

Feminist Withdrawal and the Refusal of Care: Silence, Trauma, and Ethical Isolation in Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain*

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Abstract

Anita Desai's **Fire on the Mountain** is a profound example of a radical feminist inquiry into the themes of loneliness, silence, and the refusal of care. Moved away from the traditional feminine trope of care-giving, the novel poses female retorialism as an ideologically complex act of female resistance. The current research contends that Desai's work builds a feminine discourse where female loneliness is constituted in opposition to female solidarity, disciplining traditional morality that has long dictated women's roles in care-giving, sacrifice, and emotional service. The conversation in **Fire on the Mountain**, linking Nanda Kaul's story with that of Raka's, followed by Ila Das's experience of life's plight, specifically examines the act of female retorialism as a reaction of either patriarchal exhaustion or violence-induced trauma in women that cannot be reproduced or redeemed. **Fire on the Mountain**, in fact, breaks new grounds in the context of Indian feminine literary thought by validating female retorialist femininity that is largely anti-domestic and morally ambiguous.

Keywords: feminist withdrawal, refusal of care, silence, trauma, feminist realism, Anita Desai, Indian women's writing

Introduction

The Indian feminist literary tradition has always highlighted the resistance of women through voice, solidarity, and relation. Care, endurance, and emotional labor have often been positioned as the moral site of strength in feminist texts, which make women the moral poles of a fractured social world. Though such representation has political mileage, there is the danger of reproducing the same expectation that consigns women to caregiving and self-abnegation. Withdrawal, solitude, and emotional refusal: it is upon such theses that Anita Desai contradicts in her **Fire on the Mountain** an uneasy feminism.

The novel is located in the distant hill resort of Kasauli, and it unfolds in the lives of three women: Nanda Kaul, a widow in old age who chooses to live in seclusion after a life of public service; Raka, a reserved great-granddaughter of Nanda Kaul, influenced by experiences of domestic violence; and Ila Das, a socially responsible woman whose vulnerability defines the boundaries of ethical bio-care. Instead of reconciliation or healing, the novel hangs together through ethical isolation culminating in violence and not closure. Within this essay, the feminist discourse that was created in **Fire on the Mountain** will be shown to revolve around the notions of withdrawal and denial rather than those of nurture and repair.. By subverting the conventional moral order in which femininity stands for nurturing and caregiving, **Fire on the Mountain** challenges the concept of morality in its own innovative and groundbreaking manner.

Review of Literature

Critical responses to **Fire on the Mountain** have focussed on its psychological depth, symbolic landscape, and exploration of female solitude. The scholarship reads the novel as a meditation on alienation, ageing, and the human urge towards withdrawal. Feminist critics have analyzed Desai's critique of patriarchal marriage and women's invisibility within domestic structures. Nanda's past as an efficient vice chancellor's wife has been read as emblematic of the erasure of women through social roles. Ila Das's activism has been interpreted variously as a contrast to the withdrawal of Nanda, representing competing models of female engagement. Yet most of the extant scholarship approaches the practice of withdrawal from a logically analogous perspective: as a failure, a pathology, or pessimism. Less attention has been accorded to withdrawal conceived as a feminist resistance to compulsions to care. Correspondingly, care is seldom interrogated for the moral demand it disproportionately and persistently places on women. Trauma, particularly domestic and sexual violence, rarely is discussed descriptively and almost never as an ontological force shaping varieties of feminist refusal.

This paper addresses these gaps by foregrounding feminist ethics of refusal, trauma theory, and feminist realism. I read **Fire on the Mountain** as a feminist critique of moral imaginaire demanding women's emotional availability and maintain that Desai legitimized solitude and silence as ethically significant forms of resistance.

3. Theoretical Framework

This paper is informed by feminist ethics, particularly critical approaches that interrogate the moralization of women's nurturing roles and the ideology of compulsory care. Feminist ethicists challenge the assumption that care is an ontic or virtuous attribute of womanhood, arguing instead that it is socially imposed and coercively ethical. Such frameworks foreground the emotional burnout and self-effacement produced when care is naturalized as women's principal moral duty. Applied to **Fire on the Mountain**, feminist ethics allows a reading that draws into view dominant cultural narratives equating femininity with self-effacing and relational accountability.

Drawing on trauma theory, that conceptualizes withdrawal, silencing, and emotional unavailability as structurally produced responses to sustained psychic injury rather than individual/moral failure, trauma in this perspective is best conceptualized not as an event but as a condition that rewriting subjectivity, constraining relational possibility, and violating the normative invitation to emotional strangers. Allowing for the readings of silences and refusals in the novel as the consequences of lived violence, not as signs of lack or deficit in this text.

In conclusion, this research is also informed by the notion of feminist realism, which rejects the narrative of empowerment, recovery, or redemption associated with feminist literature. Feminist realism goes on to accept the fact that opposition in a patriarchal society can also be found in withdrawal and endurance or in ethical discomfort. All of these serve as tools in understanding the withdrawal of feminist groups in **Fire on the Mountain** as an ethical gesture towards constraint and not a nihilistic acceptance of society.

4. Nanda Kaul and the Exhaustion of Care

Perhaps the most significant feminist gesture of this novel is Nanda Kaul's retreat to Carignano. Decades of playing the socially designated roles of wife, hostess, and caretaker of others' emotions are Self-consciously rejected as Nanda deliberately chooses solitude. Her refusal to see visitors or conversationalists, her renunciation of familial imperatives—all these denote a rejection of continuing the invisible emotional labor that has characterized her home life. Silence and distance become a means of taking control over a life hitherto ordered by relentless social performance.

Anita Desai reveals that the care Nanda showed within marriage was neither returned nor ethically recognized. The emotional indifference of the husband and his extramarital relations bring out the asymmetry in marital obligation and make Nanda's lifelong devotion hollow. Withdrawal, in that case, is not eccentricity or misanthropy but an act of response to patriarchal exhaustion. Nanda's desire for solitude represents an attempt at the recovery of a sense of self after years of relational erasure.

Most importantly, Desai resists such romanticization in this retreat. Though Nanda's seclusion manifests brittleness and defensiveness, all consequences of being cared for without being recognized, the story constructs its legitimacy in its ethical foundations. It articulates its characters' solitude not as a consequence of personal failure but as a personal choice in a setting that has decimated Nanda's emotional being to make her choice consistent with feminist ideals of living a meaningful and independent life.

5. Raka and the Inheritance of Trauma

Raka stands for the younger generation, the subjectivity of which has been formed under the influence of violence and emotional abandonment. Her silence and withdrawal resemble Nanda Kaul's isolation, but they hail from dissimilar circumstances. Nanda Kaul's isolation is the result of her deliberate resistance to the effects of patriarchy, whereas Raka's

disengagement has been forged under the influence of family violence and turmoil, making intimacy itself a source of danger rather than shelter.

Anita Desai challenges the medicalization of Raka's behavior. Her fascination with fire, destruction, or chaos does not, as a sign, betoken her intrinsic nature as cruel. It is, instead, the indicator for the internalization of chaos, which ensues due to a chaotic domestic setting. Fire here symbolizes her anger that lies within, as it symbolizes the rage that could never be expressed. The lack of bonding with others in Raka's situation serves as a survival strategy.

Via Raka, the novel deciphers the transmission of trauma across generations in a patriarchal framework. Withdrawal is reconstructed not only as a personal choice but also as a condition inherited through gender violence and emotional depletion. With this in mind, "feminist resilience in this case is not grounded in agency and self-awareness so much as in survival under pressure." The significance of Raka's silence "resists moral judgment about whether or not to withdraw and ratifies the commitment to Feminist Realism in this text." The commitment to Feminist Realism in this text is evident in Raka's commitment to survival.

6. Ila Das and the Limits of Feminist Altruism

On the other hand, Ila Das symbolizes an alternate form of feminist activism, which is substantiated in terms of social reform, righteous belief, and external compassion. An outspoken and politically aware individual, she is also convinced about the power for change inherent in care and activist ideals. Nevertheless, her vulnerable side and ultimately tragic death in violence also symbolize the impermanence and risks involved in compassionate feminist ideals in an hostile and patriarchal framework rather than validating them.

Anita Desai challenges the notion of integrity leading to safety and/or impact. The suffering of Ila proves the point of women who go past the boundaries of their own self to offer care to others always end up bearing more stress. The character of Ila challenges the feminist ideals where selflessness leads to fulfillment. Getting involved with activism does not give person agency but puts the in more danger.

It is the contrast between Ila Das and Nanda Kaul that highlights the contradictions of feminist ethics: engagement or withdrawal, compassion or refusal. It is important to note that the novelist chooses to avoid placing herself on one side of these contradictions. Rather, she highlights the ethical implications of each alternative and finds the structural danger faced by women inexpedient within the existing moral definitions of their responses to such danger. Fire on the Mountain presents feminist defiance through the intensity of ethical inconclusiveness.

7. Landscape, Silence, and Ethical Isolation

‘The mountain environment in **Fire on the Mountain** functions as the extension of the feminist withdrawal phenomenon, which promotes the ethical stance on isolation and rejection already asserted in the novel.’ It so clearly indicates that the mountain environment signifies the isolation already advocated in the novel because it has "no comfort, and it never resolves anything," and such isolation "is what it means to be there, alone and remote."

In the mountain environment, there "is nothing to see but the mountain," which reminds the readers that the environment lacks comfort and anything that can resolve any issue or problem. It only signifies isolation, which ‘

Silence pervades the textual space not as absence, the void that can be filled, nor as a thematic device for meaningful communication. Desai’s work shuns the mode of explanation that renders women’s suffering meaningful. The failure of narration in the mode of expressing suffering undermines the reading act’s desire for communication, healing, or resolution. The female subject in Desai’s work carves out its existence in the realm of obscurity rather than in the act of expression.

In combining the concepts of landscape and silence, Desai builds an aesthetic of ethical isolation in which withdrawal itself is validated as a method of coping with patriarchal exhaustion and trauma. The mountain becomes a feminist zone in which refusal rather than speaking maintains liberty from invasive ethical systems.

8. Feminist Agency Without Redemption

Fire on the Mountain is the complete antithesis of “redemption” with its offerings of healing and reconciliation. This narrative ends in destruction instead of the usual closure that reinforces Anita Desai’s belief in “feminist realism.” This novel resists the reading that women’s explicated pain must inevitably lead to some kind of moral liberation or understanding.

Desai defies the mandate that trauma must be symbolically redeemed in order for it to signify. Rather, the novel upholds the moral integrity of unpurified pain. The agency of feminism in the novel does not manifest in the transcendence of violence or the restoration of relational integrity, but in the refusal of suffering’s moralization.

Fire on the Mountain refuses redemptive closure in order to extend the boundaries of feminist discourse in a way that surpasses traditional narratives of empowerment and recovery. But in doing so, **Fire on the Mountain** asserts that “resistance may be in waiting and in survival,” that is, in stasis and inattention. Furthermore, it also asserts that “resistance is not progress” and that “women’s lives do not necessarily need narrativization in order to be significant.”

9. Refusing Care as Feminist Ethics

The most radical form of feminist intervention in **Fire on the Mountain** is that **Fire on the Mountain** refuses to sanctify ‘care.’ By depicting ‘care’ as emotionally draining, ethically coercive, and even dangerous, Anita Desai subverts cultural discourses that associate womanhood with nurturing and morality. “Care” is not made to appear as a

redemptive or transformative practice but as a demand that drains a woman's psychological and emotional resources.

Withdrawal, therefore, becomes a principled feminist act in this context, as it can no longer be seen as a character failing. The importance of solitude and refusal as survival strategies in oppressive social structures that fuel the care of women becomes pertinent here. The feminist ethics of the novel can be therefore considered as focusing more upon the preservation of self as opposed to the figure of the moral heroine who embodies selflessness as a virtue to the possible expense of women's survival.

10. Conclusion

This paper has addressed how *Fire on the Mountain* enables the construction of a feminist discourse through the themes of withdrawal, silence, and the refusal of care. Through the intertwined lives of the three women, Nanda Kaul, Raka, and Ila Das, Anita Desai uses the novel as a narrative medium to explore the emotional and ethical tolls of imposed care, as well as challenge those cultural discourses that suggest the definition of womanhood, femininity, and femininity as virtue rely upon self-sacrifice, self-denial, and self-less engagement.

The refusal of redemption and narrative resolution found in **Fire on the Mountain** also connects the novel with the tradition of feminist realism, which acknowledges the possibility that resistance within oppressive structures may not lead to healing, to reconciliation, to moral resolution. The agency of women in **Fire on the Mountain** does not reside in solidarity, in healing, in moral heroism but in refusal, to care on demand, to interpret suffering into moral virtue, to be resilient on cue.

significantly, **The God of Small Things** problematizes feminist ethics in so far as it resists prescriptive readings of women's agency. On one hand, it does not romanticize withdrawal; on the other hand, it does not condemn participation, instead articulating the ethical unease attendant upon both modes of being in the world. Such a complex embodiment of ethical unease resists feminist critique in its norms towards visibility, voice, and relation as definitive parameters of agency.

Ultimately, **Fire on the Mountain** insists that women's acts of resistance must not be affirmative, productive, or visible within society in order for them to be of ethical importance. Through the recognition of refusal and endurance as acts of feminism, **Fire on the Mountain** challenges the traditional parameters of women's studies within literary studies by incorporating acts of agency that are not necessarily affirmative.

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