

Depiction of Traumatic Childhood and Familial Ties in Anita Desai's
Fire on the Mountain

Rashmi Rekha Saikia
Research Scholar
Dept. of English
Assam University, Diphu Campus

Literature is the finest manifestation of human experience, thinking patterns and social norms prevalent in the society. Literary texts extrapolate the very essence of human relationship that forms the key to great literary works. Man, being a social animal makes numerous relationships that characterize them as human and determine the true essence of existence. But surprisingly enough, such relationship is yet to find a niche in our socio-economic and socio-political set-up. Fiction, being the most effective genre manifests the social consciousness and the social situation and thus it becomes a tool of social criticism. Edward Proffitt observes; fiction are treasure-trove of human experience limning “ an intimate sense of the inner lives of people, their deepest feelings, their conflicts their most secret joys and fears.” (Proffitt 31)

The rich diversity of human relationship can be glimpsed in the fictional writings of Anita Desai that forms a rich backdrop to her literary works. Anita Desai, one of the

prominent women novelist of the post modern period has dexterously explored the most complex issues of human relationships, may it be man woman relationship or interpersonal relationships. Parent child relationship in Desai's novels is not essentially pleasant and chaos and conflict is obvious in such relationships. Childhood experience moulds the wholesome personality individualizing one's character. Various schools of psychology too have accepted the importance of childhood experiences and its role in molding individual's personality. While commenting on her introspective and solitary characters, Desai stated in an interview with Jasbir Jain; I agree that the experiences of childhood are the most vivid and the lasting ones. But I'm quite sure that even adult life contains many traumatic experiences, for instance fighting in a war may be traumatic experience for a soldier. (Bande 38-39)

Desai's novels are an exploration of the problematic childhood crippled with complexes that distort the child psychology leaving an imprint on the matured life. Anita Desai's award winning novel, *Fire on the Mountain* wonderfully illustrates the link between filial ties and child psychology. Though *Fire on the Mountain* dramatizes the traumatic life of a widow humiliated and betrayed by husband, but the primal focus rests on the problematic childhood of Raka, an epitome of distressing family situation. In human relationship, the existence of domestic peace is perceived through true love and emotional rapport that strengthen the familial bond. But surprisingly enough, the absence of love and parental guidance naturally attributes toward psychic disintegration of the

individuals in Desai's novels.

The family is the chief foundation of child's personality and moulds the type of the person they grow in later years. Childhood experience in the formative period prepares a child for future life. So, the parental role is very significant, as it is under the guidance of parents that the child develops the sense of maturity. In his theory, Lucan had pointed out that the parent serve as a mirror. And "the mirror image would seem to be the threshold of the visible world." (Lucan 3). The parents shows the gateway to the children to face the matured life. By laying the solid foundation, the parents provide the right track to expose to the wider world. Here lies the self sacrificing role of parents associating with high ideals and moral examples.

Raka, the great grand daughter of Nanda Kaul in *Fire on the Mountain* is a product of her destined surrounding. A neglected child of a drunkard father and a nervous mother, Raka exhibit herself as a broken figure transforming into a split personality. Parental negligence and negative exposure contributed to increased internalizing behaviour resulting in Raka's withdrawal, anxiety and depression. The key to understanding Raka's personality can be found from the narration of the traumatic incident which she experience;

Somewhere behind them, behind it all, was her father, home from a party, stumbling and crashing through the curtains of the night, his mouth opening to let out a flood of rotten stench, beating at her mother with hammers and fists of abuse – harsh, filthy abuse that made Raka cover under her bed clothes and wet the mattress in fright,

feeling the stream of urine warm and weakening between her legs like a 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. (71-72)

The harsh behaviour of Raka's father provided ample scope in understanding the child psychology of Raka and its dominant influence in her mind. Absence of fatherly attention and affection and the lack of motherly warmth and love aggravated the tragic soul of Raka.

Walsh William acknowledge the connotation of love for the decent growth of a child when he says:

“ the child's consciousness, which is partial and successive, does not include a sense of the past or the future. It has to be discovered, and the provocation to learn it, is love. Affection is the seed of time. It is love intensifying the delight in the present and correspondingly bringing discomfort in absence – which introduces an element of performance into the child's experience.” (Walsh 166)

A child discovers happiness in the familial bond living amidst all the colours of blessings. Children get greater exposure to the larger world and perceived happiness in the closeness of family members. Deprived of all the colours of life, Raka turn into a 'freak child'. Nanda kaul, as a grandmother too failed to build up an emotional rapport as she herself is a victim of circumstance who being betrayed by her husband had transformed herself into a distressing figure. Generally caring grandparents exerts positive influence on child's behaviour. In the lap of grandparents, children develop a

strong emotional rapport that contribute in strengthening the bond. But, no such close proximity could be traced between Raka and Nanda and such affection is sadly missing in the relationship. Nanda Kaul, a solitary soul reject every companionship in the alienated world. Raka's presence was an un welcomed intrusion in the solace of Carignanao as she did not long for the company of grandchild at that age. The relation between Raka and Nanda is showcased in a very unusual way both carrying feelings of hatred and annoyance alienating themselves from each other. Instead of a strong emotional and affectionate feeling, both behave as if occupants of two different world. Desai's protagonists suffer from a haunting existential quest with an intense search for everlasting freedom. In the fight for survival of the fittest, many of her protagonists undergo emotional deprivation and loose the normality of life. Raka, in *Fire on the Mountain* is no exception to this. Boggled down by existential insecurity and uncertainty, Raka turned out to be a rebel. *Fire on the Mountain* illustrates the hardship of escaping from the reality. The prolonged exposure to fearsome stimulation arising out of destined circumstances gave way to an inward journey of life alienating with shunning all intimacies and tenderness. The tragedy of Raka unfolds the fact that her free growth and independent existence is chiefly responsible for parental negligence and unresponsive attitude which negate her ability to adjust with the changing circumstance. The compulsive drives tend Raka to forgo her vital 'self' and human values in her problematic journey from childhood to adulthood.

Maturity and realization of selfhood determines the true essence of human

personality. The sense of selfhood develops during childhood and leaves an imprint on the adult personality which is a magnified manifestation of the childhood impressions. If the parental role failed to provide positive influence in influencing the child's personality, it may produce negative effect on the future character development. Desai's characters are both fragmented and spiritually destroyed by social constructs and social conditions of life. In the absence of a meaningful life, individual's quest for authentic personal being suffers and life becomes a sort of paradox. A developed personality is definitely a key to success and the parents role serves as a mirror image in providing the sense of security and a sense of belongingness. Healthy family atmosphere and proper parental guidance goes a long way in positive moulding of child's personality. The child however normal may be, but unhealthy and undomesticated family atmosphere lend children to become maladjustment and distance themselves both physically and mentally to live a life of seclusion. So the familial ties should be strengthen so as to develop the sense of selfhood preparing themselves with moral responsibility for future life. The sensitive characters of Desai are all engulfed with the stifling prisons of self created enigma. Desai presents human relationship as a serious problem crippled with all complexities and a searching mind to find a coherent existence.

References:

1. Bande, Usha. *The Novels of Anita Desai*, New Delhi : Prestige, 2000.
2. Desai, Anita. *Fire on the Mountain*, New Delhi : Allied Publishers, 1977.
3. Horney, Karen. *Feminine Psychology*, New York: Norton, 1967.

4. Khanna, Shashi. *Human Relationships in Anita Desai's Novels*. New Delhi: Sarup & Sons, 1995.
5. Lacan, Jacques. *Ecrits : A Selection*, U K : Routledge, 1989.
6. Profitt, E. *Reading and Writing about Literature*, New York:Harcourt Brace, 1990.Print. PTI "2.4 lakh illegal Indian immigrants living in U.S.: report" The Himdu 24 May 2012. Web.1 July 2013.
7. William, Walsh. *The Uses of Imagination*, London :Chatto and Windus, 1959.