

Research Paper—English



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Marital Discord in Anita Desai's Fire on the Mountain



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Marital discord, the conflict in married life, is as old as the institution of marriage itself, although it has varied in degrees from time to time and from person to person. In the pre-industrial era, men and women who came together in marriage shared cultural values, mutual commitment, trust and faith which subordinated the interests of the individuals resulting in the smooth relationship of the family. There were tensions and maladjustments in their marital relationship too, but the moral and religious convictions, economic dependence and the fear of social disapproval kept them together.

In the wake of the industrial revolution, marital discord has come to assume greater importance. Men and women who came together in marriage lacked knowledge of various sexual, psychological, spiritual and social aspects of life, the proper understanding of which alone ensured peace, adaptability and self-control. In the commercial age, the increasing independence of married woman has pulled her further apart and has changed the concept of marriage, in the words of Virendra Kumar "from stability, permanence and indissolubility to discord, separation and divorce" (Kumar.1978:25). Marital discord represents a breakdown in the consensus and co-operation of the married couples. Usually, marital discord originates when rivalry develops between the partners by internal and external manifestations like separation, physical violence and vituperation. They drift apart when they are

unable to sort-out their problems which result in the strain and tension in their relationship. According to C.B.Mamoria, "Desertion and divorce are the final tragic denouements of family disorganization" (Mamoria.1960:384).

In one form or another, the theme of marital discord dominates the contemporary fiction, may it be of British, American or Indian origin. It is one of the central themes in the works of D.H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, William Faulkner, Raja Rao, Arun Joshi, Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal, Ruth Praver Jhabwala, Bhabani Bhattacharya, Anita Desai and others.

Marital discord recurs as the theme of the novels of Anita Desai. Her novels, with a touch of feminist concern, portray the failed marriage relationship which often leads to alienation and loneliness of the characters. Her novels, like, *Cry the Peacock*, *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*, *Voices in the City*, and *Bye-Bye Blackbird* also deal with the theme of marital disharmony, but the aim of my present paper is to study the marital discord in her Sahitya Academy Award winner novel *Fire on the Mountain* published in 1972. Her novel *Fire on the Mountain*, grapples with the theme of incommunication and lack of understanding in marital life. The novel records the story of Nanda Kaul, the Vice-Chancellor's wife who has chosen the house of top of a mountain in Carignano in the village of Kasauli, as her shelter away from the disturbances of family and society. Life with

the Vice-Chancellor had long ordeal with only the duties and responsibilities of her position without any love attached to it. She is disillusioned with her selfish, infidel husband, who “treated her simply as some useful object” (Solanki. 1992:49). She played the gracious hostess all the time for her husband, who “wanted her always in silk, at the head of the long rosewood table in the dining-room, entertaining his guests” (18). In the words of Gopal N.R., “She is so busy raising the family and discharging the duties of mother, housewife and hostess that in the evening of her life she is happy in her seclusion even though it is partly voluntary and partly circumstantial” (Gopal.1999:37). Mrs. Desai probes deep into the problematic life of Nanda Kaul, who, besides being the wife of a Vice-Chancellor and leading a luxurious life, is satiated by it. “Outwardly Kauls were an ideal couple to university community but from inside it was all empty, the whole social role and socializing was a mere sham” (*Ibid*:36). Her life with her husband was “lacking in composition and harmony” (25).

The psychological seclusion of the lady is echoed by the landscape of the mountain - rocky and barren. Her wish to be lonely and secluded is seen in her apathy to receive her great granddaughter. “Discharge me, she groaned. I’ve discharged all my duties. Discharge” (30). Carignano offered her the anonymity and escape she longed for. Mrinalini Solunki rightly observed:

Her option for total isolation is not related to the spirituality of Indian thought. She does not opt for this isolation willingly, but circumstances have left no other way out for her. Her long involvement with the people and the affairs of the world gave her neither satisfaction nor a sense of

belongingness. Therefore, in a bid to survive she opts for withdrawal, for an existence away from the world of messages and visitors” (Solanki.1992:30) The novel tells of falsity to which Nanda is forced to. Her conjugal life was not peaceful. It was not all love and sincerity but the terrible betrayal of her husband prompted her to a life of silence. The children were alien. The graces and glories were a fabrication, to drive the present. “Her relation with her husband did not involve her inner “self” (Solanki.1992:49). The novel gives an impression of her happy life with her husband, but the last page of the novel reveals that the whole story was a white lie. She had fabricated her life to Raka:

She had lied to Raka, lied about everything. Nor had her husband loved and cherished her and kept her like a queen – he had only done enough to keep her quiet while he carried on a lifelong affair with Miss David, the Mathematics teacher, whom he had not married because she was a Christian but whom he had loved, all his life loved. The children were all alien to her nature. She neither understood nor loved them. She did not live here alone by choice – she lived here because that was what she was forced to do, reduced to doing.

There occurs another failed marital relationship in the novel – the relationship between Raka’s mother and her excessive drinking and aggressive father. But the writer has focused on the plight of Nanda Kaul, who is deceived and betrayed by her husband. “Lack of understanding of the partner’s expectations and temperaments is chiefly responsible for the marital discord of Mrs. Kaul” (Khurana.2001:28). Thus Anita Desai lodges her protest against unhappy married life in the phoney world through her female characters.

REFERENCE

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