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### Address for Correspondence:

Editors

CONTEMPORARY DISCOURSE  
A-2, 503, Punyodaya Park  
Near Don Bosco School  
Adharwadi, Kalyan (West)  
Thane- 421 301  
Email: [litsight@gmail.com](mailto:litsight@gmail.com)  
Cell: 09322530 571



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### Contact

09322530571/09405024593/

[sudhimikam@gmail.com](mailto:sudhimikam@gmail.com)

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**Dnyansagar Institute of Management & Research**  
SKP Campus, Near Pune-Mumbai Highway,  
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## From Language to Literature: A Study of Imagery in Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain*

WANKHEDE PRAKASH TUKARAM

*Anita Desai's chief concern was mainly for the deplorable conditions of Indian women victimized under the ideological social circumstances in Indian society. In portraying the women characters, Anita Desai vivifies the inner conditions of the mind and the outside environment by projecting it in terms of images. 'Fire on the Mountain' is a great novel by Anita Desai. The significance of the existential conditions of the characters-Nanda Kaul, Ila Das and Raka- has been enhanced with the profuse use of imagery. It is mainly from the subhuman and the inanimate world underlying the somber and agonized souls of the characters. The imagery appears mainly in similes and metaphors projecting psychological and physical violence executed by the multiple folds of the society. It also reflects the consequential status of these suffering characters. The ultimate value of violence as shown by the imagery is seen in terms of the three different courses of life as they had embraced. The imagery has rendered the tragic spirit of these women characters almost with the classical height.*

**Keywords:** *Subhuman, inanimate, kinship, violence, frantic, elite, patriarchy, image, irritation, hysterical drudgery, spinster*

It has universally been acknowledged that literature is the product of human conditions expressed through a specific use of language which is employed by the writer for vivifying the ideas and the objects for communicating his ultimate vision of life as it occurs in a particular culture or society. It is then obvious that imagery is the most vital dimension of the creative effort in literature. Imagery as a literary device is perceived to be images taken collectively, almost cropping up from a poem or other kinds of literature. In the form of allusions or in the secondary references of similes and metaphors. While rating significance of image in the context, W.H. Clemen (1951) comments: "Every image, every metaphor gains full significance only from its context." Therefore, it could be argued that imagery has a vital relevance in the context which projects the thematic concern of the writer.

Qaiser Zoha Alam (1994) studies imagery in Indian English Literature. He classifies the images and interprets it in the thematic context. He argues: "There is often a fairly heavy density of images in Anita Desai's works. Her

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images are generally integrally related to the contexts too. She tends to conceive experience and projects the same in terms of metaphors and symbols. Therefore, the present paper attempts to investigate the nature of imagery in Anita Desai's novel, *Fire on the Mountain* (1977). It tries to show how images are used in multiple situations and communicate the ultimate vision of the novelist.

Apart from its literal meaning, the title of the novel, *Fire on the Mountain*, shows the load of figurative sense, almost a metaphor for the highest elite situation that prevailed in the Vice-Chancellor's family and ironic enough, Nanda Kaul remains agonized at heart all through her married life, deprived of genuine happiness that evolves from love, care and concern as the supreme values of a family. The quality of the elite is directed towards selfishness and exploitation without concern or affection for mother. In the initial narrative, there occurs an abstract idea expressed in the image of concrete objects, a combination of abstract and concrete in order to vivify the abstract: "The sight of him inexorably closing in with his swollen bag, rolled a flat ball of irritation into the cool cave of her day" (3).

The images of ball and cave vividly express Nanda Kaul's disturbed mind against the sight of the postman. The phrase 'ball of irritation' and 'cave of her day' profoundly communicate her loss of faith in human world. The abstract is defined in terms of concrete. The punctual and obedient nature of the postman with his daily hardwork of carrying the bag of letters through the narrow paths of the mountains has been expressed in the image of 'donkey' (11). The image of 'ghost' (15) projects Raka's extreme weakness due to typhoid as it emerges from Tara's letter.

Nanda Kaul ponders over her past life as she had lived with her family. Her bitter experience with them over the years appears in the following narration: "Looking down over all those years, she had survived and borne. She saw them, not bare and shining as the plains below, but like the gorge, cluttering, choked and blackened with the herds of children and grandchildren, servants and guests, all restlessly surging, clamoring about her" (p. 17). The two dominant images in the above- 'plains' and 'gorge' corresponding to sunshine and happiness and darkness and misery respectively. Her life did not have the sunlight of plains, as the image communicates, But her life had the darkness of gorge where there was a large quantum of thankless hardwork till fatigue and agony.

The wives and daughters of lecturers and professors visiting the residence appreciate Nanda Kaul as splendid and queen-like. But it actually provokes Nanda Kaul to irritation as seen in the following bit of narration: "...and her eyes had flashed when she heard, like a pair of black blades wanting to cut them, despising them..." (18). The analogy between sharpness of her eyes and a pair of black blades wanting to cut them show her furiousness against the existing domestic situation which consumes her energy at the cost of her freedom and satisfaction of living.

The circumstances of Ila Das differ from that of Nanda Kaul. She is a spinster- ugly and short. She has to face social trouble to live. Her shrill voice is

compared to 'a long nail frantically scratching at a glass pane' or 'a small child gone berserk' (21). Both the images project Ila Das's helpless verbal violence emerging from her much troubled soul as a result of her humiliation done by the social violence against her.

Nanda Kaul's composed state of mind emerging from much of disappointment and loss in the past is expressed in the metaphoric expressions such as 'a charred tree trunk in the forest' and 'a broken pillar of marble in the desert' (23). The images communicate meanness of her existence characterized by a rewardless hard work without human dignity almost rendered to a little non-human status. Her inmost will to become a tree (4) rather than human being shows her merging of self in Nature and her absolute abandonment of human world as a result of gross negligence despite the vast domestic drudgery done over a period of fifty years. R.S. Sharma (1981) observes: "her withdrawal stands for emotional staticity, a kind of psychic frigidity that refuses to take note of any movement around"<sup>13</sup>

Nanda Kaul's basic mindset is not of domestic drudgery as perceived from her childhood and adolescence. Her inward craving for freedom and individuality make her domestic work unnatural. The distance between her mindset and the patriarchal familial responsibilities is found in the analogy: "reading a great heavy difficult book". Nanda Kaul's withdrawal of herself from the human world and her hermitage amidst the mountains of Kasauli is broken with Raka's arrival at Carignano. The forthcoming trouble and the petty existence of the female child is appropriately communicated by the image 'mosquito' (40). The child's sudden appearance and disappearance from the place disquiets her to a large extent. In this sense, Raka has been compared to 'a rabbit conjured up by a magician' (40). It is the fantasy that illustrates the fact. With Ila Das's arrival at Carignano her appearance has been defined in various images: The adjectives 'tea-cosy', and 'egg-cosy' project the poor quality of her existence. The state of her old age is shown with the adjective 'yellowed' rather than 'whitened' (112). It projects her old age as an accumulation of insults and humiliations over the years. The image 'a bit of a crumpled paper' (112) shows a very trifle quality of her life which is without essence, full of everyday circumstances, exactly signified by the image of 'grave'.

The contrast between Nanda Kaul's life and that of Ila Das has been figuratively brought out in the images of 'ragged life' and 'beacon' (112). The adjective 'ragged' projects multiple meanings in this context. It communicates the torn pieces of her life in terms of existential conditions across the years, as well as the most ragged quality of her life which agonized her soul, as it emerged from taunts and jeering from the anti-social elements of the society. The interaction of Nanda Kaul and Ila Das over their past life is shocking to Nanda Kaul. Ila Das has been perceived as 'raucous apparition' which highlights the ugly features of her life as well as a degree of violence that she brings with her. Her voice is compared to an arrow which could pierce her temples and penetrates her jaws. Ila Das's speech is vividly perceived as 'waterfall'. Her sigh with anguished sense of the

past has been communicated as 'air from a slashed balloon' (120) that does not give her comfort.

Nanda Kaul's background and her upbringing at her father's home shows her confidence in goodness and humanity in living. From this point of view, she tries to judge her post-marital experience of life where she finds a kind of disorder. The following image projects the sense rightly:

Now was the moment to rise and put all in its place, like the goddess of a naughty land returned to deal with chaos' (122). The image of goddess signifies her own goodness and humanity which she applies during her premarital and post-marital period of life and even during her old age. The phrase 'naughty land' and the word 'chaos' refer to the territory of patriarchal society where the ultimate sense of morality towards humanity does not prevail. Ila Das's experience with the rural social system their problems, ideas and interactions with her are conceived as 'horror'. Her existence amidst this situation, as a Christian social worker renders her passive and poses threat to her life. The imagery appears as follows: 'Yes, Ila Das brought horror with her and horror it was that hovered about her as she went off as jerky and crazy as an old puppet with her ancient umbrella and tattered bag' (133)

The image of 'an old puppet' appropriately defines Ila Das as a social worker amidst traditional rural Indian society, almost a hopeless sufferer without justice and humanity but with cruelty and violence, unfairly worked out.

S. Indira (1994) studies imagery in *Fire on the Mountain*. She observes: "There is a string of images foreshadowing Ila Das's death as if that were the logical culmination for her tortured existence"<sup>14</sup>. Nanda Kaul receives Ila Das's phone with the sense of 'murder' (101). Her voice on phone is perceived in the image of 'a shot crow' (102). Nanda Kaul feels that Ila Das's strictly existence looked so precarious. The word 'precarious' projects a sense of danger almost imminent in her life.

There are other images in the novel which are almost decorative. The vast plains below the mountains and a Chandgah lake amidst it is expressed as 'dull silver brooch' (61). The vastness of the plain with natural beauty has been viewed as 'an ancient scroll' (61) unrolled under Raka's feet for her to survey. The imagery emerging from Raka's vision amidst the mountains is weird in nature. Aman in green is compared to a grasshopper. His voice is expressed in the image of 'crowing cock'. A woman with a bucket on her head is seen as a cooking spoon rolling in an empty pot (69). The vision irritates Raka. Her energy and spontaneity in moving from one place to another is expressed in the word, 'shooting'. It is compared with the immediate release of a seed from the burst pod (71). The layer of ashes spread on Kasauli mountains is communicated in the image of a grey peil (76). The red eyes of the churails are expressed in 'coals'. It is suggestive of its destructive values.

An atmosphere of thought-content is created with the help of several images. When Nanda Kaul receives a phone call from Ila Das, her restlessness

indicating immediate circumstances, is projected in the following image: "She turned her head this way and that in an escape she matched the white hen drag out a worm inch by resisting inch from the ground till it snapped in two. She felt like the worm herself. She winced at its mutilation" (21) This prey-predator image of hen pecking at a worm is suggestive of Nanda Kaul's present inner turmoil. Her past suffering at the hands of the adulterous husband and her present awareness about the harsh realities of life are communicated by this image. The image of the charred pine tree is repeatedly employed in the novel. Its analogy with Nanda Kaul, as she perceives, vivifies the conditions of her past life: her work as great benefactor and yet out of ungratefulness, remaining agonized. Anita Desai's vision of the existential life of the women characters in the novel shows her pre-predator characteristics- their individual features and relationship. The images of ugliness, loneliness, destruction are frequently used for projecting the existential theme of the novel.

Nagappan Sethuraman (2005) views the tragedy of Nanda Kaul in terms of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, almost a journey from home to heath, vivified with imagery. He comments, "Imagery of ugly and evil animals like jackals and wolves are recurrently used, creating an animal imagery that reinforces the thematic concern of the play, namely the tragedy of human life, personified in the life of Lear, a victim of indifference in old age."<sup>5</sup>

The wide range of images contributes to projecting the traits of the characters, the nature of their relationship with the social forces, almost from family to the remotest elements of society, the conditions and circumstances emerging therefrom, their suffering and reflections, the places, objects and events occurring in the course of their life. The imagery occurring in the novel is functional as well as decorative. The functional imagery develops the thematic strands of the novel and integrates them to the ultimate vision of physical and psychological violence in the life of the three women characters. The imagery characterizes their suffering in terms of dissatisfaction and agony in spite of their goodness and honesty. They remain the victims of the patriarchal social values which bring in violence and slowly destroy the pulse of their life. The life remains without identity and significance, but exploited and neglected. The decorative images add to the overall rhetoric of the novel though it do not communicate the theme. The most of the images are in the form of simile and metaphor.

Much of the imagery emerges from the subhuman and inanimate world: almost dry and decaying, projecting the adverse, agonizing and ungrateful nature of the social elements which begin from the family. The imagery succeeds in projecting the temporal and the universal together. Nanda Kaul, Ila Das and Flaka then emerge as representatives of the mass of women suffering under similar circumstances. To conclude, one may recall Thomas Hardy's words (1959) about the craft of fiction depicting universal through the particular situations of life: "about the craft of fiction depicting universal through the particular situations of life: and the drama- in the construction part-lies in the

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