

Ethical Dimensions in Anita Desai's *Fire On The Mountain*

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Abstract

The paper explores the moral, ethical dilemmas brought on by the conflict between consciousness of one's roles and responsibilities towards others and personal convictions about one's duty towards oneself in Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain*. The concept of Dharma (ethics) - whether as a set of moral principles/value systems that we have internalized or as the right ways of living which have bearing on human behavior - has multiple dimensions in the society and in literary works which fundamentally reflect various aspects of a society. In this paper an honest endeavor has been made to address various issues through two elderly women characters such as - When consciousness of moral laws come into conflict with individual liberty and preservation of happiness, what ought to be one's course of action?

Key words: Moral dilemma, dharma, dimensions, consciousness, barrenness.

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Introduction

Fire On The Mountain, the Winifred Holtby Memorial Prize (1977) and the Sahitya Akademy Award (1978) winning novel of Anita Desai explores the moral/ethical dilemmas brought on by the conflict between consciousness of one's roles and responsibilities towards others (hammered onto one's psyche since childhood) and personal convictions about one's duty towards oneself as an individual. A work of literature must have the responsibility to be 'on the side of life', to borrow F.R. Leavis' terms as there is interaction of life and literature. Just as moral awareness reflects quality of life, moral preoccupations characterize a novelist's area of interest. Discussing the essential greatness of novelists in the critical text *The Great Tradition*, Leavis opines that "they are all distinguished by a vital capacity for experience, a kind of reverent openness before life, and a marked moral intensity" (quoted in Lodge, P. 69). David Lodge, another great literary critic, however, objects to the putting of notions like 'moral intensity' at the very centre of critical judgment in view of the fact that "they are not really literary concepts, but ethical ones" (P. 71). Nevertheless, he further adds that literary artists and critics have some kind of understanding of the moral life as

"moral values come into play in the study of literature" (P. 71) and hence critics should not "refrain from discussing the moral dimension of novels in the course of reaching a literary evaluation" (P. 72) though the criteria must be controlled by the aesthetic experience. The novel studies two solitary lives - a great grandmother, leading the life of a recluse in the Hills of Kasauli and a lifelong friend of hers, a spinster trying to make ends meet in the nearby villages in the Himalayan foothills as a Government Social Welfare worker. Their past and present are shown as caught in the cross-currents of moral laws sanctioned by society, culture and age-old traditions on one hand and of moral judgments based on their own convictions i.e. a particular moral code on the other. The paper, therefore, approaches the concept of Dharma (ethics) through literary language and its linguistic devices (paradox, irony, tension etc.) generated through the writer's careful arrangement of words and through the usage of figurative language (images, symbols, metaphor, similes etc.) to communicate ideas, feelings, suggestions that may lead to one of the various dimensions of Dharma. Literary language creates through the writer's special arrangement, 'an aesthetic experience, a world of its own', to use Lois Tyson's terms as it "depends on connotation: on the implication, association, suggestion, and evocation

of meanings and shades of meaning” (P. 138). It is also expressive as “it communicates tone, attitude and feeling”. The paper analyses the concept of dharma in the novel based on the concrete experiences of the characters expressed through literary language and not mainly from the point of view of Indian philosophical traditions and ethical doctrines. Therefore, emphasis is laid on the emotional stress and psychological trauma that the two women characters have lived through owing to their finer sensibilities being trampled upon, making them feel neglected, lonely and helpless. The concept of Dharma (ethics) - whether as a set of moral principles/value systems that we have internalized or as the right ways of living which have bearing on human behavior, has multiple dimensions in the society and in literary works which fundamentally reflect various aspects of a society. Generally, it has to do with human thoughts and actions having moral worth, of doing and thinking the right way for the sake of righteousness. Individually, it has to do with doing and thinking the right way in one’s own context, called for by the struggle for existence, self protection and individual rights. In S. Cromwell Crawford’s words “In its broadest sense, dharma represents the ethical laws of the Universe which regulate the moral life in the same way as the laws of nature govern the physical world.” (P. 133). In Hinduism, dharma is one of the oldest philosophical concepts dealing with man’s moral and spiritual nature. It is one of the basic ‘four ends of life or Purusarthas’ (P. 131). Its meaning in the context of a Purusartha is “the performance of right action out of a consciousness of moral law” (P. 133). Performance of right action is the main cause of concern for the two characters, but the most pertinent question is- from whose point of view, right action is to be determined? Is it from the point of view of the individual concerned or from other’s perspective? When consciousnesses of moral laws come into conflict with individual liberty and preservation of happiness, then what course of right action one ought to follow? An honest endeavour has been made to address the issues in this paper.

Having led their lives, sharing common set of rules, customs, habits, beliefs and education and having experienced the same fate of being cast aside and forced to live in isolation, the two women continue

their long and weary journey of life. When the novel opens, the great grandmother is living a life of a recluse in the Hill house wishing to sever ties with the outside world, specially with her painful past and its remnants- “bags and letters, messages and demands, requests, promises and queries, she had wanted to be done with them all”(p.3). Attending to demands and requests would mean that she has to, once again, relive her past life of roles and responsibilities, to perform her duties towards others when she is already tired with her multiple role playing. Wishing to leave her domesticated and claustrophobic world of her past behind her, here, in the hills -“she wanted no one and nothing else, whatever else came, or happened here, would be an unwelcome intrusion and distraction.” (p.3). The line has strong undercurrents of willful rejection of any kind of involvement which would become an intrusion on her personal space and time.

Having convinced herself that her barren life in the hills among the rocks and pines with abundance of light and air is what she has always wanted and hoped for, she appears to be pleased, “what pleased and satisfied her ... was its barrenness ... its starkness” (p.4). The terms “barrenness” - bare and unproductive and “starkness” - unpleasant and colorless, suggest that there is a link between the physical barrenness of the landscape with the emotional emptiness and lifelessness of the woman who has led a traumatic, claustrophobic and colorless life. How scarred her emotional life has been is revealed when she refused to watch the birds feeding its nestlings, a sight others would have delighted in. To understand why barrenness and signs of neglect appeal to her more than the signs of nurture and security gained by staying close with others, one must go back to her past.

As the wife of a Vice-Chancellor of a University in Punjab, she has been at the centre of a small but intense and busy life, presiding over countless numbers of dinners, lawn parties, always dressed in silk (as per her husband’s wishes), planning and preparing every single detail, entertaining his guests, relatives, family and attending to the needs of a large number of children, their tutors and managing servants in a large household. Her life has been like a whirlpool, always on the move and

“she was the still, fixed eye in the centre” (p.24). She has been vexed with the shortage of privacy in her husband’s house with the disordered and noisy children, the unpredictable excess of relatives and their unwanted presence and the orders from the room of her mother-in-law. Performing her duties as a wife, mother and daughter-in-law on one hand and as the elegant wife of a V.C on the other, she has blindly followed with an “ironic bow to duty that no one had noticed or defined” (p.19) the ‘dharma’ of a woman, the indefinable codes of conduct, morally, socially and culturally sanctioned. Her own wishes and aspirations as a human being, her personal moral convictions that may be the opposite of the socially and culturally sanctioned moral duties – have never mattered to anyone, not to her husband, not to her children who all seem alien to her nature. It has never occurred to others that she has exhausted all her energy and time, having buried all her dreams and passions in the deep recesses of her heart, compelled to live her life for others. What makes continuous her one-hour-long afternoon rest, practicing stillness and composure, closing her eyes while trying to shut out sound from invading her - the only time she could call her own as even her husband has to accept and respect it. The afternoon rest is taken not because she could literally rest but to prove her point that she has accomplished her duty towards others and that she needs some space and time of her own that each and everyone ought to understand. She does it intentionally by way of getting her importance and recognition accorded to.

Now that she has come to the hill in the twilight of her life after the death of her husband and after all her children have established themselves, she feels that she has discharged all her duties and hopes that others would also discharge her. But sadly she comes to realize that her duty towards others is not yet over when she, all of a sudden, receives two unwanted pieces of information – one, her friend’s visit and two, her great grand-daughter’s stay with her to recuperate after a prolonged illness. Once again, as in the past, no one has asked her opinion – her friend invites herself to tea and her daughter simply informs her about the child’s arrival. Their coming into her life would mean opening the old and thick ledger of her past, the repetition of the same old boring and tiresome daily routine, forcing

her to participate in their lives while performing her duties towards them.

She has to start practicing that ‘stillness’, that ‘composure’ once more in order to stop letting the unwelcomed presence of others disturb her peace of mind (which has been achieved only in the end of her life) and calmness of heart which has been accomplished as an art over the years. Therefore, she decides “she would be a charred tree trunk in the forest, a broken pillar of marble in the desert, a lizard on a stone wall” (p.23) so as not to harbor irritation or annoyance like the natural objects. The images and symbols here evoke a picture of a life that is so broken and charred that there is no balm that can heal the wounds of a life full of emotional scars, cowering under her consciousness of her dharma towards others, living the right way of life for others. The irony of her situation is that no one can escape from one’s past, do away with one’s duties and responsibilities and achieve the status of calmness and stillness unless death comes. She, therefore, faces a moral dilemma – whether she should continue shouldering other’s responsibilities as she has always done without any choice as someone who is conscious of her ‘dharma’ towards others or she should choose her own “dharma” based on her moral convictions, not as a part and parcel of a society but as an individual who is answerable only to herself. To grasp the depth of the great grand-mother’s moral dilemma, Crawford’s notions of Objective and Subjective Ethics in Hinduism have been brought in. With regard to Objective Ethics, he observes,

“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)

Subjective Ethics is one step ahead of Objective Ethics in as much as the former is concerned with virtues which are superior to duties represented by the latter. He further observes,

“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 sum up, on the stage of Objective Ethics, an individual is bound by moral duties and on the stage of Subjective Ethics, after ‘purification of the mind’ duty is transformed into virtue. In the event of the great grand-mother having taken her first option which is in tune with objective ethics, then she can fulfil her dharma towards her great granddaughter and her friend. However, it would deprive her of her privacy, restrict her freedom of movement and put an end to her carefree ways of life. In the event of her second option being chosen, it would ensure her a life on her own terms unfettered by the chains of duty. However, it would suggest that she is devoid of fellow-feeling, sympathy and acts of benevolence which are indispensable for establishment of lasting relationships. Apparently her second option seems different from the concept of subjective ethics as the great grand-mother has turned inward focusing only on her personal well being, leaving behind the idea of virtuous actions. But, the great grandmother herself is a paradox – taking a studied resolution to ignore the child as well as to refuse her friend’s visit, her heart melts with tenderness at the sight of their abject helplessness despite her proud and unmoving exterior. Her silence, her haughty pose betrays her wounded self to hide which she has built a wall around her heart concerned only about guarding her inner life. She accepts their dependency on herself not because she is duty bound but because of her consciousness of doing the right thing, of her individualistic morality or else, she would have refused as she seemingly wants to, to accept any kind of intrusion to her private life.

Why she does not like the child’s entry into her life is solely because of her fear of losing her privacy which she has been guarding religiously as the child would demand her time and participation as a caregiver, a role she is tired of. And her friend has been a part and parcel of her life since childhood who seems to have followed her out of her past.

Her reluctance to receive her friend stems from her apprehension that her friend might rake up her past reminding her of the painful memories 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 long life of duty and obligation” (p.48).

Born to an affluent family, given piano and music lessons taught by English governesses, taught to sing nursery rhymes by skirted nannies; the friend and her sister had a privileged upbringing. But then tragedy struck the family - the three drunken brothers who had been sent to foreign universities, squandered all of their allowances in luxury and on racecourses and finally after the father’s death due to stroke, drove out their mother with the broken hip and their sisters of their home without a single penny after depriving them of the last of their jewellery. The two sisters suddenly found themselves ill-equipped to face reality and yet keeping their heads high based solely on their will, started working –one giving piano lessons and another, with the help of her friend (the great grandmother), teaching in the Home Science College where the great grandmother’s husband was the Vice Chancellor. The education they had received, the piano, singing and French lessons they had learnt were of no use in facing the harsh realities of life while they always thought of having received the best. During this period of her life when the friend felt safe and secure, working as a teacher, sure of her meals and a bed in the hostel, she had enjoyed a brief moment of respite when she could even join the lawn parties and play mix doubles in the badminton court in the VC’s house. However, this period of respite came to an abrupt ending when she was superseded by one of her junior colleagues in filling up the post of the Principal of her college. In the situation as befitting her upbringing and education, she was constrained to tender resignation to keep her pride and honour intact. Her moral conviction rendered her to run from pillar to post in search of a job rather than undergo humiliation, thereby solving her moral dilemma- whether to go ahead and continue with her job despite humiliation or to quit the job at the face of humiliation- based on her ethical principles. She once again was rescued from her predicament

by her friend, the great grandmother, by finding a job of spreading knowledge about health, hygiene, ill-effects of superstition and child marriage as a social welfare worker.

Now, the friend in ancient white court shoes with a broken brown umbrella, a little grey top knot, spectacles that is tied with a ribbon to stop it from falling off her nose, is a caricature, a ghost of the past. She has been taunted and derided, bumped into and jeered at by mobs so much that she has become accustomed to it now, accepting her abject helplessness while her eyes blinked tearfully. There seems to be hardly any connection between her luxurious and sheltered childhood and her pathetic present life except for her shrill voice. Having failed to put her away out of sight and out of mind, the great grandmother has to welcome her friend who comes floating like a bit of crumpled paper.

Despite her resolution not to appear concerned about others the great grandmother realizes after seeing her friend that she is still concerned and worried about her. As a result she cautions her friend to be careful about threats received from the father of a 7 year old girl whose marriage has been arranged to an elderly widower with children just because he owns a piece of land and two goats. At an unguarded moment, the great grandmother desires to invite her friend to come and stay with her but the fear of her friend intruding upon her closely guarded privacy restrains her from doing so.

Walking back to her hut in the village after returning from the market empty handed, unable to afford anything for her meals, the friend shivers thinking about the long, cold and hungry nights ahead before she could get her salary. 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. Nevertheless, she could not bring herself to ask for help from her friend who has always been her savior as her voice of conscience stopped her from becoming a burden to her friend. This is her definition of dharma just as her friend considered it her dharma to preserve her privacy even if it means ignoring her friend’s

plight. Each of these two women has chosen their personal moral dimensions not based on others’ moral concerns but depending on their own moral convictions and principles, however seldom such decisions occur. In this situation the final tragedy strikes her when the father of the 7 year old girl who has been lying in wait in the dark, rapes and murders her in the most inhuman way. The picture is heart rending “crushed back, crushed down in the earth, she lay raped, broken, still and finished. Now it was dark” (p.143). The writer’s choice of words are associated with violence – ‘crushed’, ‘raped’, ‘broken’, raising various questions emphasizing on the imagery of destruction, on actions devoid of humanity, morality and finally a complete negation of ethical concerns. The physical darkness of the night merges with the symbolical darkness of the human action of violence against human values where everything is finished, dark, giving an image of life as a complete wasteland devoid of moral, religious and human principles. When the great grandmother receives the news about the rape and murder of her friend, her first reaction is to take the news as a lie just as she has created a web of lies to captivate the child’s attention and she has woven a fantasy world full of lies about her past. She has chosen her world of lies to escape from her reality and has made others believe that she herself has chosen, of her own volition, her life as a recluse. But with the reality of her friend’s death her life of lies crumbles into dust, making her accept that “She did not live here alone by choice – she lived here alone because that was what she was forced to do, reduced to doing” (p. 145). How crisis or traumatic experience brings about a change in one’s life can be understood clearly as Lois Tyson puts,

“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 deeply troubled as she now comes to realize that she ought to have, out of her own freewill, helped her friend to lessen her problems. She feels that her friend’s tragedy could have been averted had she opened her heart to her friend to seek counsel or given her friend a chance to relieve her

heavy heart. The weight of this guilt, for not being able to be virtuous to invite her friend despite understanding the fact that staying with her is the need of the hour for her friend though she has not expressly asked for, is too heavy for her to cry aloud and this resultantly chokes her and costs her life and it is how her great grand-daughter finds her “on the stool with her head hanging” (p. 145). However, before her death she has finally accepted the truth about her past, provoked by her friend’s reality, which she has been hiding not only from others but from herself too 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 could not marry because she belonged to another religion. What traumatized her in the past was the fact that she not only had to hide her husband’s infidelity but she also had to put up with and welcome the other woman’s presence in her house while upholding her pride as a wife. She has always wanted to cover up these aspects of her life with her web of lies but at the very end it comes out as an inescapable reality with indomitable force.

Conclusion

The fire at the end of the novel set by the great grand-daughter on the mountain symbolically puts an end to her world of lies. It also symbolize a funeral pyre that purifies every trace of human experience. The stark ending of the novel raises many issues regarding the way we live our lives – should one live one’s life in terms of one’s own ethical principles even if it invites criticism for ignoring one’s dharma to others or should one live for others even to the extent of sacrificing one’s own mental and emotional well being just to fulfill one’s dharma towards others. The answers and the different dimensions each of us decide to take will be different, influenced by one’s moral, social, personal and religious principles or ethics. However, what one must not forget is the basic fundamental goodness of human beings to be able to take choices based on different concepts of dharma which would allow one to live and let live.

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