

Re-reading the Juvenile Psyche in Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain*

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Abstract: Anita Desai is a distinguished indo-Anglian Novelist with her sharp insight; she has probed into the inner recesses of the psyche of her characters in order to arrive at a clear understanding of their problems. An attempt has been made in this study to rediscover the Juvenile world in Anita Des fire on the mountain. Juvenile response to an indifferent world is portrayed through the depiction of Raka in fire on the mountain. Raka is provided every comfort in life, but she has no attachment to anyone or anything. Her psychic problem is caused by exposure to cruelty and violence inherent the male dominated social and family set-up.

Keywords: trauma, juvenile psychology, animal imagery

The juvenile characters of Anita Desai's novels are presented from the perspective of 'Third Force Psychology'. The world of these personages, with their lonely striving, desperation and neo-neurotic urges, is an ossified and petrified domain that is destructive to their healthy growth. Most of her characters undergo experiences that contribute towards the disintegration of their personality. Traumatic and stressful home conditions have a paralyzing effect on them and cause "psychic death".

Raka, the great grandchild of Nanda is the only child in the novel among a group of retrospecting adults. Raka means the moon. But Raka, the character is not round faced, calm or radiant. In fact animal imagery is profusely used to describe her in the novel. She has got an extravagantly large bulging eye that resembles the eyes of insect, and large and protruding ears. To her great grandmother, Nanda Kaul, she appears an insect, "like one of those dark crickets that leap up in fright but do not sing, or a mosquito, minute and fine, on thin, precarious legs." (39)

Raka is not a normal child by any standard. She shuns all attention and tenderness viciously. Children are often lured by the beauties of existence. They often have stock interests: fairy tales, adventure stories, flowers, butterflies and the like. Raka, on the contrary, regales in ugliness, danger and destruction. She possesses a weird imagination and is irresistibly drawn to uncanny places and things. Even as a child she loves privacy and seclusion. Solitude never disturbs Raka. To NanadaKaul, Raka is an abnormal child in comparison to her other children and grandchildren.

Amongst them, she appeared a freak by virtue of never making demand. She appeared to have no needs. Like an insect burrowing through the sandy loam and pin-needless of the hillsides, like her own great-grandmother, Raka wanted only one thing-to be left along and pursue her own secret life amongst the rocks and pines of Kasuali. (47-48)

Raka's isolation is instinctive and unimposed, unlike Nanda's. It is spontaneous and natural. Raka shows a tendency of exploration-exploring by herself what she finds new in nature and getting excited at every new peak she climbs. She does everything so silently and secretly that Nanda cannot find out what she does with herself all day long. She returns with her brown legs scratched, her knees bruised, sucking her finger stung by rattles. Her eyes look still and thoughtful as if, "she had visited strange lands and seen fantastic, improbable things that lingered in the mind" (46). She would rather see herself in the image of an isolate that would have nothing to do with family or society, but would rather constitute a world of her own where there would be no violence external interference.

Raka becomes an introvert because of the abnormal circumstances around her. She is the victim of a broken home. Amidst the glamour and glitter of the diplomatic society she has experiences the squalor and dirt of a failed home. She has seen bitterness, distrust and aggression in her house. Childhood is the most formative period of one's life. The experiences and interactions of this formative period, determine the establishment and maintenance of harmonious interpersonal relationship in later life. A child perceives the beauty and sweetness of human relationship through love. Raka's parents have no time or inclination to fulfill her emotional needs. Her parents do not love each other. Their relation has been on rocks all the time. Her mother is sick and father is intoxicated all the time. Her loveless childhood fills her heart with distrust and suspicion.

Raka's traumatic experiences deprive her of a child's innocent trust and feeling of joy in the company of others. Her only solace lies in exploring those areas which have been unmolested by civilization. She goes to such uncanny places where an ordinary man dreads to go. The nurseries and bedrooms of her infancy do not attract her, nor do the clubs and parks of the cities in which she had lived. What attracts Raka will be frightening enough to any normal child.

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 levelled hill-tops and the seared remains of the safe, cosy, civilized world in which Raka had no part and to which she owed no attachment. (91)

Raka is lured by violence and destructiveness of nature and dark mysterious aspects of life. The group of linguor's with their destructive habits attracts Raka. She runs towards them with Ramlal, yelling and waving her arms, as they tear leaves of the apricot trees in search of fruit, pluck the flowers and destroy them. The sight of destruction fascinates her. Fire is the other element which attracts Raka. It was Ramlal who mentioned about the forest fire to her. She seems excited at the thought of the garden and forest on fire. The burnt house on a hill and another unbuilt one allures Raka. Raka yearned to run away from the fantasy world of the two old ladies, Nanda and Ila Das. The horror of the Ila Das's presence was heavily weighing on Raka, her heart throbbing to break their shell of fantasies.

The sight of Ila made Raka think about the grotesque figures that had jerked and pranced in the ball room. This might have reverberated in her mind the atrocious and painful memories of her father that made Raka feeble with insecurity and instability. She felt she was in a boat rocking alone. (131)

Childhood is a stage that does not brook any semblance of artificial order, deceit or injustice. Raka was, at a very early stage in her life, exposed to domestic violence and the cruelty of her father towards her ailing mother. It had instilled in her a distrust of the adult world. Nanda Kaul and Ila Das's faked reminiscence of a 'glorious childhood' serves only to aggravate this suspicion and distrust.

The picture of the house on fire that Ramlal constructs for her becomes in her mind an image of liberation of setting oneself free from everything oppressive around, whether it is from her father's tyranny, the agony over the mother's tragic state, or the pretences of her great grandmother and her friend. However, it is not merely for Raka but for Nanda Kaul too, in the end, that a shattering of the beauty constructed world must come to an end. This happens when she receives the news that Ila Das has been cruelly molested and put to death, a few moments after leaving Carignano. Thus Raka's act of setting fire to the forest and its coincidence with Nanda Kaul's acknowledgement of the fake world she had been spinning for Raka are symbolic of juvenile sensibility that sets ablaze a sham picture of the world.

Thus the novel deals with the detrimental effect of a stifling home environment upon the tender psyche of a young child. The novel asserts that if a child is denied love and affection owing to negligence and irresponsibility on the part of the parents, he or she may turn out to be a problematic maladjusted child. Raka in *Fire on the Mountain* is perhaps the most reckless, complicated and mysterious child character in the entire gamut of Indian fiction in English. She presents an intriguing picture to the readers by her bizarre behavior.

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