

# **Memory and Fantasy in Anita Desai's-*Fire on the Mountain* and *Clear Light of Day***

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## **Abstract:**

*This paper is prepared to explore Anita Desai's art of fictionalization with a particular reference to the most predominating aspects in her novels--- memory and fantasy. For a convenient discourse, two masterpieces **Fire on the Mountain** and **Clear Light of Day** have been selected, where the twin inter-related aspects---memory and fantasy, get full divulged. The terms 'memory' and 'fantasy', which are chiefly related with psychic faculties, get profound discussed from various representations, including cultural, mythical, social and the literary arena. The cultural symbolism and depiction of imagery, its gendered stereotypes are lucidly discussed in the immediate means of representation, and more emphatically analyzed with respect to a larger context of socio-historical relations and identities. On literary perspective, two basic elements like 'time' and 'psychology' are explicated with reference to their changeability in this flux of the world. An attempt to aesthetize the psycho-analytical constructs behind gender and its multilayered characterizations, irrespective time and place, is adopted for a larger concept of the 'truth untold' amidst mankind.*

**Keywords/Phrases:** Memory, fantasy, literary arena, psycho-analytical constructs, aesthetize, truth untold.

## **Anita Desai's Acumen in Memory and Fantasy:**

Anita Desai, a literary giant in the realm of Indian fiction in English, is noted for her unconventional writing and exquisite portrayal of the inner life of her characters. During Post-Independence era, it was only her writing either in form of short stories or of fictions that seemed to carve an indelible mark in the readers' minds with her innovation of life-centric plot constructions and psychologically moving characterization. Having a mixed parentage – Bengali father and German mother, Anita Desai used to go by her own views and occasionally claimed to think English to be “a suitable link language, a compromise”, as she admitted herself in the

treatise *The Indian Writer's Problems, Language Forum*. All along in her academic life, Anita Desai maintained her habit of reading Indian fiction in English only "to keep in touch". But, as a writer, according to the critic K. R. S. Iyenger, she is "an original talent that has the courage to go its own way"; her literarily creative interest lies in not in the traditional way of weaving plot construction in a good texture, rather in the projection of inner world of the characters, their mental annals and anguish in the comprehensive language and style. Of her many successful works, the citations can be made of *Fire on the Mountain* (1977) and *Clear Light of Day* (1980), wherein the facets of memory and fantasy, two important pillars of human psychology, get a full exposition and explication to culminate in a message of truth to the society of mankind.

As characters, particularly their inner arena, are prime concerns to her, Anita Desai is not so particular about the selection and formation of themes. She keeps utmost focus on the development of mental world of her characters with a combination of coherent literary structure, pattern, rhythm and the unity of vision in her works. With a little importance on the traditional notion of beginning, middle and an end in a work, she lays preference on the art of characterization with varied psychological offshoots like memory and fantasy, wherein her own voice can be recorded:

I follow flashes of insight; I veer away from or even fight anything that threatens to distort or destroy this insight, and somehow come to the end and look back to see the pattern of footprints on the sand. (*Replies to the Questionnaire*, 1978)

As any sort of writing is not an act of deliberation, reason or choice, Desai deems her novels in general and the quoted ones in particular as an outcome of the process of instinct, silence, compulsion and waiting.

### **Memoire in *Fire on the Mountain* and *Clear Light of Day*:**

In Anita Desai's noted novel, *Fire on the Mountain*, memory plays a gigantic role centering round the life of the protagonist, Nanda Kaul. The title of this fifth novel, commonly designed after William Golding's reputed 20<sup>th</sup> century fiction *Lord of the Flies*, is an exploration of the psychic world of the old heroine Nanda Kaul, living a life of utter seclusion far from the madding crowd. It fictionalizes the loneliness of this old woman and the way fantasy and memory become integral part of her life. Desai depicts the mental conflict of Nanda graphically when she dwindles between fantasy and reality, and at the end with unavoidable

acknowledgement of reality, “*All those graces and glories with which she had tried to captivate Raka were only a fabrication...*”. (P-145)

In this novel, solitude that ‘never disturbed her’ (Nanda Kaul) is a metamorphosis of fantasy. Living a lonely life in the mountain retreat, Carignano, is not a challenge to her, but a surrender to the life itself. Her voluntary retreat to the mountain seems to be not a ‘withdrawal’, rather a ‘forced’ seclusion that she coveted stubbornly. Even her desire for solitariness reached to such an extent that ‘she wished no one to go either--- certainly not Raka’. (p,80) In fact, she is thought to be ‘reduced’ to sustain the rest of her life alone in Kasauli. Memory becomes sorrowful to Nanda when she broods over her very busy past life, full of duties and responsibilities. As a wife of Vice-Chancellor, she had to cater various social and domestic duties in a house full of children, dignified guests and *et al.* But despite all these, Nanda remained alone within and ‘slept alone’. As per the common trait in Anita Desai’s novels, the lack of bonding between mother and children happens here, too, as if the lesson of individual independence is taught upon as a part of life. So by law of natural relation that during her old age she is not so well looked after by her children, “*Discharge me,*” she yelled, “*I have discharged all my duties Discharge.*” Nanda holds extreme resentment for Raka’s intrusion because it awakens in her the past memories of her children. Her conjugal relationship with her husband marked a sorrow figure in her memory; her husband’s affair with another woman bears a scar on her heart which she endeavours to forget with her ‘withdrawal’ into the world of fantasy. Her rejection of the outside world can be seen as a transformation into the world of fantasy, “*She wished she could close her eyes. She wished she were a million miles away from the band. She tried to think she was asleep and this was a nightmare*”. (p,69) If withdrawal is a necessity to nourish all fantasies and memories, Nanda’s loneliness is ‘a moment of private triumph, cold and proud’ for her.

At the arrival of Raka, her great granddaughter, at Carignano, Nanda Kaul holds a strong aversion--- “*Raka’s genius, Raka’s daemon. It disturbed.*”(p,64) She did not like to open a chapter of disturbance once more with the arrival of Raka there. To her, Raka was “*still an intruder, an outsider, a mosquito flown up from the plains to tease and worry*”. (p,40) But Raka is a highly perceptive child, who goes by large in accordance with her instinctive choice of

independence. She occasionally makes distance from Nanda and roams in the desolate and wild surroundings with the day in and the day out. Gradually a change dawns upon Nanda with the realization that Raka was “the finished, perfected model of what Nanda Kaul herself was merely a brave, flawed experiment”. (p,47) Very soon Nanda hankers after the company and attention of Raka as if she is a “good, a challenge to her - the illusive fish, the golden catch.” For the purpose, she concocts tales of fantasy to win over Raka’s mind. Nanda makes desperate attempt to face the reality of the present by modifying the challenges of the past in her life. Her creation of the world of fantasies and memories gives birth to a life of speculation and introspection. She fabricates varied childhood stories with extreme interest on topics like apple orchards, bears, leopard, cats, peacocks, tortoises and pangolins, things which are supposed to captivate the fantasy of a child. But Raka pays least interest to all of Nanda’s attempts, making her ‘breathless’: *‘She would have to break out into freedom again. She could not bear to be confined to the old lady’s fantasy world when the reality outside appealed so strongly . . .’*

Memory and fantasy equally play a greater role in the character of Ila Das, one of Nanda’s dear and near ones. In course of their friendly discussion, Ila Das is found to weave a make-belief world about Nanda Kaul’s youth “always in pearls and emeralds”, which further assumes to be of no use to Raka. At such a moment Nanda perceives that her world of lies is simply like the ‘tranquillisers’ required for her to keep up the act of living in her abandoned state. Thus, Raka performs as an agent to help an adult review in her life and to make her confront the reality. At the penultimate stage, Nanda Kaul confronts the reality of her being contrasted with Raka and becomes shattered in her make-belief world originated from her unhappy past life. What Raka sustains the world of individuality and freedom, does even get shared with Ram Lal, the servant. According to **Jabir Jain**, the noted critic of Desai’s literature, Ram Lal and Raka weigh themselves not as an adult and child; rather they share the wonder and the awe that their world of fantasies evokes irresistibly. True to his background and the mooring of social ambience, Ram Lal’s fantasy in the supernatural world is neither an escape nor an emotional prop; instead it is an integral part of his make-belief world. Raka, too, acknowledges it unquestioningly because it carries certain authenticity and cohesion. In fact, the aroma of fantasy that Raka nourishes for herself is quite different from Nanda Kaul’s and Ram Lal’s. While staying at Kasauli, she used to ramble in the desolate surroundings of Carignano. In no way she demands any attention and surprises even Nanda by her reticence and aloofness. Her fantasy gets

expressed in deeming the Pasteur Institute as a 'Square dragon' and Ram Lal's kitchen as "***a blackened, fire-blasted cave in which one fiery inflamed eye glowed and smouldered by itself.***" Surpassing Nanda Kaul in terms of seclusion, Raka is a great devotee of liberation, who holds caliber to turn away from the gruesome reality of human relationships. Since her childhood, she has been a spectator of her father's ruthless molestation upon her mother, which marks a negative effect on her sensitive mind. It is this imbedded apprehension that impels her set that mountain on fire. It is further an irrepressible urge to destroy all falsities, to drive away all malice in the world around her. When Nanda directly confronts such reality, she feels free to admit all the falsities exhibited and executed on her. Ultimately she justifies the morale of her life and dies. The inherent philosophy that comes out in the end of the novel is that death is the ultimate reality of life whereas life is a painful process to experience. The remark of Jasbir Jain can be cited here, "withdrawal, which does not come naturally to her, takes her nowhere and involvement is equally meaningless."

Anita Desai is equally fervent and consistent to make memory and flashback as the main narrative strategies in her novel *Clear Light of Day*. As characterization is the chief forte of her writing, the novel delves deep into the nether world of all major characters, starting from Bimla to Tara, from Raja to Baba. While Desai interviewed, she sharply replies that she "probes deep into the inner recesses of the psyche of the character and delves deeper in a character or a scene rather than going round about it." As the novel unfolds itself, the characters like Bimla and Tara are travelling along the childhood memories, specifically about their parents, their garden houses, their education and their neighboring people. Even Baba, a mentally retarded, prefers playing "the same old records" on gramophone, wherein Tara questions, "Isn't it strange, ... . He loves his old ones".(CLD,p-11) Moved by T. S Eliot's *Four Quartets* (1978), Desai shows how time can be both a destroyer and a preserver in Das family living in Old Delhi, a place of historicity. Sectioned into four distinct parts, the novel undergoes several psychic oscillations and flashbacks of the upper middleclass characters with a view to unravel the identities.

The novel *Clear Light of Day* lays immense significance of varied memories of childhood of the major characters because of their differing temperaments and circumstances of life. Each of them, it can be asserted, prefigures the past in their own 'pattern'. Keeping in mind the epigraph of Emily Dickinson's "Memory is a strange bell/ Jubilee and knell", Desai

highlights the joys and sorrows evolving around the members of Das family. They are enough nostalgic about their Old Delhi House:

Here in the house it was not just the empty, hopeless atmosphere of childhood, but the very spirits of her parents that brooded on ...”. (CLD, p-33)

The contrast between time past and time present, between childhood and adulthood is crucial aspect to the aesthetic structure of the novel. What Tara thinks is quite quotable here: “Although it was shadowy and dark... she felt only love and yearning for them all”. The children of the novel are alienated from the external world intrudes upon their consciousness, breeding anguish in their unruffled existence. Time acts as a catalytic agent in the lives of the characters, suggesting specifically the protagonist's totality of experience and build up the overall tonality of the novel.

Memory strikes the bitterest in the form of a letter written to Bimla by her brother Raja, while the latter going to settle in Hyderabad. The mortifying letter Raja wrote to Bimla about the house lease of the old house in Old Delhi, where Baba and Bim were the occupants till then, fetched out the pivotal movement in the novel:

In the end, the only paper she tore that night was the letter he had written her and she had never answered. It was too late to answer it now. The only course left was to pretend it had never been written. (CLD, 257)

The letter begets a great jolt of disintegration between the two brother and sister for a long time, which gets reconciled at the end after much realization in the due time. So the humiliating letter of Raja is a memory maker that finally gets resolved into absolute fantasy of its non-existence in the novel.

### **To Wind Up:**

Thus, the interplay of memory and fantasy in *Fire on the Mountain* and *Clear Light of Day* is an escape from reality, a way of life, a survival-strategy to deal with the present. It is fantasy with a purpose ---first to make Nanda's solitary life tolerable and then to win Raka over in futile. Both remain enigmatic, invariably leading to self-deception from one to another. When the past and the present are built on and of memories and fanatsies, one has to pay the price, and the price, in Nanda's and Bimla's cases, is confrontation with reality, the realization of truthfulness in life. Again, both Nanda and Bimla endeavor to construct a make-belief world of

“memory-making’--- to seek a refuge for themselves, some sort of solace or comfort from myth-making when real life provides little scope for dreams or happy recollections. In clue to the postmodern cry “Things fall apart, the center cannot hold”, memories and fantasies in Desai’s novels are only the offshoots that cannot deceive ones, are the means to retain to centrapetality of the mankind.

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