THE PHILOSOPHY OF EXISTENTIALISTIC MEANINGLESSNESS IN THE NOVEL, **FIRE ON THE MOUNTAIN** BY ANITA DESAI

Md. Nazmul Huda  
Assistant Professor, Department of English Language & Literature,  
International Islamic University Chittagong, Bangladesh.  
parrotitiu@yahoo.com

Abstract

Existentialism, a quite contemporary dogma apparent in the philosophical and literary work of Sartre, was much in vogue in the European literature dating back from mid-twentieth century. This timely dogma started setting its roots in literature since Sartre set up an association between literature and philosophy in his writings. Existentialism dealing greatly with the alienated trepidation, preposterousness, prejudice, escapism, over-attraction for liberation, started becoming the subject matter of almost all the writer of the modern age irrespective of age, race, geographical location, etc. As an avant-grade novelist, Anita Desai also didn’t hesitate to exhibit her strong obsession, fascination, and inclination for this doctrine in most of her novels. But the present study limits its discussion to one of her most remarkable existentialist novels, *Fire on the Mountain*.

Key Words: Alienation, loneliness, meaninglessness, logical thinking and existentialism.

Introduction: Existentialism as a mode of philosophy as well as of literature may have various interpretations. However, many traits of existentialism have been approved. Still some most common traits of existentialism like meaninglessness of the universe, logical thinking, rationality, positivism, and the usual systematic way of life usually exhibited in the writing of the earlier writers and philosopher were strongly reacted and discarded by the contemporary existentialist writers, because “as a philosophy, existentialism by its very nature defies and abhors systematization” (Ahmed, 10). In spite of it a great majority of modern writers prefer to face the challenge of incorporating this philosophy in their works. This is the vital cause why “man’s alienation, dread, absurdity, bad faith, responsibility, commitment to freedom, anguish are the hallmark of 20th century literature” (Ahmed, 5). Swain (164) also suggests that “Man’s autonomy, assertion of his subjective self, his flouting of the reason and rationality, his denial of traditional values, institution and philosophy, his exercise of ‘will’ and ‘freedom’, and his experience of the absurdity and the nothingness of the life are some of the existential themes which are reflected in the writing of the exponents of existentialism.”

Desai’s prime preoccupation is human quandary and dilemma; she is especially concerned with the alienated, miserable, hopeless and helpless married women tortured and tormented by existentialist tribulations. His women are also modern as well as conservative, loving as well as caring. In this connection Swain (165) asserts “Anita Desai is obsessively occupied with the individual’s quest for meaning and value, freedom and truth that provide spiritual nourishment to the estranged self in a seemingly chaotic and meaningless world.” Anita Desai herself being a woman most probably seems to feel too acutely the psychic purgation of emotional world of women which has been reflected time and again in her female protagonists. She is always in the habit of pulling out the brunette and unexplored sides of life especially of women which she does very artistically by placing her heroines in a very antagonistic and unbearable family surroundings. Thus the catastrophic family situation and hostile, intolerable and neglected environment takes the form of existential anxiety in her novels. “Existential conflicts in Desai spring from the self’s craving for the fulfillment of certain psycho-emotional needs, from the desire to overcome the horror of separateness, of powerlessness and of listlessness (Swain, 165). Swain (165) further boldly affirms, “the Desai protagonists do not shy away from the assaults of existence. Existential heroines, they face the problem of life single-handedly with courage and determination.”

Almost all the critics of Desai have generously alleged her of being existentialist in almost all her novels, *Cry the Peacock*, her first novel to her
last, Baumgartner's Bombay. According to Singh (12) “Her central theme is the existential predicament of an individual, which she projects though incompatible couples-very sensitive wives and ill matched husbands. ”

*Fire on the Mountain* introduces a new dimension and technique employed by Desai in digging out the bitter relation of social life and the concealed inner tormented psychology and the strange nature exciting or over-burdening the mind of her characters. Thus Gupta (185) exhibits it as “the lyrical fictionalization of the quintessence of existentialism”. For it really dramatizes the peculiarities of the lives and living styles of three women characters who dare to direct their lives completely revelry to the one usually lead by Indian women. Being guided or prompted by their existential zeal, they choose to tread the unusual and less traveled path usually ever dared by an Indian woman in a conservative Hindu society. They encounter quite unexpected or too miserable ending. Thus Choudary (77) blames “*Fire on the Mountain* displays skillful dramatization of experiences of certain women emboiled by the cross way of life.” The novelist, most unwillingly or out of sheer reality compels her central female protagonist, Nanda Kaul, an over aged lady to a self-exile in a quite isolated uncivil mountainous village. To turn her existential view into authenticity, Desai also exposes the futile life of a very tender girl Raka, who suffers in isolation without sharing her anguish with anyone. The testimony of Desai’s existentialism is further intensified by the presentation of Ila Das, a completely failed careerist who being quite compelled chooses to fight back the forces quite dominating and unequal to her strength resulting in her tragic death. A more intellectual pursuit of the novel will reveal to the readers the aptness of Desai exhibited in focusing the alienation of human existence by a hostile environment and the sheer toil one encounters to prove him/her survival of the fittest.

The whole novel, *Fire on the Mountain* consists of three major sections each section subdivided further into various brief chapters. “Nanda Kaul at Carignano” forms the very first section of the novel which compromises of ten chapters in total. All the ten chapters exclusively deal with the alienated, lonely life of the chief protagonist Nanda Kaul in Kasauli, a village far from the maddening crowds. An unwelcome intruder, Raka, Nanda Kaul’s great granddaughter forming the second section, disturbs her peaceful life. The second section “Raka comes to Carignano” consists of twenty-one chapters. The chapters depict the ups and downs of the relationship between the grandmother and her young complex and self-confined grand daughters. The third and the final section named “Ila Das leaves Carignano” having thirteen chapters displays and dramatizes the tragic death of Nanda Kaul’s childhood friend, Ila Das who comes to Carignano with a humble mission of eliminating the curseful early marriage among the village people. All the sections unitedly highlight and advocate the existential torment bumped into by all the women protagonists who try to assume a bit different role then their common counterparts.

The novel opens at Carignano with Nanda Kaul, the wife of the Vice-Chancellor of the Punjab University, Mr. Kaul, in complete isolation living far away from the hustle and the bustle of the city life. She seems to be an icon of existentialism perfectly built up by Desai, who ardently vows to keep herself completely detached and disconnected from society and social life. She seems very much to enjoy her lonely life away from the touch of the complex and complicated modern people. She seems to hate even the exchange of correspondence with her past life which is exhibited by her sheer grimace at the arrival of the postman. But this quite rein of her is molested by the arrival of her great grand-daughter Raka who also seeks a solitude place like Carignano to recuperate from typhoid. The story reveals the inner psychic plight of the two female protagonists, Nanda Kaul and Raka according to Indira (96) “the story element is very thin and there is practically no action except for the tragic end.” The two protagonists live in their own individualistic isolated life without having any emotional interaction between the two. But with the passage of time, Nanda Kaul behaves quite contrary to her existential nature; she feels a kind of attraction towards her granddaughter, Raka. But Raka remains unmoved to her existential nature and refuses to be befriended with the old recluse and instead finds a safe refuse for her in the lonely hostile and alienated mountains.

The novel takes a new turning point with the arrival of Ila Das, a childhood friend of Nanda Kaul, to Carignano. If we go to the flashback, we find Ila Das as a lecturer in the Punjab University who loses her dignified job of the University soon after the retirement of Mr. Kaul. Like the other two female protagonists, she too seeks a new role for herself out of her existential whip. Finally, she manages to be an officer in the social welfare department at Kasauli. At the
social welfare department, her job of enlightening the cursed, deprived and ignorant poor villagers by eradicating the evil tradition of child marriage compels her to hurt the male ego especially of Preet Singh. Her bold endeavor destroyed a profitable bargain of Preet Singh who was ready to marry his daughter in exchange of a tiny piece of land and few cattle. Preet Singh was burning within to repay Ila Das the loss she has done to him. While returning to her house from Carignano, one late evening Preet Singh had his will by raping and finally murdering her. Nanda Kaul was greatly shocked by receiving the dead news of her bosom friend and she herself also left the world for good. On the other hand, Raka quite ignorant of her grandmother’s death entered the house announcing loudly to her existential whim that she has set fire on the mountain. All these characters can be viewed as a victim of existential quandary in an intimidating cosmos beyond the control of an individual. A critical scrutiny of Desai’s ill-fated protagonists will further reveal her success in her materialization of her existential viewpoint through three female protagonists and by her employment of imageries and symbols.

When the novel opens, Nanda Kaul has already taken her reclusement in a mountainous region, Carignano. She maintains her private lives in confinement which even the servants do not dare to disturb. “She wanted no one and nothing else. Whatever else came, or happened here, would be unwelcome intrusion and distraction” (Desai, 3). Her isolation rejuvenates her past which results into her existential ennui. In this connection Raizade (44) says “From her musing of her agitated mind it appears that as the wife of the Vice-Chancellor for the Punjab University and the mother of the several children, she has lived a very busy and tiring life.” She didn’t leave any stone unturned in receiving, entertaining and treating the whole host of guests and visitors coming to meet her important Vice-Chancellor husband living a very monotonous life. But her contribution for her beloved husband and family has been rewarded with betrayal from her husband who carried on a life-long love affair with Miss David, her husband’s mathematics mistress whom he would have married had she not been a Christian. Again the memories of her self-centered and unaccommodative children rouse agony and anguish in her mind. Thus being tormented, tortured and crossed by the responsibilities of a bunches of unfaithful family members, Nanda Kaul preferred a lonely and secluded life at Carignano not only from her family members but also from the people of alike kind, the civilized society. What Desai actually wants to highlight in her novel is that at certain time and moment loneliness and seclusion become an essential parts of human life, which we can here see in the case of Nanda Kaul. The tall pine tree beside her residence which stands out from the other inferior short trees reminds her again and again of her own alienated condition of life. Nanda Kaul had what usually everyone has in life, education, marriage, married life, children etc. Not all the theatrical abruptly came to an end and she looks forward for the final destiny of all mankind, death. She is so hunted by the alienated and existentialism of life that the realization of the lonely struggle of human life against the odds becomes evidently to her without any struggle.

In case of Nanda Kaul, a treacherous husband’s faithlessness and some ungrateful and cantankerous children’s negligence act forceful odds towards her. Though late, she is utterly convinced of the fact that her sacrifice, contribution and all the cares for her family and family members has rather been repaid by unhonoured, meaningless and isolation in her dirge and sore needs, old age. So she herself boldly endeavours, like all existential heroines, to find and leave a deep important meaning and existence of her life on earth all by herself. “She treasures her freedom, her privacy, glad her responsibilities towards her family are over, glad she needs nobody and nobody now needs her” (Krisnaswamy, 260). The extreme blow from her dear ones suddenly seems to her like a jerk which teaches her to look life on from a new perspective, misanthropist view. The suggestion of her new out look towards life becomes evident from the reaction at the arrival of the postman, a means of connection with the present isolation and that of her unpleasant past, and also at the arrival of her great granddaughter Raka. Desai seems to be an apt portrayer of existential characters. Almost all the female characters in her various novels seem to reflect the same truth. Her characters always feel a kind of cast way and unimportant and thus seem to arrange on the circumstances concerned by eliminating themselves totally from the situation. Here also we witness the same phenomenon. “If Nanda Kaul was a reclusion out of vengeance for a long life of duty and obligation, her great grand daughter was a reclusion 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” (Desai, 48). So from the above observation it may be said that Nanda Kaul’s existentialism is due to her extreme sensitive nature, while Raka’s one is the outcome of her parents unhappy influence on her: existential quandary. Desai deals with two-sided
existentialism. Raka seems to be a recluse out of her free will, a solitude loving youth. While Nanda Kaul is both a product of her will as well as of the external forces whose peace and alienation is disturbed by the unwelcome intruder, Raka. Desai has portrayed Raka’s arrival through an animal image. When Raka first approaches Nanda Kaul, she (Nanda Kaul) visualizes an insect. “Raka showed down, dragged her foot, then came towards her great grandmother with something despairing in her attitude. She turned a pair of extravagantly large and somewhat bulging eyes about in a way that made the old lady feel more than ever her resemblance to an insect” (Desai, 39).

Desai did not deprive her female protagonist of being a kind and humane mother and woman. That is why Nanda Kaul at the very beginning was a bit sympathetic and exposed her sympathy towards the poor Raka. But pre-occupied with existentialistic instinct “to Nanda Kaul she (Raka) was still an intruder, an outsider, a mosquito flown up from the plains to tease and worry.” (Desai, 40). Desai also exhibits her mastery in delineating a passiveness and a different aspect of existentialism in her young character Raka who is not disturbed at all by the “blatant lack of warmth” (Desai, 40). Inhumanely created by Nanda Kaul the girl rather enjoys her loneliness undisturbed by the company of the old lady. The portrayal of Raka’s character established Desai’s reputation as an expert character builder. Desai shows something quite unusual and peculiar in the character of Raka. The girl is not a normal girl interested in flowers, gardening, household jobs, not even playing usually preferred by a girl of her age. The girl’s peculiar existentialism is more evident to the reader when Raka stalks like a wild animal all alone in her room. Her bitter alienation is brought to the limelight by a technique of interior monologue employed by Desai. Desai aluminates Raka’s past life by using two reptile images:

“The daughter of an ill-matched couple, Raka has been a witness to the brutality and futility of human existence. She is haunted by the recollections of the nightmarish nights that have made her almost a child-stoic. 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 cower under her bedclothes and wet her mattress in fright, feeling 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. Under her feet, in the dark, Raka felt that flat, wet jelly of her mother’s being squelching and quivering, so that she didn’t know where to put her feet and wept as she tried to get free of it. Ahead of her, no longer on the ground but at some distance now, her mother was crying. Then it was a jackal crying” (Desai, 72).

Desai very technically through some reflective monologues introduces the readers with the bitter past of Raka. The monologues reflect that she was not frightened only by her family quarrels but also by the external phenomenon—jackal crying. From all these it is clear that since childhood Raka’s life is associated with strange, dreadful and brutish things like the grubbling of a drunken father in the house and the frightful cry of the jackal in the nearby wood. Thus, from a very tender age, she has learned to endure the harsh and frightful realities of life. Thus, loneliness and wilderness seem to have no effect on her, rather she seems to crave eagerly for such lonely places. As such, she did not hesitate to travel deep down to the narrow valley to the monkey point- a quite lonely and less visited place far from the reach of human habitation from where wild cries of jackals etc. are heard:

“No one ever came here but Raka and the cuckoos that sand invisibly. These (the cuckoos) are not the dutiful domestic birds that called Nanda Kaul to attention at Carignano. They were the demented birds that raved and beckoned Raka on to a land where there was no sound, only silence, no light, only shade, and skeletons kept on beds of ash on which the footprints of jackals flowered in gray” (Desai, 90)

The above passage is pregnant with symbolic meanings. Desai here represents Raka as a symbol of an individual’s search for the meaning of life on this meaningless and futile earth. The jackals symbolize the mystery of life and Raka’s walk to the monkey point symbolizes her search for something mysterious which is inescapable and indispensable. A normal human child would not usually dare to cross such dangerous cliffs comprehending the fierce threat of jackals. Similarly all human beings are not aware of the vacuity of human existence on earth nor are they thirsty in search of noble values. This unusual
existential theme of search for the values and meaning of life has been artfully depicted through the solitary and bamboozled wandering of Raka who denies to remain merely as a member of the multitude normally done by all in the society and universe:

“Her (Raka’s) childhood has hardened her into a little core of solitary self-sufficiency and now, a young girl up here in the mountains her spirit is defiant enough to go chanting ‘I don’t care, I don’t care, I can’t care of anything” (Desai, 73).

In this regard, Krishnaswamy asserts “The conventional sweet smells and sounds of girlhood are ignored, she feels drawn by scenes of devastation and failure. The forest fires tingle her and she bursts from the shell of Carignano like a sharp, keen edged explosive to set fire to the mountainside” (Krishnaswamy, 261, 262).

Raka’s fondness for the forest fire requires elaborate analysis for it bears strong symbolic connotation. From the very first day of her arrival at the Carignano, Raka exhibits a strong liking for wild life, loneliness, risk-taking and above all the forests which the mountain provides in abundance. Raka’s strong fascination towards the forest fire exposes a new dimension with the forest fire related to her existentialist fixation. Soon after her arrival at Carignano, she for the first time encounters a fierce forest fire. Thus fire exerts a new hope and despair of which she was so far unaware and even failed to find a logical answer to the hereditary suffering she was undergoing since her birth. The fire seems to appear to her as the outburst of her inner conflict: weather to continue with her mediocre painful and aimless existence forced upon her by her heredity and environment or to revolt against their dictates and attempt to create her own values. She set the forest on fire towards the end of the novel as an elaborate expression of her free will and the exposition and manifestation of her capability to choose and act. The fire demonstrates her existential anguish to destroy and demolish the worn-out old, privileged and worthless values, customs and societal arrangements and to establish new and meaningful practices. This strong quandary of hers affirms and proclaims her consciousness and rummage around for values and rights of human beings in an absurd and ineffectual existence.

Ila Das, the third female protagonist of the novel quite different from Nanda Kaul and Raka, plays a minor role. However, Desai hold up another dimension of the existentialist philosophy through this minor character, Ila Das. “Her (Ila Das) life suggests another dimension of misery and meaningless existence” (Jena, 30). The readers come to know of her from the first time in the novel when she calls Nanda Kaul over the phone and notify her of the intention of coming to Kasauli to meet Raka. She speaks in a horrible voice and is quite ordinary in her looks and get-up. Desai uses a technique of a long interior monologue in Nanda Kaul’s mind to inform the reading of Ila’s past life. Through Nanda Kaul’s monologue the readers are informed that Ila Das is a childhood friend of Nanda. By profession, she served in the university as a lecturer with the aid of Mr. Kaul who was the Vice-Chancellor of the same university. But soon after the demise of Mr. Kaul she had been cast away from her position and pushed her to struggle and suffer to manage an honest and humble livelihood till managing her present position as a social welfare officer. She boldly endeavours as a part of her duty, to raise her voice against child marriage, a prestigious and uncontrolled practice among the tribal. Performing her duty sincerely and responsible puts her in an unpleasant and unenviable situation. But she undauntedly determines to fight her own battle lonely against the cherished practices of the uneducated and unscrupulous throng. Very much aware of the dire consequence of her act, she was always ready to encounter it boldly without any compromise of any sort. Her strong conviction helps her to succeed in stopping several unfortunate and unwise child marriages, the most remarkable one being the marriage of Preet Singh’s daughter of seven years old. Supporting herself on a scanty pay and enduring the intolerable loneliness and risk, she endeavours to declare a fierce war against the long-practiced customs of the society. For her strong stubbornness and uncompromising attitude, she pays a high price finally. She embraces her death after being raped by the brutal Preet Singh who was eagerly waiting for the revenge.

Ila Das, though a minor character in the novel, is an allegorical figure. Though alone and meager in both strength and livelihood, she courageously and manically faces all the challenges cast towards her by the brute majority. It is true that she meets a tragic ending but her revolt and firm resistance made her subsistence on earth a vital blow on the face of the hot-headed societal arrangement and practices. “Her real involvement in people’s welfare assumes tremendous symbolic significance” (Jena, 30). She epitomizes the existentialist concept of the struggle against the odds of life. “For the existentialist, man is never a just part of the cosmos but always stands to it in a relationship of
tension with possibilities of tragic conflicts” (Macquarrie, 17). She is a representative symbol of the contemplate and rational individuals who brave s to practice her free will and act according to her own desire and prefer rather than surrender herself, as women in society do, submissively to the vices and odds of life. The unscrupulous tribal society in general and the brute Preet Singh in particular establish the vices and malpractices of human beings and society opposing the desires and act of individuals. “One of the many ways of defining tragedy sees it as a clash between the aspiration of human freedom and creativity with a cosmic order that is stronger and defeats man” (Macquarrie, 189). No doubt Ila Das loses both her life and chastity fighting the strong and brute forces, her life has become meaningful in establishing a momentous framework for the society and its inhabitants.

An analysis of the use of symbolism and imagery in the novel will be helpful in understanding Desai’s existential interest. “She portrays a tragic world where no compromises are made, no epiphanies are exploded, to be totally destroyed, as the sensitive, the visionary suffers nothing but suffocation and oppression. So, the subject matter of the novel is a complete violence. The lives of the principal characters are ‘unloved’ and ‘unlived’ (Indira, 95, 96).

Keeping in mind the above concept, Anita Desai makes effective use of imagery and symbolism in her Fire on the Mountain. As usually, Desai makes abound use of prey-predator imagery in this novel also. Images of ugliness, loneliness, destruction and annihilation are frequently used in order to clarify the existential tone of the novel. Several images are employed in various ways to establish an environment of friendless introspection. Such an image is even evident soon after receiving a phone call from Ila Das when Nanda Kaul “turned her head this way and that is an escape. She watched 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” (Desai, 21). The same image is continued in the next page also: “still starting at the hen which was greedily gulping down bits of worm, she thought of her husband’s face and the way he would plait his fingers across his stomach” (Desai, 22). Through this image, Desai too artistically exposes the present inner turmoil of Nanda Kaul. This image also successfully establishes both her past torment induced by her cruel and adulterous husband and her existing consciousness about the cruel realities of life.

The image of the burnt and single pine tree standing up mostly meditated upon by Nanda Kaul bears a deep significance: “She was grey, tall and thin, she fancied she could merge with the pine tree and mistaken for one. To be a tree, no more and no less, was prepared to undertake” (Desai, 4). This image greatly adds to the existential theme of the novel. “Nanda’s sense of identification with the pine trees suggests her desire for absolute stillness and withdrawal from life” (Indira, 97). The image of the half burnt pine tree is recurrently employed in the novel on various occasions. The burnt tree and the lonely hills again and again suggests the uselessness of existence to Raka. “This hill with its one destroyed house and one unbuilt one, on the ridge under the fire-singed pines, appealed to Raka. There was something about it: illegitimate, uncompromising and lawless. The sense of devastation and failure drew her, inspired her” (Desai, 90). “Images of insects like lizards, birds like eagle and parrots, and “the thematic image of the ‘fire’ with its connotations of violence and urgency occur at regular intervals, warning the reader of the impending tragedy” (Indira, 96). She also opines: “It is the charming mosaic of imagery woven so skillfully by the novelist that makes the novel a work of art” (Indira, 97). Form is an excellent creation of Desai where she skillfully declares through her images a closeness of man and beast, earth and vegetable. The rich textures and greater depth of the novel are made possible only by the employment of imagery. The critic Indira (96) asserts, “this novel deprived of its imagery, would be an ugly skeleton, chilling the reader. The significant house imagery, the images of plants, colour, atmosphere and moon all contribute to the textual density and symbolic centrality of the novel.” The narrative technique, another important aspect of this novel, is its symbolism. Several symbols are employed to intensify the philosophic insinuation of the novel. Nanda Kaul’s present abode, Carignano, symbolically suggests the solitude and unproductiveness of human life in general and Nanda Kaul in particular. “What pleased and satisfied her so, here at Carignano, was its barrenness. This was the chief virtue of Kasauli, of course – its starkness occasionally an eagle swam through this clear undoubted mass of light and air” (Desai, 4).

The lonely and alienated house symbolically represents the lonely life of Nanda Kaul and Raka. The barrenness and starkness associated with its symbol an essential human condition-alienation which is the key note of all existential philosophy. Another aspect of
existential philosophy, namely quest, is repeatedly presented by the eagle symbol, along side the house symbol. Seeing the eagle flying high up in the sky, Nanda Kaul longs to fly aloft like the bird. “An eagle swept over its wings outspread, gliding on currents of air without once moving its great muscular wings which remained in repose, in control, she (Nanda Kalu) had wished, it occurred to her, to imitate the eagle-gliding, with eyes closed” (Desai, 19). These strong desires for flying aloft above the reach of deterministic boundary are the hallmark of Raka’s character. While describing Raka’s walk to the monkey point, Desai employs the eagle symbol to put an emphasis on the above-mentioned features. “She was higher than the eagles, higher than Kasauli and Sanwar and all other hills” (Desai, 61). Thus Nanda Kaul’s yearning and Raka’s effort amalgamate in the eagle symbol, which signify their existential anguish and search for values.

The forest-fire episode has a deep symbolic implication. Like the “The Fire Sermon” in T. S. Eliot’s The Waste Land, The fire in Fire on the Mountain “is a destroyer. It is also a purifier” (Brown, 557). Anita Desai provides Raka’s character with allegorical proposition by using the universal fire symbol. Raka, the invalid and restless girl who is the product of a broken family, turn into the symbol of the existential perception of the individual who finds herself in this intimidating and useless world. To survive, she feels a compulsion to originate or to discover values and importance for her survival. In this connection it can be observed that the symbolic insinuation of the forest fire is reinforced by the title of the novel, Fire on the Mountain. The title is also exceedingly important from its thematic point of view. The mountain symbolizes Nanda Kaul and the fire is symbolic of Raka’s untamed temperament. “Nanda Kaul is the ‘rocky belt’, dry, hardened by time and age. Raka is silent, swift and threatening like forest fire … The novel thus may be noted as a story of inabilities of human beings to ignore the world, to place oneself in another position” (Choudary 79).

The philosophical implication of the novel is further reinforced by the frequent use of allusions from various books and poems. Like her other novels, Desai employs poetry from Hopkins in Fire on the Mountain:

I have desired to go
Where springs not fail
To fields where files no sharp and sided hail
And a few lilies below
And I have asked to be

Where no storms come,
Where the green swell is in the havens dumb,
And out of the swing to the sea. (Desai, 87).

The poem is quoted by Nanda Kaul exposing her inner feelings to be away from the monotony of life, to a Utopia beyond the reach of the maddening crowds. The theme of alienation which is the central theme of the novel is uplifted by the use of this poignant stanza from Hopkins’s poem by Anita Desai. The same theme of alienation is further enforced by the use of an allusion to a passage from The Pillow book of Sei Shonagon which starts with a title ‘When a Women Lives Alone’ and through the image of an abandoned house “with a poignantly desolate look” (Desai, 27). This image signifies the solitary and depressing life of Nanda Kaul herself. Desai again uses another allusion to The Travels of Marco Polo (Desai, 87) when Nanda Kaul is in the company of Raka. Through the reference to this book the novelist wants to remind her readers of the Cape of Good Hope. This reference is another addition to the symbolism of the novel. Nanda Kaul’s adventure can likewise be equated with the adventure of Marco Polo who carries out the journey in search of something new and promising.

Thus, these three characters, Nanda Kaul, Raka and Ila Das, are the representative samples of women in isolation. Through these three characters, Anita Desai, an ardent writer and believer of existential inclinations, scrutinizes three significant features of this school of thought. The three major traits of existentialism are alienation, search and conflict. Desai implanted these three vital aspects of existentialism in the character of her three female protagonists and existential anguish. Raka represents the individual’s quest for meaning in an otherwise useless life. Ila Das is a study for the eternal conflicts enacted in the human drama between the individuals and the forces of determinism. One common factor apparent in all these three female characters is that they are women who live in seclusion both out of choice and compulsion. The novelist has very tactfully studied the quandary of females in isolated wilder setting by placing her three female protagonists in Kasauli, a place surrounded by hills and villages, much remote from civilization. Desai has intentionally done it to expose the predicament and psychology of women in isolation. In this connection Prasad (140) asserts, “Essentially, Desai is a novelist of existential concerns, chiefly considering what F. H. Heinemann described as the enduring human condition. In her novel, she has ably dwelt upon such existentialist themes as maladjustment, alienation, absurdity of human existence, quest for the ultimate
meaning in life, decision, detachment, isolation and time as the fourth dimension, focusing on how women in the contemporary urban milieu are bravely struggling against or helplessly submitting to the relentless forces of absurd life.”

Conclusion: To sum up, Fire on the Mountain summons likeness with Shakespeare’s King Lear. In his great tragedy, to dramatize the suffering of a deceived father, Shakespeare eliminates Lear from the stronghold, his palace, and situates him in the windswept moor - an intimidating situation- to insinuate that the predicament of Lear is indistinguishable with the anguish of every wronged father. Shakespeare makes use of animal imagery to reveal the decayed and crooked world of the dramatis personae of King Lear. Images of gruesome and malevolent animals like jackals and wolves are frequently used constructing an animal imagery that strengthens the thematic interest of the play, explicitly the catastrophe of human life, embodied in the life of Lear, a sufferer of indifference in old age. By making use of the images of insects and animals like mosquitoes, lizard and jackals, Desai suggests how her female protagonists loathe the irrationality of their existence. They either retire into a shell like Nanda Kaul or like Raka, wish for something novel or is created by the surroundings as in the case of Ila Das. Similarly, by making Kasauli the setting of her novel, Desai has endowed it with a wider allurement where the precincts of region, religion and time pause to exist. This novel includes the essence of the novelist’s existential world-view in which all the three characters are nothing but the materialization of her amended ego that manifests her outlook on life. It may not be an overstatement to her outlook on life. It may not be an overstatement to say that Fire on the Mountain warrants a place in the galaxy of existential work of art like Kafka Trial, Camus’ The Plague and Sartre’s Nausea.

References


***
Anita Desai has been honored with many literary awards including The Guardian Award for Children’s Fiction, for the novel The Village by the Sea and the 1978 National Academy of Letters Award for her novel Fire on the Mountain. Anita Desai is a Fellow of many prominent literary organizations such as The Royal Society of Literature, London and the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Her daughter Kiran Desai has won the 2006 Man Booker Prize for her novel the “Inheritance of Loss”. Fire on the Mountain is a 1977 novel by Anita Desai, an Indian writer. Desai has been recognized three times on the Booker Prize short list and is a British Guardian Prize winner. Fire on the Mountain received a Sahitya Akademi Award. The book focuses on an elderly widow’s isolation and loneliness, as it tells the story of Nanda Kaul who lives in Kasauli and leads a solitary existence. Publishers Weekly said of Anita Desai, “what’s so refreshing about Anita Desai is that she’s a modern literary writer with a straightforward approach to her work.”