Against the Current: Ila Das as a New Woman in Anita Desai’s *Fire on the Mountain*

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This paper deals with the concept of new woman which began in the west at the turn of the nineteenth century and how that concept is modified in an Indian context by Anita Desai in her novel *Fire on the Mountain*. Leaving the other two central female protagonists aside we would concentrate explicitly on Ila Das, Desai’s New Woman who upholds the need to accommodate a passionate affirmation of female identity and freedom in a male dominated society. Our present paper would critically analyse Ila Das’s struggle for self-realisation and self-definition, her quest for identity, her pursuit of freedom, equality and transcendence and her rebellion and protest against oppression within a gendered society with reference to the Indian Women’s Movements.

The ‘New Woman’ is readily known as an emerging feminist icon of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century England. She is a woman who questioned the gender norms and fought for her financial, educational, social, political and sexual rights in the Victorian and Edwardian periods. The concept of “New Woman” took its birth in the late nineteenth century from Henrik Ibsen’s mind and was popularized by the American writer Henry James. James’ heroines like Isabel Archer in *The Portrait of a Lady* (1880) and Daisy Miller in the novella *Daisy Miller* (1878) represented the New Woman. Ruth Bordin, the notable historian commented that the term New Woman referred to women who exercising personal, social and economic control over their own lives. In other words the word “new” applied to women suggested a change of the traditional image of women as “dolls” in the “house”. This feminist concept was explored by various writers. Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* (1879) and *Hedda Gabler* (1890) and Shaw’s *Mrs. Warren’s Profession* (1893) and *Candida* (1898) are well known New Woman plays. These plays inevitably explore the status of women characters in various patriarchal institutions and deal with themes like prostitution, female bondage by patriarchy and feminist self assertion. In the world of fiction Olive Schreiner, Annie Sophe Cory, George Gissing and Sarah Grand are notable writers experimenting with this theme. Gissing in his *The Odd Women* reveals his “New Woman”. The novel begins with the death of a father symbolising the end of the patriarchy and ends with the birth of his grand daughter, a “New Woman” free from previous modes of domination. Later on novelists like George Eliot and Thomas Hardy went on projecting their heroines as images of the “New Woman”. They challenged the institution of marriage, secured financial independence, strove for an education, entered the work force, and explored her sexuality. This changing image of women from established and accepted role model to a more radical figure is also depicted in the women’s writing. Women writers asserted their own definition of femininity by focusing on the awareness and awakening amongst their female
protagonist and more specifically through the representation of the new woman. She was characterized as “the wild woman”, “glorified spinster”, “advanced women” and “modern woman”. In the Indian context the term “new woman” refers to a particular class of women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The nineteenth century is the take off point for modern western education in India. In spite of strong opposition from a conservative section of the Hindu orthodoxy, the Brahmans spearheaded educational reforms for women along with cultural-social reforms through a series of ruptures. The Brahma Samaj successfully gave rise to the ‘new woman’ who could socially participate in intellectual discussions with their husbands as well as exhibit cultural refinement at home and handle domestic duties efficiently. She was prepared for the urban elite society. The 1970’s was a turning point when several events within and outside India gave a radical turn to the women’s movement. In India women began to articulate a more diverse, radical and nuanced critique of patriarchy, reaching towards a new and more politicized gender identity. There was a beginning of new social movements and organizations within which popular women’s voices found their first platform like Shahada movement in Dhulia district of Maharashtra (1972), Maoist Women’s organization (1973) and Chipko movement. The new women’s Movement developed mass connections and was national in scope. There was a relationship between the beliefs and the practices of the movement and the textual representation of women in the works of Indian women novelists. Women novelists generally positioned their female protagonist vis-à-vis the social and cultural movements of the period. The novelists continued to question the sanctity of cultural norms in women’s lives. Female protagonists in the novels dismiss traditional notions of womanhood and asserted a strong and confident image of their creativity. Anita Desai also faced the responsibility of giving her women characters specific roles that would fit in the socio cultural modes and values of a changed society. Like other Indian novelists, Anita Desai’s major concern is to depict the anguish and conflict of the modern educated Indian women caught between patriarchy and tradition on one hand and self-expression, individuality and independence on the other. Women in Desai’s novels are aware of their predicaments and choose to protest and fight against the general accepted norms and currents. We would like to term these women as Desai’s “New Woman”. The strategy used by Desai to represent her New Woman within her novels involves questioning convention and tradition, discovery of her self, development of individuality and capacity to make a free choice not depending on the choice of the male characters and establishment of her own identity. Desai asserts in an interview that her protagonists are new and different: “I am interested in characters that are not average but have retreated or been driven into some extremity of despair and so turned against... the general current.” (Dalmia xxxiii).

What is different and new about Desai’s protagonists is that they are prepared to face the consequences of their choices. They are determined to change the condition of their personal existence. A study of the progression of Desai’s novels and character depiction captures the rapid social and cultural changes which have been taking place in postcolonial India as a result of swift economic development and expansion. There is a cross current of traditional ideas and newly imported ones. Along with the rapid growth of middle classes in India there is a rapid evolution of urban, educated middle classed Indian women. Desai’s women represent the disparity and helplessness of these modern women who have to negotiate their societal roles and position within and without the family and home. They are diffident, meek and quiet in the face of exploitation but are highly sensitive and intelligent. Their extreme sensitivity tries to find an outlet to their pangs and channelises their mode of liberation in various directions. She is aware of her inferior position in the family and society which try to fit her into two water-tight
compartmental divisions that of the traditional notion of “Angel in the house” and “sexually voracious” image. They challenge the social norm which has been expected to change for them, but remarkably have not; only have assumed new guise. Subha Mukherjee writes, “The new woman has become more vulnerable and her problems have increased. No longer can she retreat to the seclusion of her kitchen and at the same time the male domination has tried to overpower her. But she has fought on to seek an identity.” (Mukherjee 84) The changing role of woman as modern woman is explored in the novels of Anita Desai who recognises the displacement and marginalisation of women and attempts to turn this pattern upside down. Within marriage her female protagonists claim equal division of domestic duties, removal of dowry, right to maternity, love and mutual respect and the freedom to explore one’s sexuality.

*Fire on the Mountain* (1977) by Anita Desai illustrates the experiences of woman and the trials they encounter in life. *Fire on the Mountain* has three major female characters: Nanda Kaul, her great-grand daughter Raka and Nanda’s friend, Ila Das. The last among the three women characters Ila Das, Nanda Kaul’s childhood friend is a forced spinster. She represents Desai’s “New Woman”. In our society a spinster is looked down upon as a burden but Ila Das, a modern woman is keener at establishing her own identity than seeking an identity through a husband. The vulnerability of unmarried woman to incidents of sexual harassment reinforces entering into marriage as the only effective remedy. Ila Das’s rape and murder reveals the gender ideology of women as dependent and men as protector. Her attempts to challenge existing gendered structure of the society are seen as potentially disruptive of social order.

Ila Das was always treated inferior to her brothers in her house. Her father was least bothered about her future. Rather he concentrated deeply on his sons’ education and made huge investment over it. She is a fatty, short statured lady jeered and laughed by children and others. Ugly and unattractive with a shrill voice and funny gesture she is not loved by anyone in spite of her involvement in life. This makes her feel lonely and alienated. In 1979, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar made a breakthrough in feminist criticism with their work *The Madwoman in the Attic: the Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. In the 700-page text, Gilbert and Gubar use the figure of Bertha Mason as the so-called “Madwoman in the Attic” to make an argument about perceptions toward female literary characters during the time period. According to Gilbert and Gubar, all female characters in male-authored books can be categorized as either the “angel” or the “monster.” The “angel” character was pure, dispassionate, and submissive. In sharp contrast to the “angel” figure, the “monster” female character was sensual, passionate, rebellious, and decidedly uncontrollable: all qualities that caused a great deal of anxiety among men during the Victorian period. Anita Desai like many of her contemporaries did not limit her characterizations to this strict dichotomy between monster and angel. Her new women possess both the qualities of angel and monster. Ila Das possesses many of the qualities of the so-called angel: she is pure, moral, and controlled in her behavior. Yet, at the same time, she is extremely aspiring and rebellious that characterises the “monster.” She refuses to submit to a position of inferiority to the men in her life and ultimately triumphs over social expectations. At that time a girl child of an affluent upper class family was brought up in an anglicized fashion. But such westernised upbringing made a girl even more helpless and pitiable. It left her unequipped to face the harsh reality of the world outside. After the death of her father, she has to struggle with the realities of life at every step. Her brothers turn out to be selfish and irresponsible while she comes forward to shoulder the responsibility of her family. Ila takes utmost care of her bed-ridden mother and needy sister. She boldly faces hunger and poverty. Kaul, Ila’s childhood friend requested her husband to manage a job for Ila in the home science
college. She has been too closely connected with Kaul’s family and comes to meet Nanda in order to revive the memory of her childhood. Most of her problems are of course due to her honesty, self-respect and service mindedness. She resigns her lecturer’s job because of her principles and after it she continues to struggle in order to earn just few rupees. In this context she says, “That was why I resigned Nanda—it was the only honourable thing to do, wasn’t it? But ooh the flesh is weak, and you know how things have gone for me since then, Nanda. You know how I’ve had to go from pillar to post, trying to earn fifty rupees here and fifty rupees there, with not a room to call my own most of the time, and it’s grown worse and worse…” (137). Later on, she becomes a welfare officer and comes to the Himalayan foot Hills to discharge her duties amongst the poor. She is like that of Tara Lata in Bharati Mukherjee’s novel The Tree Bride (2004) who is well read and teaches her servants to read and write and then sends them to remote villages to teach five others. Just for identity, she prepares to work as a welfare officer. She fights against child marriage by enlightening the local people about the evils of this practice, and faces innumerable obstacles from the patriarchal society. She is very much concerned about the social evils that continue to plague India. Ila is particularly conscious of the inferior condition of women. Especially the superstitious practice of child marriage vexes her. Child marriage is one of the most prevalent forms of violence and exploitation happening to women Ila Das experiences. She empathises over the condition of girls and broods over “What it is for a girl to be married and bear children at the age of twelve. In the valley where she works as social officer she finds parents consenting to child marriages out of economic necessity. They view marriage as a way to provide male guardianship to their daughters, to protect them from sexual assault, avoid pregnancy outside marriage, extent their child bearing years or ensure obedience to the husband’s household. In spite of the efforts of government through legislation and enforcement, ending child marriage appears to Ila as challenging because even when women who understand its negative impacts may find it hard to resist economic and societal pressures and traditions. Marrying at a young age has lifelong consequences. Early marriage thwarts woman’s chances at education, endangers her health and cuts short her personal growth and development. She is aware of the role of women in the process of modernisation in India. “One thing is important- her misery, is not her own creation but is inflicted upon by the passing social current.” (Chowdhury 78) She says while talking to Nanda Kaul, “It’s so much harder to teach a man anything, Nanda – the women are willing poor dears, to try and change their dreadful lives by an effort, but do you think their men will let them? Nooo, not one bit” (141). She narrates to Nanda quite a few hair raising stories of her experience as a welfare officer. She is bold and brave enough to reject traditional norms and choose a line of revolt. Before leaving Carignano she relates to Nanda how she had tried to prevent a villager named Preet Singh from marrying off his seven year old daughter to an old widower having six children, a quarter of an acre of land and two goats. Saying good bye to Nanda, she starts rushing to her place in a hurry with a view of getting there before dark. As she walked alone towards the village, that last of the light had left the valley. On the way Preet Singh, who has been laying in a bush for her, angrily assaults and rapes her and consequently murders her. This treacherous and brutal act expresses man’s cruelty and woman’s helplessness to save her honor and life from animal-like man-made society—“Crushed back, crushed down into the earth she lay raped, broken, still and finished. Now it was dark”(156). The rape and murder of Ila Das highlights the vulnerability of new woman in patriarchal world. They have intense suffering, loneliness and isolation in a cruel society where standing against the current brings slings of misfortune and pain. Rape is a powerful weapon used by the male-dominated society to silence women. The patriarchal structure regards honour
as the most valuable possession of a woman. It is even more valuable than life itself. So a woman’s first and foremost duty is to save her honour. Once lost it can never be regained. This patriarchal belief ensures that woman always lives with the fear of losing her honour and accept her inferior position. Thus she is controlled by the fear of being raped, a fear completely introduced by the patriarchal structure to confirm its superior position. In India during the 1970s Women’s associations dealt with issues like rape, domestic violence, dowry, bride burning, sati, and female foeticide in a way previous reformers had never done. However the Mathura Rape Case was the first national level issue which united women throughout the country. The protests were vastly covered in the national media and gradually gained momentum. Finally, the government was pressurized to amend the Evidence Act, the Criminal Procedure Code and the Indian Penal Code and subsequently introduce the category of custodial rape.

Ila Das not only represents the oppression of women in India, but at the same time shows how independent and strong they can be. She shows how insignificant they are seen to be (by men), whether they have a high station in society or not. She is not only used as an example of this oppression, but she is also used as a tool for giving information about it through the stories she tells Nanda about the women in the village where she lives. She and her sister were overlooked as heirs to their father’s estate despite the fact that they are clever and industrious; the estate is instead given to their worthless brothers who squander it away and leave their mother and sisters to suffer. The women in her village are forced to watch their children die because “their men” want them to listen to the village priest who tells them not to take their young ones to any hospitals. Thus her passion to fight against the norms and make society better in her eyes makes her iconic and ideal as well as symbolic and important.

Ila Das’ character serves as a contrast to the other characters in the novel. While Nanda Kaul and Raka are presumed to be strong and independent characters, they seek solitude to hide their pain and damages from the world. In a sense they are weak and quite the opposite of what they try to portray. Ila Das on the other hand has suffered many injustices not only physically but emotionally and financially, and daily she is taunted by strangers and reminded of her misfortunes. Yet she gets up everyday and plunges herself into the world of the living with no malice. Unlike Raka who sets her internal world of illusion into fire as a radical act of destruction, Ila Das keeps the constructive fire of aspiration and revolution burning within her. It is fire of rebirth and resurrection, a symbol of unexpected free will and human desire. She fulfill the desire for independent selfhood which Nanda can only imagine in an abstract form. Nanda’s search for identity by retreating into a life of seclusion is nothing more than an illusion, bound to end in disillusionment. But Ila Das emerges as a Desai’s “New Woman” who claims to assert her

There is a striking similarity between Ila Das and the character Bim from Desai’s Clear Light of Day. Bim resembles Ila Das to a great extent. Like Ila Das she is also the victim of her brother Raja and is deprived of her rights as an individual by her father. Both of the characters are educated, cultured, strong, teacher by profession and has chosen not to marry. Both of them are strong in voicing their opinion and consider themselves equal to man in every aspect of life. They have new views that counteract the normal stereotypical views of everyone else. While Bim actively participates in discussions with men in social functions, Ila Das in her youth plays cricket and badminton with men. While narrating Raka her old experiences in the Vice-Chancellor’s house Ila says, “You wouldn’t believe it my dear, but I was quite capable of running out on the lawn and taking a cricket bat out of the boy’s hands and playing myself” (132). In Desai’s “A Secret Connivance” (1990) Desai published in the Times Literary Supplement, Desai reveals how Indian Women secretly negotiates with the value systems that
exist in the hierarchically structured society. They connive at her subjugation by conforming to the assigned rules of patriarchy as symbolized in the form of Indian mythical goddess and Desai has imposed on her characters specific rules in order to vent the suppressed voices of centuries of woman. These women face the dilemma of choosing between tradition and modernity but they finally emerge victorious by their capacity to make free choice. Ila Das is a force for change questioning the cultural and sensual roles assigned to Indian woman to prove gender is indoctrinated is therefore different for biological sex. Both Ila and Bim are caring and responsible. While Ila looks after her ailing mother and blind sister and sends money for her sake starving herself, Bim nurses her brother Raja and aunt Mira during their sickness and takes care of her younger brother Baba too. Rather than moving towards site of modernization both of them chooses to live in old and primitive areas. While Ila Das chooses to be the welfare officer of the poor villagers in the Himalayan foothills, Bim chooses to remain in old Delhi maintaining the house in which she and her siblings grew up. But what differentiates them is that Bim finally wins in her struggle for existence while Ila is crushed down by the patriarchal atrocities.

Thus *Fire on the Mountain* reveals a woman’s struggle to secure self-respect and self-identity for herself. Desai subtly bares the multiple levels of gender differentiation and oppression, including sexual oppression experienced by a new woman in our society. She tries to define freedom for Indian Woman within the Indian socio-cultural value system and institution. She has also presented the dilemma faced by woman in choosing between tradition and modernity. They become the embodiment of revolt, questioning restrictions and limitations of marriage and instead reinforce a belief in education, financial independence and self-fulfilment.

**End Notes:**

1. *The Odd Women* (1893) is a pioneering work of early feminism. The novel takes on the 19th century "Woman Question" by looking at themes of feminism, marriage, and economic independence.

2. In the 1970s, an organized non-violent resistance of peasant women to the destruction of forests in the Uttarakhand region of the Himalayas spread throughout India and came to be known as the Chipko Movement.

3. A historical novel by Bharati Mukherjee, *The Tree Bride* is a story of revenge and resistance of an Indian woman against colonialism.

4. An incident which led to change in Indian legal system, the Mathura rape case was a detestable incident in India wherein Mathura, a sixteen-year-old tribal girl, was allegedly raped by two policemen on the compound of Desai Ganj Police Station in Chandrapur district of Maharashtra.
Works Cited: