

Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain*: A Postcolonial Feminist Reading

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Abstract: The present paper attempts to add a new feather to the scholarship of Anita Desai. With this intention, important insights of 'postcolonial feminism' have been picked up to exhaust and evaluate *Fire on the Mountain* with novelty. Postcolonial feminism is a relatively novel wing of feminine scholarship. Postcolonial feminism or 'third world feminism' emerged in response to Western mainstream feminism. Western feminism has never been mindful to the differences pertaining to class, race, feelings, and settings of women of once colonized territories. Postcolonial feminism rejects Western feminism on the ground of its utter 'eurocentricism'. Hence it is fallacious to hope postcolonial females to be valued, appreciated and justified by the Western hands. Of course, the long Western tendency to homogenize and universalize women and their experiences led to the emergence of 'postcolonial feminism'. Postcolonial feminism is a hopeful discourse. It seeks peaceful solutions for all world marginalized women. Postcolonial feminists imagine a world in which differences are celebrated and enjoyed. Anita Desai in the novel argues like 'postcolonial feminists' for social, cultural, economic, and religious freedoms for women.

Keywords: Colonialism, Postcolonialism, and Postcolonial feminism.

In the very beginning I would like to articulate frankly that it is over simplistic to hold that Western feminists can represent and justify the stand of women living in once-colonized countries. Since lives, experiences and circumstances of postcolonial women differ utterly from that of Western women, so feminists of postcolonial origin should come forward and make differences visible and acceptable; otherwise be ready to take on colonized clothes of identity. If lives, experiences, and circumstances of women of postcolonial settings are divergent, they should be judged, evaluated, and treated as such. In this paper it has been intended to view Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* (1977) from the perspective of 'postcolonial feminism'.

Long history of prejudices and inhuman remarks against females prevailed over countless social and cultural texts ultimately led to the emergence of feminism in late 60's and early 70's of twentieth century in the West. Since then feminists went all out to reexamine issues of sex, gender, and even language (as by-products of patriarchy) in literary and cultural discourses. Feminism like Marxism and Post colonialism invalidates unjust power relationships. Feminists having an oppositional stance started questioning their inferior status and asked for amelioration in their social position (Freedman, 3). As such it calls for equal justice and equal opportunities for females. In short feminism as a concerted attempt aims to get the nature of gender inequality, gender

politics, gender roles and relations, power relations and sexuality. Since when women started questioning their subordinate status, it got continuously fractured, divided, and developed; it at present does not imply to a single and coherent trajectory of thought (Tolan, 319). In the course of development especially, with the fall of European colonies in Africa, South-East Asia, and Latin America, and the Caribbean islands, it was felt by feminists belonging to once-colonized territories in eighties that much amount of time passed and it is nonsensical to continue to be represented by aliens; we should represent ourselves in our own terms instead, hence postcolonial feminism. Before we discuss postcolonial feminism, it is better to know first what post colonialism is. Post colonialism gained currency exactly with the telling and spicy critique of Western constructions of the Orient in Edward Said's magnum opus *Orientalism* (1978). In numberless colonialist texts, papers, articles, and documents, it is sought hard to project and picture negative pictures or images of orients which Westerners never use for themselves and as such, to inculcate inferiority and meanness in oriental minds. This is what Western scholars call 'civilizing mission'. Moreover indigenous culture, language, tradition never found scant attention and respect in the eyes of the West. Of course it was aimed to prepare defective robots. However it was over-vaulting dream of the West. In colonial hands, language although played very crucial roles, and purposefully wreaked havoc on orientals. In this way, orientals during colonial rule were victims of cruelty, brutality, and so-called 'civilizing mission' of the West. Post colonialism although seeks to counter all kinds of oppression, injustice and traces left by the West.

Next, postcolonial feminism sometimes also referred to as 'third world feminism' born out of the critique aimed towards Western feminism which is mainly a white discourse. Truly the history of Western feminism is predominantly covered by West European and North American women experiences. I myself abhor using the nomenclature third world feminism because in Western discourses the term is used pejoratively and connotes at once social, cultural, and economic backwardness. If backwardness is taken for granted, no nation is immune to this phenomenon. The term 'third world' is no better than 'commonwealth'. It must allow meeting the destiny which commonwealth in 90's met. Postcolonial feminism emerged out of the gendered history of colonialism. The history of colonialism is largely the history of exploitation of non-white, non-Western others. Colonized countries have been deeply affected by the exploitative racist nature of colonialism. Postcolonial feminists argue that colonial oppression particularly racial, class, and ethnic has in large part overlooked women in postcolonial societies. Postcolonial feminists are critical of Western forms of feminism, especially radical (in the sense it seeks to make differences visible in non-oppressive ways) and liberal forms (for, they have no sense of differences) of feminism and their habit to homogenize and universalize women experiences of the whole world. Primly, postcolonial feminism explores in different contexts, women's lives, work, identity,

sexuality, and rights in the light of colonialism and neocolonialism with gender, nation, class, race, and sexualities. This field of study is mainly identified with the works of feminists of once-colonized nations. Chandra Talapade Mohanty, Gayatri Spivak, Uma Narayan, Sara Suleri, Lata Mani, Kumkum Sangari, are some of few postcolonial feminists. Postcolonial feminists are closely associated with Black feminists (Alice Walker, Angela Davis, Kimberla Crenshaw to name a few) because both strive for recognition not only by men in their own culture, but also by Western feminists.

Postcolonial feminism like its parental form is a hopeful discourse. It seeks for peaceful solutions for all world marginalized women wherever located. It provides of course correctives to mainstream Western feminism, and involves women of both developing and developed countries. It envisions global feminism. To downplay racial, class, and age differences have been part of mainstream feminism. Postcolonial feminists inveigh against Eurocentric complacency and colour blindness. Western feminists tend usually towards a complete and totalizing identity. They examine their own culture and customs to evaluate the rest of the world. Such universalist aspirations have been very common among western feminists. The postcolonial feminists abhor universalist aspirations and warn against the reproduction of colonial/colonized hierarchy.

Chandra Talapade Mohanty in her influential article *Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses*, criticizes Western feminism on the grounds that it is ethnocentric and does not pay attention to the unique experiences of women residing in postcolonial nations. In the other words, she disapproves of Western feminism regarding all women as a homogeneous group without having any sense of difference pertaining to race, class, and circumstance. She vehemently opposes and brings into light various colonial tricks applied in the production of the third world women as a singular monolithic subject; in some recent feminist text (Gandhi, 85). As such they colonise the material and historical differences of the lives of women. Mohanty deconstructs the politics of image-giving to postcolonial women of Western feminism. Next, she is against portrayals of postcolonial women primarily as ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domesticated, family-oriented, and victimized. Mohanty feels that in such negative characterizations scant attention is paid to history and difference. Postcolonial feminists disapprove postcolonial tendencies to construct a single category of the colonized ignoring differences. They argue that colonial oppression undoubtedly hurt sentiments of both men and women but nature was quite different. Women suffered what Mohanty calls double colonization first as a colonized subject and second as simply being a woman by patriarchy. She argued that, just as men reduced women to the other, so the white women had constructed the Third World women as the other to her self (Tolan, 331). The notion of double colonization reminds of Bapsi Sidhava a Pakistani feminist who writes:

Colonialism humiliated the men and they in turn humiliated the women. So whenever the condition of society is weak or humbled, women suffer the most it has given men the only vent for their frustrations. And that pattern continues with expectations of subservience from the women (Kumar, 85).

Mary Daly an American radical essentialist feminist in her 1978 book, *Gyn/Ecology: The Mathematics of Radical Feminism*, like Simone de Beauvoir argues that religion, law, and science all are just to benefit patriarchy and to define and delimit women. In this book she compares sati practice with European witch burning. Uma Narayan of postcolonial origin is critical of Daly's account on sati. Uma Narayan feels that Daly is not immune to the ways postcolonial women experiences are universalized and generalized. She thinks that Daly fails to give due attention to social and cultural contexts on sati. Hence she stresses on the need of adequate knowledge of history to deprogramme and devalidate Eurocentrism. Uma Narayan argues:

Colonial history is the terrain where the project of 'Western' culture's self-definition became a project heavily dependent upon its 'difference' from its 'Others' both internal and external. The contemporary self-definition of many Third-World cultures and communities are also in profound ways political responses to this history. Working together to develop a rich feminist account of this history that divides and connects us might well provide Western and Third-World feminists [with] some difficult but interesting common ground, and be a project that is crucial and central to any truly 'international' feminist politics (Narayan 1997: 80).

The question of voice that is who speaks for whom and whose voices are being heard in discussions on postcolonial women's issues; is another moot point in postcolonial feminism. Gayatri Spivak raises the question of voice in her most popular essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' (1988). In it she explores possibilities to recover the long silenced voices of the subaltern women. And it is duty of postcolonial feminists to represent them. But when Western women speak for the others, they only displace them, replacing their voices with their own (Boehmer, 354). To sum up, postcolonial feminists seek to devalidate Western feminists because they easily tend to universalize and homogenize women's issues, and moreover believe incorrectly that their texts represent women of the whole world. The prime objective of postcolonial feminists is to make differences (race, class, and setting) regarding women's lives visible and recognizable in the eyes of Western feminists in non-oppressive ways. They imagine a world where differences are not detested instead, entertained and enjoyed, and moreover make space to thrive being immune to hierarchical structures of class, race, sexual and gender power.

The character of Nanda Kaul the protagonist in *Fire on the Mountain* is depicted struggling against the legacies of colonialism, and neo-colonialism. Colonialism and patriarchy are nothing more nothing less male supremacist ideologies and are marked by exploitation of 'others'. During colonialism, natives were 'others' and women are 'others' in

independent nations. In the novel, *Fire on the Mountain*, Anita Desai through Nanda Kaul, Raka, and Ila Das is voicing against patriarchal (colonial) oppression, and sexual politics. The novel set in Kasauli looks outwardly as if it were about the geography of Kasauli, but the close scrutiny informs that the novelist has purpose of unraveling patriarchal mechanisms of injustice and oppression. Nanda Kaul, the wife of late Vice-chancellor of Punjab University is living in Carignano, an old house having colonial history far from the madding crowd. Her husband no doubt belongs to the upper class but Nanda Kaul before coming to Carignano remained there as mere a token, rejected and dejected soul. Having fed up with familial responsibilities and after her husband's death she immediately buys Carignano bungalow only perhaps to overcome emotional setbacks received at the hands of her debauchee (husband), son, and son-in-law who used to thrash her daughter Asha, and to forget her past, to have a sigh of relief and for introspection. In the house of V.C. she was always cornered and considered the other. From the beginning she was caught in the traps of sexual politics. By the phrase 'sexual politics', Kate Millet means power-structured relationship, arrangement whereby one group of persons is controlled by another (Millet, 23). Toril Moi more primly defines 'sexual politics' as the process whereby the ruling sex seeks to maintain and extend its power over the subordinate sex (Moi, 26). Nanda never felt emotional satisfaction in her husband's company instead like the gorge, cluttered, choked and blackened with the heads of children and grandchildren, servants and guests, all relentlessly surging, clamouring about her (Desai, 17). She wanted no one and nothing else (p.3). She wished to be identified with a tree, no more and no less, was all she was prepared to undertake (p.4). Anita Desai exposes unjust patriarchal by quoting another instance:

Nor had her husband loved and cherished her and kept her like 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 (p.145).

Nanda knows her husband's adultery yet she does not oppose him perhaps for two reasons; first, she does not prefer to tarnish her husband's dignity like other typical Indian wives. Radical feminists may disapprove of Nanda's stand but postcolonial feminists who seek for peaceful solutions may wait for and that is what happens in the end. Her husband's death and her decision to retire to hilly station Carignano proved 'victory only to truth' (*Satyameva jayate*). Her husband's death broke open the iron-gates of colonialism and neo-colonialism.

Ila Das a friend to Nanda Kaul is another victim to sexual politics and colonial/patriarchal oppression. In patriarchal set-ups male and female children are looked after discriminately. Women face discrimination right from the childhood. The process of gendering starts from the very beginning of the babies' birth. The birth of male child is celebrated, and the birth of a female baby fills with pain; sons are showered with love, respect, better food and proper health care. Boys are encouraged to be tough and outgoing; girls are encouraged to be home-bound and shy.

Such awareness-raising views have brought undoubtedly changes in postcolonial settings. Yet these social codes sometimes get worse and unbearable. This is what happens in the *Fire on the Mountain* to the life of Raka, Ila Das and her sister Rima. Raka suffered male-chauvinism for no faults. The over indulgence of Tara and her husband prohibits them to keep Raka with themselves. This is another instance of gender difference. In postcolonial settings it is often seen that female babies are taken as burden. The idea of Nanda's boarding school, birthday parties, gatherings, and going to clubs, all are very irksome to Raka. For all these her domineering father and twittering mother both are solely responsible. Their indulgence made Raka mute and silent.

The parents of Ila Das discriminately sent their three sons to different foreign universities like Heidelberg, Cambridge, and Harvard for proper study. Under the pretext of studies these boys wasted their entire father's money on drinks and horse riding. Consequently their father soon plunged into financial crisis and finally succumbed to death stroke. His all three sons even have not bothered to attend the funeral. Anita Desai as such exposes the hollowness of the gender difference. Thus, the onus of the family falls on Ila and her sister Rima. To extend proper care and emotional support to their ailing mother, they did various odd jobs. Even in their abject state male supremacist ideologies prohibited males coming forward and extend their support to Ila Das and her family. But Nanda Kaul ignoring her own penurious state in the family asks her husband for the creation of a post in the university for Ila Das. She got lectureship in the department of Home Science. But she lost her job after the death of Nanda's husband. Again Nanda assisted her and she as result became a social worker. She knows that the stalwarts of patriarchy could not stand Ila's programme of social welfare. As she says:

I do believe the women would listen to me if it were n't for that priest. It's so much harder to teach a man anything, Nanda- the women are willing, poor dears, to try and change their dreadful lives by an effort, but do you think their men will let them? Nooo, not one bit (p.129).

Again Ila talks to Nanda:

I do think the women would listen to me- if anyone knows what it is for a girl to be married and been children at the age of twelve, it's them, isn't it? But whenever I go, the priest follows me, and undoes what I do. He hates me, Nanda- ooh, he hates me (p.129).

In this way Anita Desai denounces religious priests who follow suit patriarchy. Ila further says that 'in the end, the women listen to them- if not to the priest, then definitely to their husbands (p.129). Nevertheless, Ila Das continues her campaign of awareness among illiterate folks undauntedly. She protested Preet Singh a 'sullen lout'(p.130) by tooth and nail who was ready to marry off his seven years old daughter to a widower having six children to his former wife just at the cost of 'a bit of land and two goats'(p.130). Her attempts incurred the displeasure of Preet Singh. The consequence of it proved disastrous and horrendous to the life of Ila. Ila was returning from the house of Nanda and it was growing dark, Preet Singh in camouflage strangled first and then raped her (p.143). After long battle of life and death finally she

submitted herself to the icy hands of death. As Nanda came to know about the heinous murder of Ila Das, she took the moral responsibility on herself and finally submitted to death by choking. Of course these deaths verify patriarchy as a relentless, remorseless wing of crime against women. Raka, a sensitive child, reacted against the whole situation by setting fire on the mountain instead of making verbal expression.

To sum up the whole discussion, it can be said, that in postcolonial settings first and foremost aspiration is to liberate those women who are colonized at homes, and their suppressed freedom can be achieved by providing them education, and legal, moral, social protection. Moreover, unlike the Western females, it is the cultural, economic, and religious freedoms that the present Indian women desperately seek. Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* is a forceful attempt that addresses all these flummoxing issues related to the Indian women. She pitted victimized against victimizer to prove patriarchy as a reservoir of sins and injustice of incalculable shape and figure.

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