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From Struggle to Liberation: The Journey of Women in Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* and Imayam's *Beasts of Burden*

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Abstract

Anita Desai, a renowned Indian diasporas writer through her novel *Fire on the Mountain* presents a glimpse of the burning issues of female struggle to survive in a male- dominated society. Her novel deals with Nanda Kaul, who is depressed and anxious due to her indifferent and unloving husband. Imayam wrote many novels and short stories dealing with caste discrimination, patriarchy, women's sufferings, injustice and oppression. The writings crafted by Anita Desai stand as a compelling testament to the changing roles of women, surpassing societal expectations and mirroring the transformative voyage from pre-independence to the present time.

Though both, Imayam and Anita Desai, wrote in different periods of time, they spoke about issues related to women who are torn between hope and despair in patriarchal societies. The marginalized women workers, such as washerwomen, in the novel the *Beast of Burden*, endured sexual violence from the village head of the upper caste. The present paper analyses two different types of women suffering – one type like Arokkyam, rises above the sufferings and faces life indomitably, whereas the other type like Nanda Kaul, unable to face sufferings, breaks down physically and mentally. Concepts related to existentialism with its fear, alienation, absurdity, prejudice, and escapism is used in the analysis of the characters.

Key words : *Dalit, Existence, Marginalization, Oppression, Patriarchy, Rural, Suffering, Struggle, Urban, Violence.*

> "As women achieve power, the barriers will fall. As society sees what women can do, as women see what women can do, there will be more women out there doing things, andwe'll all be better off for it". — Sandra Day O'Connor

Introduction

Indian writing in English is a bright canvas that captures the complexities of India's social fabric, with an emphasis on the voices of underrepresented groups. Women from underprivileged communities have frequently been underrepresented or omitted from popular narratives due to gender, caste, class,

religion, geography, or other socioeconomic considerations. The experiences of such marginalised women have been illuminated by a number of Indian writers in English, especially women, who through their notable contributions have addressed these voices in recent decades.

The intricate caste and societal hierarchies permeating Indian society had its impact on the position of women in society. Discrimination against marginalized women, whether from lower castes, tribal communities, religious minorities, or rural areas, has been exacerbated by factors such as caste, class, and religion in addition to gender. Over the years, numerous authors have employed English or a regional language as a means of asserting the voices and experiences of people who are at the margins of society. The intersection of gender and caste is one of the most important themes, as women from lower castes—especially Dalit women—face oppression based on both caste and patriarchy. The autonomy and resiliency that underprivileged women acquire to combat oppression is a prominent theme in their writing. As they navigate patriarchal structures and social conventions, their battle is frequently both personal and collective.

The present paper is an attempt to portray the sufferings of women due to patriarchy and caste taking for an analysis the novel *Fire on the Mountain* by Anita Desai dealing with the sufferings of an urban woman under the tyranny of patriarchy and another novel *Beasts of Burden* by Imayam focusing on a rural woman encountering difficulties due to caste.

Desai's novels, originally written and published in English, caters to a worldwide readership, and represent the views of urban, educated, and frequently privileged women. The use of English shapes her narrative style, with a focus on psychological introspection and existential themes, which are accessible to a wider, predominantly elite readership. Considered one of the leading writers of south India, Imayam seeks to present the lives of ordinary women and men living on the fringes in the northern coastal districts of Tamil Nadu, their everyday problems and inequalities in a language that employs raw candour. Imayam's work, initially written in Tamil, and translated into English carries the cultural and linguistic distinctiveness of a particular context.

When Desai's narratives frequently centre on the existential struggles of urban, upper-class or upper-caste women, despite the fact that these struggles are significant, but they exist within a framework of privilege where caste and extreme deprivation are largely absent, Imayam's work vividly depicts the lived realities of Dalit women, highlighting caste-based discrimination, systemic oppression, and economic deprivation. His narratives not only draw attention to the intersection of caste and gender but also highlight the resilience of Dalit women in the face of such adversity.

As demonstrated in books like *Fire on the Mountain*, Anita Desai frequently explores the psychological depth of her characters by examining their internal conflicts and problems with identity, alienation, and self-understanding. Similar to this, Imayam concentrates on the mental and emotional

anguish of his characters, illustrating their struggles within a culture characterized by strict conventions, caste systems, and individual struggles. For example, *Beasts of Burden* explores the psychological conflicts of the protagonist, which are influenced by societal circumstances. Complex family dynamics and the duties of women in the home are regularly examined in Desai's works, which typically show their loneliness and hardships. Imayam also depicts family relationships, particularly the ways in which family members are impacted by society structures. Imayam depicts persons whose private lives are impacted by more general societal viewpoints.

Desai is renowned for reflecting the inner emotions of her characters through the use of vivid imagery and symbolism, especially those associated with nature. The emotional terrain of her characters is frequently portrayed through her pictures. Similar symbolism is used by Imayam, especially in the way he mirrors his characters' emotional and psychological states through the use of animals, rural settings, and other natural aspects. Both *Beasts of Burden* and *Fire on the Mountain* are moving examinations of both individual and societal hardships that provide deep understanding of women's life. Imayam's work concentrates on social realism and caste discrimination, whereas Desai's tends toward psychological and existential topics within an upper-middle-class setting. Notwithstanding these variations, both writers are dedicated to capturing resilience, estrangement, and the personal cost of social expectations.

Introduction to Anita Desai

Diaspora literature is written by writers living outside their homeland and characterised by alienation, isolation, nostalgia, search for identity, and constant displacement of the self. It deals with migrant consciousness and focuses on the life of migrants and their internal and external conflicts in a foreign land. Displacement, fragmentation, marginalization, identity and cultural conflicts and others such issues faced by migrants are themes widely reflected in contemporary Indian writing in English. By portraying these themes along with multiculturalism and universal aspects of human existence, diasporic literature occupies a prominent place in world literature.

Anita Desai is one of the most influential novelists in Indian literature in English. She has won the Sahitya Academy Award for the novel *Fire on the Mountain* in 1978. She has presented in her work female characters and the problems they face in a patriarchal society. Women have been given a secondary place since ancient times and there has been a need for women to fight for their rights. Even in western countries, women had to wage a long battle for the right to vote, and equal pay for equal work. Women are victimized in many countries. Their voice for equality began as a socio-political development, which slowly gained momentum with advancements in different fields, including writing. Feminists share a deep concern about the portrayal of women in writing and women's mental struggles and problems that were brought before the public, raising significant issues regarding the portrayal of women in literature.

Nanda Kaul's Longing for a Quiet life

Anita Desai is an adept in dealing with the lonely experiences of women characters. The novel *Fire on the Mountain*, deals with the protagonist Nanda Kaul's experiences in her journey from adulthood to old age. She was the wife of the Vice Chancellor of a university. She became weary of her responsibilities and loveless life. After the death of her husband, she moved to Kasauli to live a quiet life. In spite of her old age she wanted to live alone inher isolated cottage at Carignano in Kasauli, a mountain in India.

Embracing solitude in silence, Nanda Kaul lived in harmony with nature. She enjoyed the moments of gentle breeze weaving her thoughts and ideas together in peace to make these magical moments unforgettable. She saw the birds fighting and playing with each other; listened to the chirping of birds and the fluttering of wings and kept thinking. The rustling of the leaves in the gentle breeze created a warm feeling inside her.

> She had practised this stillness, this composure, for years, for an hour every afternoon: it was an art, not easily acquired. The most difficult had been those years in that busy house where doors were never shut, and feet flew, or tramped, without ceasing. She remembered how she had tried to shut out sound by shutting out light, how she had spent the sleepless hour making out the direction from which a shout came, or a burst of giggles, an ominous growling from the dogs, the spray of gravel under bicycle wheels on the drive, a contest of squirrels over the guavas in the orchard, the dry rattle of eucalyptus leaves in the sun, a drop, then spray and rush of water from a tap. All was subdued, but nothing was ever still. (Anita Desai 1977: 33-34)

Since she enjoyed her solitude, she was determined to be alone and became annoyed when her privacy was disturbed by the visit of the postman or the maid.

Nanda Kaul's house was simple, with open windows and white walls. Rising to the top of the slope in her garden, she observed with bitterness as the postman lumbered towards Carignano, a bored kid bopping beside him. She saw the postman coming up the hill, fearing that he might deliver a letter and ruin her quiet time. Nanda Kaul averted her gaze. She enjoyed being in her house surrounded by natural objects and the author narrates beautifully her experience in Carignano:

> Everything she wanted was here, at Carignano, in Kasauli. Here, on the ridge of the mountain, in this quite house. It was the place, and the time of life, that she had wanted and prepared for all her life – as she realized on her first day at Carignano, with a great, cool flowering of relief –and at last she had it. She wanted no one and nothing else. Whatever else came, or happened here, would be an unwelcome intrusion and distraction. (Anita Desai 1977:13)

Raka's Arrival: an Intrusion

Nanda Kaul's grand-daughter Tarahad a violent and philandering spouse in Rakesh; so she became an

unhappy and worried woman who frequently experienced mental breakdowns. Tara's daughter Raka is another important character in the novel. As she apprehended, the letter Nanda Kaul received from the postman was from her daughter Asha, requesting her to take care of her granddaughter Raka, the great-granddaughter of Nanda Kaul. Raka was recovering from typhoid, but her despondent mother Tara was heading to Geneva to try to reconcile with her violent and harsh diplomat husband Rakesh. Desai explains the situation:

> Tara's husband was given a new posting... in Geneva, and Asha had persuaded her daughter to go with him, to give him another chance. There was the little problem of their child who was only just recovering from a near-fatal attack of typhoid, but Asha was sure they would find a way to deal with this minor problem. The main thing, she had trumpeted, was for Tara to rouse herself and make another try at being a successful diplomat's wife. Surely Geneva would be an excellent place for such an effort. (Anita Desai 1977: 24)

Asha would not be able to take Raka with her because she had to rush to" Bombay at the end of the month to help Vina [her daughter] with her confinement" (Anita Desai 1977:25). Hence, she requested her mother, Nanda Kaul, to look after Raka.

The novel reflects on the silence and solitude of the old woman Nanda Kaul's deserted life and the anguish that follows. After the demise of her husband, she shifted to Kausali, far from the city, in search of happiness and peace among the hills and pinecones. Asha's news about her granddaughter Raka coming over to her, disturbed Nanda Kaul's peaceful seclusion and she was irritated in the beginning. She wanted to stay away from everyone to be alone in Carignano, as she no longer wished to continue with her responsibilities or ties. But Asha's letter about Raka's arrival annoyedher. It is worthwhile to make a note of Sartre's views in this regard: "Existence is not something which lets itself be thought of from a distance: it must invade you suddenly, master you, weigh heavily on your heart like a great motionless beast—or else there is nothing more at all" (Sartre 1969: 177).

Nanda Kaul wish to Escape from her Unhappy Past

Nanda Kaul, before coming to Carignano, led an unhappy life since her patriarchal husband was indifferent to her. She never enjoyed her married life. To add to her sufferings, she discovered that her husband, who was the Vice Chancellor of the university, was having an affair with Miss David, a mathematics teacher. Nanda wanted to be alone, away from his pointless existence. Desai depicts Nanda Kaul's life as a continuous internal struggle–Nanda Kaul's husband never showed any affection to her but was bent on getting the responsibilities related to his position fulfilled. He was so greedy and treacherous that he wanted Nanda Kaul to assume the role of the ever-loving hostess, to amuse the visitors in the dining room by sitting atop a large table draped in silk. He wanted to show off that he had a good family. Nanda Kaul suffered silently because of his fastidious nature. But even after his

death and her move to Carginano to live her own life, things did not go smoothly for her. When she did not want any disturbance or intrusion, the letter from her daughter came announcing the arrival of Raka.

Nanda Kaul became worried when she got the news from her daughter Asha about the visit of her great granddaughter. When she needed freedom and a peaceful environment, the letter came to disturb her. Her expression changed as she read her daughter's letter. Jean Paul Sartre's words from his work *Nausea* rightly fit in while describing her condition: "I want to leave, to go somewhere where I should be really in my place, where I would fit in… but my place is nowhere; I am unwanted. . . ." (Sartre 1969: 164). Her great- granddaughter would come to spoil her solitude.

Raka seeking Solace in Nature

Despite her innocent appearance, Raka is a quiet girl who disliked being around others. Being the daughter of an abusive and cruel father, who was also an alcoholic, Raka became despondent and lonely even at her young age. She saw her father hitting her mother brutally. As Anamika Majhi points out in her article" The Marital Discord: an Analytical Study in Anita Desai's Novels *Fire on the Mountain*",

> Visible reasons why married couples find marriage as an intimidating bond is that they face issues like lack of trust, mutual respect, love and understanding in their relationship. It is thus clear that catastrophe in the married world of Anita Desai's fiction arises basically because of unreliable incompatibility. What Desai pleads is a balance, a midway between the two extremes of practicality and fantasy and that is the only way to arrive at a fruitful solution of the problem of marital discord. This is an issue which is cause of anxiety to all times. (Anamika Majhi 2018: 515)

The lack of parental love drove Raka lonely, and she found consolation in the world of nature. The desolate, dilapidated, and barren landscapes of Kasauli, reflected her inner turmoil and hence drew her in.

Woman's Pivotal Role in Family

Anita Desai highlights the agony of women due to the torture given by various members of the family and society. Married women are chained and burdened with all kinds of heavy responsibilities throughout their life. Women plan and work tirelessly for the welfare of the family. Their unconditional love, uncompromising care and untainted affection make the family chariot move forward. The happy journey of a family begins with the embrace of a woman who is an elegant wife, a caring mother, and a humble daughter-in-law who fulfils all her duties. The journey becomes triumphant due to the greatness of a magical mother. Desai presents the internal conflicts of the female character fighting against the odds. As a female novelist, Desai has carved a niche for herself by exploring the emotional world of women and bringing to light various deep forces in female consciousness and psychology.

The arrival of her granddaughter Raka was like an intrusion in Nanda Kaul's peaceful life. Memories of the unpleasant past and the unhappy and burden some tasks Nanda Kaul had carried out emerged now and then and filled her with pain. She had always been busy with thankless, endless household chores. Her memories reminded her of the hectic life she had been leading in those days – sewing, sweeping, cleaning, supervising the cooking, instructing the servants, caring for the three children, and receiving her husband's guests.

On the outside, Nanda Kaul enjoyed the comforts and social status of a leader's wife: but deep down, she felt lonely, dissatisfied and neglected. She was a dutiful wife who met the needs of her husband and children. But the relationship between the husband and wife was strained. His extra-marital relationship with Miss David was a factor in the unhealthy relationship. Emotional deprivation was the root of Nanda Kaul's disillusionment with life. Her husband did not love her as a wife but regarded her as a necessary tool to run his family effectively. Even after knowing about the illicit relationship, she did not confront her husband but suffered pain in silence. She was entirely under the control of her husband. The author vividly paints the traumatic married life of Nanda Kaul, who is a representative of Indian women who live their lives for their children, husbands, family and society. Rajnesh Kumar, in his article titled "Feminism in the Novels of Anita Desai: A Critical Exploration" brings out the themes of Anita Desai in the following manner: "Anita Desai's exploration of female identity stands as a central theme in herbody of work, reflecting a keen understanding of the intricate nuances that shape women's lives with in the context of Indian society. Throughout her novels, Desai crafts narratives that delve into the complexities of female protagonists grappling with questions of identity, autonomy, and societal expectations" (Rajnesh Kumar 2024: 412).

Women in Male-dominated Society

In a world dominated by men, women's likes, desires, and talents are buried deep in their hearts. Women's wishes are brought to the notice of others only at times by authorities who can scan their minds and hearts from different angles and circumstances. Anita Desai is an avid reader of women's thoughts. When Nanda Kaul wanted to settle in a peaceful place, free from the shackles of endless duties and responsibilities, she was called upon to care for, comfort, and communicate with another human being, her granddaughter Raka. The news of her arrival upset her. M.K. Subashini in her article "Alienation and Isolation in the Novel, *Fire on the Mountain* by Anita Desai" compares Nanda Kaul's life in Carignanoto a river." Her life at Carignano can be rightly compared to the surface of the river which is very clear and it reflects isolation. The arrival of the granddaughter is like a stone thrown on the surface of river where her isolation is disturbed forming ripples" (M.K. Subashini 2014: 3).

Nanda Kaul's childhood friend Illa Das came to Carignanoto see Raka. After losing her employment at the university, she became an officer in the social welfare department. She had been working to prevent child marriages by educating the community about the drawbacks of the custom. Preet Singh,

the father of a local child bride, raped and killed Ila Das, when she protested against his plan of getting his seven-year-old daughter married to an old man. Nanda Kaul was devastated when she learnt about Illa Das' death. Unaware of her great- grandmother's death, Raka hurried inside the house and exclaimed to everyone that she had started a fire in the forest.

In *Fire on the Mountain* Anita Desai addresses women's issues like suffering, subjugation and putting up with violence. The novel depicts Anita Desai's tragic philosophy of life, according to which decent people pay a heavy price for their goodness and endure unending suffering. The novel becomes a symbol of purging and devastation, of a cruel world full of countless women like Nanda Kaul, Tara and Ila Das, of unfair circumstances where women bear the brunt of tragedy, societal injustices, and injustices inflicted upon them by a barbaric culture of males. Women have made significant progress in the modern era compared to earlier periods, but they still have to go a long way.

Desai delves into the internal struggles and consciousness of her characters, often portraying their emotions and thoughts with profound sensitivity. Her narratives frequently explore themes of loneliness, identity, and the search for meaning in life. This psychological focus sets her apart from many contemporary Indian authors. Her prose is often poetic and layered with symbolism. Nature plays a recurring role in her narratives, serving both as a backdrop and a metaphor for her characters' emotional states. Example: In *Fire on the Mountain* (1977), the stark and isolating beauty of the Himalayan landscape mirrors Nanda Kaul's desire for solitude and detachment from the world.

Desai often examines existential dilemmas, portraying characters who grapple with their place in the world, their relationships, and their inner conflicts. These themes resonate with urban, educated readers familiar with modernist literature. She is deeply concerned with the lives of Indian women, particularly their struggles within rigid familial and societal structures. Her portrayal of gendered experiences is both empathetic and critical.

Desai's narratives often centre on middle-class or upper-class Indian families, focusing on their psychological and emotional challenges rather than systemic issues like caste or poverty. Example: Her characters, like Nanda Kaul in *Fire on the Mountain*, often come from privileged backgrounds, and the stories emphasize their personal struggles rather than broader social inequalities. Her writing style emphasizes introspection over action, favouring the development of mood and atmosphere. The slow, reflective pace allows readers to immerse themselves in the characters' inner worlds. Thus when Desai is concerned with the inner world of the characters, Imayam focuses more on the physical struggles and mental anguish felt by his characters.

Nancy Poornima, in the article titled "The Unheard Screams of Dalit Women in Imayam's '*Beast of Burden*'" states,

> ... through the character Arokkyam, we realise a Dalit woman untold pains, who experiences physical assaults, verbal abuse and sexual abuse. We could see the helpless pathetic condition which results in depression, loss of confidence, anxiety and fear for future. Some people fight back to bring betterment in their life and some fail to bring it. Imayam's '*Beast of Burden*' clearly conveys the far cry of the dalit

> woman in a washerman community. Dalit women are trapped in patriarchal societies; they face severe social discrimination as a dalit and a woman and deny them freedom in all spheres of life. Her screams and worries were unheard and unnoticed by anybody. (Nancy Poornima 2019: 957)

Introduction to *Beasts of Burden*

When the state of women and their sufferings are portrayed by a woman novelist from the perspective of a woman, it is interesting to note that writer Imayam also presents the condition and struggles of women in society. With his keen observation and insight, he is able to present the events that happen in the lives of women along with their experiences in a very realistic manner. Imayam's first book, *Koveru Kazhuthaigal* was published in 1994 with an intense depiction of casteism. Kazhuthai is associated with Vannan and Vannati, who are washermen. They live in places reserved for them doing this washing for generations. *Koveru Kazhuthaigal* translated into English as *Beasts of Burden*, depicts the life of the poverty-stricken Dalits, the way they lead their lives and meet their basic needs in a caste-oriented society. The novel, *Koveru Kazhuthaigal* accurately portrays the lifestyle of a low-caste woman, Arokkyam, and her family. Arokkyam used to participate in all the good and bad happenings in the village. Her help proved invaluable when girls attained puberty and women during their labour. Arokkyam's family also had certain responsibilities during funerals in the village.

Arokkyam and her Family

The novel is structured around two journeys undertaken by the protagonist Arokkyam – a pilgrimage of faith and a routine trip to her usual washing pond. The story begins with her pilgrimage to St. Anthony's Church, a journey of hope. Arokkyam's longtime dream was to go to that church. She went to the upper-class house, where she was working to get permission. Though they refused her permission at first, she managed to get permission to go to the church along with her husband, son, and daughter. When they reached the church, they could not find the priest there and were told that the priest would come in the afternoon. Arokkyam was upset. The author describes her condition in the following manner. 'Arokkyam refused to eat. Her heart was heavy. It always turned out like this when she came to this church. As soon as she had heard that the priest was not there, her hopes had wilted away. She took it as an ill omen' (Imayam 2019:30). Despiteall her troubles, her dream remained unfulfilled.

Sufferings of Dalit Women

The Dalit women have historically experienced persistent sexual assault and harassment. Rather than being considered real, flesh-and-blood humans, they are seen as objects to be toyed with. Chadayan, an upper-caste man in the novel was free to do as he pleased. Mary, Arokkyam's daughter was abused by him. One day, when her mother was unwell, she went to every house in the street to collect clothes.

Then Chadayan, who belonged to an upper caste, raped her. Though she struggled against him, he did not let her go. Mary was in agony as to whom she could tell this incident. She wept for a long time. Chastity was the only thing that was hers, and she could not protect that also. She cried bitterly. Later, when she came to her mother, Arokkyam guessed what could have happened to her daughter, and started crying. Even though there were men in their house, they could not do anything against such things, because they belonged to lower caste. The writer brings out Mary's condition in the following manner:

> Arokkyam asked Mary whether she would light the wood stove and make a little gruel. Mary was extremely exhausted and weary. She washed her swollen face, she left the house and came outside only after it had darkened completely. She sat down in front of the stove, still in tears. In the light of the burning stove, her face looked anguished. She cooked a handful of rice, making gruel for Arokkyam alone. The evening's collection of food would be sufficient for Savuri and Peter. Savuri ... called out to Mary three times ... It was only at the fourth call that Mary heard him. As if she had come to herself at last, she came to the threshold of the house. (Imayam 2019:130)

The Dalits are left helpless. They cannot do anything against in the upper caste people, even if they are insulted or ill-treated. Rashida Manjoo, in her report points out the condition of Dalit women: "The reality of Dalit women and girls is one of exclusion and marginalization.... They are often victims of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights violations, including sexual abuse and violence. They are often displaced; pushed into forced and/or bonded labour, prostitution and trafficking" (Rashida Manjoo: 2013). Besides being homemakers, women go out to work to help run their families without any financial strains. In their work places, they may be sexually harassed; at home they may have to put up with alcoholic husbands.

Due to triple oppression—based on caste, class, and gender—Dalit women suffer particular challenges that are highlighted by Dalit feminist theory. Dalit feminist theory emphasizes the unique social, economic, and cultural difficulties faced by Dalit women, whereas mainstream feminist thought frequently focuses on the hardships of upper-caste women. Dalit women face discrimination not only because they belong to a lower caste but also because they are women and frequently live in poverty. Caste, gender, and class all contribute to the double or triple marginalization of Dalit women. The life of Arokkyam is an example of this triple oppression as she suffers in the hands of her husband and upper caste people for whom she washes clothes and due to her poverty. Her daughter Mary also suffers harassment as she could not struggle against the upper caste people.

Arokkyam thrust into Existence

Arokkyam remained ignorant of many things happening in the world. She lived her entire life for her children. As Jean Paul Sartre says in his *Nausea*" I am the one who pulls myself from the nothingness to which I aspire: the hatred, the disgust of existing, there are as many ways to make myself exist, to

thrust myself into existence" (Sartre 1969: 99), Arokkyam did everything for her family without which she could not survive. She endured all hardships and pains for the sake of the family. Even small children would call Arokkyam a "Vannati woman". She did not get angry because she thought that it was beyond their humble community. Moreover, she had to do her job in peace. When Arokkyam developed such kind of tolerance, her son Peter was fed up with the kind of life they were leading. The following conversation between Arokkyam and Peter reveals that.

Why don't we just finish with this business once and for all?'

'Now what's the matter?'

'We'll ask people to give us our wages properly, in money.'

'Is that likely to happen?'

'And why not?'

'Do you think this is something that was set up yesterday or today?'

'Then why can't we keep a shop like my brother does?'

"Do you think we come from a line of Rajas to act out our wishes? We are people who can't so much as change our loincloths". (Imayam 2019:36)

Sufferings of the Marginalised women

These people did not have any time for themselves. They were always at the disposal of others. When Arokkyam and her husband Savuri were sleeping, Ramasamy, the Panchayat Joint President and Colony President, who belonged to the upper class, called on them. It was before the first light of dawn and Arokkyam was still half asleep. She could not recognize the caller in the darkness. She shook Savuri awake. 'Wake up, da, useless fool,' (Imayam 2019: 47) shouted Ramasamy. Savuri woke up startled. Savuri was deeply disturbed. For a moment his mind raced and they wondered why Ramasamy had come. Savuri and Arokkyam could not have any time, which they can call their own.

When Arokkyam's son Peter wanted to go to Madras, she criedover her son; she always worried about her daughter Mary. During Pongalshe felt sad because none of her children were with her. "She would be a mere corpse hereafter, abandoned by everyone, no one at all at her side. Who was there left to be her comfort? First Josep went away. Then Mary was gone. If peter too should go?...and why should he stay? Had they all actually planned to isolate her like this? And would the townsfolk stand for it?" (Imayam 2019: 223)

Arokkyam's daughter Mary also had her troubles and difficulties. She married her aunt's son, Diraviyaraj, and was taken to his village. Mary gave birth to a boy. Two years later her husband, Diraviyaraj died of a snake bite and Mary returned to her mother's village with her child. She joined her mother washing clothes and household chores. Arokkyam became heartbroken since she did not seem to have any relief from her sufferings.

Arokkyam had great affection for her village and people and treated them as her relatives. Moreover, her children had gone to different places and hence she was isolated from everyone. She says,

"Throughout my life I believed my children were everything to me. I don't need wealth, or comforts, or a big mansion. To this day, there is breath in my body only because of the thought that my children are about me. If it were not for them, I'd give up my life in an instant, saami" (Imayam 2019:222).

Arokkyam's Attempt to Rise above her Problems

When Nanda Kaul wanted to be away from human beings and human ties, Arokkyam wanted to be surrounded by her children. One became frustrated and despondent due to her experiences and relationships, the other one cherished her family ties. Arokkyam's work was on the wane, and new changes came to her village. A new laundry shop and tailor shops had also come up. Due to this, her career declined, and she became very depressed. She was tired of thinking about the change that came to the village; the villagers seldom searched for her.

Arokkyam woke up at midnight and broke into a loud lament. First she wept for Josep, then for May, and then again for Peter. She sang her laments in turn. She castigated the laundry man and the tailor. She wept aloud saying it was because of them that her family had scattered and fallen upon evil days. She complained about the townsfolk. At last she railed against Savuri for not allowing her to go and see Sahayam's child nor even to visit Mary. She wept until it was morning at last. (Imayam 2019: 291)

As a washerman, Savuri's father was unaware of how they initially arrived at that place. Given that Savuri established himself as the village's only was her man. At the novel's end, Arokkyam was seen carrying Mary's baby on her hip trying to hide her tears. Her daughter, Mary, followed from behind, and Savuri was leading the way. They kept disappearing as they walked. Neither their shadow, northeir footprints could be seen. "As they walked further and further, they looked like dark shadows. Then those shadows too diminished. They appeared as mere dots. Gradually the dots merged. A single dot. Even that diminished, disappeared. Like the bare sky, the horizon stretched, endless. Then just space. Empty space" (Imayam 2019: 332). This is the way of human life.

Comparison of the two writers

Anita Desai's and Imayam's female characters from the chosen works were analysed in terms of their choice, existence, and other aspects using the notions of existentialism. The leading existentialist figures are Arokkyam, Mary, Nanda Kaul, Raka, Asha, and Tara. Jean-Paul Sartre's views on existentialism are used in the analysis of the characters. Existentialism, which is dealt extensively with alienation, fear, absurdity, prejudice, escapism, and an overwhelming need for liberation, began influencing nearly all modern-day writers. Novelist Anita Desai, demonstrates a strong preference for the existentialist understanding of the human condition in *Fire on the Mountain*. Not only Nanda Kaul, but Raka, and Ila Das also suffer from loneliness and boredom. Similarly Arokkyam also suffers due to loneliness, lack of freedom and caste oppression. However, Nanda Kaul and Arokkyam try to find the purpose of their life.

Desai's work has been praised for its eloquence and depth but critiqued for its limited engagement with broader socio-political issues, such as caste and poverty. Her focus on elite and urban perspectives contrasts with the works of authors like Imayam, who foregrounds marginalized voices, Dalit experiences, particularly those of women, in a way that amplifies their resilience and humanity. His characters often fight against oppressive societal norms, highlighting their agency despite systemic barriers. His writing is informed by the traditions, dialects, and cultural nuances of rural Tamil Nadu, adding authenticity to his storytelling. Imayam's work explores the intersections of caste and gender, portraying how these identities compound oppression. His narratives often feature strong women characters like Arokkyam who challenge societal norms. By centring on Dalit women, his stories highlight their dual marginalization and their resilience in navigating oppressive systems.

The marginalization of characters is portrayed by both authors, although in distinct settings. Desai examines how women are emotionally and psychologically isolated in privileged yet constricting family and social settings. Imayam draws attention to the structural oppression that Dalits, and especially Dalit women, endure, highlighting their battles with prejudice based on gender and caste. The oppressed are given a voice in both situations, which promotes social awareness and empathy.

Conclusion

The present study explores the social reality of women's condition and explains the various forms of violence they face. The way caste, class and gender play a fundamental role in Indian society, has a history of organized violence against oppressed gender, caste and class communities in recent centuries. In most rural areas, streets, houses and neighbourhoods are organized primarily according to one's caste, class and religion. The present paper, thus tries to analyse the condition and struggles of women and how they undergo physical violence and mental trauma, in a gender based society in Anitha Desai's novel *Fire on the Mountain* and in a caste – ridden society in Imayam's novel *Beasts of Burden.*

With thought-provoking and frequently ambiguous endings, his novels examine the human condition in profoundly nuanced and frequently unnerving ways. His books do not provide easy answers to the issues they raise, but reveal the ingrained oppressive structures that impact his characters' lives, implying that although individual endeavours could offer a certain amount of comfort or self-satisfaction, the larger socio-political systems essentially remain the same. The endings of Imayam's books frequently function as a critique of society and personal stagnation, giving the reader the impression that although progress is gradual and hampered, the fight for equality and dignity is still essential.Women instead of succumbing to the circumstances, should rise above them and become empowered.

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