CHAPTER – 4

An insight into the identity crisis and tragic self-alienation of Nanda and Raka

(Fire On The Mountain 1977)
CHAPTER 4

Nanda Kaul

Anita Desai’s fifth novel Fire on the Mountain (1977) is a winner of both the Sahitya Akademy Award and the Royal Society Award. In this novel too, marital discord, loneliness, withdrawal and alienation are projected, substantiating the novelist’s conviction that all human relationships are inadequate and that loneliness is an inescapable human predicament. This malady affects the child, the young and the old.

In this novel, the two old ladies Nanda Kaul and Ila Das and the child Raka suffer from isolation and alienation in varying degrees for different reasons. But here, instead of the feverish and frenzied outpourings witnessed in the previous novels, there is a quite austerity and coldness in the principal characters, Nanda and Raka. Their attitude and temperament call for a controlled and mature treatment of the theme.

We meet Nanda Kaul at her sprawling house “Carignano“ where she has lived her full life span. Hers has been an existence choked with activities - the multiple responsibilities of running a household, looking after a brood of children, (how many? she has lost count of them), and maintaining the social status of her Vice Chancellor husband. After such a hectic life, with all the mundane responsibilities discharged, a wish for a quiet spell of aloneness and contemplation is understandable.

Nanda Kaul does not look for peace in Kasauli, she likes the emptiness of Carignano, lives like “a recluse“ and enjoys the “starkness“ of the town.
She has been conceived of as “a charred tree trunk in the forest, a broken pillar of marble in the desert, a lizard on a stone wall” (23). With only one difference, viz; she, unlike them, is capable of irritation and annoyance.

In this “lonely house” (16) she has been livings all these years all alone: “It was the place, and the time of life, that she had wanted and prepared for all her life .... and at last she had it. She wanted no one and nothing else. Whatever else came, or happened here, would be an unwelcome intrusion and distraction.” (3)

After her frantically busy life at the Vice-Chancellor’s house, here “she had held herself religiously aloof, jealous of this privacy acheived only at the very end of her life.” (35-36). After having played out her innings, now she lives like “a recluse out of vengeance for a long life of duties and obligation,” wishing her privacy to be left intact. Even the postman’s sight irritate her,” she asked to be left to the pines and cicadas alone .... to be a tree, no more and no less, was all she was prepared to undertake.” (4). Nanda’s sense of identification with the pine trees suggests her desire for absolute stillness and withdrawl from life. There may even be an unconciousness death-wish in desiring to become a tree. R.S. Sharma points out that “her withdrawal stands for emotional staticity, a kind of psychic frigidity that refuses to take note of any movement around.”

The house, Carignano, seems to Nanda’s Kaul so exactly right for her. What please and satisfies her at Carignano is its barrenness, its starkness. This clear unobstructed mass of light and air defines her freedom. Nanda Kaul’s desire for solitude, her absorption with herself in Carignano reflect on her past years which were not “bare and shining as the
plains below, but like the gorge, cluttered, chocked and blackened with the heads of children and grand children, servants and guests, all restlessly surging, clamouring about her.” (17).

The wife of Vice Chancellor in the small university town in Punjab, she had managed the household affairs for her husband with great skill, like an empress, or so the cringing people around her said. But that house was never hers, it shared none of her characteristics, with all its “dark furniture, all rosewood.” Her husband, Mr. Kaul, emerges as another of those efficient, successful, indifferent men. We do not even hear his name. The amount Nanda Kaul, we are told, has jettisoned from her life might have taken another’s breath away. Her children are distinct too: they do not relate to her. Tara’s letter indicates her motives for writing - Raka must be provided for, and Nanda Kaul has been an excellent provider in the past. She is caught in her own actions in the past, but now unable to accept it or transcend it. “Now it converse again whom it was silence she wished, to question and follow up and make sure of another’s life and comfort and order, to involve oneself, to involve another.” (19). All these activites need enterprise and the giving of oneself, it seemed hard on her now to re-enter such a course. She had resigned from the business of living, of relating. Tired of all these relationships “ Nanda Kaul lay on her bed, absolutely still ... She would imitate death, like a lizard.” (23). The hopelessness of her wish is hinted in the fact that the parrots dare to arouse her. Nanda Kaul who instinctively held forth compassion for others needed to make a determined effort not to respond, to retain herself to herself. This was an art she had practised for years, but it was finally mastered at Carignano: “ the care of others was a habit Nanda Kaul had mislaid. It had been a religious calling she had belived in till she found it fake. It had been a vocation that one day went dull and drought-struck
as though its life-sparing had dried up."(30). On her arrival at Carignano, she had drifted about the garden without ascertaining herself, her will. It is perfectly in place that she should be reading from The Pillow book of Sei Shonagon - "A Woman Lives Alone."

The novel incorporates bizarre psychology. In her frustration Nanda frantically searches for detachment. Life has not honoured her claims. As her original self-effacing solution has not worked through her life, she substitutes it with the strategy of resignation. So much is made of the protagonist's rebelliously detached attitude and her desire to live in complete isolation that we tend to regard Nanda Kaul a formidable old woman who has snapped all ties and discarded everyone.

Fire on the Mountain is "Cry, the Peacock" is reverse and also brings out the problems of marital disharmony as a basic ingredient for disintegrating family life. Here Maya's place is taken by granite - hard coldly determined widow Nand Kaul who rejoices in her seclusion and loveless, attachmentless life. It is as if Maya's pleading for warmth, for involvement have been compelled to boomerang into a black thunder cloud of furious hate and complete rejection in Nanda, but here, of course, the maladjustment is not basically psychological as in Maya's case, there is a strong reason, earth and clear enough and that is the life long faithlessness of Mr. Kaul to his wife, Nanda. This marriage, again, is based solely on physical lust and circumstantial convinience for the husband who lives his double life without any commitment to either his spouse or his mistress. Nanda becomes the victim of forced motherhood producing umpteen number of unloved, unwanted children. She always arranges the dinner table as a hard working hostess, out wardly everything seems to be smooth; but inwardly Nanda Kaul burns with a fire of
frustration. On the contrary Mr. Kaul keeps his mistress Miss Davidson on the teaching staff, invites her for Badminton parties, goes to drop her back at night and comes back stealthily to his separate bedroom. Nanda keeps the frozen smile on her face, looks after the family, his children, his house, shutting the doors, whisking away flies and mosquitoes, supervising cooks and servants, managing the outward world with supreme confidence and showmanship.

She is, however, waiting, always waiting with a singular, burning soul destroying hatred for her husband to cease living for the blessed widow hood, the exquisite solitude without man and children around. What Maya's neurosis brought out as a catastrophe in her action of elimination, is further developed as a wayout by the older women's exhausted, deeply - distrusting brain that intensely desires an avenue of escape. The death of her husband is the death of her Jailor, it brings for her the long - awaited freedom from the condemned cell of spiritual annihilation. It is hard to believe that Nanda is basically a compliant character for whom love is the most desired sentiment, above every thing else. What ever little we learn of her life with her Vice - Chancellor husband is sufficient to analyse her fundamental demands. Her flash backs on her over-busy days reveal that Nanda strikes a "bargain with fate". As a compliant individual, valuing love as the most essential part of life she is sure that if she is good and dutiful, others will treat her with love. But the realities of life give her a raw deal. Her husband's infidelity, his utter disgard, the callous attitude of her children deal her blows. The reality of life is : She is not the queen of his home, just an unloved woman, mother of his children, a social symbol of his respectability. Under these circumstances the choice for Nanda in limited - to fight it or bear it mutely. She chooses the seond alternative. Also to save her from self berating, she
quickly builds around her a citadel of self-glorifying virtues. Quietly she engages herself in the discharge of her family duties. Nanda does not rave or rant as Maya does in, *Cry, the Peacock*. Although both these protagonists are compliant they differ in their sub-types. Maya is a morbidly dependent woman. Her strategy demands unquestioned love from others. Anything less than her, expectations in love, whether real or imaginary is retaliated with vindictiveness. Nanda Kaul, on the contrary is a self-effacing type. She did everything that was asked of her, never failed in any of her duties, herself control is tremendous considering the fact that she had no emotional security. But she never complains and thinks it beneath her dignity to question her husband knowing very well that he would not leave Miss David. Her plight is perhaps more painful and traumatic than that of Maya and Monisha - but she retains her dignity and self control. What is more important is that she sees no solution in the violent death like that of Maya or Monisha. Although there are times when she wishes ardently for death to relieve her, there’s no hint what so ever of ever having entertained the idea of committing suicide.

Both Maya in *Cry, the Peacock* and Monisha in *Voices in the City* see no other alternative to their rejected existence. The lack of love and understanding on the part of their husband makes them suffer from an acute sense of insecurity. The lack of self control and her extreme sensitiveness makes Maya push Gautama to his death she fails to accept the indifference of Gautama, and since there was no love, death and insanity take their place in her life. Monisha’s life, on the contrary, was shared by the entire family. She was ruled by the mother-in-law, aunts, uncles and of course Jivan. Jivan himself was content to act superior and like the other husbands in Anita Desai’s novels has no time for his wife. Monisha, a highly intellectual and well-read protagonist, is crushed unto being a hand maid
of the family, with absolutely no say in any matter, whether trivial or important. Her meaningless life prompts her to end her existence.

From this perspective, there are two major differences in the life of Nanda Kaul. She has children whereas both Maya and Monisha don't. Moreover her husband has a life long affair with Miss David, whereas again neither Jivan nor Gautama carry on with any other women. Maya, Monisha, Sita and Nanda Kaul are all victims of uncaring, loveless husbands.

Nanda is an epitome of devotion, duty and sacrifice. Her life pattern amply illustrate it attending to guests, looking after "so many children" serving her husband efficiently:

Too many trays of tea would have to be
made and carried to her husband's study,
to her mother-in-law; bedroom, to the verandah
that was the gathering place for all, at all times
of the day. Too many meals, too many dishes on
the table, too much to wash up after (29).

She is ever engaged in her duties disavowing her pride. Hardly ever resentful, she is at the most vexed when guests pour in leaving no privacy. This is the portrait of a silent sufferer, a martyr, a "subdued victimized self". Nanda is not only helpless in the face of her circumstances but also rendered weak and unassuming by herself effacing drives. Her husband is too immersed in his affairs with Miss David to notice the self sacrificing devotion of his wife. The novelist portrays her defencelessness, in the imagery of lapwing. Nanda thinks of the bird as "nervous and agitated." It is
a “hunted, fearful bird, distracted and disturbing.” (26). Symbolically, she is like the bird, disturbed, agitated unable to fight and defend herself. Consciously she thinks of herself as a “night cat” prowling in the dark, but unconsicously forces tell her that she is like the bird flying unevenly “Through the funeral moonlight” This image flashes across her mind when her husband leaves her alone to carry on his love-affair. To relieve the tension of the situation, she considers her aloneness as “a moment of private triumph, cold and Proud.” As R.S. Sharma points out, these pervasive non human sounds keep disturbing Nanda’s quest for absolute stillness. Although we know that the constant interaction between the protagonist’s psyche and the external world is a recurrent feature in Mrs. Desai’s fiction, her artistry lies in the element of surprise in every instance, the element of surprise in every instance, the adequacy of the effect and the immediacy of appeal.

Nanda Kaul had no life of her own. All her energies were spent on the children and in keeping the house but it is wrong to assume that she existed because of her children. Motherhood is never a joyful, fulfilling experience to her and so the right of the nestlings of hoopoes does not fill her with delight. “Their screams were shrill and could madden” (4) The same reaction is seen in her relationship with her own children. As a critic says, “the debunking of the myth of motherhood runs as a continuous thread in Anita Desai’s novels (99) No other Indian English with portrays the character of a mother in such sickly, offensive images as Mrs. desai does. To Nanda, being a mother seems to be a troublesome responsibility that has to be fulfilled somehow and its ends up in smothering her innerself, As a result of this long stint, Nanda has become a machine, has lost her human capability to relate to others, she feels no love for anyone. She begins to dread the idea of looking after a convalescent child again as it means she has to suffer
from the stranglehold of family ties. Her misery as implicit in the last sentence she utters before her death. "And her children - the children were alien to her nature. She neither understood nor loved them. She did not live here alone by choice - she lived here alone because that was what she was forced to do, reduced to doing." (145).

Obviously the children do not care for her. She is a forsaken woman. The novel does not expound the behaviour of her other children but Asha's case suggests that Nanda has failed in her human relations, and has generated compulsive drives. Asha is her least loved daughter, as Nanda recollects. She has been "the most exasperations of her daughter," (14), who compensates for the lack of love in her life by dedicating her entire lifetime to beautifying herself. Later, when she is a mother, she neglects Tara, her daughter, who grows up a weakling. Tara is ill treated incapable of fending for herself. Tara's daughter, Raka pays for the sins of her parents - father's brutality, mother's nervous breakdown. The graph is clear: Nanda's compulsive drives and her inability to pattern her life, affect three generations.

All her life Nanda lives in pretences. They are, by far, too many - she is the mistress of a happy family; she is always in hubbub of a busy social whirl; she is the queen of the Vice Chancellor's house. These pretexts continue and stretch into her old age. She lives in a make-believe world to compensate for the cruel reality.

Nanda Kaul's effort at the creation of a fantasy are partly motivated by jealousy which Raka's dependance on Ramlal arouses in her and partly by a desire to communicate: "Ram Lal could arouse Raka's interest and hold it as Nanda Kaul could not interest her, but at the same time give her reassurance of safety. Nanda Kaul knew that a child needed to have the two
elements combined, but she could not, or would not be bothered to try, while Ram Lal did it naturally and comfortably for Raka."

The two Nanda and Raka are forced into a kind of companionship on a stormy evening. And when Raka touches a bronze Buddha, Nanda Kaul grabs at the opportunity if offers of weaving a fantasy around it. She begins to narrate the child the happenings of her own childhood and how her father had journeyed across the borders in search of adventure and action. Her description of the beauty of nature is paradisical and exotic, and the names she confers on the animals have a quality of strangeness. Nanda Kaul conciously acknowledges the unusual nature of these adventures by commenting on them as "stange", "stranger still" and prefacing her stories by such comments as "can you believe it" she also introduces sorcerers in her story, sorcerers with the "strangest powers." (84-85). Fantasy is used by Nanda Kaul initially as a means of breaking through Raka's indifference which was a "goad, a challenge to her - the illusive fish, the golden catch." (99).

Later she is firmly entangled in the weaving of these talks and feels thwarted and disappointed when the necessary response from Raka is not forthcoming. Raka's unresponsiveness lead even Ila Das to narrate stories of Nanda Kaul's youth, of her time as a Vice Chancellor's wife, "always in pearls and emeralds." Nanda's desperate attempt to weave charming fantasies reminds what Anthony storr says about those who love aloneness: "the more isolated a person the more will his relationships he with phantasy figures and the more important will latter he to him." 

In her isolation Nanda is cut off from reality, and therefore, gets more involved in fantasy figures. Moreover, in her imaginary childhood she seems
to have become a child again. In the process, she also projects her own longings as the novelist clarifies: “one might have said she had arrived at her second childhood if one believes in such things. She looked so exactly like a baby thwarted, wanting attention she did not get, as she stalked through the hot, waiting house.” (101) It helps her overcome the feelings of deprivation which has been her lot throughout her life. Nanda is so much lost in her own world that she feels as if Raka would understand her true nature. She keeps on telling her about her parents, husband and the collection of rich material in the house from different parts of the world.

Whenever Nanda tells Raka about her past, her voice undergoes noticeable changes. One can easily make out the difference between fact and fiction through her narration, “that did not sound as if it belonged to her.” (82). The fantasized narration of her childhood memories reflect her psychic state, as it is largely based on the make-believe aspect. Psychologists agree that day-dreams and fantasies are important for human psyche; they represent wish fulfillment and stand for symbolic satisfaction. Nanda herself admits in the end, that all those graces and glories with which she tried to attract Raka were only fabrication: they helped her to sleep at night just like traquillizer or pills. Colin Wilson also maintains that human beings can, not only maintain mental images; but they can spend hours in a world of imagination. He observes: Man is the only animal who is prone to insanity; and this is because he spends so much time in this suffocating prison inside his own head. His fantasies creep all over him like ivy on a tree, until they drain away his life.\"4

The concept of aloneness and isolation is not alien to the hindu mind. Dr. S. Radhakrishnan regards silent communion as an essential part of
worship. As he observes: "In everyone of us is a secret shrine where no one could intrude, to which we must retire at often as possible and discover what our true self is as distinct from the appearance we present to the world outside." Unfortunately Nanda's 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. Talking about the plight of such persons, J.C. Coleman rightly comments: "The forces of isolation progressively destroy the older person's linkage with the world, reducing the meaningfulness of his existence and increasingly forcing him back into himself."6

In the case of maladjusted, unfulfilled individuals there is strong tendency to turn inward, to reduce their involvement in the world around and to reminisce about and time increasingly in the past. Nanda is not free from the bondage of the Past and for the purpose of silent meditation she retires to Carignano. The seclusion of Carignano, however, does not shield her from the haunting sense of faliure and meaninglessness. Feelings of hopelessness, apathy and depression continue to torment her. She is not happy even in her solitude and that's why she cannot think of any creative work to keep her gainfully occupied. Indeed, her behaviour and thinking reflect, "sociological aging". Needless to say she reveals a marked tendency for negative thinking. She broods over her predicament, but is incapable of doing something concrete to ameliorate her situation. She appears to be a resigned individual, all set in for spiritual experience of inner peace. However, we soon learn that this is only a semblance of peace, created to run away from conflicts. She feels secure at Kasauli because it is away from
the plains where the drama of her life enacted. Carignano has no memories of her past.

In the end Nanda Kaul's aggression is directed against her "self" because she has to cope with the struggle between her idealized and real selves. In her last moments we discuss that behind the fragmented world reflected by her self-accusations, lies the vision of reality; a brief interplay of life and death, destruction and renewal chaos and cosmos. The negative values chaos and destruction overpower her real self which a lifetime of pretences has already enfeebled. Nanda condemns herself as a murderer of Ilia. Self-destructive drives work on her but she does not commit suicide like Maya or Monisha, nor do her neurotic impulses drive her to violent outbursts like Nirode.

Just as Carignano's chequered history is of no relevance to Nanda, so is Nanda's own past to it. An atmosphere of impersonal relations suits her. She has achieved the desired loneliness and feels happy. She has, however, overlooked the basic principle that the past cannot be shut out by fleeing it. As Emerson argues, we can never go out of ourselves. We always perceive our own thought: "It is easy in the world to live after the world's opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after your own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude." Nanda has not achieved the capacity to be timeless and selfless in the sense Emerson visualises it, without attaining the optimum liberation of the self, any move in the direction of withdrawal leads to chaos. Nanda confronts her past in Ilia and Raka, and is ensnared in her memories.
NOTES

7. Ibid. 499. An individual feels many changes as a member of family and society. These changes usually accompany death of husband or wife and completed parental roles. The thinking and attitudes of a person in such a situation suffer a marked change. Some people develop positive attitude, whereas others become a victim of negative thinking.
Raka

Though Nanda is the protagonist of the novel, Raka is given equal importance too as she has significant role to play. It is she who tear down the edifice of Nanda’s fantasy and help her face reality. Raka, the great grand child of Nanda Kaul is the only child-character we meet out of all the other retrospecting grown-ups. Childhood is universally accepted as the most formative period of one’s life. Anita Desai, too, believes that childhood experiences are lasting and play a vital role in development of a wholesome, personality. Commenting upon her solitary and introspective character’s childhood, she observes, “I agree that the experiences of childhood are the most vivid and lasting ones”. The filial ties are, therefore fascinating and intriguing in almost all the novels of Anita Desai. A close examination of her novels reveals that her characters have peculiar childhood. The experiences and interaction of this formative period, when combined with their congenital hypersensitivity contribute towards their inability to establish and maintain harmonious interpersonal relationships in later life. Maya, in *Cry, the Peacock*, Monisha and Nirode in *Voices in the City*, Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* – all are victims of filial bondage. Their ungratifying childhood experiences complete with an unusual interaction with erratic, over indulgent, cruel or indifferent parents determine conditions for neurosis in their later life. The children in Anita Desai would start feeling “basic anxiety which adversely influences their personality and deprives them of the qualities required to establish and maintain fulfilling relationships.

*Fire on the Mountain* also deals with the detrimental effects of a stifling home environment upon the tender psyche of a young child Raka.
her great grand mother she roams around all alone in the ravine or visits the lovely burnt house on the hill. She does not care for her: “She ignored her so calmly, so totally that it made Nanda Kaul breathless. She eyed the child with apprehension now, wondering at this total rejection, so natural, instinctive and effortless when compared with her own planned and willful rejection of the child” (47) Nanda Kaul is utterly surprised to discover that Raka is quite unlike to her other children, she is attracted to Raka by the child’s natural instinct to reject, to maintain an attitude of careless disregard for company. She notices that Raka has the gift of avoiding what she considers dispensable. She is a child who does not care for love, she “preferred to stand apart and go off and disappear to being loved, cared for and made the center of attention” (79-80). These observations work on Nanda’s unconscious, and the wish to win Raka’s confidence figures therein. All her life, Nanda has tried hard to feel wanted and loved. Consciously and unconsciously her efforts have been to get a positive response from her family for her devotion, but, all in vain. Now she directs all her energies to hold Raka’s interest. She longs desperately for love and realizes that if she is discarded, she will be crushed by her self-hate.

To Nanda Kaul, Raka is an abnormal child in comparison to her other children and grand children. “Amongst them she appeared a freak, by virtue of never making a demand. She appeared to have no needs... Raka wanted only one thing – to be left alone and pursue her own secret life amongst the rocks and pines of Kasauli” (47-48). Anita Desai calls Raka a natural recluse and thus compares her with Nanda Kaul: “If Nanda Kaul was a recluse out of vengeance for a long life of duty and obligation, her great-grand daughter 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” (48).
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Disappointed by the father-figure in her life, Raka cannot imagine loving or encouraging fathers. The perverted acts of the people dressed in the most bizarre fashion remind her of her own father and his wild behavior at home:

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 cover under her bed clothes and wet the 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 did not 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 (71-72)

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Anita Desai, thus presents the hypothesis that the filial ties are the most sensitive and enduring bonds. A pernicious home environment and
Raka's traumatic childhood experience hamper her "full human-ness" as Maslow terms it. In psychological terms Raka gets "no room to grow". Thus, the filial ties can inject one with trust and love or with distrust hatred and suspicion. To a child the parents are the models. He or she worships them and sees others as the extension of there two figures. When a fulfilling relationship is missed during childhood or even during one's adult life as in case of Raka and Nanda difficult to have a positive emotional interaction in any other relationship which one establishes later on.

Raka, too, is a victim of fantasy. Two kinds of fantasy worlds exist side by side – one which is consciously and deliberately woven by Nanda Kaul to interest her great-grand daughter Raka, the other which is shared by Raka and Ram Lal and is based on his belief in the supernatural. There is also a third world of fantasy which thrusts itself on Raka's imagination, a world which reflects her alienation from the disjointed world of her parents. The first kind of fantasy centres around Nanda. In all unnatural craving to possess Raka, her fantasy assumes enormous proportions with fruits, nuts, apple orchard, bears, leopard cats, peacocks loris and pangolins. The more Raka eludes her, the more she blows up her world out of proportion. As Jasbir Jain says, her "fantasy has its basis in reality which constitutes the take-off point for all fantastic elaboration" and idyllic set up lets her imagination run wild. Raka who in the beginning had devoured her words in silence (84) gradually becomes suspicious (95) and wants to be released from this "disagreeable intimacy" she is restless and impatient to "break out into freedom again. She could not bear to be confined to the old lady's fantasy world when the reality outside appealed so strongly." (100). Ram Lal's belief in the supernatural is neither an escape nor an emotional prop, it is an integral part of his world. Raka accepts it unquestioningly with wide-eyed
wonder and wants to know more about the *churails* he tells her about (77) they both share the wonder and the awe that the existence of such beings is likely to arouse.

Raka’s private world of fantasy is somewhere between the two—it is neither wholly a natural accepted fact as the *churails* are for Ram Lal, nor is it a lie woven for self-preservation. Her fantasy is rooted in the world of her observation of and her responses to the adult world around her. It finds expression in her thinking of the factory as a “square dragon” of Ram Lal’s kitchen as “a blackened, fire blasted cave in which one fiery, in flamed eye glowed and smouldered by itself” (42) when she chances to visit the club one evening she is confronted by a total reversal of her expectation and instead of ladies “dressed as queens and men as princes” (68) all that she finds is a group of “madman and rioters” chasing each other and appearing like monsters to her.

The ‘evil’ atmosphere at home has bruised the ‘child’ in Raka. Her blighted childhood has done an irreparable damage to her sensitive soul, distorting her vision and perception. It is her morbid psyche that sees madness and violence in the gay party in the club. Even the bright colors assume the air of nauseating unnaturalness. Raka seems to work forward the total annihilation as is evident in her desire that all the people at the club should be washed away in blood. The repeated mention of this yearning serves as a harbinger of the final catastrophe. It is also interesting to note that final while feeing at home in he world of animals, Raka revolts against the “animal like” behaviour of the men at the party. This attitude places Raka along-side of Maya and Sita of the other novels, who too feel in the same way.
There is a marked change in the images that follow the incident in the club, reflecting Raka’s disturbed state of mind. “She was no longer the insect, the grasshopper child, she grew as still as a twig” (72). The earlier careless exuberance and abandon are replaced by a still rigidity. It is clear that Raka identifies the langurs with the mad rioters in the club who imitated them. The masquerade in the clubs haunts her making an indelible blot on her inner self, making everything an object of repulsion. But still, the child in her feels sorry for “the pinched and anxious” (78) young monkey and begs Ram Lal not to through stones at her. It looks as if she felt that she ought to defend all the victimized young ones as she herself is one, corresponding to the agitated state of Raka, the storm comes from the north though it is not time yet for it. The inner turmoil and frenzy of Raka is thus externalized in the storm. The untimely storm is symbolic of the trauma Raka passed through so early in life.

Raka’s private world of fantasy is neither related to the tales of churails which Ram Lal keeps on narrating, nor her own self-image. Although she listens to Ram Lal willingly but she does not use all this to create her own world of fantasy. Her fantasy is rooted in her world of observation and her own experiences of the world around her. She is a child, and obviously her fantasies have to be different from those of Nanda Kaul. In her imagination, Raka finds herself superior to all, “higher than the eagles, higher than Kasauli and Sanawar and all the hills” (61). As Jasbir Jain points out –

The differences between the fantasy world
of the two – Raka and Nanda Kaul – lies also
in the degree of freedom fantasy offers. For
Raka, it is perhaps a move towards a liberation
from her childhood fears and a violent realization
of the future, For Nanda Kaul it serves
as a mirror of the hollow self she has created
and shocks her into the present.

Thus fantasy in Fire on the Mountains sustains life and when it is
destroyed it brings about death. Raka's act of setting fire to the forest is
symbolic of her revolt against the cruelty and violence rampant in our society.
Apparently, the title of the novel is suggestive of the revolt of the new
generation of women against the harsh, cruel man dominated world. Like the
fire on the mountain the novelist spreads a burning awareness of woman's
condition in our society. Anita Desai like all modern feminists would like to
suggest that the myth of masculine superiority is somehow preserved in
the area of physical strength. Through Ila Das's rape, Nanda Kaul's life of
compromise and Raka as a symbol of new generation, she shows her
conscious awareness of woman's position in society, and this awareness is
the only possible link of relationship between modern feminists and Anita Desai
as a novelist.
5. Jasbir Jain. Stairs to the Attic. 50.