

Women And The Victorian Values In Fire On The Mountain

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ABSTRACT: Simone de Beauvoir (1949) made a claim that the “representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their point of view, which they confuse with absolute truth. “A woman is constructed by the society and from a young age, she is molded to behave as the patriarchal society expects her to. This silently leads to gender oppression especially when the woman is not able to speak for herself or realize that she is being denied of her rights. Gender oppression cuts through all other forms of domination and exploitation in human societies. In particular, it does not only extend beyond class conflicts, but it also cuts through all collective social realities – ethnic, national, religious, local. It is closely linked to the private sphere, individual and daily life. This paper deliberates on how women are shaped or affected by men as suggested in Desai’s *Fire on the Mountain*. Men’s shaping of women does affect women’s living. This paper also gives some history of the Victorian Period, taking into consideration the novel is set during this period. Additionally, some ways in which these oppressed women try to challenge men’s oppressive nature, whether they succeed or not is discussed.

KEYWORDS: class oppression, oppression, patriarchy, psychology, Victorian Period

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For many centuries, women have had to overcome beliefs that they are the weaker gender and insubordinate to men. They have been oppressed by the patriarchal power for years. Patriarchy “literally means the rule of the father or the ‘patriarch’, and originally it was used to describe a specific type of ‘male-dominated family’ – the large household of the patriarch which included women, junior men, children, slaves and domestic servants all under the rule of this dominant male” (Sultana, 2011: 2). Presently, “it is used to refer to male domination, to the power relationships by which men dominate women, and to characterize a system whereby women are kept subordinate in a number of ways” (Bhasin 2006:3).

Women’s oppression takes place in a variety of ways, which include: being caring, kind, nurturing, playing a status enhancing role for the husband, not being able to make their own

decisions, self-sacrificing and many more. *Fire on the Mountain*, Anita Desai’s Sahitya Academy Award winner novel, published in 1972, has the theme of miscommunication and lack of understanding in marital life.

Fire on the Mountain is a fiction about the lives of women characters whose lives reflect the lives of women in the Victorian period. The name Victorian Age came after Queen Victoria who was in power from 1837 to 1901. The difference between the Victorian Period and the society now is the status of women in society. In this Victorian Period, there were insightful women of autonomous authentic thought, but for most of these women life was painless if they welcomed the belief that a woman belonged in the home only. A woman’s sole purpose was to get married and bear children. A girl was groomed for courtship and marriage. Apart from this, a woman was expected to be innocent, biddable, dutiful, virtuous, and to be uninformed of intellectual opinion. All Victorian women were to be weak and helpless, incompetent in decision making and

to ensure that the house was comfortable for her family.

The protagonist of the novel is shaped by the Victorian society. She is suppressed by her husband and for some time she accepts it, doing what her husband wants her to. Later, she realizes she is tired of being a good, typical wife, but instead of fighting her condition, she escapes it all by moving to live in isolation.

Nanda Kaul, a great grandmother, is disenchanted with everything and decides to be in isolation in the peaceful surrounding of the Kasauli Mountains. Her sickly great granddaughter, Raka arrives in Kasauli. Raka takes interest in strange things, which nobody else would be interested in. She has been witness to her mother being ill-treated by her father and is disturbed by the incident. Just like Nanda, she also loves solitude, but Nanda does not like the idea of having someone around. Ila Das, Nanda Kaul's childhood acquaintance, visits them. Ila is harassed by the neighbourhood hooligans. She is a social worker fighting for the rights of other women, which is not an easy task for a woman. Nanda despises her as well, thus being guilty of class oppression. The novel finishes with Raka setting the forest on fire and Nanda Kaul's death upon hearing of Ila Das's death.

The novel suggests that women of Nanda's class in that period in India were expected to play a status enhancing role for their husband. A prosperous woman was expected to consume her time sewing, reading, visiting, welcoming and seeing to the guests, seeing to the servants, letter writing, and dressing to enhance her husband's social status. The head of a Victorian family clothed his woman to demonstrate family richness. This is the kind of role played by Nanda Kaul. The novel suggests experiences of misery and helplessness of women. It is evident through the short flashbacks that Nanda Kaul has been through deception and others demands in life, such as, demands by her husband to receive endless visitors and demands by her children,

before going to Kasauli. She had lived a tedious life, receiving and greeting the never-ending flow of visitors who used to visit her husband, who was a vice-chancellor. "Mr. Kaul had wanted her always in silk, at the head of the long rosewood table in the dining room, entertaining his guests" (Desai, 1977: 18). Due to the many guests visiting them, "there was a shortage of privacy that vexed her" (Desai, 1972: 29). Even if she did not like having visitors and sitting as a vice chancellor's wife dressed in silk, she had to do it because she was fulfilling the duties of a wife – those duties which were prescribed by the patriarchal society. To keep her husband's dignity and pride, she had to do as he desired.

Even today, most people have preconceptions about women. They think it is the woman who should cook even if she is working outside just like the husband. Not only this, many people believe that it is the mother's responsibility to teach moral values to children and to see that they are raised properly. The entire household burden falls on the woman's shoulders. The sad fact is that there are among us, women, who do not question the decisions made for them by others. Nanda Kaul is one such woman, who smothers her desires and does everything to please her husband and the society.

The novel also shows that women were expected to accept men's double standards and were not expected to question them on their way of life. Nanda Kaul's husband has an extra-marital relationship with his mathematics paramour, Miss David. He wanted to marry her, but did not only because she was a Christian. Despite being a good wife, she has been deprived of the love of her husband. Nanda Kaul tries to do everything Mr. Kaul expects of her, but he chooses to carry on an affair with another woman, again hurting Nanda's feelings. She comes to know about the affair when some of Mr. Kaul's visitors come to their home for dinner, but she does not say anything to him. She suppresses her thoughts and

feelings, being untrue to herself. By doing this, she chooses to be oppressed.

Moreover, the fiction demonstrates that women do not have a moment of their own. They are not able to live the way they want to, but have to live according to the way men want them to. Through reminiscence, Nanda Kaul's life as a prosperous wife and mother is revealed. She has only lived for others. She has been a perfect wife and a good mother, always making sure that everything is in order and as expected. Her husband always expects her to do everything in a perfect manner, just as women of the upper class are and this increased his superiority. On top of all this, she has seven children, all demanding and unaccommodative, which gives her many anxious moments. Thus, it can be said that Nanda Kaul never lived the way she wanted. She was not even able to rest in her one hour resting period every afternoon. "She remembered how she had tried to shut out sound by shutting out light, how she had spent the sleepless hour making out the direction from which a sound came"(Desai, 1977: 23).

Desai tries to show that females are molded to meet the needs of others, in particular, the needs of men. For instance, Nanda Kaul has only lived to keep the pride of her husband and sacrifice for others. Nanda Kaul would have led a life of her own and would have had time for herself, if it had not been for her husband. After all, why should she entertain streams of visitors? It is only because that was what was expected of her by Mr. Kaul and she was frightened to resist.

The novel throws light on the psychological effect of oppression on a woman. In the beginning, Nanda rejects Raka, her great grand-daughter, and is unable to accept the fact that Raka would be staying with her, but does not say it:

"To Nanda Kaul, she was an intruder, an outsider, a mosquito flown up from the plains to tease and worry." (Desai, 1977: 40)

Raka is created to highlight the class consciousness of Nanda Kaul. Nanda is of the upper class and she tends to look down upon

women of the middle and lower class. She feels they are inferior to her and is unable to tolerate them because her life has been shaped like that of an upper class woman. Her husband too wanted her to behave in that way so he could show off to his friends.

Nanda Kaul here is trying to be one of those women who accept their oppressive situations without resisting and expect the other women to do the same. She fights a silent battle, but unconsciously, she is oppressing the other female characters in the fiction. Raka needs all the support and love she can get, especially after the manner in which her mother was treated, however, Nanda Kaul does not realize this and fails to fill that gap in Raka's life. Just like her husband, Nanda is thinking for herself and tries to search for peace and silent moments of her own.

The appearance of Ila Das again reminds the readers about Nanda Kaul's class oppression. Though Ila had been her childhood friend, she is not very pleased at the idea of having Ila Das visit her. She even detests her voice, regarding it as a 'mad shrilling of that dreary old friend's voice' (Desai, 1977: 101). Nanda Kaul is not able to cross social boundaries. This could again be due to her husband's control over her. She has always been reminded of her class and status by the demands of her husband and now when she meets people of other class, she is unable to accept them.

Another character who is psychologically affected is Raka. Raka does not care what Nanda Kaul thinks of her. She does not worry greatly about the "blatant lack of warmth" (Desai, 1972: 40). She chooses to stay in seclusion. She does not show passion for things such as playing, as children of her age ordinarily would. "She walked about as the newly caged, the newly tamed wild ones do, sliding from wall to wall on silent investigating pads" (Desai, 1977: 41). There seems to be something strange about the child.

Eventually, it is revealed that she has been spectator to the barbarity and emptiness of human

existence. She was also obsessed by her past and the reason for this was her father:

‘Somewhere behind them , behind it all, was her father, home from a party, stumbling and crashing through the curtains of night, his mouth opening to let out a flood of rotten stench, beating at her mother with hammers and fist of abuse - harsh, filthy, abuse that made Raka cower under her bedclothes and wet the mattresses in fright, feeling the stream of urine warm and weakening between her legs like a stream of blood, and her mother lay down on the floor and shut her eyes and wept. Under her feet, in the dark, Raka felt that flat, wet jelly of her mothers being squelching and quivering so that she didn’t know where to put her feet and wept as she tried to get free of it. Ahead of her, no longer on the ground but at some distance now her mother was crying’ (Desai, 1977: 71-72)

Thus, Raka’s life is crowded with wild and fearsome things – whether it is the reminiscences of her mother being beaten by an alcoholic father or the distressing howl of the jackals or the lush fire. Raka’s condition too, is an outcome of a man’s behavior – of her father. Raka’s father beat her mother to suit him, without realizing he is indirectly affecting Raka as well. Raka is not a direct character of men’s oppression, but indirectly she is. Her life has been molded in a way which is quite unnatural for a child. She has been deprived of those beautiful moments and feelings of being a child. Raka has not known anything such as peace and love due to the brutal acts of her father, hence, it can be said that she too has been shaped by a man.

Furthermore, the manner in which women are doubly colonized is also depicted in the fiction. They are dominated by men and Victorian values. Nanda Kaul is colonized by her husband. He dictates her life, telling her what he expects her to do and she accepts the decisions made by him without questioning him. She is colonized by the society as well, in the sense that she is a woman. Society expects her to live by the rules of her

husband and she does so because she is frightened she might ruin her husband’s reputation in the society.

In addition, *Fire on the Mountain* projects another element of misery and meaningless existence, where a woman is not allowed to voice her opinions and has to only live men’s dictations. This is shown in the character of. Ila Das. Though she lives in isolation, she is courageous and is able to voice her thoughts about the wrong doings of others. She protests against child marriage and struggles against it:

“I go along my way, trying to do my duty, going from house to house and especially wherever I hear there’s a child marriage in the offing, and threaten them and tell them how they can go to prison for committing a social offence.” (Desai, 1977: 129)

However, the society does not easily accept a woman challenging its ways. Ila’s voice is silenced by Preet Singh, who has been stopped by Ila Das from trading his seven year old daughter. Ila Das was only trying to voice her concerns just as any man would do, but little did she know that she belonged to the secondary gender and could not partake in such issues. Preet Singh is the kind of man who sees women as weak and helpless in comparison to men and he does not want Ila questioning his ways. Hence, to silence a woman’s voice, he rapes and kills Ila Das.

Furthermore, through the novel, Desai suggests that men’s domination damages women mentally and physically apart from limiting their opportunities. Ila Das had been receiving a meager pay and fighting with the unavoidable loneliness. She gets a job at the Punjab University due to Mr. Kaul and after his death, she loses the job. An important thing to note here is that she does not get the job due to her own capabilities, but because she knows a man working at the same place. Her potential is not recognized. Men normally think women should not work outside to earn money and if they do, then it has to be a job

which is lower in rank and wages than a man's. These are oppressive conditions, which Ila Das goes through. Also, her father leaves all his wealth for his sons and nothing for Ila Das. She had been doubly colonized. Her father also regards her as inferior and incapable of looking after the family wealth. The Victorian society too does not allow her to live independently.

However, Desai's characters try to get away from the oppressive conditions. Nanda Kaul tries to fight her husband's oppression and decides to leave everything and go to Carignano, to retreat to the mountains to lead a withdrawn life. Here she treasures her freedom, her privacy and is pleased she is not dependent on anyone:

"She had been so glad when it was over. She had been glad to leave it all behind, in the plains, like a great heavy, difficult book that she had read through and was not required to read again." (Desai, 1977: 30)

Nanda Kaul thinks isolation is a need for humans. She is reminded of her own estrangement every time she glances at the pine trees outside her room. Nanda feels that alienation is a way out of her problems instead of speaking out for herself. If she would have been able to stand against her husband and fight for her rights, she would have fought for other women as well who are being oppressed and are not able to voice out their thoughts.

She is disturbed by her past and this makes her conclude that life for humans is principally a lonesome struggle to counter the difficulties in life. The odds in her life are a disloyal husband and quarrelsome children. By moving to Carignano and living in seclusion, she intends to find out the reason for her being alive:

"She would be a charred tree trunk in the forest, a broken pillar of marble in the desert, a lizard on a stone wall. A tree trunk could not harbor irritation, nor a pillar annoyance. She would imitate death, like a lizard." (Desai, 1977: 23)

This shows her desperate need for freedom.

Another way in which Desai tries to show a woman's fight against oppression is by creating a character, who is not passive. This is shown by her reactions and her resistance to things. She is able to leave everything behind and accept isolation in search of self identity. She has been strong enough to defy the laws of her society and that of her husband and for once choose not to listen to them.

Desai also shows that sometimes oppression leaves such a drastic effect that women are not even able to fight their condition. Unlike Nanda Kaul, Raka, though she is not directly oppressed, does not try to escape this harsh experience and memories but goes deeper into it – she visits the rare places in the valley, such as the Monkey Point, a place which is not frequented by anyone:

'No one ever come here but Raka and the cuckoos that sang and sang invisibly. These were not the dutiful domestic birds that called Nanda Kaul to attention at Carignano. They were the demented birds that raved and beckoned Raka on to a land where there was no sound, only silence, no light, only shade, and skeletons kept in beds of ash on which the footprints of jackals flowered in grey' (Desai, 1977: 90).

Raka searches for the meaning of existence of life in her own way. Her childhood has hardened her into a girl who has courage enough to chant "I don't care-'don't care-! Don't care for anything!" (Desai, 1977: 73). It seems she is searching for something, probably for the meaning of existence. She has not known life to be anything, other than what she is going through, yet, she tries to keep going on her own, in isolation. Though a child, Raka could have questioned the ways of her father, instead of quietly watching it and being affected by it.

The third character, Ila Das puts up a battle against the dictates of the society. Her struggle is in a way greater than Nanda Kaul's. She tries to cross social boundaries. Apart from fighting to free herself from the constraints of the society, she

fighters for the entire women population. She may have been aware of the consequences because it is quite unnatural that brave acts of women are tolerated by men. She stays faithful to her cause, but is unable to reach the freedom she was fighting for.

Conclusively, *Fire on the Mountain* deals with female characters whose lives are in constant control of men. Desai has tried to portray the lonely and meaningless lives of women who are ruled by men. She has shown the various ways in which women's lives are affected by men, consciously or sub-consciously, and the effect it leaves on the woman. The novel also suggests ways in which these women try to combat oppression, whether it is a brave step or just an escape from the daily routine of oppression.

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