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AMBIGUITY IN EMPOWERING WOMEN IN POST-COLONIAL FICTION: ANALYSING  
ANITA DESAI'S FIRE ON THE MOUNTAIN

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ABSTRACT

Literature has always seen an ambiguity when it comes to portraying a woman. Women have never been given the equal spot as men. Even though there are writings that cater to the issues of women empowerment and also speak about the strengths of women, such writings also talk about the weaknesses of women. Even the relationship between women are not strong and there is always a sense of confusion between them. *Fire on the Mountain* speaks about such ambiguity issues related to the empowerment of women and also their personal relationships. The present study explores this ambiguity throughout the novel

Keywords: ambiguity, women, empowerment, Desai

Published in 1977, Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* is a novel set on the backdrop of one of the little town of India Kasauli. The major characters in the novel is Nanda Kaul, a reclusive woman and her granddaughter Raka. Another prominent character in the novel is Ila. Though she is not seen much in the novel, her presence is felt towards the end of the story in the life of the protagonist. The relationship that the women share in the novel are quite ambiguous. On one hand, we find that there is no point of similarity between the women characters in the novel but on the other hand, the women characters also try to form a connection among themselves. The novel is divided into three parts and throughout the novel, we find that the women characters struggle to form a friendship among themselves. There are traces of failed attempts and guilts of not being able to form a bond which leads to alienation and loss of lives.

The novel begins at Carignano which means 'shelter'. Nanda Kaul is a permanent resident of the place. She receives a letter from her daughter asking her to take care of her granddaughter Raka who will soon be visiting her. Nanda Kaul is annoyed by the news as she does not want anyone to disturb her solitude. She hated to be responsible. Raka's presence in her house disturbed the monotonous life of Nanda Kaul and this in turn perturbs her. She thought that she now would have to observe formalities she would not have cared about otherwise. However, soon we see that Nanda Kaul starts to identify herself with Raka. She finds the "reclusive Nanda" in Raka. She attempts to make a connection with Raka but her advances is profoundly rejected by her. The motif of tea plays an important role in the novel. Raka and Nanda both drink tea together. On one hand, for Nanda, tea is a symbol of the developing companionship with Raka and for Raka, it is just one of the mere daily routine of her life. The ambiguity in their relationship is clearly seen as at the beginning of the first part of the novel, we find that Nanda Kaul grows anxious about the thought of her granddaughter's presence in her private domain and as the novel steps into the second phase with the arrival of Raka at

Carignano, we see both of them embrace each other with lack of warmth and move in. But the shift from the uninterested nature of Nanda Kaul to a caring guardian is well portrayed by Desai in this novel. Ila, another important character in the novel is introduced quite late but her presence is felt very prominently in the novel. The climax of the novel takes the story of Ila as its central part. Ila is a childhood friend of Nanda Kaul who works as a welfare officer in a village in Kasauli. She meets her need with much difficulty. She has a shrill voice which is source of nuisance and laughter for many people in the town. Nanda Kaul is irritated by her presence in her house. She doesn't like when she pays a visit to Carignano to meet her and Raka. Kaul, too, comments upon Ila but for her, Nanda Kaul has been a friend who was always there. Thus, the ambiguity is brought to limelight. When Ila greets and kisses a hesitant Raka, Nanda Kaul irks and smug at the same time. Ila begins to describe their good old days, and everyone sitting over there gets weary. Kaul cracks her knuckles and this clearly proves that she is not at all welcoming towards Ila. However, it is evident that when Ila was in distress, Nanda Kaul helped her to get a job in her husband's school. As she is about to leave, the other characters seem busy. Nanda Kaul is concerned about Ila and wants to protect her from the people of the town. As she works against child marriage, Ila is constantly targeted by the distressed mob. Nanda Kaul even offers her to stay with her at Carignano though a little hesitant. At the beginning, we find that Nanda Kaul gets a little anxious by the arrival of Ila at the beginning of the third phase of the novel. But in the climax, when she receives the news of Ila's rape and murder, she feels tremendous guilty of not forcing her to stay at Carignano. The forest 'fire' towards the end is a symbol of the inner turmoil of Nanda Kaul. The relation between Ila and Kaul cannot be explained in one single line. There are various emotions attached in their relations. It is filled with anxiousness and irritation on one level and care and guilt on the other. Though Nanda Kaul is upset with Ila's arrival at Carignano, but later she even cares for her.

The post-colonial concept of this search for identity with respect to relation is clearly evident in the novel *Fire on the Mountain*. The protagonist Nanda Kaul is not sure of her own feelings. She is constantly swinging between dilemmas of whether she feels good about the presence of Raka in her house or her presence is a sort of disturbance to her. Her companion from childhood is also looked down upon by her but at the end we see Nanda Kaul repenting her misbehaviour with Ila. The constant shift in the character of people is a trademark characteristics of post-colonial world. People are not sure of what they should do. They are unable to control their feelings and emotions. Independence in a way brought about self-doubt and nervousness in people. They were free but their thoughts were still captured. The same reference can be seen in this novel. Nanda Kaul is unsure of her thoughts and actions. The haphazardness of what to do and what not to do is evident in the novel. This captured thought makes people reclusive as we seen in case of Nanda Kaul. Post-colonialism, therefore sowed the seeds of tension, self-doubt, discontent among the post-colonisers. Though the colonisers left, yet their presence could be felt for the next fifty years and *Fire on the Mountain* which is a product of 1977 clearly portrays this element. However, the independent aspect could also be seen in character like Raka who despite all bondages could set herself free and live a life of her own choice. Her setting the entire forest on fire is a way of retaliating to the old set norms which can be seen as an example of challenging the colonial outlook. The independent woman voice was marginalised in the colonial text, however this novel focuses on women voice and portrays women as independent who does not require a male counterpart to support them. Nanda Kaul often comments that she is better of living single than with her husband who forced violence upon her. Even Ila comments the same. Hence we see that the main idea of a post-colonial text to bring the marginalised into the centre is justified by this novel. As a woman writer in post-colonial India, Desai herself being the victim of patriarchy have successfully justified the women characters in the novel with fair ambiguity in their dialogues and actions.

#### Works cited

Desai, Anita. *Fire on the Mountain*. Random House India, 2008.