

Fact and Fancy in Fire on the Mountain

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Abstract

Facts and fancies play a vital role in mundane human life. Creative artists often use fancy as a tool to interpret various aspects of society. Fancy is significant to both, the creative writers and the psychologists; the former is for the interpretations of the characters and latter is in understanding human nature more appropriately. Sometimes, the reality of life becomes intolerable to such an extent that human beings need to take shelter into the world of imagination and dreams in order to escape or defend themselves from harsh realities. Fancies are inherent part of defense mechanism leading to a kind of healing power for the traumas and shocks that one experiences. In this connection, the paper is to study the elements of fact and fancy in Anita Desai's masterpiece *Fire on the Mountain* (1977), which won her a lot of critical acclaims and a Sahitya Academy award for fiction. The novel evolves around the protagonist, Nanda Kaul, an eighty year old widow who is forced to live in isolation at the behest of patriarchy and eventually chooses to die. Her voluntary death is, perhaps, a submission to the giant patriarchy.

Keywords: fact, fancy, isolation, patriarchy, submission.

Women writers of all ages have a natural preference for writing about women characters, and Anita Desai is no exception insofar. She has written by and large about women characters and issues related to them. The uniqueness of her women characters lies in the fact that they are generally near-neurotic females – highly sensitive and sequestered into a world of dreams and imagination. These are the women, who because of various factors, remain under mental presser and do not usually behave normally. They cannot be called insane directly, and certainly they are not normal too. In her interview with Yashodhara Dalmia, Anita Desai expressed her views on women characters:

I am interested in characters who are not average but have retreated or been driven into some extremity of despair and so turned against, or made a stand against the general current. It is easy to flow with the current, it makes no demands, it costs no effort. But those who cannot follow it, whose heart cries out the great "NO", who fight the current and struggle against it, they know what the demands are and what it costs to meet them (*TOI*, 29 April, 1979).

These women characters are so much troubled by the reality as it exists in the society– the social setup, patriarchal hegemony, gender differences, and the unequal status – that it all seems very cruel to them. Bewildered by the world which they do not understand and which does not understand them, they feel tragically and pathetically alone. Consequently, they alienate themselves from their surroundings due to their inadequacy or unwillingness to cope with the reality. In their retreat from reality, they cut themselves off from the rest of the world and enter into a world of dreams and fancies. It is this world of fancy that makes their survival easy in the harsh world of reality. Psychologists also agree that

daydreams and fancies are important for human psyche. They represent a kind of wish-fulfillment and stand for symbolic satisfaction. Sigmund Freud in his book, *Dream Psychology: Psychoanalysis for Beginners*, says, "...the dream is the (disguised) fulfillment of a (suppressed, repressed) wish" (39).

Tennessee Williams distinguishes between two types of persons: those who adopt themselves to this world and those who suffer under a sense of personal inadequacy. The latter one, he says, they always remain "outsiders" (qtd. in Bande, 15), because they cannot accommodate themselves to the world of realities. Anita Desai's characters fall under this second category. They live either in illusion by retreating into fabrications and fantasies, or, show their reluctance to face reality, therefore, live in self-imposed solitary confinements. In her interview with Madhushree Sinha Rao, Desai also talked about two types of characters, "There are those who can handle situations and those who can't. And my stories are generally about those who cannot. They find themselves trapped in situations over which they have no control..." (TOI, 18 June, 1992).

The theme of fact and fancy runs parallel in all the novels of Anita Desai and in *Fire on the Mountain*, it is crucial for the story's accomplishment. The novel deals with the story of an eighty year old widowed lady Nanda Kaul, who retreats herself into a secluded area of rocky mountain in the realm of Kasauli. She lives here all alone by herself with just a cook – Ramlal, in a house named – Carignano. She repeatedly affirms that she does not want any change in her life, she does not want anything to happen in her life, and she does not want anyone to interfere in her life. She only wants to be left alone to lead a secluded life in isolation. When she gets the news that her great granddaughter, Raka is coming to stay with her, she becomes furious and shouts in despair, "Discharge me...I've discharged all my duties. Discharge..." (33). Now at this juncture of her life, she does not want any human company, she does not want to communicate with anybody, and she does not want any relationship to be imposed upon her bare existence again. It is all, "like a great, heavy, difficult book that she had read through and was not required to read again" (32). She feels self-satisfaction and finds herself complete in this isolated world. M. Chakranarayan writes, "Nanda Kaul is the passive purveyor of visions, who had chosen the house to find rest and relief from the mad world of duties and obligations" (95).

The self-imposed escape is not so easy and an "unwelcome intrusion" (3) comes in the form of Raka. Gradually, Nanda realises that Raka is what Nanda herself would have liked to be, but failed in being so. She is amazed to find, how Raka is different from any other child, she has ever seen. So different that solitude never bothers her and she never seeks any attention. She seems to have no needs, and she makes no demands. Both of them want the same thing – to be left alone to pursue their individual reclusive lives in the lap of nature – amid rocks, trees, and mountains. She then develops a kind of admiration for the child and realises that Raka, "was the finished, perfected model of what Nanda Kaul herself was – merely a brave, flawed experiment" (52). At the same time, Nanda also realizes the basic differences between herself and Raka: for her, the desire for reclusion has been a kind of willful reaction to the maltreatments of life; but for the child, it is something inborn, automatic, natural and spontaneous, because "she had not arrived at this condition by a long route of rejection and sacrifice – she was born to it, simply" (53). Raka has been affecting Nanda Kaul's consciousness, tearing into her facade of indifference and aloofness. Though, Raka is like Nanda Kaul, yet there seem to be a single fundamental difference between them. Desai writes, "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" (52). Nanda Kaul has disconnected herself from the world, but Raka has never had a chance to build any connection with the world.

Raka is another example of this disturbed feminine psyche. Her disturbed psyche is the result of the brutality practiced by her father on her mother. Her un-child-like activity and introvert nature is the result of her traumatic childhood experiences. Her mind is flooded with the unpleasant memories of her childhood days, of her drunken father coming home late at night and physically assaulting her mother while she hiding herself somewhere in the room. Her childhood experience is conveyed very horrifically in the novel through these lines:

Somewhere behind them, behind it all, was her father, home from a party, 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 cower under her bedclothes and wet the mattress in fright, feeling the stream of urine warm and weakening between her legs like a stream of blood, and her mother lay down on the floor and shut her eyes and wept (78-79). The traumatic childhood experience created a dehumanizing effect on Raka’s mind. She becomes a pathetic being to find any interest in children games and there is nothing childlike in her personality. She is a fine study of a disturbed child psychology – withdrawn and not interested in children games at all. She is more interested in rambling through hills and jungles.

The element of fancy enters into the novel at the point when Raka sees a sudden glow on the eastside hills. She thinks that it is the full moon, but Nanda Kaul tells her that it is a big forest fire which is common at this time of the year. This is Raka’s first experience of a forest fire. She asks Nanda in excitement, “What about houses? What if houses burn?” (82). Nanda replies, “Yes, they will burn. Whole villages may burn in a fire that big...” (82). Although it is far away, Raka is excited at the prospect of the fire spreading violently throughout the hills. The whole night, she keeps getting out of her bed and slowly stealing into the drawing room to look from the window, “if the fire had come any closer to Carignano” (83). She is troubled because she feels if she falls asleep, “the fire might creep up and catch her unawares” (83), which has, “the quality of a dream – disaster, dream specters that follow one, trap one” (83). This activity of Raka reveals her inner urge to let herself burnt into the fire consciously. One thing to be noted is that Raka is only a kid and she is having such dreadful desires at her unconscious mind about which she herself is unaware, but her behaviour discloses it all. However, her wakefulness keeps Nanda Kaul awaken in the adjacent room. Eventually, worn out by fatigue, the child falls asleep on the drawing room sofa where she is discovered by Ram Lal in the morning.

Next day, following high wind in the mountain, heavy rain sets in. Both Nanda Kaul and Raka become restless as they watch the rain, because they know it well that the rain will set the fire off, undoing their death-wish to come true. This is what makes them uneasy. Along with the rain enters a new element in the novel in the form of narration-within-narration. When Raka strokes a little bronze Buddha on the tabletop, Nanda Kaul suddenly begins her story. She casually tells Raka that the Buddha has been brought from Tibet by Nanda Kaul’s father. Raka, who is normally very selective in listening, now appears surprised and interested. Nanda Kaul continues adding fantastic details to her narrative in order to impress Raka. Her voice rises “unnaturally” when she speaks of her explorer father’s extraordinary adventures and experiences – his many collections from which, of course, only the Buddha remains with her. She continues telling Raka about her parental house in Kashmir, adding up fantastic and extravagant details about the interior and exterior as well as about the lifestyle of the inmates. As she spins her stories, she yawns in an “unusually high-pitched voice” (100), that makes Raka feel uneasy.

Nanda Kaul keeps spinning more stories, from stories about her father she switches to stories about her husband, raising her voice above the rain and thunder. She tells Raka about the luxurious and

exotic collections of her Vice-Chancellor husband, which were again not brought over to Carignano, since they were all given away to his successors or distributed among his large family. She further tells Raka about the exotic life she had in the Vice-Chancellor's house as a "Queen". She puts up pictures after pictures for the child's consumption, from a private zoo inside the house to free animals in the garden outside. As she narrates, she "covers" her eyes as if she herself is "dazzled" by the splendour of her own fiction. At this point, Raka starts getting skeptical about her Nani's stories, but Nanda Kaul keeps her eyes "averted" so that the flow of her narration does not break. All the time, she assures Raka that these are reminiscences of real life and events, and not something that is fabricated. She loses into her world of dreams to such an extent that she becomes unable to return to the world of reality. Francine E. Krishna writes, "Nanda now unable to stop, becomes adept at turning reality into fantasy, whereas Raka becomes dubious, guessing that Nanda is no longer telling her the truth" (162).

Nanda Kaul now seems unable to give up her story telling as she hurries from one element to another, "with an unaccustomed lightness and dreaminess of tone" (106). It has become a compulsion on Nanda Kaul's part to hold Raka's attention. She seems unwilling to stop her story and let the child go out of her sight. The rain makes her so restless that she becomes unable to cope up with the reality, therefore, seeks shelter into the world of her imagination where she comes to her observations on fact and fantasy. The author rightly portrays, "Fantasy and fairy tales had their place in life, she knew it too well. Why then did she not tell the child the truth? Who wanted truth? Who could stand it? Nobody. Not even herself. So how could Raka?" (89).

Although, Nanda Kaul's reminiscences are not authentic, most of them are made up or fabricated, but she knows its importance. On the one hand, it is a kind of wish-fulfillment for Nanda; and on the other, it is a kind of defense mechanism so necessary for the maintenance of her survival. She begins to tell the stories to keep Raka engaged during the rain and captivate her attention, she knows that all this is a lie—a big lie that characterizes her life. But Nanda comes to accept it only at the point when she gets the news that her childhood friend, Ila, has been raped and murdered brutally. She is not ready to believe it and thinks it is a lie, just as she had lied to Raka about everything. She groans pathetically:

No, no, it is a lie! No, it cannot be. It was a lie – Ila was not raped, not dead. It was all a lie, all. She had lied to Raka, lied about everything. Her father had never been to Tibet – he had bought the little Buddha from a travelling pedlar. They had not had bears and leopards in their home, nothing but overfed dogs and bad-tempered parrots. 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 whom he had loved, all his life loved. And her children – the children were all alien to her nature. She neither understood nor loved them. She did not live here alone by choice – she lived here alone because that was what she was forced to do, reduced to doing. All those graces and glories with which she had tried to captivate Raka were only a fabrication: they helped her to sleep at night, they were tranquilizers, pills. She had lied to Raka. And Ila had lied, too. (158)

This last paragraph of the novel gives a bombastic effect to its boredom like story, and it can be said that the whole gist of the story lies in this single paragraph. It is this last paragraph that reveals the hidden past of Nanda in an explosive way, and gives this molehill like story a mountain like texture. Every sentence, she speaks, openly breaks the layers of the lies she had lived, and now she is forced to face the bitter realities of her existence. Usha Bande expresses her views about the unique qualities of Anita Desai as a writer, she says, "her profound feelings spring from her art of creating human beings

caught in the terror of facing existence with all its sickening realities” (174). At the end of the novel, it becomes quite clear that Nanda’s sense of betrayal, frustration, failure and bitterness was a result of her husband’s lifelong faithlessness. He had an extramarital love affair throughout his life with Miss Davidson, a mathematics teacher at his university. He could not marry her because she was a Christian, but he loved her all his life. He often invited her for badminton parties at his home, took her to his separate bedroom, and then dropped her back secretly in the night. All these activities of Mr. Kaul were silently endured by Nanda like a typical ideal wife. She could never protest or even utter a single word against the infidelity of her husband – neither to her husband nor to anybody else. In India, a woman as a housewife is often taught that her husband is the only means of her livelihood therefore she should never go against his wishes. Though, the husband beats her, abuses her, or even keeps a mistress too yet she should never protest. She should always be meek and submissive. These things get so much ingrained into a woman’s psyche that she can hardly resist because of the fear of losing her husband’s shelter.

Similar things happen to Nanda. Though she was a convent educated girl from an upper class family yet she could never liberate herself from such stereotypes. Like a typical Indian woman, she always kept herself silent and performed all the social and moral duties of a wife, a mother, a hostess, and most importantly of a woman. She could never express her ‘self’ – her love, her anger, her needs, her desires, her hopes, her aspirations or anything else from her emotional world. Externally, everything seemed to be smooth and beautiful in their relationship and they were perfect couple in the eyes of others. But internally, there was a big hollowness at the core of their relationship. Though, physically they were united but emotionally they were poles apart. Her husband never loved her, caressed her, or, cherished her like a queen, “he had only done enough to keep her quiet” (158) all his life. Though, it is not mentioned anywhere in the novel, that her husband practiced any kind of physical brutality upon Nanda like beating or abusing, but he gave her mental tortures by keeping a love affair with another lady. So, Nanda was not a victim of any physical atrocity rather she was a victim of a mental oppression, and a mental suffering is often far above than any kind of physical pain.

The emotional needs of Nanda remain unsatisfied as she was always devoid of her husband’s love, care, concern and affection. He never tried to understand her and remain indifferent towards her feelings and emotions. Neglected by her husband, Nanda inclined towards her children, but the children too, “were all alien to her nature” (158). They could never understand the inner pain and sufferings of Nanda, and left her alone at last. She faced rejection – firstly, at the hand of her husband; and secondly, at the hand of her children. These things became so painful for Nanda that she left everything behind and came in the barren world of Carignano. But, at the end of the novel, she confesses that her seclusion was not a result of her choice rather, “she lived here alone because that was what she was forced to do, reduced to doing” (158).

In order to escape from the bitter realities of her life, Nanda takes shelter into her imaginary world: which, on the one hand, acts as a mode of wish-fulfillment for Nanda; and, on the other, it is a kind of defense mechanism too. It is through this imaginary world that she tries to fulfill her failed desires; whatever she could not achieve in reality as a daughter and as a wife, she tries to aspire that all through her imagination. And, at the same time, it works as a defense mechanism for Nanda, because it is through this imaginary world that she tries to defend herself from her bitter past which keeps haunting her. It is interesting to note that it is a grown up person and not a child who goes into the world of fantasy, but the world of fantasy, as defense-mechanism, cannot last forever. By the end of the novel, the world of fantasy collapses and brings about the tragic end of Nanda Kaul, because the reality becomes

quite unendurable to her and she prefers to die. Neeru Tondon writes, “In her novels the attraction of the unusual attracts, and the fantasy lies in the narrative technique which combines the realistic and the romantic modes” (95).

At the end, Nanda’s aggression is directed against her ‘self’ because she has to struggle between her real and idealized selves. At this point, she fails to cope up with the reality and her ‘real-self’ takes over her ‘idealized-self’. Thinking that her whole life has been nothing more than a lie, Nanda chokes. She “wanted to cry, but could not make a sound” – a thing that she could not do all her life. Therefore, she prefers to die voluntarily and silently without uttering a single word. She twists her head, then hangs it down and lets it hang forever. Nanda’s bowed head sends out a very symbolic message – she dies bowing her head in front of the power of patriarchy – which stands for an act of submission. Usha Bande analyses this act of submission of Nanda from a psychological point of view. She writes, “From psychological standpoint we analyze the forces destroying Nanda as the compulsions of self-destructive drives generated by the torment of a life which has been a failure” (100).

The news of the tragic death of Ila acts as a catalyst to bring back Nanda into the world of reality and shatters her world of dreams into pieces. The illusionary world, she had created once as an emotional shelter, now completely breaks down. And, Nanda faces the bitter realities of this patriarchal world in which a woman is just a pathetic being. She suffers from the slings of misfortune, social injustice and gender inequalities that are inflicted upon her bare existence by this male dominated world. Even after all these enormities, she is assumed to be submissive and compliant. And, if in any case, she tries to go beyond the set barriers of the society, she must have to pay for it, sometime resulting in murder and rape too. Though Ila Das was not young or beautiful or attractive in anyway, though she was an old withered woman who had been beaten and tattered by life; yet Preet Singh must have to rape her before murdering her to prove his manhood and to avenge her for crossing her limits. The only fault of Ila was that being a welfare officer, she tried to stop the marriage of Preet Singh’s seven year old daughter to a middle aged widower having six children. This is what, completely becomes unendurable for Nanda where a man can go to such an extent to prove his power. She prefers to die voluntarily and silently bowing her head in front the giant ‘patriarchy’. Ujwala Patil opines, “Nanda suffers from the psychological shock of rape and feels, like Ila Das, that her womanhood too is defiled and selfhood insulted” (63).

The novel ends on a very symbolic note with Raka setting a fire on the mountain and the flames leaping all over the mountain. Raka’s act of putting the fire on the mountain may be regarded as an act of fulfilling her great grandmother’s wish – a wish, with which Nanda suffered all her life – a death wish. When a natural forest fire spreads all over the mountain, it gives a kind of inner pleasure to Nanda and she feels that now she would be redeemed from the boredom of life. But a sudden coming of the rain sets the fire off which makes Nanda desperate and she is forced to accept the reality that she has to suffer the monotony of life further. It is this realization that makes her uneasy, she becomes so restless that she starts spinning fantastical stories about her past life, a past that keeps stinging to Nanda. Usha Bande writes, “she lives in a make-believe world to compensate for the cruel reality” (100). However, being a sensitive child, Raka was able to feel the uneasiness and the strange behavior of her great grandmother during the rain. She understood, “this new talkativeness of her great grandmother’s who had preferred, till lately, not to talk to her at all, nor had wanted to be talked to. Now she was unable to stop...” (106). She understood it well that, it was the rain that had blotted out the fire and made her great grandmother restless. Therefore, she sets the fire on the mountain again to fulfill her great grandmother’s wish. But

one thing to be noted that it is before the physical fire getting spread all over the mountain, Nanda burns herself with that invisible fire that was there in her heart. She commits suicide by self-immolation, and this immolation is not done by any physical fire but through an invisible fire that was burning in the lady's heart. She becomes a Sati not because she is a widow rather she becomes a Sati because she is a woman. And this is the fact of womanhood that she (woman) has to become a Sati in all ages either directly or indirectly. N. R. Gopal aptly points out that, "The life of a woman like in the given circumstances is never happy and the result is that she burns herself to death. Her impending death by suicide has been poetically described by Anita Desai even before her actual death which comes later in the novel" (25).

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