

Ambiguous Tragic Flaw in Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain*

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The Indian author Anita Desai creates in *Fire on the Mountain* (1977) a perfect tragedy in the Greek mode. Though fiction, *Fire on the Mountain* contains the nobility of character, tight structure, sense of retrospective inevitability, ambiguous flaw, and recognition of complicity which Aristotle so admired in 5th-century B.C. plays. Nanda Kaul is a noble woman who, after a long life spent serving a large family, wants only to retreat to a quiet sanctuary, Carignano. Instead, the family puts a great-granddaughter, Raka, into her charge. Raka proves to be as independent and unapproachable as Nanda, and, in her rebelliousness, sets fire at the end of the book to the hillside on which her great-grandmother's house perches. During the forest fire, another old woman, Ila Das, who serves as an alter ego both for Nanda (a tired, elderly woman) and for Raka (someone demanding Nanda's care), is raped and murdered. Nanda, devastated, may recognize that she herself has contributed to Raka's anarchy, by not reaching out to her sooner. Moreover, she has contributed to Ila's murder, by refusing to offer Ila a place to stay.¹ Nanda is somehow responsible for all the violence, although she has intended only peace for herself—a reversal exactly in Aristotle's terms.

As ancient tragedy hovered between fault and fate, here too Desai sometimes blames a person, who may deserve punishment for inner lack, and sometimes a metaphysical "nature of things," which cannot be changed. She also adds in another contributor to catastrophe, when she blames society, which could possibly be changed in the future. Desai gives evidence for at least three possible flaws that condemn or exonerate Nanda to different degrees and lead to different interpretations of the final violence. Most disturbingly, by revealing at the end that Nanda had neither "understood nor loved" any of her children, Desai may accuse Nanda of coldness (145). A woman who desires to be alone has failed as a woman. From this point of view, Ila in her sufferings substitutes for Nanda. The graphic description of "dry, shrivelled" Ila pinned down "into the dust and the goat droppings" may imply that Nanda, with her dry, shrivelled capacity to nurture others, actually deserves a similar blotting out and thus receives a vicarious punishment. In some ways the book reads uncomfortably as if Desai, initially sympathetic to Nanda in her escape from the demands of a traditional culture, suddenly closes the narrative in a paroxysm of self-recrimination, against herself and all women. How dare she imagine a character like Nanda who withholds the care that she must, *as a woman*, continue to give every second of her life?

A second interpretation of the violence is that Nanda, far from the cold person she may appear to be, feels strongly for Raka, but emotion inevitably

¹ Anita Desai, *Fire on the Mountain* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1977) 127. Subsequent citations will be noted in parentheses.

brings pain. Desai would then be creating the tragedy of someone who, hoping to remain aloof, cannot prevent herself from caring intensely for Raka after all. Nanda is hurt because love is itself a kind of burning forest fire. In this case, the violence seems more metaphysical and less Nanda's personal fault.

A third interpretation of the violence is that society punishes all three female characters for departing from the norm prescribed for women. Ila with her squawking voice, Nanda with her aloofness, and Raka with her independence transgress the expectations for femininity: demure quietude, care giving, and dependence. The disaster results in this case not from personal lack or metaphysical flaw but from societal limitation, a failure to recognize the worth of the two women and the little girl, who become innocent victims.

Desai shifts ambivalently among these three views of the violence, making *Fire on the Mountain* rich, intriguing, but also disturbing and in some ways complicitous with the values that at other times Desai seems to be questioning. The multiple interpretations that the book suggests may, in fact, express the uncertainty of Indian society caught between two worlds and times: between a tradition where women are expected only to nurture others, and a more westernized, modern vision whereby women have a right to lives of their own. The ambivalence of the book thus becomes not a failure of Desai to think through her position but rather a valuable register of the "political unconscious," to borrow a term from Fredric Jameson².

Desai supports in several ways the first interpretation of the violence, as something caused by a cold Nanda who hasn't attained the warmth "natural" to women. By not inviting Ila to move in with her, Nanda allows the attack on her friend. In fact, the man who rapes Ila fades from the picture, almost excused for his peasant ignorance, while Nanda looms as the real culprit. Nanda as cause of Ila's rape thus becomes a depressing version of the slur against women as responsible for their own rapes after all. For hasn't her desire to be alone already tended toward destruction and death? Nanda admires the freedom of an eagle at Carignano, but perhaps her own desire to soar above her real place, down with the mundane tasks of caring for others, precipitates a fall. The vistas of Carignano, commanded by the eagle, lead only to "ice and snow sketched upon the sky" and to a "plunging cliff," both suggesting death (4). Moreover, her colonial house, inhabited by a long line of foreign "maiden ladies," has even caused an actual death when "The entire roof . . . was lifted off the square stone walls and hurled down the hill as far as Garkhal where its sharp edge sliced the head off a coolie who was trying to make it shelter beside a load of stacked wood on the roadside" (6). This detail makes it seem as if the unmarried status of the women, along with Nanda's present desire to be alone, is itself the "foreign" value most dangerous to the community, like the unnaturally careening roof.

But if Desai at times seems to accuse Nanda of coldness, at other times the author presents Nanda more sympathetically as someone "burning" with emotion. Love itself hurts the characters. Widespread imagery for love as dangerous--forest fire (74), burning deck (112), poison (48), dust storm (53), bruise

² Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell UP, 1981) 20.

(34)—closely resembles the vocabulary for dangerous passion in another tragedy, Racine's neoclassical *Phaedre*: flame, drowning or shipwreck, poison in the veins, wound from an arrow. And in both the neoclassical tragedy and this modern, fictional tragedy, characters like Phaedra or Hippolytus or Nanda who think to control chaotic emotion only unleash more chaos by the very means of imposing order. The chaos inheres in the nature of human emotion, and the characters, though slightly reprehensible for expressing themselves awkwardly, escape final blame.

Desai also clears Nanda of censure by incriminating Nanda's husband. One reason Nanda may regard love as a poison is that she has been betrayed and used. Although Desai does not clearly name until the end his long adultery that has hurt Nanda (145), she hints at it earlier with beautiful evocativeness. Right before Nanda thinks "with asperity" of her husband driving a guest home, she "stepped over a broken shuttlecock discarded beside a bed of white petunias over which moths fluttered in a kind of frantic ecstasy" (25-26). As the moths evoke, in retrospect, the husband and his mistress, the game insinuates the man shuttling between mistress and wife, giving the former his love and giving his wife more children until she finally moves his bed into a separate room. Nanda appears as a victim, who builds up a feigned indifference solely as a protection against further hurt.

But when the author draws sympathy for Nanda by explaining her through her husband, Desai confuses the apparent questioning of women's roles. If Nanda has not after all *chosen* to be alone but has been "reduced" to it (145), then Desai seems to retreat from her original sympathy for a woman's desire not to be a care giver by denying that such a desire could really exist in women except under warped circumstances. Because her husband and children do not respond adequately to Nanda's overtures, she tries to repress her impulses toward others. But, according to one recent Indian critic, thwarted womanhood will take its revenge: "Due to the strong maternal instincts women, as a rule, derive peculiar joy in bringing up their children. . . . But Nanda Kaul is an exception to this." Nanda's desire to be alone was silly and unnatural, and her resolution "begins to crumble in the human presence of Raka. Maternal love and her basic nature weaken Nanda Kaul's self-imposed detachment. Once again she looks for someone to care for; her inner dictates force her 'to reach out to another,' to love and be loved."³ "Reaching out" to another person is, for this critic, not a human characteristic of both men and women but a trait found only in women, who have weaker, "compliant" natures.

Actually, Desai does not entirely support this view that it is a perversely repressed and now resurgent "maternal instinct" pushing Nanda toward Raka. Nanda's compulsion toward Raka is not that of a settled older person seeking to protect a helpless youngster, but rather the yearning between equals—of any gender—or even from childlike Nanda to independent Raka as adult role model: "Seeing Raka bend her head to study a pine cone in her fist, the eyelids slipping down like two mauve shells and the short hair settled like a dusty cap about her scalp, Nanda Kaul saw that she was the finished, perfected model of what Nanda Kaul herself was merely a brave, flawed experiment" (47).

³ Usha Pathania, "The Filial Ties—A Bane: *Fire on the Mountain*" in *The Fiction of Anita Desai*, ed. R. K. Dhawan (New Delhi: Bahri Publications, 1989) 113-15.

But if Desai moves away from questioning roles of husbands and wives in general by indicting this *particular* husband, the author often does undermine accepted codes by getting sympathy for the women who appear as victims. Ila's family expects the daughters to relinquish the inheritance to their brothers, even dissolute ones (127). The villager Preet Singh expects to marry his seven-year-old daughter to an old man; because Ila threatens to invoke the law against that marriage, Singh kills her.⁴ Although Nanda might appear to oppose Ila--reserved silence versus intrusive squawk--Nanda in her desire to be alone jangles against propriety as much as reform-minded Ila. Nanda takes pleasure in Carignano's "barrenness," a quality which flouts the community's requirement that women be fertile and then go on for generations gushing concern (4). Even Raka prefers "paths that were barely marked," setting all three female characters outside the bounds of "upright citizens" (63). Although these female characters refuse only unreasonable societal expectations, they suffer the cost.

Desai prefigures the rape and murder at least four times, in scenes whose implications will serve to review and summarize Desai's ambivalence whether to place blame for tragic violence on Nanda, on emotion in itself, or on society. These scenes answer the accusation that "The abrupt and violent climax is unconvincing because it has not been properly prepared for. The novel is thus structurally defective and psychologically unconvincing."⁵ Although on first reading the attack is unexpected, on second reading it is clear that Desai prepares for it insistently, subliminally, powerfully, each scene placing a different degree of responsibility for the attack on Nanda.

In the first prefigurement of the attack, an austere Nanda, despite her apparent indifference to the lushness of apricot trees, reaches for fruit: ". . . she stooped now to pick up a bright apricot from the short, dry grass. It had been squashed by its fall and she flung it away. Immediately, a bright hoopoe, seeing its flight and flash, struck down at it and tore at its bright flesh, then flew off with a lump in its beak. it had its nest in the eaves outside her bedroom window, she knew, but did not stay to watch the nestlings fed. It was a sight that did not fill her with delight. Their screams were shrill and could madden" (4). Nanda is not fed, but the young must be fed. The scene thus resumes the emptiness of Nanda's past life, given over to caring for heedless children and for a husband who did not care for her. The tearing of "bright flesh" also suggests the future attack on Ila. Ila and Nanda thereby become identified, representatives of all women who must be sacrificed for others. Not satisfied themselves, they are consumed by demands. When society places the exclusive care for children on women and begrudges them any other outlet, so that unmarried Ila can work for the government but only as a misfit in her community, something in the woman is killed--even if not so graphically as in Ila's case.

⁴ "The Child Marriage Restraint Act, 1929, proclaimed the minimum marriageable age for women as 14 and men as 18." Malashri Lal, "Anita Desai: *Fire on the Mountain*," in *Major Indian Novels: An Evaluation*, ed. Narindar S. Pradhan (Atlantic Highlands, N. J.: Humanities Press, 1986) 262.

⁵ B. Ramachandra Rao, "Technique in the Novels of Anita Desai," in *Perspectives on Anita Desai*, ed. Ramesh K. Srivastava (Ghaziabad, India: Vimal Prakashan, 1984) 89.

If this first prefigurement of the attack on Ila locates the source of the "starving" of women in society, the second prefigurement makes Nanda herself seem dangerous. When the postman approaches Carignano, Nanda resents his intrusion even before she knows that the letter he carries announces the arrival of Raka: "He slowed down, drawing out her irritation, keeping behind a small schoolboy who had materialized out of the hillside and was dawdling schoolwards without much sense of purpose or direction for he would stop now to pick up a flat stone, now to shy it at a chipmunk, then climb halfway up a hill for a thorny snatchful of raspberries, then slide down on his bottom into the ditch and search for a golden beetle. The postman seemed unable to overtake him—hypnotized by the boy's whimsical progress, he stopped and kept behind while Nanda Kaul, slit-eyed, burned on the knoll" (5). The schoolboy partly anticipates Raka, who likes to wander just so haphazardly. Throwing stones at a chipmunk, he also foreshadows the schoolboys who will harass Ila on her last fateful walk (107-09), themselves foreshadowings of the rapist, Preet Singh. This early scene of the schoolboys interfering with the postman and the postman intruding on an old woman, with a simultaneous "burning" on the knoll, sketches out, in fact, the climax of the book: the schoolboys hounding Ila and a man raping her, while the forest burns. Yet this early description makes Nanda's role ambiguous. By burning, is she suffering innocently? Or is she actually presiding, "slit-eyed" and evil looking? This scene comes close to locating the attack on Ila in Nanda's scorched irritability, her lack of caring.

In a third prefigurement, a dust storm tosses a hen, "its squawks snatched out of its beak, shattered like glass" (53). Ila's primary characteristic is her screeching voice, and she will be strangled by the rapist. Just as she is directly compared to a shot crow (102), here she is implicitly present in the squawking tossed hen. Desai identifies Raka indirectly with dust storms and with fire and connects these two natural phenomena with each other (53, 74). In this omen of attack and fire, Raka, or unrequited emotion for Raka, kills an old hen-woman, and the fault resides in emotion itself rather than in Nanda.

Desai prefigures the attack on Ila a fourth time through Ila's walk toward Nanda's house at the end of the book. Several events on the walk urgently warn of the catastrophe which is soon to occur. The boys cruelly taunting Ila announce the man who will attack her, as the spectacle of Ila "spiked by an agave bedside the path leading to Carignano" prophesies the rape (107, 110). Her umbrella, taken by the boys, becomes a horrifyingly dehumanized metonymy for Ila, who also "squeaked and shrilled like an agitated shrew": "The umbrella squeaked in protest. Boys fell upon it, brought it down into the dust and it bowled along the gravel, kicked helpfully on by them to the side of the road. . . . Roaring in joyous expectation, the boys tried to help it through the rails but it stuck fast, protesting like a lady in hoop-skirts at their uncouth sport" (108). The servant Ram Lal extricates the umbrella, "as maimed and crooked as a hunchback, a witch of olden times tied and readied for the fatal dip" (109). But if Ram Lal is helping Ila, he also scorns this "old animal that has been made to run before the hounds. Carefully turning his head, he spat into the raspberry bushes" (109). Because even Ram Lal blends with the other males in the scene along a scale from uncaring to brutal, this prefigurement indicts a patriarchal society for the attack.

By blaming the catastrophe at different times on Nanda, emotion in itself, or outworn gender stereotypes, Desai accurately and usefully records the ambivalence of her society in its present mixed expectations for women. Having heard so often that women who don't give care are "unnatural," she seems tentatively to test whether Nanda may be as dangerous as a flying roof. But Desai then corrects the terms of the assumption by making Nanda not a specifically feminine care giver to Raka but a human seeker of affection. Nanda reaches out not maternally but as a thwarted baby (101) or an admiring disciple (47) or an equal friend (64) or even a wary lover (97), when she seems to court Raka. The multiplication of comparisons breaks down the labels by which society normally channels and limits longing.

Desai thus clears Nanda of blame by respecting both her solitude and her need for affection. Tragedy occurs not primarily because of prideful solitude or because of an inescapable nature of things, although any affection remains inevitably painful. Instead, disaster results from society's flaws, which could be changed. In 1970 Desai criticized Indian women writers for not protesting more, for a "lack of imagination, courage, nerve, or gusto—of the satirical edge, the ironic tone, the inspired criticism or the lyric response that alone might have brought their novels to life."⁶ Malashri Lal thinks Desai goes astray in her attempt to "distill" women's experience in India if she resorts to "symbolism," which for Lal is a "mere reworking of a heritage of literature."⁷ But it is precisely through Desai's "lyric response," through the rich suggestiveness of her imagery—tattered umbrellas jammed in slats, squawking hens tossed by the storm—that Desai registers and works out the ambivalence of her society. She senses the internalized opprobrium that makes women reproach themselves, feeling that maybe they *ought* to be thrown out and silenced. But then Desai pushes beyond that doubt to affirm that the hounded characters Nanda, Ila, and Raka do not deserve to have their lives stifled.

⁶ Anita Desai, "Women Writers," *Quest* 65 (Apr.-June 1970): 42-43; quoted in Srivastava 12.

⁷ Lal 259.