

The Tripartite Cycle of Alienation: A Psychological Study of Patriarchal Entrapment in Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain*

G. Sivashakthi

Assistant Professor, Department of English, St. Joseph's College (Arts & Science), Affiliated to University of Madras, Kovur, Chennai

ABSTRACT:

This paper explores the multifaceted nature of female alienation in Anita Desai's Sahitya Akademi Award-winning novel, *Fire on the Mountain* (1977). This research proposes a "Tripartite Cycle of Alienation." This systemic framework categorizes the characters into three distinct psychological pillars: Internalized Alienation (the Past, embodied by Nanda Kaul), Societal Alienation (the Present, represented by Ila Das), and Inherited Alienation (the Future, manifested in Raka).

Through a specialized feminist and psychological lens, the study argues that these varied forms of isolation are not autonomous personal choices but rather the inevitable products of a rigid patriarchal structure that demands female utility while neglecting female identity. Central to this analysis is Desai's use of eco-psychology, wherein the barren, indifferent landscape of Carignano serves as a potent objective correlative for the characters' fractured inner lives. The study culminates in an interpretation of the term "Fire" as a symbolic necessity that serves as a force that consumes a generational cycle of trauma. Ultimately, this research posits that Desai's narrative serves as a strong critique of a social order that offers marginalized women no recourse for autonomy other than total self-erasure.

Keywords: Anita Desai, *Fire on the Mountain*, tripartite cycle of alienation, eco-psychology, objective correlative, Indian writing in English

INTRODUCTION:

Anita Desai is considered a pioneer of the Indian psychological novel. Her writing is distinguished by its deep and sensitive exploration of the human condition and the experiences of the women. As a specialist in psychological novels, she dives deep into the psyche of her characters, especially women characters, to convey their introspections. This exploration of the psyche of the characters helps to uncover the roots of their emotional struggles and inner turmoil. Her analyses of the inner lives of the characters are shaped by their experiences from the outer world. This also brings forth the interplay between the inner and outer worlds, which is also one of the predominant themes of her novels.

Anita Desai was awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1978 for her novel, *Fire on the Mountain*. In the light of the novel *Fire on the Mountain* (1977), Anita Desai has explored the existential theme of alienation and the psychological aspects of the women characters, such as Nanda Kaul, Raka, and Ila Das. These characters self-alienate themselves from the social and familial bond to live a life of

resignation. The theme of alienation is presented in a way that not only the young, Raka, but also the old, Nanda Kaul and Ila Das, are alienated.

This study on the novel *Fire on the Mountain* collectively examines the tripartite cycle of alienation of these women characters. Within this framework, the alienation is not merely a voluntary isolation but a systemic inevitability imposed by an inflexible patriarchal society. By examining Nanda Kaul's internalized past, Ila Das's vulnerable present, and Raka's inherited future, Desai illustrates how patriarchal entrapment torments the female soul until it reaches its ultimate end.

TRIPARTITE CYCLE OF ALIENATION:

- **Internalized Alienation (the past)**—represented by the character of Nanda Kaul, an elderly woman, who retreats to the mountain as a defensive withdrawal from her lifetime emotional imprisonment and marital neglect.
- **Inherited Alienation (the Future)**—represented by the character of Raka, great-granddaughter of Nanda Kaul, who retreats to the mountain as an instinctive withdrawal from the domestic violence and loveless marital life of her parents.
- **Societal Alienation (the Present)**—represented by the character of Ila Das, friend of Nanda Kaul and a social welfare officer, who highlights the external and physical dangers of being a marginalized woman in a male-dominated community through her socio-economic vulnerability and her brutal death.

NANDA KAUL: THE FORTRESS OF THE PAST

The character of Nanda Kaul serves as the first pillar of the tripartite cycle of alienation, which is the “internalized alienation.” She represents the terminal stage of patriarchal endurance in which her past life has hardened into a cold and impenetrable shell. The past story of Nanda Kaul includes the pain and suffering she had to undergo in her marital life. Nanda Kaul was cherished as a queen by her late husband, the vice-chancellor, just to keep her quiet and make use of her utility. Her role as the wife of the vice-chancellor and mother of her children always demanded her to be an impeccable homemaker and as a duty-bound woman. Nanda Kaul felt overburdened and worn out by her previous life, which made her withdraw from the external world and lead an isolated and detached life in Carignano. Her urge to live alone is an attempt to reclaim a self that was long eroded by her domestic duty. This study examines that her pursuit of isolation is not a spiritual awakening but an internalized alienation inflicted from a systemic marital trauma. Desai illustrates that, in the process of attaining peace, Nanda's psyche has lost her identity and asserted a fabricated image of autonomy.

Moreover, Nanda Kaul considers the human contact as a threat to her carefully constructed “Fortress of the Past.” She doesn't like any intrusion in her isolated, lonely life. She doesn't invite any of her family or friends to Carignano. Thus, their arrival sometimes at Carignano makes her feel frustrated and agitated. They will always be an uninvited guest to Carignano. “Whatever else came, or happened here, would be an unwelcome intrusion and distraction” (Desai, 2008). She dislikes the presence of Raka, Ila Das and even the Postman who comes occasionally to deliver the letters. The arrival of these uninvited guests disrupts her solitude. Nanda Kaul always wanted to display herself as emotionally distant, frigid, and uninterested in human interaction.

This physical retreat reflects her mental escape from the emotional duties and responsibilities of her life. The character of Nanda Kaul can be compared to the narrator of the short story “The Yellow Wallpaper”

by Charlotte Perkins Gilman. As the narrator of the short story confines herself to a room with the yellow wallpaper, Nanda Kaul isolates herself in the mountain house, Carignano. The narrator of “The Yellow Wallpaper” quotes that “And I am alone a good deal just now” (Gilman, 2019). This isolation is also reflected in the character of Nanda Kaul, as “all she wanted was to be alone, to have Carignano to herself in this period of her life when stillness and calm were all that she wished to entertain” (Desai, 2008).

Therefore, the alienation of Nanda Kaul is “internalized,” because she has accepted the patriarchal lie that a woman’s worth is tied to her utility. Once her utility (raising children and hosting) is over, she has no choice but to vanish.

RAKA: THE GHOST OF THE FUTURE

Raka, great-granddaughter of Nanda Kaul, embodies the second pillar of the tripartite cycle, which is the “Inherited Alienation.” Raka is not merely a child seeking solitude but a psychological byproduct of toxic patriarchal domesticity. Unlike Nanda, who chose alienation as a late-life defense, Raka’s alienation is instinctive and innate. She rejected the world at a young age, which has shown her only violence and instability.

Anita Desai projects the memory of Raka, scarred with the loveless marital life of her parents. Therefore, Raka is unable to create and sustain a harmonious relationship with her parents and wishes to lead an isolated and independent life. The character of Raka mirrors Henry David Thoreau’s desire to get closer to nature. Her character is crafted as a wild, untamed figure who loves the companionship of nature more than humans. She is seen as a child with a sense of mystery as she has her own secretive thoughts. She believes that all creatures should have their own freedom and thus she creates an aversion to seeing anything that is caged. She also refuses the traditional expectations of society as well as the standards of discipline and beauty that are associated with women. Both the appearance and internal conflicts of Raka are reflected in her rebellious and free-spirited personality. Consequently, Raka, same as Nanda, also views human intimacy not as a comfort, but as a threat. Both Nanda and Raka reject the presence of each other as an act of self-preservation.

In this cycle, Raka serves as the “future” demonstrating that the patriarchal trauma is not static but evolutionary. The alienation of Raka comes to an end with her obsession with the “Fire.” She sets the mountain on fire, which creates a significant impact on the minds of the readers. While Nanda seeks the stillness of the mountain, Raka seeks its destruction. Her final act of setting the forest on fire is a symbolic “burning down” of the tripartite cycle. This fire can also be considered the funeral pyre. In his book, *Anita Desai*, R.S. Sharma remarks that, “The only reality the reader is finally left with is the reality of fire that symbolizes the funeral pyre—ultimate consummation” (Sharma, 1981).

It is a desperate and wordless declaration that the future, when built on a foundation of inherited trauma, can only result in total loss. Through the character of Raka, Desai suggests that the cycle of patriarchal suffering, if left unbroken, eventually consumes the environment and the self alike.

ILA DAS: THE VULNERABLE PRESENT

While Nanda Kaul and Raka represent internal and inherited alienation, respectively, Ila Das embodies the third pillar of the tripartite cycle, which is “societal alienation.” Ila Das, as a social welfare officer, represents the external world, which is messy, impoverished, and violently patriarchal and refuses to provide peace for the alienated woman. The character of Ila Das is seen as an intrusion of the real world

in the psychological landscape of Nanda and Raka. She is the “present” reality that Nanda Kaul desperately rejects to accept. Unlike Nanda, her alienation is not her choice but a consequence of her socio-economic displacement.

Ila Das, as an unmarried woman, has been disregarded or left out of popular social narratives on female identity. She struggles with loneliness, abandonment, and longing. She is more isolated emotionally than geographically. The character of Ila Das is similar to the character of Akhila in Anita Nair’s *Ladies Coupe*. Akhila, as a 45-year-old unmarried woman feels trapped by the societal expectations and familial obligations. Both Akhila and Ila Das are forced to fulfil their roles as a daughter, sister and provider. They yearn for a life of their own. Despite being a spinster, Ila never felt burdened by the societal expectations, like women should be in a relationship, take care of their families, etc. However, Ila serves as a victim of patriarchal assumptions that left her without the safety net.

Ila Das was a dedicated welfare worker who educated the people and stopped them from engaging in harmful social practices and superstitions. Ironically, the person whom Ila Das educated about the undesirability of child marriage attacks, rapes, and kills her. Her death made her aware of the pointlessness of human existence. This presents her as a pathetic character whose helplessness evokes pity among the readers. Her rape and murder by Preet Singh are not just plot points but represent the ultimate physical manifestation of patriarchal rage against the female agency. The tragedy of Ila Das provides a brutal “reality check” to the tripartite cycle. This proves that societal alienation is a death sentence.

Moreover, Ila’s death is the news that finally breaks the silence of Nanda Kaul, forcing her to admit the lies of her own life. In “Anita Desai’s *Fire on the Mountain: An Ecofeminist Reading*”, Maha Abdel Moneim Emara mentions that “The brutal death of Nanda’s only friend Ila Das breaks the web of self-insulation that Nanda has been weaving since her arrival in Carignano” (Emara, 2017). The thoughts of Nanda’s fabricated life choked her and she confronted her fatal end. Meanwhile, Raka sets the forest on fire.

Therefore, in the tripartite framework, Ila serves as a bridge that connects the internal trauma of the past (Nanda) to the external violence of the present (Ila Das), leading to the “fire” set by the future (Raka).

ECO-PSYCHOLOGY AND OBJECTIVE CORRELATIVE:

The novels of Anita Desai often provide a detailed, realistic portrayal of modern Indian life. Anita Desai is particularly known for using visual representations of nature to portray character and setting in her works. Central to this cycle is Desai’s use of “eco-psychological” symbolism, where the desolate Carignano landscape serves as an objective correlative for the characters’ mental states.

The barrenness of Carignano serves as a primary objective correlative for the soul of Nanda Kaul. She does not love Carignano for its beauty but for its indifference. The natural landscape surrounding the house of Nanda Kaul reflects the inner desolation of Nanda and her desire for solitude. Unlike her past, the mountains ask nothing of her. Nanda seeks a landscape as empty of life as she feels her identity has become. This environment reflects her “internalized alienation.”

Raka, herself, serves as an objective correlative of the future. Raka, conversely, does not seek the stillness of the mountain but its instability. While Nanda tries to be a “stationary” part of the house, Raka is compared to the flora and fauna of the mountain. Her alienation is “inherited” because she has bypassed human socialization entirely to bond with a scorched earth.

The “Fire” in the title of the novel is the ultimate eco-psychological climax. It represents the point where the internal psychological pressure becomes too great for the characters to hold. It acts as a metaphor for the suppressed rage of three generations of women. The “Fire” serves not merely as an act of arson but as an essential symbol. When Raka sets the mountain ablaze, she is effectively performing a "mercy killing" of the landscape that has served as a monument to their collective suffering. The fire purges the "fortress" of the past, the violent "present" of Ila Das, and the evolutionary "future" of Raka, leaving them at their ultimate end. Therefore, these objective correlatives used by Desai clearly demonstrate that the novel is built on the symbolism of eco-psychology.

CONCLUSION:

The tripartite cycle of alienation in *Fire on the Mountain* serves as a scathing critique of the patriarchal structure that systematically strips women of their autonomy. Raka setting the forest on fire suggest that within this rigid social order, total self-destruction is the only remaining remedy for independence. Nanda Kaul's internalized alienation is a response to a hollow past, Raka's inherited alienation is a rejection of a violent future, and Ila Das's societal alienation is the tragic reality of the present. Ultimately, Desai shows that when patriarchal control is absolute, the only outcome is the complete destruction of both nature and the individual. Therefore, Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* serves as the best example for the tripartite cycle of alienation.

REFERENCES:

1. Desai, Anita. *Fire on the Mountain*. Random House India, 2008.
2. Emara, Maha Abdel Moneim. “Anita Desai’s *Fire on the Mountain*: An Ecofeminist Reading.” *Advances in Social Sciences Research Journal*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.14738/assrj.42.2716>.
3. Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. “The Yellow Wallpaper.” *American Literature*, 19 July 2019, <https://americanliterature.com/author/charlotte-perkins-gilman/short-story/the-yellow-wallpaper/>.
4. Sharma, Radhe Shyam. *Anita Desai*. Arnold-Heinemann, 1981.