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EXPLORING SUBALTERNITY IN *VOICES IN THE CITY AND FIRE ON THE MOUNTAIN* BY ANITA DESAI

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Abstract:

Anita Desai is well-known Indian novelist and a short story writer. Peculiarity of her writing is use of woman protagonist as a subject. Being an Indian woman, she often depicted the Indian culture and its woman as a subaltern female who is lean towards to face betrayal, suppression, and predicament, inferior position than the male in the house or in the society. The all protagonists are living the life under the subaltern themes. As these characters portrayed to be oppressed, exploited, economically dependent on male. Subaltern means the lower social classes and the other social groups displaced to margins of the society. Subaltern is referring to those groups in the society who are subject to hegemony of the ruling society. Anita Desai is a distinctive writer who shows relevance with postcolonial studies especially those dealing with colonized nation. The woman protagonist of *Voices in The City and Fire on The Mountain*, Monisha and Nanda respectively are to be marginalised, suppressed, dependent subaltern woman. Present paper deals with the exploration of Subalternity in novels *Voices in The City and Fire on The Mountain*. Annoyance of the protagonist due to patriarchal society which is main reason of depiction of agony.

Keywords: Peculiarity, Subaltern, Predicament, Suppression, Marginalised, etc.

Introduction:

Anita Desai unquestionably holds a prominent position among the Contemporary writers of Indo-Anglican fiction. She is a bold and experimental Novelist with a new sense and vibrant richness. Her style of writing makes reader to sink inside the incidents or situation described. Much courtesy is given to the emotional predicament of her protagonists who live in a muddled society. She delves deep to find out the factors responsible for such a despair. Winner



of the Sahitya Academy Award, Desai has authored as many as sixteen works of fiction. She began her writing at the age of seven in English language. She has written novels, stories, children's books and articles. She uses memories of past that is reminiscence as a narrative technique. Her distinct style of writing, original characters, use of language, realistic theme, and narrative technique has made her writing so endearing which earned many words, recognitions and awards for her work. Her contribution to the literary world is without any doubt is great. Her works gives a pen portrait of woman's inferior or marginalised position in the society. She has wisely presented *otherness* faced by woman protagonist in her novels.

Subalternity:

The word 'Subaltern' denotes a person holding a subordinate or an inferior position. 'Subaltern Studies' gained momentum in the last part of the 20th century. Antonio Gramsci, (1891-1937) an Italian Marxist, thinker adopted the term 'Subaltern' in a sense of 'inferior rank', to refer to those working class people in Soviet Union, who were subjected to the supremacy of the ruling class. The working class includes peasants and workers who were denied of hegemonic power. The term 'Subaltern' has been adopted by a team of historians who are known as the 'Subaltern Studies Group' who aimed at promoting a discussion on Subaltern themes. They used the term 'Subaltern' to refer the prevailing subordination in terms of class, gender, race in the South Asian Society. The group consisted of such members as Ranjith Guha, Dipesh Chakrabarty and Gyanendra Pandey etc. The concept of 'Subaltern' gained more importance with Gayatri Spivak's essay "Can the Subaltern speak?" (1985). In this essay, Gayatri Spivak an Indian literary critic, a practical Marxist feminist, focuses on some of the problems of the Third World Women. Her opinion is that if in the situation of colonial production; the Subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the Subaltern as a female is even more deeply in shadow. To Spivak, Subaltern women are subjected to oppression more than Subaltern men; they do not have proper representation and are not able to voice their opinion. Spivak's writings reflect the background of women's struggle and oppression in the third world countries. These problems have never been mentioned nor discussed in the third world countries. Spivak expresses with anguish that female subalterns have become ghosts in society. This paper will focus light on the depiction of subalternity in *Voices in The City* and *Fire on The Mountain*, by Anita Desai.

Subalternity in *Voices in The City* and *Fire on The Mountain* by Anita Desai:

Voices in The City is second novel of Anita Desai published in 1965. Through the title reader realises that the voices inside the novel must be suffered or suppressed due to hegemonic influence present in the surroundings. Anita Desai's *Voices in the City* is a very emotional novel which has a perfect example of subaltern female who is Monisha. Monisha is oldest daughter among the four siblings about whom the novel is. She gets married with Jiban who belongs to orthodox family dominated by Patriarchy. Where she made to touch feet of her family members everyday which was a humiliating thing for Monisha. A remarkable existential novel that undoubtedly exemplifies what Anita Desai describes about subaltern woman. Monisha feels imprisoned in Jiban's house because even for Jiban, it is difficult to understand Monisha's plight because he has seen women spending their lives like birds in the cages, waiting for death and dying misunderstood, always behind bars, those terrifying black



bars that shut us in, in the old house, in the old city". Monisha thinks about the Bengali women who work for centuries inside the "barred windows". She feels like a trapped bird and wonders how can she "live, eat, work, sing bleeding through life"? Whenever Monisha wants to unshackle herself from the house of her husband, she feels the bars of the window of her room imprisoning her. Quite often she cries out her wish: "I long to thrust my head out of the window - and cannot, the bars are closely set and scream: 'Stop!'" These bars signify her as shackles which bound her only for traditional purpose not for love or emotion. Monisha was childless and was again and again insulted by family members with this weakness of no bearing child. Even she was accused as a thief on the house which made her to draw her in the waves of sorrow. She was profound learner as she was reader of Kafka and Camus. But literacy was unproductive because she was always judged through the physical weakness; no one was there to glance inside her mind to understand her, to take her out of grief of barrenness, not even her better half. Life seems to her "waste" for it is enclosed in a "locked container". In her struggle for liberation from a trap situation, death seems to be the only way out. Monisha found solution to escape from predicament is suicide, which made her free from all shackles. This novel explains the suppressed voice which is major theme of the novel portraying subalternity.

Fire on the Mountain (1977) novel by Anita Desai that deals with the subjects of solitude, existentialism, and oppression of females in patriarchal Indian society. Which shows the treatment of subaltern female in the novel. The book tells the story of Nanda Kaul, a widowed, reclusive woman who has to unwillingly take in her great-grandchild, Raka, a sickly girl from a broken marriage. Desai's text won the Sahitya Academy Award and the Winifred Holtby Memorial Prize in 1978. Desai considers this her most satisfying work, saying, "the work in which I have come closest, to what I set to do, and I don't think I very often do, is *Fire on the Mountain*. The agitation of emotional reality by Anita Desai is clearly reflected in one of her masterpiece *Fire on the Mountain*. The novel mainly deals with the solitude and isolation as well as the resultant anguish and agony in the empty life of an old widow. The novel narrates the story of Nanda Kaul who live in Carignano, a desolate and haunted house in Kasauli, away from the world "of bags and letters, messages and demands, she had wanted to be left to the pines and cicadas alone else came or happened would be an unwelcomed intrusion and distraction". Nanda Kaul's happy isolation is endangered by the irritating letter from Asha, letter was announcing about arrival of grand-daughter of Asha and Nanda Kaul's great grand-daughter. The unexpected arrival of Raka comes in the way of the desire to live like a solitary, far from the society. She does not want to involve herself in any responsibilities anymore, for all she wants is to be alone, to have Carignano to herself, stillness and calm are all that she wishes to entertain. But Asha's letter has made her apprehensive and she ponders painfully: "Now, to bow again, to let that noose sleep once more round her neck that she had thought was freed fully, finally," now to converse again when it was silence, she wished. Nanda Kaul reclusive and intelligent woman, widow of a university vice-chancellor who always treated her as an object. She was always weary of her responsibilities and is thrilled to live a quiet life in Kasauli now that she does not have to raise children or run a household. Nanda Kaul is described as proud and stern, and she does not like to exhibit her feelings. When she learns, Raka is coming to her, she is initially extremely bothered, but she



comes to respect and even cherish the child, especially as Raka seems so much like her. Raka keeps her at arms' length, though, causing Nanda Kaul no end of frustration. Nanda Kaul is Ila Das's closest friend, but the relationship is not entirely reciprocal, and Nanda Kaul does not invite Ila Das to stay with her even though Ila Das suffers from poverty and threats of danger. At the end of the novel, Nanda Kaul feels crushed by the weight of the lies she's told herself and others which were due to insecurity of losing her alienation. The three main characters of the novel are victims of patriarchy in different ways. Nanda Kaul has spent her life in a loveless but not childless life. Her husband loved a different woman, but that didn't stop him from expecting Nanda Kaul to bear and raise children and run his household. Raka regularly witnessed the abuse of her mother by her father and was thus traumatized in her childhood. Ila was left poverty-stricken after her brothers squandered all her family money. She is later raped and killed after she protests a child marriage. All these women are trying to find a way to live life on their own terms in a patriarchal society. But these all are unable to do so, as they are tangled with the fetters of patriarchy, which make them to be a puppet to dance accordingly. Here the image of suppressed subaltern woman can be detected in this novel.

Conclusion:

For centuries, women in the traditional social order and system have always been considered subservient to men. In patriarchal Bourgeois society, the matriarchal community has been dominating the woman always. To conclude, it can be said that the theme of both the novels is suppression, exploitation, and marginalization which are major themes studied under Subaltern studies. This disharmony and discord in the life is confined to the patriarchal structure and at times to the mal-adjusted or ill adjusted self. Alienation and exploitation love drives Monisha to the jaws of death and violence, while Nanda suffers from the lifelong betrayal of her husband and the lies; she makes to pretend herself happy. They both represent the Indian personality structure which is very complex and multilayered. These protagonists are portrayed to be the representatives of repressed female community. All characters from Anita Desai's novels are on interior journey. They struggle to find out new patterns of life or new orders of life. They have strong creative urge and them as try to rediscover a creative possibility within them. They attempt for the self-assertion. They get swayed by the problems of loneliness, pessimism.

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