

Perspectives of Morality: A Critical Study of Anita Desai's *Fire on The Mountain*

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Abstract

In Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain*, the tension between knowledge of one's duties and obligations towards others and personal convictions regarding one's responsibility towards oneself leads to moral and ethical dilemmas. The idea of Dharma (ethics) has several dimensions in society and in literary works that fundamentally represent different facets of a society, whether as a collection of moral principles/value systems that we have internalized or as the right ways of living that have impact on human conduct. In this article, an honest attempt has been made to discuss different issues through the characters of two elderly women, such as - What does one do when moral laws interfere with individual liberty and the preservation of happiness?

Keywords: obligations, ethics, ethos, barrenness, honest.

Introduction

Anita Desai's novel *Fire On The Mountain*, which won the Winifred Holtby Memorial Prize (1977) and the SahityaAkademy Award (1978), examines the moral/ethical dilemmas caused by the tension between one's awareness of one's roles and obligations toward others (hammered into one's psyche since childhood) and personal convictions about one's responsibility towards oneself as an individual. Since life and literature intersect, a work of literature must have the obligation to be "on the side of life," to borrow F.R. Leavis' phrase. Moral preoccupations describe a novelist's field of interest, just as moral consciousness represents quality of life. In the critical text *The Great Tradition*, Leavis writes about novelists' fundamental greatness, saying that "they are all characterized by a vital capacity for experience, a kind of reverent openness before life, and a marked moral strength" (quoted in Lodge, P. 69). Another great literary critic, David Lodge, objects to terms like "moral intensity" being placed at the centre of critical judgment because "they are not even literary concepts, but ethical ones" (P. 71). However, he goes on to say that literary artists and critics have some conception of the spiritual life because "moral ideals come into play in the analysis of literature" (P. 71), and that critics should not "refrain from addressing the moral dimension of novels in the process of reaching a literary evaluation" (P. 72), even though the criterion must be governed by artistic experience. The novel follows two lonely lives: that of a great grandmother who lives as a recluse in the Kasauli Hills, and that of a lifelong acquaintance, a spinster struggling to make ends meet as a Government Social Welfare worker in nearby villages in the Himalayan foothills. Their history and present are depicted as being trapped in the cross-currents of moral rules imposed by society, community, and long-standing practises on the one hand, and moral decisions based on their own beliefs, i.e. a specific moral code, on the other. As a result, the paper approaches the concept of Dharma (ethics) through literary language and its linguistic devices (paradox, irony, stress, and so on) created through the writer's careful arrangement of words and the use of figurative language (images, symbols, metaphor, similes, and so on) to convey ideas, feelings, and suggestions that may lead to one of the various dimensions of Dharma. To use Lois Tyson's words, literary language produces "an artistic experience, a world of its own" through the writer's unique arrangement, as it "depends on connotation: on the implication, association, suggestion, and evocation of meanings and shades of meaning" (P. 138). It's also expressive since "sound, mood, and feeling" are all communicated. The paper examines the idea of dharma in the novel through the characters' personal experiences as articulated through literary language, rather than primarily through the lens of Indian philosophical practices and ethical doctrines. As a result, the focus is on the emotional turmoil and psychological distress

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that the two female protagonists have experienced as a result of their finer sensibilities being trampled upon, leaving them feeling abandoned, lonely, and powerless. The idea of Dharma (ethics) has several dimensions in society and in literary works that fundamentally represent different facets of a society, whether as a collection of moral principles/value systems that we have internalized or as the right ways of living that have impact on human conduct. In general, it has to do with morally valuable human thoughts and deeds, with doing and saying the right thing for the sake of righteousness. Individually, it is about doing and thinking the right thing in one's own situation, as dictated by the fight for survival, self-defense, and individual rights. "In its broadest sense, dharma reflects the ethical rules of the Universe that control the spiritual life in the same way that the laws of nature rule the physical world," writes S. Cromwell Crawford. (See p. 133.) Dharma is one of the oldest philosophical ideas in Hinduism, and it deals with man's moral and spiritual existence. It is one of the four basic Purusarthas (ends of life) (P. 131). It means "the execution of right action out of a consciousness of moral law" in the sense of a Purusartha (P. 133). The key source of concern for the two characters is the execution of right action, but the most pressing question is from whose perspective is right action to be determined? Is it from the perspective of the person concerned or from the viewpoint of others? What is the proper course of action to take when moral laws interfere with individual liberty and the pursuit of happiness? The topics in this paper have been addressed with integrity.

The two women continue their long and exhausting journey through life, sharing a similar set of laws, traditions, behaviors, values, and education, as well as having suffered the same fate of being cast aside and forced to live in isolation. When the novel begins, the great grandmother is living in the Hill house as a recluse, wishing to cut ties with the outside world, especially with her traumatic history and its relics- "bags and letters, messages and demands, requests, promises, and questions, she had wanted to be finished with them all" (p.3). Responding to demands and requests would require her to relive her previous life of roles and commitments in order to fulfill her obligations to others, even though she is still exhausted from her multiple role playing. She wanted no one and nothing else here, in the hills, as she wished to put her domesticated and claustrophobic life behind her. "Whatever else came, or happened here, would be an unwanted intrusion and distraction," she said. (p. 3) Undercurrents of willful denial of any kind of presence that might become an assault on her personal space and time run through the thread.

She appears delighted, "what pleased and fulfilled her... was its barrenness... its starkness," after convincing herself that her barren existence in the hills among the rocks and pines with plenty of light and air is what she has always desired and wished for (p.4). The words

"barrenness" and "starkness," which mean "bare and unproductive" and "unpleasant and colorless," suggest a connection between the physical barrenness of the landscape and the emotional emptiness and lifelessness of the woman who has lived a stressful, claustrophobic, and colorless existence. When she declined to see the birds feeding their nestlings, a sight that others may have enjoyed, it showed how scarred her emotional life had been. To understand why barrenness and signs of neglect appeal to her rather than signs of nurturing and stability obtained by remaining close to others, one must look back in time.

She has been at the centre of a small yet intense and busy life as the wife of a Vice-Chancellor of a University in Punjab, presiding over countless dinners and lawn parties, often dressed in silk (as per her husband's wishes), planning and preparing every single detail, entertaining his guests, relatives, and family, and attending to the needs of a large number of children, their tutors, and a large number of children's tutors. Her life has been like a whirlpool, always in motion, and she has been described as "the still, fixed eye in the middle" (p.24). With the disordered and noisy children, the unpredictable abundance of relatives and their unwelcome interference, and the orders from her mother-in-law, law's she has been vexed by the lack of privacy in her husband's home. While performing her duties as a wife, mother, and daughter-in-law on the one hand, and as the elegant wife of a V.C. on the other, she has blindly followed the 'dharma' of a woman, the indefinable codes of conduct, religiously, socially, and culturally sanctioned, with a "ironic bow to duty that no one had noticed or defined" (p.19). Her own wishes and ambitions as a human being, her own moral values that may be diametrically opposed to socially and culturally sanctioned moral duties – none of this has ever mattered to anyone, not her husband, not her children, who all seem to be foreign to her existence. Others have never realized she has used up all of her energies and time, burying all of her hopes and passions in the depths of her heart, compelled to live her life for others. What makes her one-hour afternoon rest, practicing stillness and calm, closing her eyes while trying to block out sound - the only time she can call her own because even her husband has to agree and appreciate it - so important? The afternoon break is taken not to physically rest, but to demonstrate that she has completed her obligation to others and that she needs some room and time to herself, which everyone can understand. She does it on purpose in order to increase her importance and appreciation.

She believes she has discharged all of her duties now that she has arrived on the hill in the twilight of her life, after her husband's death and after all of her children have developed themselves, and she hopes that others will as well. But, unfortunately, she learns that her responsibility to others is not yet complete when she receives two unexpected pieces of information: one, her friend's visit, and two, her great-granddaughter's with her to recover from a long illness. No one has asked her opinion, as has been the case in the past – her friend invites herself to tea, and her daughter simply tells her of the child's arrival. Their presence in her life will imply the opening of an old and thick ledger from her history, as well as the continuation of the same old dull and tiresome everyday routine, requiring her to engage in their lives while fulfilling her responsibilities to them.

She needs to reclaim that 'stillness,' that 'comfort,' in order to avoid allowing the intrusive presence of others to disrupt her peace of mind (which she only attained at the end of her life) and calmness of heart, which she has cultivated as an art over the years. As a result, she chooses to be "a charred tree trunk in the forest, a broken pillar of marble in the desert, a lizard on a stone wall" (p.23) in order to avoid becoming irritated or annoyed like the natural artifacts. The photos and symbols conjure up a vision of a life so shattered and burned that there is no balm that can heal the wounds of a life full of emotional scars, cowering under her awareness of her dharma towards others, practicing the right way of life for others. The irony of her case is that no one can escape their history, relinquish their roles and obligations, and attain a state of peace and stillness before they die. As a result,

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she is faced with a moral dilemma: whether she should continue to shoulder other people's obligations without question as someone who is aware of her "dharma" towards others, or whether she should choose her own "dharma" based on her moral beliefs, not as a member of a community but as a person who is only responsible to herself. Crawford's concepts of Objective and Subjective Ethics in Hinduism have been used to better understand the great grandmother's moral dilemma. When it comes to Objective Ethics, he says,

"On this stage morality is represented by social codes demanding external conformity. Psychologically understood, this is the stage of socialization and introjections. The voice of conscience is the interiorized voice of the group. The essence of conscience is a "must." The feel of conscience is that of fear of punishment for duties not done." (P. 144)

In the sense that the former is concerned with virtues that are superior to the duties represented by the latter, Subjective Ethics is one step ahead of Objective Ethics. He goes on to say,

"Whereas duty represents external sanctions, virtue represents internal sanctions. Duties are related to experiences of prohibition and fear, but virtues arise from experiences of preference and the feeling of self-respect. Duty denotes tribalistic morality; virtue denotes individualistic morality." (P. 144).

To summarize, a person is bound by moral duties on the Objective Ethics level, and duty is transformed into virtue on the Subjective Ethics stage after "purification of the mind." If the great grand-mother chooses the first choice, which is in line with objective ethics, she will be able to fulfill her dharma to her great grand-daughter and friend. It would, however, take away her anonymity, limit her freedom of movement, and put an end to her carefree lifestyle. If her second choice is chosen, she will be able to live her life on her own terms, free of the constraints of duty. It does, however, imply that she lacks empathy, compassion, and acts of kindness, all of which are essential for the development of long-term relationships. Her second choice seems to be distinct from the philosophy of subjective ethics, as the great grandmother has turned inward, concentrating solely on her own well-being and abandoning the concept of virtuous conduct. Despite her proud and unmoving exterior, the great grandmother's heart melts with tenderness at the sight of their abject helplessness, despite her studied resolve to ignore the child as well as to deny her friend's visit. Her haughty posture betrays her wounded self, which she has hidden behind a shield around her heart, only concerned with safeguarding her inner life. She acknowledges their reliance on her not because she is obligated, but because she is conscious of doing the right thing, of her individualistic morality; otherwise, she would have refused to allow any interference into her private life, as she seems to wish.

She is adamant about the child's presence in her life because she is afraid of losing her privacy, which she has been jealously protecting, because the child would demand her time and participation as a caregiver, a position she is tired of. And her best friend, who seems to have followed her out of her past, has been a constant in her life since childhood. Her anxiety about receiving her friend stems from her fear that she will bring up traumatic memories from her past that she has buried. Her friend's presence would, thus, pose a threat to her present life as a recluse – a condition that she has arrived at "by a long route of rejection and sacrifice", "out of vengeance for a longlife of duty and obligation" (p.48).

The friend and her sister were born into a wealthy family and were given piano and music lessons by English governesses, as well as being taught to sing nursery rhymes by skirted nannies. But then disaster hit the family: the three intoxicated brothers, who had been sent to foreign universities, squandered all of their allowances on luxury and racecourses, and eventually, after their father died of a stroke, drove out their mother with a broken hip and their sisters from their home, leaving them without a penny and depriving them of the last of their jewellery. The two sisters were unexpectedly unprepared to face reality

and, relying solely on their willpower, went to work – one teaching piano lessons and the other, with the aid of her friend (the great grandmother), teaching at the Home Science College, where the great grandmother's husband was the Vice Chancellor. The education they had received, as well as the piano, singing, and French lessons they had learned, were useless in dealing with the harsh realities of life, despite their belief that they had received the best. During this time in her life, when she felt safe and comfortable, working as a teacher and knowing she would have food and a bed in the hostel, she had a brief respite when she could even enter the lawn parties and play mixed doubles on the VC's badminton court. This time of respite, however, came to an abrupt end when she was replaced as Principal of her college by one of her junior colleagues. She was forced to tender resignation in the circumstances, as befitting her upbringing and education, in order to preserve her pride and honor. Her moral conviction caused her to flee from pillar to post in search of work rather than face humiliation, thus resolving her moral dilemma—whether to continue working despite humiliation or to leave in the face of humiliation—in accordance with her ethical values. Her mate, the great grandmother, once again rescued her from her predicament by seeking a job as a social welfare worker, where she could spread wisdom about health, hygiene, the negative effects of superstition, and child marriage.

The friend in old white court shoes, a broken brown umbrella, a little grey top knot, and spectacles tied with a ribbon to keep them from slipping off her nose is now a caricature, a phantom from the past. She has been taunted and mocked by mobs so many times that she has become used to it, acknowledging her utter helplessness as her eyes blinked tearfully. Except for her shrill accent, there seems to be no correlation between her privileged and sheltered upbringing and her pathetic present life. After failing to hide her out of sight and out of mind, the great grandmother is forced to greet her neighbor, who arrives floating like a crumpled piece of paper.

Despite her resolve not to appear concerned about anyone, the great grandmother realises that she is still concerned and worried about her friend after seeing her. As a result, she warns her friend about threats from the father of a 7-year-old girl whose marriage has been arranged to an elderly widower with children solely because he owns a piece of land and two goats. The great grandmother wishes to invite her friend to stay with her in an unguarded moment, but the fear of her friend intruding on her tightly guarded privacy prevents her from doing so.

The friend shivers as she walks back to her village hut after returning from the market empty handed, unable to afford anything for her meals, thinking about the long, cold, and hungry nights ahead before she receives her paycheck. The image of an old woman walking a desolate path with “the day gone, the light gone, the warmth of life gone” (p.140), gives a sad view of life where no ray of hope seems to appear in the horizon. “To be alone, to be old, to have to walk this long, sad distance” (p.141) is more than she could bear. Despite this, she couldn't bring herself to ask for support from her mate, who has always been her saviour and her conscience, preventing her from being a burden to her. This is her idea of dharma, just as protecting her privacy was her dharma, even if it meant ignoring her friend's plight. These two women have selected their personal moral aspects based on their own moral beliefs and values, rather than on the moral concerns of others, which is a rare occurrence. The final disaster hits her in this situation when the father of the 7-year-old girl, who has been waiting in the dark, rapes and murders her in the most inhumane manner. The image is heartbreaking: “She lay violated, shattered, still, and done, crushed up, crushed down in the earth.” It was now dark” (p.143). The writer's use of terms synonymous with abuse – “crushed,” “raped,” and “broken” – raises a number of issues, focusing on imagery of death, acts devoid of empathy, morality, and ultimately, a total rejection of ethical considerations. The actual darkness of night merges with the symbolical darkness of human aggression against human ideals, where all is done, dark, and life

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appears to be a complete wasteland devoid of spiritual, religious, and human concepts. When the great grandmother learns of her friend's rape and murder, her first reaction is to dismiss the details, just as she did when she woven a web of lies to captivate the child's attention and a fantasy world full of lies about her history. She has chosen her world of lies as an escape from reality, and she has led others to believe that she has chosen her life as a recluse on her own volition. But as she learns the truth about her friend's death, she realizes that “she didn't live here alone by choice – she lived here alone because that's what she was compelled to do, reduce to doing” (p. 145). As Lois Tyson puts it, “how a crisis or traumatic event brings about a shift in one's life can be understood clearly.” “Crisis brings into the spotlight wounds, fears, guilty, desires, or unresolved conflicts that I have failed to deal with and that demand action. I am flooded by the past because I can now see what was really going on. This is how I can know myself through crisis.” (P. 21).

She is profoundly saddened by the realization that she should have, in her own free will, assisted her friend in alleviating her problems. She believes that her friend's tragedy could have been avoided if she had opened her heart to her friend and asked for advice, or if she had given her friend the opportunity to alleviate her heavy heart. The weight of her remorse for not being virtuous enough to invite her friend, despite knowing that remaining with her is the need of the hour for her friend, even though she has not specifically requested it, is too great for her to weep aloud, and she chokes and dies as a result, as her great-granddaughter discovers her “on the stool with her head hanging” (p. 145). However, before her death, she finally accepted the truth about her past, which she had been hiding not just from others but even from herself, that her husband never loved or cherished her and kept her like a queen, that he had done only enough to keep her quiet while he carried on a life-long affair with another woman whom he loved all his life but couldn't marry, that he had done only enough to keep her quiet while he carried on a life-long affair with another woman whom he loved. What had previously traumatized her was having to not only conceal her husband's infidelity, but also put up with and welcome the other woman's presence in her home while maintaining her pride as a wife. She's always tried to hide these facets of her life behind her web of lies, but in the end, it all comes crashing down as an unavoidable truth with unstoppable power.

Conclusion

This novel symbolically puts fire as the end to world of lies. It also represents a funeral pyre, which purges all traces of human experiences. The novel's bleak conclusion poses several questions about how we live our lives: should one live according to one's own ethical values even if it attracts criticism for denying one's dharma to others, or should one live for others to the point of compromising one's own mental and emotional well-being in order to fulfill one's dharma to others? Each of us would have different answers and different dimensions, informed by our moral, social, family, and religious values ethics or one's mentality where they upbrought. One issue can be interpreted in hundred different ways. However, it is important to remember that human beings are fundamentally good, and that they are capable of making decisions based on various principles of dharma that enable them to humanity.

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