



## RAKA'S EXISTENTIAL GROWTH FROM DEPERSONALITY TO TRANSPERSONALITY IN ANITA DESAI'S *FIRE ON THE MOUNTAIN*

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KUS: 09/15-180509

Manuscript received: May 18, 2009; Accepted: June 08, 2009

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**Abstract:** Anita Desai is well recognized as an existentialist who in most of her fictions speaks of human predicament and specifically the existential crisis of women. In *Fire on the Mountain*, Raka, one of the three central figures, gets unique in her active contribution to the ultimate action, unparalleled gravity and the mystic air of her character. A.H Tak, a critique of Anita Desai, has redefined Roger Wescott's categorization of 'impersonality' by indicating at the split personality that Desai's heroines experience in their lives. Though Nanda Kaul is the central character Raka supersedes her at the end of the novel when she sets fire on the mountain. In this regard, the present paper attempts to identify Raka's shift from one state to another and wants to show how Raka, being on the existential plain raises to another height that completes her spiritual growth.

**Keywords:** Existentialism, depersonality, transpersonality, angst

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### Introduction

Existentialism is a modern philosophy, originated in Europe both 'historically' and 'culturally' that "focuses on the individual human being's experience of, recognition of, triumph over the meaninglessness of existence" (Morner & Rausch, 1998). It became influential in the 1940s, 'especially after the horrors of World War II'. Though existentialism has not developed as a 'single philosophy system' or 'a set of doctrines' it was found dominating the realm of philosophy all over the world in the mid-twentieth century and as Chatterjee (1983) says, it has left "its impact on literature [which] has both been substantial and significant"(quoted in Sethuraman, 2005). It has continuously been 'defined and interpreted' by various thinkers. But fundamentally it deals with the disillusionment and despair of human life which majority of the race succumb to.

"Man's autonomy, assertion of his subjective self, his flouting of reason and rationality, his denial of traditional values, institutions and philosophy, his exercise of 'will' and 'freedom', and his experience of the absurdity and the 'nothing-ness' of life are some of the existential themes which are reflected in the writings of the exponents of existentialism."(Swain, 2000)

As a twentieth-century novelist Anita Desai's chief concern is the human predicament and to project that she has chosen the study of the tormented psychological terrains of Indian women who have, anyhow been neglected by their own people or society. She breaks through their unknown inner world to search for their predicament, existential 'angst' and their quest for the meaning of their being. Her women protagonists are set against a completely hostile backdrop

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.53808/KUS.2010.10.1and2.0915-A>

wherein they realize the futility of existence and then set out for finding out the real meaning of life through combating with the inevitable absurdity of life. Sometimes the ultimate event gets intolerably tragic and “the tragic tension between the individual and their unfavorable environment acquires the dimension of existential angst.”(Sethuraman, 2005)

### **Existentialism in Fire on the Mountain**

Jean-Paul Sartre, the father-exponent of existentialism thinks,

“...human beings are born in a moral and metaphysical void. . . .People can passively remain in that condition, hardly aware of anything, taking the path of least resistance. Or they can face themselves and awful absurdity of their predicament, recognizing that they are alone, that there are no rules or no one to tell them what to do. It is important from the existentialist view point that human awareness of this situation go beyond mere intellectual comprehension. People have to feel the horror of meaninglessness. The anxiety (angst) produced by this awareness may lead to despair...” (Morner & Rausch, 1998).

*Fire on the Mountain* projects on themes of alienation, solitude, loneliness, pessimism, futility of human existence, freedom and struggle for survival that are related to the existential philosophy. The novel has been identified as “the lyrical fictionalization of the quintessence of existentialism.” (Gupta 1984, quoted in Sethuraman,2005). In the novel we get three protagonists: Nanda Kaul, an aged widow of the ex- vice-chancellor of Punjab University who is leading a recluse life in Kasauli ; Raka, a child, a great-granddaughter of Nanda Kaul who comes to Kasauli with a view to improving her post-typhoid weakness; and finally, Ila Das, an aged woman with peculiar physical features and a ‘cackling’ voice like that of ‘an agitated parrot’. Nanda Kaul is undoubtedly the leading character but it is Raka whose presence in the novel looms large and going parallel with Nanda Kaul, she ultimately becomes the *deu ex machina*. At the onset Raka is introduced as an ill-treated child whose heavenly days of childhood have been battered being condemned in the sick, suffocating environment of her family and her appearance arouses nothing but pity. But the child’s willful denial to any kind of care and gratification, her existential ‘angst’ and finally her success to do something in determining the meaning of life resolves her position which is a metaphysical, sublime one.

### **Depersonality and Transpersonality**

More or less, Desai’s heroines suffer from a kind of personality crisis. Tak (2000) notes in his essay that most of Desai’s heroines are afflicted by the duel of these two personalities; one of them is ‘erotica’ or the very carnal desire of bodily love and the other is ‘transcendence’ or the desire to withdraw for attain sublime and celestial for which man is ready to go against the set rules of his known world. Erotica is the search for joy that brings depression ultimately; and for getting transcendence man accepts suffering and pain but finally it brings joy. This duality and pressure between despair and exultation irk the heroines of Desai’s fictions. Wescott (1972) has suggested three kinds of ‘impersonality’ and has named them as, ‘pre personality’-‘the impersonality of non hominian animals and of hominian infants’; ‘depersonality’-the alienated condition of modern humans ‘in which personality has been eroded or destroyed by excessive regimentation’; and ‘transpersonality’-a relatively sudden and transitory experience of spiritual growth, too dramatic in nature to be called ‘learning’ in any ordinary sense.” (Tak, 2000).

An observation of Anita Desai’s novels shows that her heroines generally suffer the tangles of ‘depersonality’ and seek refuge either in the pleasant dream-like memories of ‘personality’ or try to move on to that higher state of consciousness called ‘transpersonality’. In other words, they are cast into an ambivalent world: ‘...a world where the central harmony is aspired to but not arrived at, and desire to love and live clash, at times violently, with the desire to with draw and achieve harmony.” (Tak, 2000).

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Synchronization can be seen between Tak's concept and that of Wescott. The conflict between desire and withdrawal incorporates with the categorization of 'impersonality' where getting into 'transpersonality' from primordial state of 'prepersonality' or 'depersonality' means actually attaining 'transcendence'. In other words, through the aloofness and indifference one can arrive at the objectivity of transpersonal.

In *Fire on the Mountain*, Nanda Kaul, like any other heroine of Desai suffers from a split personality though she is middle aged and has already crossed the age of erotic pleasure. But in her recluse life when she aspires to have the detachment from everything of the outer world, it is Raka who comes as the unwanted interruption to that desire. But with the progress of the novel Nanda Kaul is found regaining her lost interest about caring for others and she can not help looking after the girl.

Wescott's terminology explains that "...for Raka Carignano represented the pre personality stage of innocence." (Tak, 2000). Though primarily Raka is thought to be in her innocence of pre personality stage, at the end the act of setting fire implies something more. It is emblematic and reinforces the relevance of the title of the novel. Burning, paradoxically, gives a soothing feeling as fire is the symbol of purification and regeneration. The novel ends with Raka's declaration, "I have set the forest on fire". (Desai, 1999) This paper wants to show that being in the 'metaphysical void' Raka once gets depersonalized but her existential anguish recompenses her with the transcendence when she achieves 'transpersonality'.

Raka in *Fire on the Mountain* comes as an intruder into the recluse life of Nanda Kaul who avoids post-man, phone-calls and guests. So when Nanda Kaul gets the news of her great granddaughter's arrival from her daughter Asha's letter she apprehends the loss of her long-cherished and carefully-nursed tranquility that she wants to keep unhindered. Raka's unwelcome entrance to Carignano makes Nanda Kaul panicked of the violation of the rules of her private world. It opens another phase of the story. She takes Raka as 'an utter misnomer' for her name, meaning 'the moon' that appears as someone crestfallen. Nanda describes her as below,

"Raka meant the moon, but this child was not round faced, calm or radiant. As she shuffled up the garden path, silently followed Ram Lal, with a sling bag weighting down on thin, sloping shoulder and her feet on old sandals heavy with dust, Nanda Kaul thought she looked like one of those dark crickets that leap up in fright but do not sing, or a mosquito, minute and fine, on thin, precarious legs." (Desai, 1999)

The wild, dusty look of the child primarily creates resentment in Nanda, which aggravates when she discovers her efficiency in sliding along so smoothly from her sight. Raka's profligate exploration into the mountains and woods and her enjoying of boundless freedom give a blow to Nanda Kaul's self-made world of indifference. Raka with her vaulting curiosity tries to discover the mystery of the wild life but discovers actually the mal-practices of man even in the serene vicinity of the hill-tracts. She knows the Pasteur Institute where the doctors cut rabbits, guinea pigs and other wild animals and burn them to make serum for injections. Scornfully she looks at the filthy, black smoke that coils up and spoils the fresh air of the neighborhood.

"Why is there so much smoke?" she asked, in a somewhat weak voice.

"Oh, they are always boiling serum there—boiling, boiling. They make serum for the whole country." (Desai, 1999)

Nanda Kaul is utterly disturbed with the unpredictable personality of the child. For Nanda Kaul, "Raka's genius. Raka's daemon. It disturbed" (Desai, 1999). When Raka first comes to Carignano for improving her health, she is none but a lost child, who seems to be mentally more vulnerable than physically she is. Nanda Kaul's initial indifference to Raka gradually takes the shape of a challenge to fill in the gaps in the life of the child, and by doing so she wants to offer

her a chance to rebuild her disturbed childhood. Her building of a fantasy world for Raka proves that. But unfortunately it is proved a mistake on her part because she is really unable to dip into the deep of the child's intricate psychology. This is usual for Raka that she would discard any attempt to care for or allure her. Nanda Kaul never gets any intimation what goes on in Raka's inner world. She tries heartily to resist the child's gliding away but her indifference turns to be a 'golden catch' for Nanda Kaul. Raka's ominous exploration into the woods and her utter abjection fill her with a mixed feeling of 'awe' and 'wonder' (Uniyal, 2000). So, a war wages between them where she (Nanda) fails completely due to the 'radical dismissal' of Raka as Uniyal says, "Raka's silent disapproval signifies the ascetic refusal" and her refusal conforms to her 'depersonality'. Calling Raka as an 'abject', Uniyal quotes from Kristeva (1982) that she ,

“...lies outside, beyond the set, and does not seem to agree to the latter's rule of game. And yet, from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master. Without a sign (for him), it beseeches a discharge, a convulsion, a crying out”.

Raka has witnessed the brutality and futility of human existence. She is the daughter of an ill-matched couple. The disorder of her family has made her different from any other child of her age who so far can be taken as a 'freak'. Her complicated nature makes her mysterious. She has no demand, no need. She only wants to be 'left alone' to 'pursue her own secret life'.

“Raka was not like any other child she had known not like any of her own children or grandchildren, amongst them, she appeared a freak by virtue of never making a demand. She appears to have no needs. Like an insect burrowing through the sandy loam and pine-needles of the hillsides, like her own great-grandmother, Raka wanted only one thing-to be left alone and pursue her own secret life amongst the rocks and pines of Kasauli.” (Desai, 1999).

Raka has grown up in sheer negligence and lack of attention. Her sick mother, frequently suffering from breakdowns, has to spend most of the time in nursing homes and her diplomat father never offers her any access to his own world. She can be said in her 'depersonality' state where her personality has been severely curbed by excessive regimentation. She is nothing more than a 'pest', as such Nanda feels her resemblance to a 'mosquito' rather than to 'the moon'. Desai narrates, “Watching her wandering amongst the rocks..., Nanda Kaul wondered if she at all realized how solitary she was.... Solitude never disturbed her” (Desai, 1999).

“She is the only child Nanda Kaul had ever known who preferred to stand apart and go off and disappears to being loved, cared for and made the centre of attention. The children Nanda Kaul had known had wanted only to be such centers: Raka alone did not.” (Desai, 1999).

### **Raka's Refusal**

Existentialism, from a philosophical idealism has developed into a powerful revolt against reason because, Ahmad clarifies, “by its very nature it defies and abhors systematisation (Ahmed,1991).

Raka refuses human relationship and chooses a life of her own. She loves loneliness which makes her roam through the woods and hills in search of jackals alone. Watching her expedition in the woods Nanda Kaul wonders how much lonely she is. Her curiosity to watch alone the ravine full of ashes of cremated animal bodies represents her distorted and destroyed personality. Her sense of life is harder, broader and deeper than that of Nanda Kaul. Her rejection to follow the systems of Nanda Kaul's own world reflects her disgust to any kind of systematization. Raka is not satisfied with the cozy arrangement for both her outer and inner refreshment at Nanda Kaul's cottage; rather like a dare-devil she depends on nature for her refreshment as well as her entertainment .Nature stimulates her in all possible ways. She rejects everything, all cares and milk-potato cheeps-tea-cookies arrangement, all painstaking attempts to make her sociable. She

disapproves the world "of schools, of hostels, of discipline, order and obedience" (Desai, 1999); even she scornfully discards Nanda Kaul's proposal to be permanent in Kasauli, the place she likes much almost in the way her great grandmother rejects the outer world. Diagonally, they differ in their 'rejection'. Nanda Kaul feels that Raka is the true image of her inner soul and perhaps she gets jealous to see Raka's independence which she has desired for herself.

But Raka's refusal is instinctive and unlike her great grandmother learns to reject too early. Desai (1999) declares,

"If Nanda Kaul was a recluse out of vengeance for a long life of duty and obligation, her great-granddaughter was a recluse by nature, by instinct. She had not arrived at this condition by a long route of rejection and sacrifice—she was born to it, simply".

Truly, she is born to it. She, in her small life has experienced the absurdity of life. She has observed the inhuman brutality of her father---drunken and so torturing her mother. The frightening little child compares her mother's cry with the 'Jackal crying'. The rampage of the drunken and demented revelry of the club-party bewilders her. In great surprise, she remembers almost the same experience she had with her parents

"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 fists of abuse-harsh, filthy abuse that made Raka cower under her bedclothes and wet the mattress in fright, . . .Raka felt that flat, wet jelly of her mother's being squelching and quivering. . . Ahead of her, no longer on the ground but at some distance now, her mother was crying. Then it was a jackal crying". (Desai, 1999).

The whimpering child runs off the maddening clamor of the party, sobbing, "Hate them----hate them...." Her deep indignation to this culture and practices turns the girl desolate, which results in stubbornness. In great impudence she mutters, "I don't care- I don't care- I don't care for anything!"(Desai, 1999).In her 'depersonalized' spell the child knows about the meaninglessness of life too early. Uniyal (2000) asserts "This brief but significant moment of fear, of anguish, is a key to Raka's abjection" which is a 'logical step towards refusal'. Undoubtedly, the child goes through an existential crisis that causes a personality break-down and she discovers herself in a void. At that condition she has no alternative except refusing the whole world. The existentialist theme of futility is very much present in her. The deprivation caused by the social institutions is responsible for molding up her mindset. Desai says, "The deprivation of loving care has created disturbance in her subconscious mind making her emotionally blank and inclined to set the world on fire". (Desai, 1999). Like Nanda Kaul she needs nobody and nobody needs her.

The barren landscape of Kasauli has given Raka immense freedom. The mystic nature serves food for her thought and imagination; her childlike inquisitiveness turns into serious query here that has settled her before another unknown milieu where she has been propped up to a new identity. Her intrepid adventure carries her to the border line of her experience where,

"....she ignored that great hot plain below. Her eye was on the heart of the agaves, that central dagger guarded by a ring of curved spikes, on the contortions of the charred pine trunks and the paralysed attitudes of the rocks". (Desai, 1999)

That is she hates and refuses the populous plain below which promises life; her inclination to see the twisted, burnt and paralyzed nature ensures her rejection of her present status and she gets depersonalized. Her innate desire to rampage through the dumping yard full of 'Tins of Tulip ham and Kissan jam, Broken china, burnt kettles, rubber tyres and bent wheels' ( Desai, 1999) symbolizes her own poor and wretched life. Her corroded personality due to the unfriendly,

regimental structure of family and society makes her forget to behave normally like other children. As a result her childhood is a casualty of her ill-matched parents.

At the end of the novel Raka is changed dramatically. From a mute watcher she transforms into an active militant. In this process she is clad in a new identity and turns into an individual.

### **Raka's Discovery of Individual Self**

Existentialists have given importance on the individual and this individual is both 'a thinking subject' and an 'initiator of action' as Macquarrie elaborates, "...one must further qualify the existentialist position by saying that for the existentialist the subject is the existent in the whole range of his existing. He is not only a thinking subject but an initiator of action and a centre of feeling." (Macquarrie, 1972). Raka as a 'thinking subject' initiates the action in the novel.

Raka comes to recover her lost health; she has been refused by her parents, her society as well as her physical health. The dusty void of Kasauli stands as the best refuge for her. She, like Nanda Kaul, chooses the recluse life and falls in love with refusal as Ranu Uniyal observes, "Recovery for the refused comes in her love of refuse." (Uniyal, 2000). It is not clear whether Raka has revived from sickness or not but her change is apparent. She matures into a woman, the "Newly Born Woman" (Cixous, 1986; quoted in Uniyal, 2000). Uniyal (2000) rediscovers her as a woman, who resists and knows how to avoid. She says,

"Seemingly it is in the landscape of Kasauli she has discovered her new-found freedom. An only child, a victim of parental negligence, she finds in the wild, uncompromising, and lawless landscape of Kasauli in immense affiliation and a source of inspiration. It enables her to reach herself".

Jean-Paul Sartre, in his essay, 'Existentialism is Humanism' (1946) has advocated for man's immense freedom to live a passive, supine life in the 'mud' like void. But at the same time he has expressed his hope that man may come out of this passive situation.

Sartre as an existentialist believes that man is in 'anguish'. He thinks that 'anguish' is a moment, "When a man commits himself to anything, fully realising that he is not only choosing what he will be, but is thereby at the same time a legislator deciding for the whole of mankind—in such a moment a man can not escape from the sense of complete and profound responsibility." (Sartre, 1946)

The moral anguish will endow him energy to 'drag himself out of the mud' and he will then begin to exist. By exercising this power he can make his own life as well as the universe more meaningful. In the essay Sartre expresses his belief that, "man can emerge from his passive and indeterminate condition and, by an act of will, become *engage*." (Cuddon, 1992). Through the engagement man can fulfill his commitments to the universe which provides a reason and structure for his existence. So it is the enlightened soul that wants to change everything and Raka initiates such an action which is the pre-condition for achieving 'transpersonality'.

The 'transpersonal', Wescott (1972) says, is an "illuminated self" which is "larger, more cosmic, and less personal than the common self". Both the pre personal and the transpersonal states are apparently free of anxiety, while depersonal state is typified by a complex of wholly negative emotions ranging from resignation through apathy, depression, intimidation to impotently rebellious rage. (Wescott, 1972).

Raka's changeover is both physical and psychological. Watching her abject mother dilapidated under her father's obnoxious attacks she feels the warmth of urine like the weakening stream of blood between her legs that metaphorically foretells her looming womanhood. It reminds Raka her position in the patriarchal structure. In other words she is developed into a woman in her resistance and boldness, in her freedom and free-will, if not physically. From an abject she promotes to be an individual but it is not all; finally she gets into the sphere of

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transpersonality. Tak (2000) terms it as 'relatively sudden and transitory experience of spiritual growth' which is achieved in a very dramatic way. Raka is seen into the process. The mysterious landscape of Kasauli combining the beauty and the horror gets symbolic to her and she stands erect on her questioning and probing the meaning of everything she sees around. Her ravenous exploration makes her uncompromising and finally,

She transcends the realm of the abject and that of the hysteric by a 'radical overstepping'. She fuses the codes into one by a radical split. An ambiguous return. 'Look, Nani, I have set the forest on fire. Look, Nani-look-the forest is on fire' (Desai, 1999). The request and the tapping and the whispering of the girl-child Raka, and the command to 'look', marks her as an iconoclast and a mystic who has not only disrupted the prevailing order but by being able to foresee the necessity of her action, her vision, has managed to affect the centre. She is the *imago mundi*, who between heaven and the earth and also perhaps between the imaginary and the symbolic has created a new cosmos, a new abode for women. (Uniyal 2000).

### Conclusion

Anita Desai's experiments and exploration into women's psychology extends to that level where their intricate, entangled, hard-to-reach personalities are found at the root of their disintegration or alienation, not only the consequences generated by the male dominated society in the very general sense. In her fictions women are found resigning and ostracizing themselves being failed to recollect their soul which are shattered by the conflict between their opposite personalities and categorically they remain in a state, what Wescott terms as 'depersonality'. In this respect, Raka is exceptionally the youngest one among Desai's heroines who successfully achieves the 'transpersonality'. From the animal like existence of living only or nevertheless refusing the world, she has been promoted to a rather heightened state of life where she is an active participant in the ritual of purification. As Sartre thinks, from a sense of deep responsibility and anguish man commits to do something for himself as well as, may be subconsciously, for this world. Her craving for freedom, to come out of the shell of her muddy, misty life has turned her into a legislator to fix what should be done; she herself takes the charge to execute the job and by doing so she not only puts an end to the ordeal she is going through rather incarnates the desire of Nanda Kaul. This abrupt change in Raka can not be called the maturity gained by wisdom--so dramatic it is. It is the sudden flash of spiritual light in her that takes her to a state what Wescott calls 'transpersonality'; a state where man gets free from any kind of anxiety and depression.

Raka's inherent hate and defiance explodes through the act of setting fire. Perhaps she has taken revenge on behalf of Nanda Kaul. As Concilio (2000) asserts, "... it is a sign of Raka's rebellion against a violent world, but it is also Raka's handy execution of her great-grandmother's spiritual hate of the world". There, through the purification, Raka is embedded with such philosophical height that she might be taken as an 'illuminated self' who is 'larger, more cosmic and less personal than the common self'. She achieves the transcendental self which is something more than what the word 'learning' or 'knowledge' means and which is more like '*bodhi*' or the spiritual learning. Being on the existential plain she reaches to that knowledge that makes the reader recognize her as a philosophical guide.

Raka's metamorphosis is apparent from 'depersonal' to 'transpersonal', from a rebellious outlaw to a wise hermit, from an abject to an individual, from a reckless, indifferent child to a prudent premature woman, from an observer to an activist. The child who refused everything of the world now takes on the responsibility to rectify the world as well as the duty of taking revenge for the depravity of the society. She crosses all the barriers of subjectivity and the spiritual growth that inspires her to set fire on the mountains is the thing that can ultimately give her desired

'nirvana', a state of perfect bliss in which the individual becomes absorbed into the supreme spirit.

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