

Anita Desai exhibits a strong inclination towards the existentialist interpretation of the human predicament in her novels. Characters are "individuals for whom aloneness alone, is the sole natural condition, aloneness alone the treasure worth treasuring", as Desai once said in an interview. Her novel, *Fire on the Mountain* revolves around the inner lives of its three protagonists, Nanda Kaul, Raka and Ila Das, who are embodiments of alienation experienced by the individual in a hostile world.

Nanda Kaul is introduced as living by herself in the hills of Kasauli. Living alone in the bleakness of Carignano, with the exception of the company of a servant, she brooks no human presence. Like Maya's dark house in *Cry, the Peacock*, Carignano is symbolic of the nullity of Nanda Kaul's existence. "Carignano embodies the process of ageing, barrenness, loneliness, decay and death", writes She wants "no one and nothing else. Whatever else came, happened here, would be an unwelcome intrusion, writes Anita Desai. Through a long series of interior monologues, one finds Nanda Kaul musing about her obligatory, dull past of receiving and treating the continual flow of guests of her Vice-Chancellor husband. Her husband had also carried a life-long affair with the mathematics teacher, Miss David. Also, the reminiscences of her selfish children make Nanda Kaul tremble at the very idea of the past.

Now at Carignano, she feels that lonesomeness is the only indispensable state of human life. She is wholly withdrawn from the world of "bags and letters, messages and demands, requests, promises and queries". Nanda Kaul's desire to become one with the pine tree reflects her isolation. The arrival of Raka, her great granddaughter, does not fill up her void. Instead, to Nanda Kaul, "she is still and intruder, an outsider, a mosquito flown up from the plains to tease and worry".

Raka, just like her great-grandmother, steers clear of company and finds solace in nature. She is a foil to Nanda Kaul. If Nanda Kaul was a recluse out of a sense of duty and obligations, her great-granddaughter was a recluse by nature, by instinct. She is not playful like other children and is a tad secretive. Having witnessed fights, arguments and the violent wrath of her father towards her mother, Raka has experienced the viciousness and uselessness of human life. She is a little girl with a fractured consciousness. Raka "represents those children who relentlessly suffer for no fault of their own and are rendered mute by callous, self-indulgent parents".

At one moment, Raka watches a party at the club and her reaction is revealing: in this world to which she does not belong. This party reminds her of another traumatic past experience where she felt "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."

Ila Das, Nanda Kaul's childhood friend, is like the "last little broken bit of a crazy life". Through her, Desai projects another dimension of meaningless existence. Ila Das, in standing up for what is right, loses her life: a brutal reminder of the fact that the public domain is not for the 'second sex' or the 'other'. "Ila Das' unfortunate circumstances can be viewed as a commentary on the problems and challenges that a single, independent woman faces throughout her life and also the sexual violence as a result of patriarchal domination.

In this way, this novel manifests Desai's tragic vision of life, in which the innocents are made to suffer a