine sensibility in her affinity with her great grand child. Moreover, Nanda Kaul also thinks of leaving the Carignano villa to her great-grandchild after her death. Raka is the perfected model of her great-grandmother. She has inherited her features and temperament; she is her natural continuation.

In her withdrawal from the reality of human experience Nanda Kaul creates an illusory substitute. This substitute aggravates her loneliness. This substitute reality is destroyed by the intrusion of Ila Das, a friend of Nanda from childhood. Her arrival at Carignano shatters Nanda Kaul's bubble of illusion still further and she has to face the hard reality once more; the reality of her seclusion and the circumstances forcing her to it. Both desire to withdraw from the social milieu and lead a sequestered life, but they hardly succeed in their mission. Escape from one identity to another in quest of peace and self-contentment implies imprisonment and enslavement in the other identity. In the past Nanda had been disillusioned by her husband. As the wife of a Vice-Chancellor she had everything in life save for the love and loyalty of her husband. At one stroke the hideous reality is revealed:

... Nor had her husband loved and cherished her and kept her like a queen-he had only done enough to keep her quiet while he carried on a lifelong affair with Miss David, the Mathematics mistress, whom he had not married because she was a Christian but who he had loved all his life loved. (145)

Ila Das's visit to Carignano becomes an unmitigated disaster. That Ila Das as a social worker makes little progress in a tradition bound community is an interesting side light here. Despite her sincere involvement in her job and people she meets a tragic end. Unlike Nanda Kaul, Ila Das has seen glorious days in her childhood adolescence. But after the death of her father she became helpless as a result of family disintegration. She was appointed as a lecturer with the help of Nanda but owing to the injustice meted out to her in her job she resigns from the post, thus rebelling against the system. As a social worker Ila Das still fights against local superstitions, she still cares for the social problems which still continue to plague her country. On

the contrary, Nanda Kaul has never experienced such an engagement, she smoulders her rage within herself. Ila Das is conscious of the role of women in the process of modernization that India is under going after independence " the women are willing, poor dears, to try and change their dreadful lives by an effort, but do you think their man will let them? Nooo, not one bit" (129). Ila Das is aware of the subordinate condition of women, especially evident in the practice of child marriage. Her attempt to stop this kind social crime reflects her sense of justice to human kind. She is deeply against all kinds of injustice done upon women on the basis of gender.

Ila Das's comment on the dry weather while talking with Nanda reflects the dryness in their lives. The dryness has permeated both but it is more intense in the case of Nanda Kaul, who is dumb to her friend's request of help in her mission, and indifferent to her friend's social involvement to improve the lives of women. Both Nanda kaul's recollections of her childhood, spent in lakes and rivers, and Ila Das's umbrella in a dry season and in the evening hours are emblems of a lost womanhood, of a maternal female world, which has been destroyed by males. Nanda Kaul's husband is the cause of her present aridity and selfishness, while Ila Das's good-for-nothing brothers are the causes of her negated womanhood or even motherhood, since she could never marry. Her life suggests another dimension of misery and loneliness and meaningless existence. Her involvement in people's welfare programmes assures tremendous symbolic significance when contrasted with the barren, unfulfilled and lonely existence of Nanda Kaul. "Yet, there is an irony in her tragic death", says A. Hariprasanna "for, if Nanda Kaul's self-imposed withdrawal and alienation were meaningless, Ila Das's involvement bring only a terrible fate upon her. This denotes her personal failure as well" (101).

Unlike Nanda Kaul, Ila Das faces the reality of life. Hers is not a world of illusion. She neither craves for detachment nor does she wish to withdraw from the world. She is completely involved both within and without. She searches for self-identity and fulfillment amongst the pains and joys of living. But her conviction and involvement with the outside world fails to bring any respite to her. Her traumatic death highlights the problems of the alienated female in a male dominated apathetic society. Her running after an unsuccessful endeavor for the realization of her womanhood through a quest for identity only culminates into tragic predicament.

Women find no escape form their tragic predicament in this patriarchal family system, which accords security to those who subjugates themselves to the male ego, and opt for a slavish life. Their loss of freedom leads to their loss of identity. The plight of Ila Das's sexual violence and Nanda's death bring this truth into foreground. Ila Das was a reminder of Nanda's hopeless past, a past of 'rejection' and psychological anemia and atrophy. It is a past in which she had contracted a marriage which had degenerated into emotional and psychological anemia and atrophy. It is a past in which her husband had only kept her silent while he carried on a lifelong affair with Miss David. So, it is in this stage of life she does not want to remember any of the events that happened in her past. That's why she avoids any kind of human relation. It is not her choice alone to come to this place-she is forced to do it as a rebellion against the patriarchal family system. "She did not live here alone by choice-she lived here alone because that was what she was forced to do reduced to doing" (145).

Nanda Kaul's quest for identity is projected through sordid and macabre images, mostly zoological. When she was having telephone conversation with Ila Das, she turns her head this way or that in an attempt to escape. Watching the white hen

drag out a worm inch by inch resisting from the ground till it snaps into two, she feels "like the worm itself, wincing at its mutilations" (21). Nanda's assimilation of herself with the worm can be seen as the plight of women who is just helpless to defy or defense against the brutal and inhuman nature of men who deny the existence of women. Similarly, Desai juxtaposes the animal world with the human to suggest the cannibalistic and predatory nature of man. Preet Singh's sexual assault on Ila Das is an example. Here is again an example of helplessness of women who is seeking to stand by herself. The gruesome and horrifying rape and murder of Ila Das indicate the base and ignoble nature of man. Moreover, the house image in this novel exposes the battered and fractured selves. Besides portraying the sickening self of the alienated protagonist, the house brings to the surface their straying into the world of death and desolation, illusions and longing, in quest of meaning and value. It is concerned with the quest for self-identification bringing about a spatio-temporal continuity to the alienated self in the quest for identity. It serves as a symbol of consummation. It is the house that consoles Nanda and satisfies her. The narrator remarks

She turned around and gazed at her house instead, simple and shining on the bleached ridge. On the north side, the wall was washed by the blue shadows of the low, dense apricot trees. On the east wall the sun glared, scoured and sharp. It seemed so exactly right as a house for her, it satisfied her heart completely. (5)

Nanda Kaul's house becomes her refuge. Desai sharply contrasts this house with "that house-his house, never hers" (18). The perfect house she ran for her husband and family but to which she never really belonged. Having relinquished her present self, Nanda Kaul totally merges with the house. The organic alien identifies with the

inorganic alien-the derelict house. This identification of Nanda with the house is an assertion of self.

Satisfaction cannot be bought with luxury, it can be felt deep within the self and Nanda feels independent in breaking away from the human relations. She feels extremely happy and satisfied at her total rejection of her past relations and memory. Nanda's vigor, ambition and wildness grow more intense and she considers herself to be a bird flying beyond the boundary of tradition.

The sense of self-sufficiency and independence is also evident in the comparison of Nanda to the regal detachment of the eagle, "gliding on currents of air without once moving its great muscular wings which remained in repose, in control" (19). Nanda Kaul poses her attention on the hovering flight of the eagle. This clearly demonstrates her rejection of this world in which she has suffered a lot throughout her life. Now she wants to fly far, she wants to take her eternal and final flight: "she had wished, it occurred to her, to imitate that eagle gliding, with eyes closed" (19).

Throughout the novel, Nanda is seen conflicting between two extremes of identities. She is torn between the need to withdraw in order to presume her identity and the wish to be involved in the painful process of life. Sometimes her behaviour seems as if she is compromising. But the inner ego bursts out with an urge towards becoming an independent being. Nanda finds life with her husband an intolerable and long drawn out one of need and necessity and frustration and disappointment, her detachment is a result of her disillusionment at the hand of her Vice-Chancellor husband.

The Vice-Chancellor's treatment of Nanda can be read on the level of bourgeois male aesthetic. It is because of the economic gap between Nanda and her husband. It is also the reason why he treats her as his possessive object. He has just

kept her silent by providing money to run his household. He never asked if she was happy and satisfied. Her sentiments have never been taken into account. Though an educated woman, she is never provided with an opportunity to work outside the home.

The obstacle in the struggle of Nanda towards arriving at more authentic existence and establishing her self-identity is posed not only by Raka and Ila Das but also by the sweet musical sound of cuckoo. While Nanda was comparing herself with the eagle gliding on currents of air, she is called back to her domestic duties by a cuckoo: "Then a cuckoo called, quite close, here in her garden, very softly, very musically, but definitely calling-she recognized its domestic tone" (19). Her thoughts are diverted from a timeless dimension of self-abandonment and proud loneliness to the real time of her domestic and repetitive and unenjoyable chores. While the eagle symbolizes the eternal dimension of time, and therefore of life after death, the cuckoo seems to be an expression of the real time, specifically Nanda Kaul's present death-in-life.

In the course of searching her 'self' Nanda silently defies the over-bearing socio-cultural circumstance. Being an intelligent, unsentimental woman, Nanda Kaul is able to fulfill her desire for non-attachment in the family as well as the societal affairs only after her husband's death. Though deeply unhappy, she put up with a show of a successful marriage. She could do nothing but compromise with harsh realities of life and conceal her helplessness. Her marital relationship has never been a satisfactory one as a result of which she never felt herself to be fully involved in his life. Instead she would rather be a charred tree trunk, a broken pillar of marble on a stone wall than remain a faceless mask of a person in his house. This clearly indicates that her life is of waste and disappointment. She fails to seek any purpose and meaning in her marriage, where she is denied individually and happiness. Hence, her

seclusion and withdrawal from the outer world of family and relatives is necessary and inevitable to retain her identity.

Any attempt to escape into freedom from this social menagerie is a terrible blow to one's personal identity. It is bound to end in death. What is remarkable is that even though the quest for self-identity and individualism ends ultimately in failure, resignation and death, there has been an inner consciousness for the right values of life and more meaningful existence. Nanda Kaul's attempt to find solace in tranquility is never fulfilled till the moment of life. The news of Ila Das's violent death breaks Nanda Kaul's protective shell exposing the raw and sensitive soul which retracts in pain. She refuses to believe the news, "it was a lie-Ila was not raped, not dead"(145). She now realizes that her whole life had been a lie. Her present is equally deceptive since her withdrawal is not of her own free choice. Raka's arrival on the scene and her announcement that she had set the forest on fire further shatters Nanda's world of self-reverie. Her fragile shell of self-deception crumbles down. She confronts the truth that her loneliness is forced upon her and not of her conscious doing. This wrestling with reality shatters her poise and balance and she collapses.

The fire on the mountain is suggestive of the inner fire that has consumed Nanda Kaul unobtrusively. The burnt black shell of a house that attracts Raka's attention in Carignano stands for Nanda Kaul's self, consumed by a suppressed desire for love. Her withdrawal and loneliness too are of no avail to her. When she finally succeeds in coming out of her detachment and making contacts with the outer world represented by Raka, death snaps the connection. When Nanda Kaul tries to come to terms with reality ultimately she acknowledges that neither withdrawal nor involvement offers any solution to the problem she faced. This leads her into guilt conscious death. The fire becomes the symbol of her guilt-conscious state of mind,

which ultimately brought into destruction. The fire on the mountain is the symbolic projection of her pent up emotions that erupt into volcanic flames. Raka's setting the forest on fire is expressive of her resolve to destroy a world where a woman can only be happy by being unnatural. The natural fire finds its human equivalence. It is the fire that redeems and purges in a world of illusion. The fire on the mountain is reality but the fire in Nanda's heart is an illusion. It is a spurious fire. Ultimately with the death of Nanda, this illusory world is obliterated. Her crisis for identity is resolved. The fire is the desire within Nanda and her death is the symbol of wish fulfillment or self-assertion. The fire within her erupts, at last, manifesting itself in her death.

Death is one of the most elusive issues which can be interpreted from various perspectives. It is equally an issue of much speculation and thought since the dawn of philosophy. In literature of all kinds, death has been an issue of much concern. Existential interpretation calls it natural and much more meaningful than living a vegetable life. Similarly, religious interpretation takes it as resurrection or rebirth. Whatever maybe the way to perceive death or suicide it is not literally a favorable act. Yet it can carry a larger meaning, more explosive emotion and more revolutionary ideas than in life because it is when one's words and actions stop to mean anything. Nanda's death is a proclamation of freedom of self and of identify. When Nanda is totally dissatisfied to lead the mechanical life without soul, death remains the only way out for her solutions.

Chapter-4

Conclusion

Fire on the Mountain is a complex modern fiction which embodies multiple visions and aspects of quest for self. Nanda Kaul, the main protagonist of the novel, possesses a very complex vision regarding her search for 'self'.

Identity is a very dynamic and a life giving entity that embodies various meaning from person's individual name to social, political, economic, gender, and racial as well as cultural ones. It is an affirmation of the totality of life. And one should acquire it through the process of struggle and inner exploration. Everyone one way or the other strives for identity. Right from the presence of human being on earth, the search for identity has been continuously going on. When this quest continues people start questioning about the essence of human being. In course of searching for the essence of human being, the question of identity and self comes in front of everyone's eyes. The question of individuality and a sense of freedom is the most important at the heart of the issue. Several theories with certain orientations have emerged to address this issue. Indeed the theories of gender oppression, gender differences and gender inequalities are the byproducts of patriarchy. Radical feminists see patriarchy as a system in which men subjugate women. In other words, patriarchy is a power relation in which women occupy a subordinate status of workers whose production is exploited and appropriated by men.

Regarding the definition of 'self' Desai to some extent is in resemblance with modern existential philosophers who emphasize on individual truth and rejection of established creed and value system. One should acquire one's self through the process of struggle and pain. Like existentialists, to Desai, self means struggle to define oneself and one's value which one feels most deeply like essence.

Since long in human history women's identity remained submerged, covered and pressurized under various colourful veils. Some veils may be culture, religion, and society. The position of women is taken lowly, inferior, uncertain and unrewarding. In the novel, Nanda Kaul's self is always in conflict with society and culture because it cannot find its explicit manifestation. In the patriarchal society marriage also becomes one of the complexities which minimizes the effect of a self. As her life becomes very suffocating inside that society, inside that family, Nanda revolts against the existing values of society which have reduced her to an insignificant being, a woman chained with various strings. Though she is not a true rebel in the true sense of the term, the silent protest in her heart proves that her struggle is very intense. When she comes to know that the intricate mechanism of male-centered society like patriarchy and capitalism exist everywhere, her unyielding view that individual should triumph over society becomes more stronger and she follows the route of withdrawal and isolation as a part of her struggle to assert her individuality.

Fire on the Mountain presents a woman's struggle for asserting her independent self. Nanda Kaul, the woman protagonist of the novel, is a tragic character. Struggling to come up to self and freedom by breaking away from the traditional chains like marriage, motherhood and family, she seeks love, affection and attachment in married life but gets only neglect and humiliation which ultimately leads her to frustration and disappointment. Her husband never paid any attention to her and never realized that she is also a human. Though deeply unhappy, she put up with a show of successful marriage because she could do nothing in such an overbearing environment. Withdrawal from the society including her family is the only way out for her since she suffered isolation while living among a throng. By

withdrawing from personal relationship after her husband's death, she thinks that she has achieved perfection but fails to realize what she has achieved is but an illusion. Even in that lonely villa of Carignano she faces numerous obstruction in her quest for eternal peace and freedom. The novel ends with Ila Das's violent death and Raka's setting the fire on the mountain which push Nanda into death. She suffers from the beginning to the end. She keeps on struggling to find some solutions to her suffocating life but fails. Family bondage and the responsibilities towards husband, children and society become part of her life on the one hand and they smother her identity, freedom and essence of being on the other.

Anita Desai, in her novel *Fire on the Mountain*, has successfully presented a women's struggle for identity. Nanda Kaul, who has been an innocent, loyal wife and the mother almost through her life, develops in to an isolated, maladjusted and unique woman who breaks all possible chains and takes a self-destructive journey to define her happiness, identity, and individuality. The novel has revealed the central problem as unfaithful husband and marriage. Desai has made woman the subject of the novel who challenged the male centered world and it is made through assertion of her individuality by taking recourse to self-destructive isolation. Thus, the novel is a study of the agonized woman's heart. Nanda's struggles are the struggles for asserting her independent 'self'.

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