FIRE ON
THE MOUNTAIN
Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* published in 1977 is once again concerned with the destruction of a woman's world due to alienation and disintegration, leading to the ultimate death. Nanda Kaul lives in a world marked by a sense of hopelessness, triviality, ennui, physical void and spiritual decay. Having a look at the chronological development in Anita Desai's women we find an interesting development in their reactions and response to the temporal order. Maya in *Cry, the Peacock* refuses to accept the temporal order. She narrates her story by writing it down, she proves her self-destruction by her extreme outburst and refusal, by killing Gautama. Monisha in *Voices in the City* proves the same by her suicide. Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* shows her refusal of accepting the temporal order by having a desire of not giving birth to her child. Towards the end we find her giving in as she is aware of the futility of her desire. But she comes back to the mainland with the consolation and
satisfaction of having tried the big "No". Sita had to choose the conformity of society and accept her role as a mother, wife and a householder as it was too early in life to enable her to give up the duties and obligations. We find this refusal in a developed form in case of Nanda Kaul. It is a refusal leading to disaster unlike her refusal to return. Nanda Kaul refuses to accept society in her old age, after having fulfilled her responsibilities and duties:

Everything she wanted was here, at Carignano, in Kasauli. Here, on the ridge of the mountain, in this quiet house. It was the place, and the time of life, that she had wanted and prepared for all her life—as she realized on her first day at Carignano, with a great, cool flowering of relief—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. (Fire on the Mountain, p.3 Hereafter referred as FM).

As a child Desai had wandered up and down the rocky hillsides making new discoveries by herself. In this novel she explores her childhood visit to the land of Kasauli. It is an extension of her memories added on with imagination and reflection.

Nanda Kaul belongs to that category of Kristeva's women who neither sulk nor enjoy, neither identify nor express their expectations by sudden outbursts. She follows Kristeva's women who reject conformity having experienced it once:
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To refuse both these extremes. To know that an ostensibly masculine, paternal (because supportive of time and symbol) identification is necessary in order to have some voice in the record of politics and history. To act first with all those who "swim against the tide" all the rebels against the existing relations of production and reproduction. But neither to take the role of revolutionary (male or female): to refuse all roles, in order, on the contrary, to summon this timeless "truth"-formless, neither true nor false, echo of our jouissance, of our madness, of our pregnancies—into the order of speech and social symbolism. (Kristeva, 1977, pp.37-38).

Nanda Kaul displays a different form of refusal, though she has many similarities with her predecessors, there is undoubtedly a main difference in her case. She unlike Maya fulfilled her duties as a wife, as a householder. We do not find her sulking and lying in bed like Maya. Anita Desai in 'Fire on the Mountain' has not simply narrated the story of a woman struggling to cope with her dreams and fears, her expectations and frustrations, she has made an intense attempt to bring forth the silent sufferings of Indian woman under patriarchy. When we talk about women and womanhood it is not only the voice of Nanda Kaul that is sad and quiet but the indifferent voice of the little girl Raka, and the unnaturally loud and shrieking voice of Ila Das which seems similar to the 'cackle of an agitated parrot'. This sort of behaviour is a reflection of woman's dissatisfaction.
The patrilineal society leaves a void in lives of Nanda Kaul, Ila Das and to even a greater extent in Raka. Alienation in the city life, dominated by her husband, Sita retreats to her father's island but for a temporary relief. Nanda Kaul permanently departs from the city to retire in Carignano inorder to enable herself to live "outside time" and also, away from the masculine law that rules the city which signifies the man:

The old house, the full house, of that period of her life when she was the Vice-Chancellor's wife and at the hub of a small but intense and busy world, had not pleased her. Its crowding had stifled her...

She had suffered from the nimiety, the disorder, the fluctuating and unpredictable excess.

She had been so glad when it was over. She had been glad to leave it all behind, in the plains, like great, heavy, difficult book that she had read through and was not required to read again (FM.p. 29-30).

She remembers nothing but duties and responsibilities that existed in that house. The only one bond that existed between her and her husband was her duties in the house, she always saw as "his house, never hers" (FM.p.18). As the Vice-Chancellor's wife living in a small university town in Punjab she had "presided with such an air as to strike awe into visitors" (FM.p.17), who were left gaping at her perfection. Dressed up in heavy silks, as her husband wished her to be, she managed the house, the children
and the guests. "Isn't she splendid? Isn't she like a queen? Really, Vice-Chancellor is lucky to have a wife who can run everything as she does," and her eyes had flashed when she heard, like a pair of black blades, wanting to cut them, despising them, crawling grey bugs about her fastidious feet. That was the look no one had dared catch or return." (FM.p.18). Maintaining the status of a queen was not what satisfied her desires but kept leading her to alienation and disintegration:

If what woman desires is the very opposite of the sublimating Word and paternal legislation, she neither 'has' nor 'is' that opposite. All that remains for her is to pit herself constantly against that opposite in the very movement by which she desires it, to kill it repeatedly and then suffer endlessly: a radiant perspective on masochism, a masochism that is the price she must pay in order to be Queen:...... doesn't she have the child? In this way, social harmony is preserved: the structure functions, produces and reproduces. Without it, the very foundation of this society is endangered.(Kristeva, in Moi, 1986, p.144).

Nanda Kaul, is unhappy in the role of a wife and a mother. The self-fulfillment usually attached with motherhood and child-rearing gives no satisfaction to her. The specific status she acquires is only at the manifest level as it is unable to enable her to realize herself. We see this bold acknowledgement of the tedious and boring marital and maternal life. Nanda Kaul like Sita refuses to flow in the current of tradition, but after
performing her duties towards her husband and children. Sita has to return back as her duties are not yet over.

Nanda Kaul's leaving the city and settling down in Carignano is not only a rejection and escape from the patriarchal system but her pursuit to forget her past. She wants to save herself from disintegrating. Her husband's house was full with everything but nothing made her feel at home. She was always an alien. Basic harmony lacked in the family. Nanda Kaul withdraws herself from the world that frustrated her. Now in Kasauli she is alone surveying the prospect within, the prospect full of memories and regrets. She wants an inner peace and calm. She achieves outer tranquility but feels miserable at the partial success in inner tranquility. She is seeking absolute isolation, a totally detached life as attachments lead her to nothing but alienation:

...bags and letters, messages and demands, requests, promises and queries, she had wanted to be done with them all, at Carignano. She wanted no one and nothing else. Whatever else came, or happened here, would be an unwelcome intrusion and distraction. To be a tree, no more and no less, was all she was prepared to undertake (FM.p. 3-4).

Nanda Kaul's withdrawal stands for emotional freezing, a kind of psychic frigidity that refuses to accept any relationship. She seeks to live in complete stillness trying hard to exclude all animate and inanimate movement. She succeeds in minimizing human movement and nature is
anyway calm and peaceful in Kasauli. Amidst this peace the news of Raka, her great grand daughter's arrival is an intrusion. "She wanted no one and nothing else. Whatever else came, or happened here, would be an unwelcome intrusion and distraction" (FM.p.3).

Nanda Kaul seeks to obliterate the reality of human relationship from her consciousness. Raka is again an intrusion:

Hanging her head miserably, it seemed too much to her that she should now have to meet Raka, discover her as an individual and, worse, as a relation, a dependent. She would have to urge her to eat eggs and spinach, caution her against lifting stones in the garden under which scorpions might lie asleep, see her to bed at night and lie in the next room, wondering of the child slept, straining to catch a sound from the bedroom, their opposing thoughts colliding in the dark like jittery bats in flight. (FM.p.35).

Raka like her grandmother belongs to the world where the emotion of loneliness spares none, neither the aged nor the innocent children. Raka in her childhood is forced to a place like Carignano, known for as its history as a place of refuge for lonely English maiden ladies, who were packed and sent back to England with their "virginity intact, honour saved, natives kept at bay" (FM.p.9). Kasauli was a home for the sullen and the dissatisfied, the rejected and the unhappy. Raka unfit for the city is sent here: Nanda Kaul and Raka like the English ladies have taken refuge here as it seems to be the land for the dissatisfied, the rejected, the unhappy, the
alienated. Carignano is the home for the women who refuse the system and whom the system rejects. Nanda Kaul and Raka encounter each other and their own natural selves in this rejected place.

Nanda Kaul like Desai's other women is aware of her victimhood and sense of abjection. The social world has failed to offer justice. She has a desire to respond to her need for self-authenticity, thus wants no interference in her privacy. "She had held herself religiously aloof, jealous of this privacy achieved only at the end of her life" (FMp.35-6). This privacy is although a compulsion rather than choice but she wants to make the best of it. She had spent her life as a mother and wife for others, having no time and no space for her own. All the thoughts and actions revolved around the requirements of all others who lived in that house.

Anita Desai explores the relationship of Nanda Kaul and Raka as the most important factor. She depicts very subtly how Nanda Kaul and Raka react to each other, their initial hostility, lack of concern, carelessness, nonchalance and their ultimate rapport. The first time Nanda Kaul sees Raka shuffling up the garden path she is surprised. "Raka meant the moon, but this child was not round-faced, calm or radiant" (FM.p.39). Raka's name suggests the importance moon plays in Anita Desai's fiction. It is for the moon the Maya kills Gautama. Raka stands apart like the moon. She is not one of those ordinary children. If Nanda Kaul had secrets from Raka, she too had secrets from her:
Watching her wandering amongst the rocks and agaves of the ravine, tossing a horse chestnut rhythmically from hand to hand, Nanda Kaul wondered if she at all realized how solitary she was. She certainly never asked nor bothered to see if there were a letter for her, or news. Solitude never disturbed her. She was the only child Nanda Kaul had ever known who preferred to stand apart and go off and disappear to being loved, cared for and made the centre of attention. The children Nanda Kaul had known had wanted only to be such centres: Raka alone did not (FM.pp. 79-80).

Nanda Kaul knows the truth of the matter. She had no wish to get involved in the child's world "What she was unprepared of is the child's total rejection of her adult world" (UR.p.195). Raka neglects her great-grand-mother very naturally and is attracted towards the beauties and delights of nature which she finds in Kasauli. Raka like Nanda Kaul is abjected. When they confront each other a struggle ensues:

Each is repeatedly wounded in the symbolic realm and is equally conscious of her rejection (The unfaithful husband, the image of the drunken father beating Raka's mother, the rape and murder of Ila Das, the issue of marriage of Preet Singh's seven year old daughter to an aged widower are moments that reinforce women's objection). These are the images of the masculine order, intensely physical and brutal signs of violation that exist in the society either in the name of tradition or as a result of women's silence where speech is deemed contrary to their nature (UR.p. 195).
Nanda Kaul avoids confrontation with anybody. She is neither keen on meeting Ila Das nor meeting Raka. Finding Raka a different child she wants to re-enter her world. She is deeply moved by Raka's behaviour. She finds her to be a partner in a world of refusal. She wants an assurance to comfort her. This is the time when Nanda Kaul wants to confess and acknowledge her weakness. She finds her lost self in Raka but she receives no confirmation from Raka. She keeps herself afoof, not reacting to Nanda Kaul's efforts:

But Raka ignored 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 the child (FM.p. 47).

Raka's success suggests Nanda Kaul's failure. Raka impresses Nanda Kaul to the extent that instead of Raka identifying with her great-grand-mother it is Nanda Kaul who identifies with her. She seems to be accepting her supremacy. Once having discarded the world, Raka inculcates in her a desire to love and to be loved once more. Her true feeling of not being left alone and rejected overpowers her desire of living in Carignano. She had bravely faced and concealed her husband's adulterous affair with the mathematics lecturer, her hectic and busy life as a house-keeper and wife, her fulfilling the other's requirements, but Raka's rejection seems to be most disturbing and ruffling:
Nanda Kaul saw that she was the finished, perfected model of what Nanda Kaul herself was merely a brave, flawed experiment (FM.p. 47).

She finds a natural refusal in Raka as against her forced and failed refusal. She has rejected her family, as well as society to find her individuality "but in the spirit of Raka she witnesses a mystical fervour that is desirable and enchanting, enlightening and satisfying" (UR.p.197). There is a metaphysical difference between Nanda Kaul and Raka. Raka is the 'desired mirrored' self of Nanda Kaul. Raka's complete and effortless independence and indifference is what she had always desired for herself. She gets emotionally attached to Raka and cannot imagining her going back. She wants to open up with Raka but surprisingly receives no assurance from her.

'You are more like me than any of my children or grandchildren. Your are exactly like me, Raka'

But Raka retreated pell-mell from this outspoken advance. It was too blatant, too obvious for there that loved secrecy above all. Her small face blanched and she pinched her lips together in distaste (FM.pp. 64-65).

Nanda Kaul has forced herself to retreat to a lonely and secluded place, away from the demands of her children. She wants to live a life above attachments and obligations in the world of requests and queries. Raka is forced to come to Kasauli due to her long illness, which restrain
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her activities in the city. But she has a natural acceptance of the place and it satisfies her spirit of adventure:

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.

(FM.p. 48).

This passage explains the source of Raka's dejection. She unlike her great-grandmother has not gone through the rejection and frustration but she has experienced this feeling of the rejected female world through the rejection of her mother by her drunken father. It took a life time for Nanda Kaul to experience what Raka experienced in early years of her childhood. Raka is more courageous than the adult women like Nanda Kaul, Maya and Sita. Whereas Maya and Sita had fond memories of their childhood Raka has experienced nothing good in the patriarchal society. The adult world has a lack of trust through her experiences. Raka's prolonged sickness has left her physically weak and unfit for the life of "school, of hostels, of discipline order and obedience" (FM.p.59). She is sent to recover in a place, a refuge of the discarded. She seems to prefer this to the adult world which is symptomatic of distrust inculcated in her.

Raka finds no interest in involving herself in anything. She too is an object with a natural refusal. Like Nanda Kaul she too is in a pursuit to forget her miserable past. She wants to forget her father's attempts to bring
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her out her shell, her mother's crying, 'squelching and quivering'. The temporal world makes her shiver... The sight she saw at the club brings back her pain:

   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 bedclothes 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 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 in was a jackal crying (FM.pp. 71-72).

Raka's true inner self reveals with the imagery of the nut bursting from its shell. Though she tries to conceal her real self from her great grand mother, her true feelings cannot be compressed for long. "Desai has presented the ambivalent nature of attachment and detachment that constitutes Raka's mental framework" (UR.p.200). Her passionate and true love of nature and her cool detachment from the social and temporal world set her apart from other female characters like Nanda Kaul, Maya and Sita.
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Nanda Kaul moves to Carignano after her husband's death not purely out of wish as she projects, but as a compulsion. She had lived her life with her husband's infidelity, in order to keep his image uncharred. His death does not decrease this requirement. She moves to Kasauli, where there was nothing but seclusion, enabling her to feel easy without the need of confiding her feelings. She reminds us of a lady, an example in Freud's analysis of an obsessional symptom:

A lady, nearly thirty years of age, who suffered from the most severe obsessional manifestations and whom I might perhaps have helped if a malicious chance had not brought my work to nothing—I may be able to tell you more about this later on-performed (among others) the following remarkable obsessional action many times a day. She ran from her room into another neighbouring one, took up a particular position there beside a table that stood in the middle, rang the bell for her housemaid, sent her on some indifferent errand or let her go without one, and then ran back into her own room. This was certainly not a very distressing symptom, but was nevertheless calculated to excite curiosity. The explanation was reached in the most unequivocal and unobjectionable manner, free from any possible contribution on the doctor's part. I cannot see how I could possibly have formed any suspicion of the sense of this obsessional action or could have offered any suggestion on how it was to be interpreted. Whenever I asked the patient 'Why do you do that? What sense has it?' she answered: 'I don't know.' But one day, after I had succeeded in

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defeating a major, fundamental doubt of hers, she suddenly knew the answer and to me what it was that was connected with the obsessional action. More that ten years before, she had married a man very much older than herself, and on the wedding-night he was impotent. Many times during the night he had come running from his room into hers to try once more, but every time without success. Next morning he had said angrily: 'I should fell ashamed in front of the housemaid when she makes the bed', took up a bottle of red ink that happened to be in the room and poured its contents over the sheet, but not on the exact place where a stain would have been appropriate. I could not understand at first what this recollection had to do with the obsessional action in question; the only resemblance I could find was in the repeated running from one room into the other, and perhaps also in the entrance of the housemaid. My patient then led me up to the table in the second room and showed me a big stain on the table-cloth. She further explained that she took up her position in relation to the table in such a way that the maid who had been sent for could not fail to see the stain. There could no longer be any doubt of the intimate connection between the scene on her wedding-night and her present obsessional action, though all kinds of other things remained to be learnt.

I was clear, in the first place, that the patient was identifying herself with her husband; she was playing his part by imitating his running from one room into the other. Further, to carry on the analogy, we must agree that the bed and the sheet were replaced
by the table and the tablecloth. This might seem arbitrary, but surely we have not studied dream-symbolism to no purpose. In dreams too we often find a table which has to be interpreted as a bed. Table and bed together stand for marriage, so that the one easily take the place of the other.

It already seems proved that the obsessional action had a sense; it appears to have been a representation, a repetition, of the significant scene. If we examine the relation between the two more closely about the intention of the obsessional action. Its kernel was obviously the summoning of the housemaid, before whose eyes the patient displayed the stain, in contrast to her husband's remark that he would feel ashamed in from of the maid. Thus he, whose part she was playing, did not feel ashamed in front of the maid; accordingly the stain was in the right place. We see, therefore, that she was not simply repeating the scene, she was continuing and at the same time correcting it; she was putting it right. But by this she was also correcting the other thing, which had been so distressing that night and had made the expedient with the red ink necessary-his impotence. So the obsessional action was saying: 'No, it's not true. We had no need to feel ashamed in front of the housemaid; he was not impotent.' It represented this wish, in the manner of the dream as fulfilled in present-day action; it served the purpose of making her husband superior to his past mishap....
The woman had been living apart from her husband for years and was struggling with an intention to obtain a legal divorce. But there was no question of her being free of him; she was forced to remain faithful to him; she withdrew from the world so as not to be tempted; she exculpated and magnified his nature in her imagination. Indeed, the deepest secret of her illness was that by means of it she protected her husband from malicious gossip, justified her separation from him and enabled him to lead a comfortable separate life. Thus the analysis of a harmless obsessional action led directly to the inmost core of an illness, but at the same time betrayed to us no small part of the secret of obsessional neurosis in general (FS-I, pp.300-303).

Nanda Kaul made the same sort of attempt. She too; 'exculpated and magnified' her husband's nature. Her deepest secret was, by all means, to protect her husband from 'malicious gossip', as he carried a very respectable name and position in the society. She withdraws herself from the world immediately after his death, in order to keep his affair a secret. Nanda Kaul experienced infidelity in her adult life and so remained undimmed in her memory. Nanda Kaul, too, has not been able to free herself from her husband. She is forced to remain faithful to him. She opts to live in isolation with just Ram Lal around for her household work, as more there are people around her, the more conscious and painful it would be to keep her secret. She cannot even imagine to see his picture blemished.
Nanda Kaul's children are like that ink that proves her normal relationship with her husband. The thick silk sarees she wears are a mask to hide her alienation. The fact that her staying in Carignano was her desire is revealed to be false by the slight mention of Miss David by Ila Da, when she accepts her solitude as a state of compulsion rather than her deliberate choice.

Nanda Kaul lived her life, concealing her true emotions and her frustrations. She avoids meeting Ila Das as she knows the reality. Ila Das is another rejected individual, forced to stay in the Himalayan hills to earn her basics. She attributed her unsuccess to her childhood when they were not taught about hard facts of life, but were given absurd upbringing. The French lessons, piano lessons and the English governesses left them helpless and positively handicapped. Anita Desai's describes her so:

Then a strange, unexpected figure made a silent entry-she looked like the wisp of a ghost, unsubstantial and grey ... I had to hold my breath and concentrate very hard in order to make out her features and proportions... I had not thought of her some twenty-five years but now her ghost had arisen and was slowly climbing the hillside towards me. I found I could no longer run out of the house and that the laughter had died in any throat. I would have to write her story. I had not known that I was her story I was going to write when I set myself to write about Kasauli, but I realised that it was she who embodied the spirit of the place (Desai, in Olinder, 1984. p.:106).
Truely Ila Das embodies the spirit of the place and her age. She is one of those women who lack in insight and imagination, unlike Nanda Kaul. She continued to live and work in a world that refused to recognize her. Her incompatibility and her being unprivileged is on account of her brothers in the patriarchal society. Lack of everything in life evokes repression, incapable of fulfilling her everyday requirements. She leads an alienated life away from her own people. "I could cut down those thirty rupees I need to twenty-five, to twenty—but not, I think, less". Almost crying, she turned to Nanda Kaul. "Do you think I could do with less?" (FM.p. 127). She is unfit to enter any one's world. She lives an alienated life. But the cruel society refuses her even that:

Pushed beyond choking, the woman welfare officer's voice is not only stifled permanently but her body too is violated and finished. She is laughed at as a hysteric and is later decapitated, silenced because the society sees her as a disparagement of the existing social order. The tightening of Preet Singh's fingers around her mouth is a moment of male assertion which forces her to gasp and finally chokes her to death. In a sense she is the "hysteric" of whom Cixous says:

They are decapitated, their tongues are cut off and what talks isn't heard because it's the body that talks, and man doesn't hear the body... the woman who disturbs and is nothing but disturbance (Cixous, 1981:49). (UR.pp. 204-5).
Ila Das as a welfare officer wants to prevent child marriage, but the orthodox men like Preet Singh and the priest find her a nuisance. Ila Das' social reform and effort to change the system is seen by the men as a threat to the existing and oppressive patriarchal order. Unable to accept the challenge, put forward by this irritating woman, whose speech shows determined refusal, the men put her to silence by their physical strength through rape, violence, decapitation and bloodshed.

The tragic news of Ila Das murder shatters Nanda Kaul's world of reverie. She was always amazed at Ila Das' sincere involvement inspite of the barren and unfulfilled life she lead throughout. All her life she struggled for basics as contrast to Nanda Kaul's life. Ila Das' concern for the people as a welfare officer is contrary to Nanda Kaul's concern just with her own loneliness and her past, which was much more respectable and glamorous than hers. The pathos of Ila Das' life made Nanda Kaul regard her life even more insignificant.

Nanda Kaul seems to accept her reality when she hears of Ila Das' rape and murder. She breaks down and for the first time, wants to cry her heart out to release her accumulated emotions by venting them out, but death overpowers her and she dies with all that she had lived with.

The ultimate end of these contrast personalities is the same, inevitable death. The fire ultimately consumes Nanda Kaul's imaginary world. What remains a reality is the fire that symbolizes the funeral pyre, the ultimate consumption. Raka's final utterance against the two sensitive
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lives: "Look, Nani, I have set the forest on fire," contains the gest of life. Raka expresses her resolution to destroy a world where a woman cannot hope to be happy without being unnatural. The truth that remains the fact is death:

But Nanda Kaul had ceased to listen. She had dropped the telephone: With her head still thrown back, far back, she gasped: No, no, it is a lie! No, it cannot be. It was a lie-Ila was not raped, not dead. It was all a lie, all. She had lied to Raka, lied about everything. Her father had never been to Tibet—he had bought the little Buddha from a travelling pedlar. They had not had bears and leopards in their home, nothing but overfed dogs and bad-tempered parrots. Nor had her husband loved and cherished her and kept her like a queen - he had only done enough to keep her quiet while he carried on a lifelong affair with Miss David, the mathematics mistress, whom he had not married because she was a Christian but whom he had loved, all his life loved. And her children-the children were all 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. All those graces and glories with which she had tried to captivate Raka were only a fabrication: they helped her to sleep at night, they were tranquillizers, pills. She had lied to Raka. And Ila had lied, too. Ila, too had lied, had tried. No, she wanted to tell the man on the phone, No, she wanted to cry, but could not make a sound. Instead, it choked and swelled inside her throat. She twisted her head, then hung it down, down, let it hang.
There was a scratching at the window that turned to a tapping, then a drumming. 'Nani, Nani,' whispered Raka, shivering and crouching in the lily bed, peeping over the sill. 'Look, Nani, I have set the forest on fire. Look, Nani—look—the forest is on fire.' Tapping, then drumming, she raised her voice, then raised her head to look in and saw. Nanda Kaul on the stool with her head hanging, the black telephone hanging, the long wire dangling (FM.p. 145).

The false life of Nanda Kaul comes to an abrupt end when faced with the hard fact of life, Ila Das' death. The struggle of both, Nanda Kaul and Ila Das proved futile. Death overtook them both.

The force in Raka's 'Look' is full of determination. Raka carries the weight of her Nani's, her mother's and Ila Das' miseries. Nanda Kaul isolated herself, Ila Das compromised, her mother is still trying and hoping for change in her husband, but Raka, the youngest refuses to accept the existing order and as a gesture of defiance, sets the forest on fire. The fire normally serves as a purificatory element, it cleans and purifies. This fire, however, is meant to finish off the old system, to move towards a clean and truthful future. But as fate had destined, Nanda Kaul and Ila Das did not see the pure and truthful order, death overpowered them. The fire for them became the ultimate consumption, the pyre.