

## Spiritual Undertones in the Character Names in Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain*

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### Abstract

Anita Desai (born-1937) is one of the foremost writers of Indian English fiction. Her unique voice makes her works grounded in reality of the day. She plants the seeds of her fiction in the fertile soil of Indian culture. Hence the characters in them can be easily identified with. The spiritual aspect of human life is her focal point. In spite of this, spiritualism is the least highlighted aspect of her works. Desai's novels are driven mostly by women protagonists. Similarly, in *Fire on the Mountain* (1977), Nanda Kaul and Raka shape the entire work. Both the protagonists are portrayed in a forlorn environment and both cherish the loneliness. There exists a symbolic as well as a spiritual significance in the names of Anita Desai's characters. In *Fire on the Mountain* spirituality is apparent not just in the story but also in the names of the characters. A fine link can be established with regard to this spiritual reference between the names of the characters and the actions they perform in the novel. It paves the way for the growth of the story and the climax.

**Keywords:** spiritual, Nanda, Ila, Ram, solitude, fire.

### Introduction

*Fire on the Mountain* is a masterpiece by Anita Desai. It was published in the year 1977. The book is divided into three parts; Part I: Nanda Kaul at Carignano, Part II: Raka comes to Carignano, Part III: Ila Das leaves Carignano. So, each part deals with the arrival and departure of a particular character to Carignano. The novel is set in Kasauli. The story mainly revolves around Nanda Kaul – a recluse and Raka – Nanda's great-granddaughter; whom Nanda has to take care of. Nanda's friend Ila Das's story also carries significance as it is an integral part of the novel's climax. In the words of M. G. Vassanji, "Anita Desai's novels do not deal with the large movements of history but with the struggles of the human soul..." (Vassanji, xiii) This is exactly depicted in this novel.

In *Fire on the Mountain*, Nanda Kaul has decided to live an isolated life after retirement and the death of her husband. She has chosen to lead a quiet life in Carignano, in Kasauli. Her retreat is located on the side of a cliff. She relishes the spiritual solitude of the place. The word “Nanda” means ‘joy’ in Sanskrit. On a spiritual note, Nanda is a name of Lord Vishnu – the Preserver of the universe according to Hindu mythology. Nanda is also the name of the foster-father of Lord Krishna – the 8<sup>th</sup> incarnation of Lord Vishnu. It is under Nanda’s guidance and blessings that Krishna grows up and establishes himself as the central character in the Mahabharata and a permanent place in Indian as well as world history. In *Fire on the Mountain*, Nanda Kaul is widow of a university Vice-Chancellor. Hence a parallel can be drawn between her and “Nanda” – Krishna’s foster-father. Just like Krishna flourished under Nanda’s care; similarly Nanda Kaul had several responsibilities on her shoulders and had spent her whole life looking after little children. She discharged all her duties to perfection. The only intrusions in her solitude in Carignano are her help – Ram Lal, a visit from the postman and an occasional phone call. Her peaceful life is threatened by the impending visits of Raka – Nanda’s great-granddaughter and Ila Das – Nanda’s childhood friend. Nanda Kaul feels that her obligation free, “pared, reduced and radiantly single life” (*Fire*, 34) is in jeopardy.

Ila Das is the childhood friend of Nanda Kaul. “Ila” is a Sanskrit word. According to Hindu spiritual legend Ila is an androgyne deity. It is known for its sex changes. When the deity represents a man, he is called Ila or Sudyumna. And, when it changes itself into a female, she is known as Ila. She is also regarded as the primary progenitor of the Indian Kings belonging to the Lunar dynasty. In *Fire on the Mountain*, Ila Das works as a government social worker in the nearby villages in Kasauli. Her loud and shrill voice is a subject of laughter. Nanda “knew that this voice was Ila Das’s tragedy in life” (*Fire*, 22). Despite being born in a privileged family, Ila Das is now poverty-stricken as her brothers misspent all their family money. Ila Das is raped and killed after she protests against child marriage. In spite of working for the welfare of others, Ila Das meets a terrible end.

Ram Lal is the cook of Nanda Kaul. “Ram” is a name everyone is familiar with. Ram or Rama is a pivotal character in the Hindu philosophy. He is regarded as the 7<sup>th</sup> incarnation of Lord Vishnu. The Hindu epic Ramayana narrates Rama’s tale and firmly establishes him as ‘Maryada Purushottam’ – peerless among men. It is because Rama stuck to the propriety of conduct throughout his life despite facing daunting challenges. Even in the face of unexpected moral and ethical dilemmas, Rama stuck to the principles and set an example for

ages. Ram Lal is the old servant in Carignano In *Fire on the Mountain*. He is dutiful and is still in awe of the British even after Independence. He holds the opinion that the Army parties of the day are not as good as the ones famously hosted by the British. Raka, Nanda's great-granddaughter is also a loner and she gets a lowdown on the local scene from Ram Lal and camaraderie develops between them.

After her friend Ila Das's death, Nanda Kaul realises the real significance of her own life. It dawns on her that her husband never loved her and had a lifelong affair with Miss David. And she herself never loved her own children and living an isolated life in Carignano was not a choice for her, rather it was the last option before her. In an attempt to justify her existence she had woven a web of lies as a misapprehension. In the novel, the motif of fire is an important one. Raka arrives and informs Nanda that she had set the forest on fire. Raka tells Nanda, "Look, Nani, I have set the forest on fire." (*Fire*, 158) The book closes with the image of fire engulfing the entire mountain. This 'fire' is also symbolic of Nanda's inner turmoil and her spiritual purgation.

### **Conclusion**

In the words of Swami Vivekananda, "What is material and what is not? When the world is the end and God is the means to attain that end, that is material. When God is the end and the world is only the means to attain that end, spirituality has begun." (Vivekananda, 66) When our goal is to attain material pleasures of the world and we pray to the Almighty to help us in this regard; that is materialism. But when we focus on the Divine Spiritual Reality and use this journey of life on earth to attain the Holy Spirit; that is Spiritualism. The ultimate goal is union with the Divine as it casts aside all our delusions. Anita Desai presents intense trials and tribulations of her women protagonists like those of Ila Das, the solitary existence of Nanda Kaul and that of Raka. All Nanda Kaul ever wanted was "to be alone, to have Carignano to herself in this period of her life when stillness and calm were all that she wished to entertain." (*Fire*, 18) Nanda's realisation regarding the reality of her life towards the end of the novel signals the completion of a spiritual journey. This spiritual trial by fire gives expression to a deeper spiritual presence in *Fire on the Mountain*.

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