

## **Gynocentrism in Anita Desai's *Fire on the mountain* and Margaret**

### **Laurence's *The Stone Angel***

Dr. Salbina M. Gladis  
Teaching Fellow in English  
University College of Engineering  
Konam, Nagercoil.  
Phone: 8825610243

#### **Abstract**

**Gynocentrism** or in other words, women-centeredness, is a theory expounded by Simone de Beauvoir. It is a branch of feminist theory concerning exclusively with women. *Fire on the Mountain* (1977) deals with the alienated life of an aged widow of a Vice-Chancellor called Nanda Kaul. *The Stone Angel* (1964) spins around the pride of the ninety-year-old woman, Hagar Shipley. The crux of this study shows how Anita Desai and Margaret Laurence through their lead women characters in *Fire on the Mountain* and *The Stone Angel* present a **paradigm shift** in their attitude and behavior on the wake of self-realization. They reveal a staunch self-assertion dissimulating their **feminine consciousness** and emerge as dignified women from the curbing phallogocentric clutches. The contemporary feminist movements have influenced Anita Desai and Margaret Laurence. Women should no longer allow such a system of **male domination**. They must struggle against those institutions, social relations and ideas that keep them powerless, and subservient to men. They can indulge in collective action, and through **interpersonal relationship** realize their self-worth and emerge as liberated women. This indeed is the message of Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* and Margaret Laurence's *The Stone Angel*.

**Key words:** Gynocentrism, paradigm shift, feminine consciousness, male domination, interpersonal relationship.

Gynocentrism or in other words, women-centeredness, is a branch of feminist theory concerning exclusively with women. It deals with how power imbalances due to gender difference in a given culture cause havoc in the lives of the women. It spins around women's personal, historical, sexual and non-political position and tries to assert women's individualism.

The crux of this study shows how Anita Desai and Margaret Laurence through their lead women characters in *Fire on the Mountain* (1977) and *The Stone Angel* (1964) present a paradigm shift in their attitude and behavior on the wake of self-realization. They reveal a staunch self-assertion dissimulating their feminine consciousness and emerge as dignified women from the curbing phallocentric clutches.

*Fire on the mountain* deals with the alienated life of an aged widow of a Vice-Chancellor called Nanda Kaul. *The Stone Angel* spins around the pride of the widowed ninety-years-old woman, Hagar Shipley. Strikingly Nanda and Hager are women stranded by marital discord. They become victims in the institution of marriage in some form or the other. Regarding marriage, Simone de Beauvoir has commented, "It has been said that marriage diminishes Man, which is one often true; but almost always it annihilates Woman [...] the tragedy of marriage is not that it fails to assure woman the promised happiness[...] but that it mutilates her; it dooms her to repetition and routine " (496). Nanda has an estranged relationship with her husband because he does not love her as a wife but treats her as some decorative yet useful mechanical appliance needed for the efficient running of his household. His lifelong affair with Miss. Davis, the Mathematics instructor whom he could not marry because she was a Christian frustrated Nanda very much, yet she played the perfect hostess. Her husband wants her only to be a toy-wife, "Mr.Kaul had wanted her always in silk, at the head of the long rosewood table in the dinning-room, entertaining his guests"(Fire, 18).

Unlike Nanda, Hagar is the second wife of her husband, an older man than she is. She is the greater loser than Nanda. Her psychic torments are more poignant than Nanda's. She loses her social status of the so-called pharaoh's daughter because of marrying Bram much to the disgust of her father and the sane advice given to her. Bram's bad manners and coarse language belittles a cultured girl like Hager. Hager and Bram are from different background, so they have different concept of life. "Twenty four years, in all, were scoured away like sand banks under the spate of our wrangle and bicker." (*Stone, 102*). She lived in Bram's house more as a servant than as a wife, cleaning stores and floors, lamp-chimneys and pans – and of course children" (*Stone, 112*). Betty Friedan a feminist comments on the "relentless cage of routine" in which many a housewife is trapped. She observes:

She is trapped simply by the enormous demands of her role as modern housewife: wife, mistress, mother, nurse, consumer, cook, and chauffeur, expert on the interior decoration, child care, appliance, repair, furniture finishing, nutrition and education. Her day is fragmented as she rushes from dishwasher to washing machine, to telephone to drive the station wagon to supermarket, and [...] (30).

Hager has to relegate herself to the position of a mere egg seller to make both ends meet but her husband squanders the money she earns on drinking. Thus their marriage drains them off mentally and physically.

As the heroines belong to different cultural backgrounds, their response and reaction to their situation vary typifying their culture to which they belong. Nanda's passivity gives account of her culture that beckons women to put up with all odds ; whereas Hagar's reactions features the breaking away culture as is seen in her rebellions right from her younger days: she even

leaves her husband and goes to work for Mr.Otley. Everything is wrong in Nanda's household but she moulds herself up to all disharmonies in the right stride. Though she is disillusioned at the hands of her Vice-Chancellor husband, she puts up a show of a successful marriage. Fighting against her emotional trauma, she does nothing but compromises with the realities of life and conceals her helplessness. Nanda is like the "kitten mat" in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*:

[...] in spite of all the roses and kisses and restaurant dinners man showered on a woman before he married her, what he secretly wanted when the wedding service ended was for her to flatten out underneath his feet like Mrs. Willard's kitchen mat.(88-89)

Like the kitchen mat, though Nanda is trampled upon, she continues to be his wife though she dislikes every moment of it. She may outwardly appear passive, but a storm rages within. She is vibrant with anger and disappointment, but holds silence as the best communication and passively expresses her resentment by withdrawing into a sequestered life after her husband's death. She follows a policy of non interference and becomes indifferent towards her traumatic life. Nevertheless, Hager on the contrary has a rebellious nature. She is very stubborn in her convictions. She tries to go for dance that infuriates her father. She struggles to live a decent life with her husband and children. A time comes when he becomes unbearable and she decides to lead an independent existence. Hence, either passively or actively they rebel against the hardships, circumstances have laid on them. Though the emotional experiences of both these women are the same, they take two different manifestations, perhaps depending on their cultural and social background.

For most of their lives Nanda and Hager have lived a hybrid existence. Nanda's hybridity originates from her inner conflict against the domination of patriarchal culture. When Nanda performs the roles of wife and mother, she does it with a sense of duty to satisfy her husband and children but she never enjoys being the person she is. Her complete lack of interest in a home and family shows her longing for independence. The semblance of a dutiful wife and patient parent is to create an image, which the patriarchal Indian society demands from a married woman. Like Nanda, Hager also has a hybrid nature. She expresses herself as a different person from what she actually is. She has never spoken her heart's truth. Hager's 'doubleness' is visible in her plurality of voices. There is a wide difference between her public and private, conscious and unconscious, inner and outer voices. Often she talks what she does not intend to talk. Her public voice is harsh, irascible, intemperate, and remorseless. For example when quarrelling over the threatened confinement to a nursing home, she says "I'm not worked up a bit" and then asks herself, "Is it my voice, raucous and deep ,shouting ... oh, but that was not what I mean to say at all. How it is my mouth speaks by itself...?" (*Stone* 285). When she recollects the death of her son John that was due to her angry response to him, she thinks, "What made me to say it? As soon as I had spoken, I regretted it. But I couldn't humble myself to take back my words" (*Stone* 213).

It is remarkable that both the heroine die at the end after self realization dawns on them. Nanda dies of shock and Hager dies a natural death peacefully. Their lives have been one long struggle to acquire a degree of independence, integration and self-awareness. The novelists have portrayed their protagonists not as pitiful woman needing sympathy, but as dignified, strange and unpredictable individuals with a distinctive identity of their own. The transformation of the heroines exhibited towards the end in their attitude and behavior seen in their willful

acceptance of their fellow human beings, shows their emergence as dignified individuals. The moment of realization brings self-discovery that enables them to reconcile with the past. Self-awareness comes only at the end of their lives.

The contemporary feminist movements have influenced Anita Desai and Margaret Laurence. Through their feminist literature, they have highlighted gynocentric ideologies and sought ways to liberate women from the confining roles defined to them by the society. They share common emotions, and their problems are universal. Such awareness will help women express their grievances and find solutions. They can indulge in collective action, and through interpersonal relationship realize their self worth and emerge as liberated women. This indeed is the message of Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* and Margaret Laurence's *The Stone Angel*.

### **Works Cited**

#### **Primary Sources**

Desai, Anita. *Fire on the Mountain*. London: Heinemann, 1977.

Laurence, Margaret. *The Stone Angel*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1964.

#### **Secondary Sources**

De Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. Trans. H.M Parshley. New York: Vintage: 1989.

Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. New York: W.M Norton & Company, 1963.

Plath, Sylvia. *The Bell Jar*. London: Heinemann, 1963.