IV. FLAMES OF PURGATORY
Anita Desai in an interview with Jasbir Jain, had observed “But I’m quite sure that even adult life contains many traumatic experiences” (Jain: 1979, pp. 61-69). In the character of Nanda Kaul of Fire on the Mountain, we see the justification of her claim. Nanda Kaul, the elegant, old widow of a Vice Chancellor of Punjab University has now withdrawn to Carignano, a dry, dreary house in the foothills of Kasauli. Though she had stoically tolerated her husband’s infidelity, the trauma of it had scarred her for the entire life. Added to that, the callousness of her children has made her averse towards human relationship. Neither relationship nor responsibility engages her. So when her great-granddaughter Raka is sent to Kasauli to recoup from typhoid, while her parents try to mend their marriage for the last time, she feels disturbed and annoyed. The novel charts out Nanda’s growth: her change of heart from aversion of responsibility, to grudging involvement, to admiration and then attachment for Raka.

Jasbir Jain opines that in the “conflict between the need to withdraw in order to preserve one’s wholeness and sanity and the need to be involved in the peaceful process of life exists the theme of Fire on
the Mountain" (Dhawan: ed., 1993, p. 38). According to Asha Kanwar, "Nanda Kaul had more or less overcome the humiliation of erstwhile mechanical existence and the sting of remembrance is somewhat softened in the peaceful Kasauli atmosphere. Yet the attitude is the result of that very existence and something she cannot escape" (Kanwar: 1989, p. 91). Usha Bande sees in her need for isolation "the futility of human existence... a sickness of soul which is imposed from inside" (Bande: 1988, p. 91).

Fire on the Mountain is the story of Nanda Kaul, the mother of many children, and widow of an unfaithful man. She has spent her life in a whirlpool of activities, draped in silk and presiding over table, caring for others and has managed to seem like the "still, fixed eye in the centre of a whirlpool of activities" (p. 24). But now she has become useless, "still and empty" (p. 19). Her mind going back frequently to that period of life full of activities, the vividness of her memory, even that of a cane chair she used to sit on, belies her claim: "She had been so glad when it was over" (p. 32). And when she says "It had been a vocation that one day went dull and drought struck..." (p. 33), it delimits a key psychic situation: her resentment towards her callous, selfish children who neither
acknowledged nor reciprocated her labour nor her sacrifice. She now feels their memory is like a gorge, cluttered with heads. Hence, her memory now is more about her duties, her almost regal stature, than about her love and affection. She hardly ever recollects the husband but for his gestures, as the way he used to “plait his fingers across his stomach and slip heavy lids down over his eyes” (p.23) whenever Ila Das used to come to their house.

But after the death of the husband, and the children’s departure to their respective places of work, she is “left to the pines and cicadas alone” (p.3) at Carignano. She gloatingly claims: “It seemed so exactly right as a house for her...How could it ever have belonged to anyone else? What could it possibly have been like before Nanda Kaul came to it?” (pp.5-6).

The novel opens when Nanda Kaul taking a stroll through the pine trees sees the postman and feels irritated at the intrusion. She has revelled in the sparseness of this sequestered house. But unknown to her this house, Carignano, is witness to the jinxed past of some earlier residents. The military officer, who built the house, lived there a sad, lonely life, his sickly wife and all seven children dying before him. All
latter occupants met with a similar sad, troubled or unfortunate end. Irony, thus becomes an effective structural design in projecting Nanda Kaul’s bleak and dreary life and her troubled psyche. Raka’s arrival at Carignano adds to her woes.

Raka’s story is a reflection of Nanda’s life. Raka is Nanda’s great-granddaughter. Hailing from a disturbed family, with a violently abusive father and a “wet Jelly” (p.79) mother, Raka suffers from alienation and isolation. Nanda perceives Raka’s problems, but the hurt and rejection of her past stops her from making any commitment. Contrarily, Raka’s indifference stimulates Nanda’s need for companionship and love. Nanda “saw that she was the finished, perfected model of what Nanda Kaul herself was merely a brave, flawed experiment”(p.52). With this Nanda feels a “small admiration for her rise and stir”(p.53) and she stoops to win over Raka. So during a spell of heavy rain she narrates fabricated stories of adventure of her father and about a devoted husband to Raka. The stories are made captivating by her reading of the book on Marco polo. But the astute child sees through her lies and prefers the outer open landscape.
Ilé Das is another reminder of her past who keeps coming up in her life. Short and ugly she creates derision wherever she goes. As Nanda broods the “voice was Ilé Das’s tragedy in life” (p. 22). Though born and brought up in affluence, misfortune shadows her adult life. Parental chauvinism and apathy sees the family property bequeathed to the spendthrift brothers. The sisters find it hard to cope-up with the present misfortune and penury. At that moment, at Nanda’s behest, she is appointed as a teacher of home science in Mr. Kaul’s University. But after the death of Mr. Kaul, she perforce leaves her job. Homeless and jobless Nanda sees the sisters virtually scouring for food when Ilé gets a job as a welfare officer with an extremely meagre salary. Fate brings her back to Nanda’s path again when she is posted at Kasauli.

The opulence of her childhood is at sharp contrast to the penury of old age. But, she has neither lost her spirit nor her zeal for philanthropy.

Nanda is moved to welcome both Raka and Ilé at Kasauli. But her self-imposed withdrawal, her memory of the past desertion and humiliation, rankles her. Ilé Das is raped and murdered. The news of this violence forces Nanda to own up her “life-lie” : that except for economic security her life is equally humiliating and violent as of Ilé Das. The stories
that she has been feeding Raka with are only sustenance for her lonely nights.

The novel ends abruptly with Raka putting the forest on fire and coming to call Nanda Kaul; "‘Look, Nani, I have set the forest on fire. Look, Nani-look- the forest on fire.’ Tapping, then drumming, she raised her voice, to look in and saw Nanda Kaul on the stool with her head hanging, the black telephone hanging, the long wire dangling” (p.159). This surrealistic vision brings with it its own sadness and horror of Nanda’s existence although there is a thin silver lining: Raka addresses her as “Nani” ultimately, though she is not able to respond.

This ending of *Fire on the Mountain* highlights Anita Desai’s radical experimentation in the art of the novel, totally original and distinctively her own. In its form, the novel is an open-ended one; the action has an apparent but not a real closure; the possibility of a further line of development of the action is held in promise though not in fulfilment. It raises several questions in the reader’s mind: is Nanda Kaul dead or has she gone into a deep swoon, but the reader fails to find any final answer to these. His mind is held in suspension; his interpretative skill is intensely stirred; his imagination and ingenuity are fully engaged. The form and
design of a novel like *Fire on the Mountain* being an open-ended one bestows a reading experience of highest pleasure and aesthetic satisfaction. Interestingly Anita Desai strikes an ambiguous note at the end of the novel. Though most critics assume Nanda Kaul’s death at the end, Desai herself refutes any such claim. In answering a query on the meaning of Nanda’a suicide or death at the end of the novel, Desai replied in an interview to Jussawala, Feroza and Reed Way Dassenbrook:

I never meant the book to end in suicide or even death. I’m perfectly ambivalent about the ending myself. I have no idea what happens to Nanda Kaul . . . I don’t visualise her end. It is over for me with the fire” (Jussawalla and Dassenbrook:1992,p.166).

Thus in concluding this novel Desai stirs the germination of a world of expectations.

Structurally the novel is divided into three parts dealing with specific events in the lives of these three characters, though they are shown from Nanda’s point of view. Even the subtitles: “Nanda Kaul at Carignano”, “Raka comes to Carignano”, “Ila Das leaves Carignano”
foreground the important role Nanda and her house would play. The first — the shortest chapter— presents Nanda’s existential dilemma: her need for solitude and the forced responsibilities of Raka. The second, the largest part consisting of twenty one chapters, shows Nanda’s evolution in the light of her relationship with Raka. The last part, ominously consisting of thirteen chapters (a number usually associated with doom and disaster) presents the crumbling of Nanda’s “life-lie” following the news of Ila Das’s violent death. In a master stroke, Anita Desai entwines the story of all the three characters. Ila Das and Nanda, whose stories had started long back in their childhood and ran parallel is now juxtaposed at the purgatorial fire flamed by Raka.

The novel, for most part, is narrated by a third person narrator through psycho-narration. The adoption of this narrative technique provides the narrator dual advantage: to move backward and forward in time to project Nanda’s present as shaped by the past, and to make frequent digression into similes and metaphors that hinders the flow of the narration. This lends the narration a curiously static quality which in effect becomes a metonym for Kasualesi ambience. The narration uses narrated monologue at the end to expose Nanda’s “life-lie”.
The novel opens with Nanda Kaul walking tall, straight and graceful amidst the equally tall beautiful pine trees. Immediately a mental connection is established between trees and the person. The peaceful atmosphere is suddenly vitiated by her irritation at the sight of the approaching post man:

Nanda Kaul paused under the pine trees to take in their scented sibilance and listen to the cicadas fiddling invisibly under the mesh of the pine needles when she saw the postman slowly winding his way along the Upper Mall. She had not gone out to watch for him, did not want him to stop at Carignano, had no wish for letters. The sight of him inexorably closing in with his swollen bag, rolled a fat ball of irritation into the cool cave of her day, blocking it stupidly: bags and letters, messages and demands; requests, promises and queries, she had wanted to be done with them all, at Carignano(p.3).

Nanda’s reflections underscore her mental turmoil which is at odds with her cool, calm, surrounding. The abrupt beginning, the jarring notes of Nanda’s irritation set the tone of the story. Even before we see the
“swollen bag” of demands, the “invisible cicadas” have shown us the
“pine needles” of Nanda’s feeling. Her denial to recognise the demands of
life, tries to project her “rigid mule’s back”. Nanda’s professed claim to be
left alone and away from the outside world rouses the reader’s interest
to know more of her.

Psycho-narration here presents the setting: the cool and calm
surrounding against Nanda’s inner turmoil. The alliteration of the sibilant
sound “scented sibilance” ushers in a sense of stealth while the
judgemental language “blocking it stupidly” anticipates Nanda’s failure to
avert the undesirable. The same dissonant psycho-narration continues to
show Nanda’s anger through exaggerated vocabulary (fat ball of anger-
into the cool cave of her day). The narrator then presents Nanda’s inner
turmoil through profusion of negatives “she had not gone out,... did not
want him to stop,... had no wish...”. Then follows the overstatements:
“she asked to be left to the pines and cicadas”. Thus through the
dexterous handling of narration, the narrator vividly presents Nanda’s
inner turmoil. The negatives, the anger, the narratorial aside- all set the
tone of the story and the subverting calmness becomes an effective
structural design.
The calmness and Nanda’s jealous protection of it, creates its own distancing effect from the beginning:

(a) All she wanted was to be alone, to have Carignano to herself in this period of life when stillness and calm were all that she wanted to entertain (p.18).

(b) Is it wrong? Have I not done enough and had enough? I want no more. I want nothing. Can I not be left with nothing? (p.18).

These two quotations, first in psycho-narration and the second in quoted monologue, reveal Nanda’s inner disquiet from two different aspects even though in both cases there is a need to project Nanda’s inner turmoil as her quiet life is shattered with demands. The consonant psycho-narration betrays narrator’s sympathy with Nanda’s irritation for being subjected to demands and requests even at her age. But the narrator distances himself from her with the quoted monologue. The non-sequiter “want nothing . . . left with nothing” gives away narrator’s ironic perspective by revealing a need in Nanda for self deception.
Then the narrator gradually unravels the reasons leading to Nanda’s solitary existence and her aversion for demands and requests:

Looking down, over all those years she had survived and borne, she saw them, . . . like the gorge, cluttered and choked and blackened with the heads of children and grandchildren. . . . She thought of the veranda of their house in the small university town in Punjab, the Vice-Chancellor’s house over which she had presided with such an air as to strike awe into visitors who came to call and leave them slightly gaping. She had her cane chair there, too, and she had sat there, not still and emptily, but mending cloths, sewing . . . at her feet a small charcoal brazier on which a pot of kheer bubbled . . . instructing the servant girl to stir, stir, don’t stop stirring or it will burn . . . Looking down at her knuckles, two rows of yellow bones on the railing, she thought of her sons and daughters, of her confinements, . . . (pp.18-20).

The letter from her daughter has acted as the reminder which through flashback throws light on the past events. The use of similes of the gorge here evokes the burnt and charred remnants of memory. The
feral language (cluttered, chocked, blackened) underscores the anger towards the recollected events. The answer to this curious, unaccountable response is gleaned through her rumination.

Here, the narration rapidly moving between psycho-narration and interior monologue spans two times - the time of narration (when she is sitting "still and emptily") and the narrated time (the glorious time of activity when she stalked through that house). The use of the simple word "emptily" gives away a key psychic situation: her dislike of her present inactive life. Her memory redolent with sight, sound, action of her past life brings to the fore her need for that life full of activity and authority. The minuteness of her recollection of her actions "stir, stir, don't stop", and gestures: "presided with an air" underscores the importance of that time full of activities. The fact is stratified through the two optical references: the first is the mental vision and the last a physical gesture both referring to the memory of the children. Continuity is also maintained through the cane chair. The past is thus re-enacted mentally and the time gets dechronologized giving out Nanda's fixation with the past, her need for the past. This remembrance, however, contains the essential statement of her predicament.
The narrator duratively summarises and thus recreates Nanda’s past.

Nanda Kaul lay on her bed, absolutely still, composing her hand upon her chest, shutting her eyes to the brightness of the window, waiting for the first cool strain of breeze in the late afternoon to revive her. Till it came, she would lie still, still - she would be a charred tree trunk in the forest, a broken pillar of marble in the desert, a lizard on a stone wall. A tree trunk could not harbour irritation, nor a pillar annoyance. She would imitate death, like a lizard (p.24).

Consonant psycho-narration through associative memory reveals the nature of her dilemma. Mentally she is still in that time when she used to lord over her environment and the house hushed up to allow her the afternoon nap. The many similes: the broken pillar, the lizard or the charred tree trunk all have connotation implying the destruction of her world. This unpleasant memory takes her mind further back in time to recall other unpleasant aspects of her life as when she was in distress as the husband “had been to drop some of the guests home- no, she corrected herself with asperity, one of the guests home” (p.28).
Through such narrated events her predicament - the husband’s infidelity comes to light. The difficulty and hurt to own up the truth is revealed by the restlessness imputed to the walk (and not to the person). Such thought transference illuminates an elided event of Nanda’s past that has made her bitter towards responsibility: the husband’s relationship with that “one” person. This is the reason for her hiding and revelling in the charred deserted atmosphere; and the reason why she shuns all responsibility so reminiscent of her past. Thus we come to know that though Nanda Kaul hates the present “empty” existence, the memory of the past “full” life is even more unpleasant.

Hence, Raka who is connected to the past is also not a welcome guest. Raka on her own part does not feel the absence of warmth of welcome in her Nani and shuns her presence:

But Raka ignored her. She ignored her so calmly, so totally that it made Nanda Kaul breathless. She eyed the child with apprehension now, wondering at this total rejection, so natural, instinctive and effortless when compared with her own planned and wilful rejection of the child (p.52).
The sub-verbal state of Nanda's mind is presented through psycho-narration. It covers a wide time frame delineating the cause and process of her awakening of interest in Raka. The cause is Raka's spontaneous desire for solitude as against Nanda's "wilful", "practiced" and "planned" alienation. Inspite of her initial resentment of Raka as fresh burden, her independence and rejection, therefore, makes Nanda curious. Her emotional upheaval also takes place in the light of her concern for her.

... panting, dusty and not a little ruffled by the child's abrupt and total rejection of what had been an invitation- a unique invitation, did she only know it- to stay on in these hills, with Nanda Kaul, and make them her home(p.65).

Notwithstanding the expressions, 'Nanda Kaul', and 'a unique invitation' the passage is in the form of Nanda's quoted monologue. By presenting directly Nanda's thought the narrator brings out the moment and cause of her changed attitude. Ironically, when Raka rejected her invitation to live and belong to at Carignano the house becomes a her home for Nanda. Contrarily Raka exults in its barrenness, its starkness but not with a sense of belonging.
She could not tell why she wanted to bring Raka out into the open. It was not how she herself chose to live. She did not really wish to impose herself, or her ways, on Raka. Yet she could not leave her alone.

Raka's genius. Raka's daemon. It disturbed (p.70).

The use of narrated monologue technique reveals Nanda's extreme agitation. By calling Raka a daemon she accepts the growing importance of Raka in her life and with the acceptance of this emotional attachment, there is a gradual inner disintegration, which becomes more poignant as it militates against her belief of non-involvement. Consonant psycho-narration here gives away Nanda's inner debate over her conflicting needs- to maintain her facade of indifference and authority or to openly accept her growing attachment to Raka as she attempts to draw her great-granddaughter towards her by narrating a web of fantasy:

Clear the house, leave it bare, silent and restful, thought Nanda Kaul.

A pulse beat in her temple purple and bulbous. She thought of how she had filled, not this house but the other, earlier
ones, for Raka’s amusement— with furniture, treasure, trophies, even, dear God, with a zoo. She shrivelled up in her chair with horror at the thought and relaxed only when she recalled, with dignity, that she had not done that to Carignano. Even when at her most desperate to beguile Raka, she had not used or misused Carignano, for that shameful purpose. Carignano, she had kept clean, true, open for the wind to blow through . . .

Clear the house. Clear it of Raka? No, not that. Of herself? Yes, soon, soon, enough (pp.113-14).

The consonant psycho-narration here is marked by stylistic contagion when the narrator adopts Nanda’s language completely, including her “Dear God”. The complete merger of the narratorial and figural language betrays narrator’s sympathy for Nanda’s emotional disturbance. The passage also shows Nanda’s capacity for self questioning and also locates the moment when her inner world starts to crumble. The nature of the language, with her swear never done before, underscores her dismay with her deception and craftiness through which she has tried to captivate Raka.
Nanda's thought that she has decorated another house and not Carignano, is a clear hint of her need for secrecy, even from her own self. But her self-analysis leads her to the essence of things: to clear the house and leave it for Raka. Now her assimilation with Raka is complete.

Thus her self-castigation leads to self-knowledge and ultimately to the acceptance of the fact of her admiration and affection for Raka. This knowledge underlines Nanda to be a loving human being whose life-force had been once forcibly curtailed, but now the spring of love flows again and encompasses all. This is revealed in her concern for Ila Das when she comes to realise the extent of Ila's poverty. Inspite of her hatred of responsibility she is tempted to invite Ila Das to share her house. Though she fails to do so, her overall concern and protective attitude towards Ila Das is revealed through her worry and concern for Ila when she was leaving Carignano:

She looked slowly up and down the length of the Mall to see if the way were safe for Ila Das, and if one derisive urchin had appeared then, or if one alarming langur had let itself down from the trees and made for Ila Das, then, Nanda Kaul would have swooped to attack and demolish him. She would have
attacked any mocking urchin, any vicious *langur*, if it had meant tearing through the dust, tearing her sari or even making a fool of herself (pp.145-46).

The nature of this thought, the vehemence at the supposed threats to *Ila* underscores the extent of Nanda’s psychic growth. The consonant Psycho-narration is a proof of narrator’s empathy with Nanda’s feeling. Her thought, “if it had meant tearing through . . . making a fool of herself”, brings out Nanda’s intrinsic motherly, protective nature, which is a complete deviation from the aloof, “rigid mule’s back” she was till now projecting.

So when the news of *Ila* Das’s death comes, it shatters her nerves and makes her own up to the “life-lie”:

> With her head still thrown back, far back, she gasped: No, no, it is a lie! No, it cannot be. It was a lie- *Ila* was not raped, not dead. It was all a lie, all. She had lied to Raka, lied about everything. Her father had never been to Tibet- he had bought the little Buddha from a travelling pedlar. They had not had bears and leopards in their homes, nothing but
overfed dogs and bad tempered parrots. Nor had her husband loved and cherished her and kept her like a queen—he had only done enough to keep her quiet while he carried on a life-long affair with Miss David... And her children—the children were all alien to her nature. She neither understood nor loved them. She did not live here alone by choice—she lived here alone because that was what she was forced to do, reduced to doing. All those graces and glories with which she had tried to captivate Raka were only fabrication: they helped her to sleep at night, they were tranquilizers, pills. She had lied to Raka. And Ila had lied, too. Ila, too, had lied, had tried. No, she wanted to tell the man on the phone, No, she wanted to cry, but could not make a sound. Instead, it chocked and swelled inside her throat. She twisted her head, then hung it down, down, let it hang (pp.158-59).

In this passage, quoted monologues are couched between two sentences in psycho-narration which delineate the physical situation of Nanda after she receives the shocking news. The passage quickly moving from quoted monologue to narrated monologue effectively presents the
impact of the shocking news on Nanda. Ila Das was Nanda’s childhood friend who also loved her unquestionably. The sudden news of this violent death breaks down Nanda’s defence mechanism and makes her accost with her “life-lie”. The direct presentation of her thought at this juncture is necessary to throw light on some past events which have struck the discordant notes: her many children and her lonely life; her need for busy life along with her annoyance at such recollection; the stories she narrates to Raka and her horror at this deception; and her reluctance to receive Ila and her worries for her. The situation calls out for such swift change in the technique of narration.

As Dorrit Cohn opines, “Not surprisingly, these moments of sudden awareness, when consciousness is released from what Ibsen calls ‘life-lie’, are often associated with approaching death” (p.81). Though the initial “No, no, it is a lie!” shows Nanda’s usual habit of hiding under a lie, the negation and the exclamation contrive to break the self control. Hence the use of narrated monologue which, as Cohn observes, is used to delineate a crisis situation. Nanda’s language full of repetitions “all these graces and glories” and negations “they had not had bears, nothing...” gradually illuminates the past. And when she terms the ‘stories’ as
tranquilizers, the self-assured facade crumbles to expose the core of frustration and humiliation in her that has been hopelessly crying for love and care. Her earlier unhappiness and disturbances in life are finally got over. Thus the technique of quoted and narrated monologues reveal the moment of epiphany in Nanda’s life.

Nanda cosseted in silk and pearl by her husband that has allowed her to live with self respect has been her “life-lie”. But in this climactic scene, all lies are put to rest. The quiet that has been empathized in the course of the novel is Nanda’s barren, lonely life which she has never had any one to share with or talk to.

Anita Desai’s novels usually have interesting situations through presentation of dialogues between characters. Fire on the Mountain is, however, unique in the paucity of sound in comparison to its silence. Unlike all other Desai novels, there are very few dialogues in the novel. Thus the initial sense of calm reverberates through the story. The silence is interspersed with snatches of conversation. The first dialogue takes place in “chapter-9 ” except for the abortive phone call from Ila Das in “chapter 6” between Ram Lal and Nanda Kaul, when she intimates him about Raka’s imminent arrival:
‘My great-granddaughter will be arriving tomorrow, Ram Lal,’
She began, and her hands clung to each other and sweated.

‘Yes’, he agreed, trying to sound reassuring, but failing.

‘What will you cook for her, Ram Lal?’ she asked, curiously troubled. It was as if she had never made up handsome dinner parties... Now not one idea remained, not one, with which to feed a single small great-granddaughter.

The amount she had jettisoned from her life might take another’s breath away... ‘Tell me. Suggest something.’... ‘Potato Chips, memsahib,’ he trumpeted. ‘All children like potato chips.’...

‘Yes,’ nodded Nanda Kaul sadly, and moved towards the door, trying hard to cling to the vision of potato chips and tomato ketchup as the saving of them all. They sounded so cheerful but also, she had to admit, somehow inadequate (pp.34-35).

The interpolation of monologue between the quoted dialogues is a clear indicator of the warning of Nanda’s psyche. The recollection of her
past achievement and her present vacuity, underlines Nanda’s total severance of herself from her past busy life. The shift from psycho-narration to interior monologue heralds the unravelling of Nanda's dilemma. It begins by presenting a simple domestic scene, but absence of judgemental language underscores narrator’s sympathy with Nanda particularly when she is disconcerted by the recapitulation of the accolades she had in the past and the present uneventful existence. Gradually her introspection leads to the vision of her present quiet existence: “now not one idea remained”, and “the amount she had jettisoned”.

Nanda Kaul’s telephonic conversation with Ila Das, is another occasion in the novel exposing her character trait. Rendered through psycho narration and replete with similes, this telephonic conversation underlines Nanda’s mind style. Through associative memory Ila Das’s voice takes her mind back to her husband and the impact of that voice on him. Nanda Kaul remembers the expression on her husband’s face; how he used to “slip heavy lids down over his eyes whenever Ila Das came to their house” (p.23). Nowhere there is mention of any conversation between the couple. There is also hardly any conversation between
Nanda and Raka. But Raka is more loquacious in the company of Ram Lal. Their conversation mostly revolves round superstition regarding witches or about forest fire. Nanda grew jealous of this intimacy. In order to draw Raka to herself she starts going out with her or creates a world of fantasy. Both fail to impress Raka as her talk is always one-sided, never real conversation. So Raka hates to be “hedged, smothered, stifled inside the old lady’s words, dreams and more words” (p.110). She compares her talk to “the guided tour patter” (p.65).

But when Nanda draws an impressive picture of Kashmir for Raka they have quite a revealing conversation:

“Why did you come here then”, she asked, “instead of going back to Kashmir?”

Nanda Kaul simply shook her head and seemed to wander in a field of grey thoughts, alone. ‘One does not go back’, she said eventually. ‘No, one doesn’t go back. One might just as well try to become young again.’

‘Would you like that?’ pursued Raka, which was unlike her, but then, Nanda Kaul had provoked her. So Nanda Kaul felt
bound to answer. Laughing, she said 'No. No, I don’t think I
would. I don’t think I’d find it- quite safe’(pp.101-02).

The quoted dialogue reveals Nanda’s thought: whether in reality or
fantasy, past is not a place safe to go back to. And youth is as much
detested as the past.

Such new loquaciousness of Nanda makes her uncomfortable
instead of captivating her. The omniscient narrator’s remarks mark the
moment as a crucial stage in Nanda’s emotional upheaval: “If Raka had
cared to notice, she would have seen a storm of disintegration cross the
old, yellowed face . . .”(p.106).

The disintegration referred to in the passage is noteworthy in so far
as it takes away Nanda’s loneliness. Nanda comes out of her seclusion to
welcome both Raka and Ila. And as the story progresses human sound
replaces the emptiness that used to dominate Carignano.

The narrator presents the difference between the two friends
Nanda and Ila Das through a simile:
She watched the white hen drag out a worm inch by resisting inch from the ground till it snapped in two. She felt like the worm herself, she winced at its mutilation (p.23).

The simile of the worm being dragged out of its hole creates at once Nanda's horror at being mutilated by Ila Das's horrendous voice and also her reluctance to entertain any one. The narration shows how Nanda stands at odds with Ila Das's life of involvement and philanthropy. The technique also helps to expose Nanda's character traits by placing her against the other two female figures, Raka and Ila Das. Nanda and Raka are shown as complementary characters. As R. S. Shrama says, "The distinction that Anita Desai makes between the two characters is subtle and persuasive. It is almost metaphysical: If Nanda Kaul shuns all movement, Raka loves it . . . They try their best to avoid each other . . ." (Sharma:1981,p.122). Both Nanda and Raka are practitioners of the novel's theme of withdrawal. Raka like Nanda shows a strange aversion towards interpersonal relationship. Like some other Desai characters, Raka is a product of violent family atmosphere. If initially we were shown Nanda's reluctance to receive Raka, the latter also shows no eagerness for Nanda's company. Her complete rejection rekindles Nanda's curiosity
and later her need for human company. To begin with both of them shirk physical touch. But when they ultimately meet, each felt the thinness, the unaccommodating nature of the other’s body. Both of them shun human company. They exult in the loneliness and the barrenness of the mountains. Like Nanda Kaul, who secretly envied the freedom of the eagle, Raka pretends to be air-borne or ship-wrecked: “I’m shipwrecked, Raka exulted, I’m shipwrecked and alone. She clung to a rock- my boat, alone in my boat on the sea, she sang” (p.68).

It is no wonder that Nanda finds a reflection of herself in Raka. And she tells her: “...you are more like me than any of my children or grand children. You are exactly like me Raka”(p.71). But Raka, because she is so like Nanda, detests this open admission. It forces the ultimate acquiescence from Nanda that Raka “was the finished, perfected model of what Nanda Kaul herself was merely a brave, flawed experiment” (p.52).

Nanda and Raka are more alike, inspite of their obvious reluctance to communicate. Nanda has never found a home in the house of her past life. The infidelity of her husband and the callousness of her children have driven her to this place; and Raka, a product of a broken family, an
abusive father, is sent here to convalesce from typhoid. In their
withdrawal and in their approach to their surroundings, they mirror each-
other’s thought. While Nanda revels in the barrenness of the land, Raka
is attracted to the rocky mountains and the burnt houses.

Conversely, when Nanda freezes her senses and shuns all
movements, Raka’s love for isolation and movement baffles Nanda.
Raka’s aloofness and isolation are spontaneous, Nanda’s stillness is self-
imposed and practiced. It is acquired with much difficulty over the years.
Her desire to be left to the cicadas and pines suits Raka who violently
shuns human company. Understandably there is a complete lack of
communication between Nanda and Raka. But Nanda’s innate maternal
instincts rouse her care for and worry about Raka while she goes tripping
over the mountain cliff. She craves for Raka’s company and gradually her
frozen maternal instinct thaws and pulsates with life.

Nanda’s maternal instinct is manifested in her changed response to
Ilia Das. Though both Ilia and Nanda have been childhood friends, their
lives are rather disparate than similar. If Nanda Kaul suffers ignominy in
the hands of her husband and children, Ilia Das is the victim of her own
father who has only catered to the needs of his worthless sons, leaving
the daughters pauper. Ila struggles her entire life for money, but for Nanda finance is not the problem. Even physically ugly and with a horrendous voice Ila Das stands at opposite end to Nanda’s tall, elegant persona. But fate has clubbed these two dissimilar characters together. In the horrible and humiliating death of Ila, Nanda sees and acknowledges finally her own broken hopes and her humiliations. Like Ila’s dry and hungry life, Nanda has been hungry for love, respect and care of her own family that has been denied her. And thus in the death of Ila, she sees the crumbling of the glass-house of her imagination. Asnani rightly observes:

Ila’s real involvement in people’s welfare assumes tremendous symbolic significance when contrasted with the barren, unfulfilled and lonely existence of Nanda Kaul (Asnani: 1981, pp.89-90).

Fire on the Mountain, like other novels of Anita Desai, uses similes and metaphors, imagery and symbols and fantasies in order to bestow poetic intensity to the representation of woman’s character.
One of the revealing images in the novel is related to geographical contiguity of Nanda’s life at Carignano. Her garden according to Sandhyarani Das:

... is a projection of Nanda Kaul’s yearning for loneliness and privacy... The garden of Carignano is also a projection of Nanda Kaul’s self that is bare and empty (Bhatnagar and Rajeswar ed., 2008, p.203).

Nanda’s thoughts regarding rose may be interpreted as metonym pointing to her life:

... the yellow rose creeper had blossomed so youthfully last month but was now reduced to an exhausted mass of grey creaks and groans (p.18).

The description of the vegetative world of Carignano mirrors Nanda’s existence as when she observes the garden:

She had drifted about the garden... she revelled in its barrenness, its emptiness (p.33).
Nanda’s thought regarding rose may be interpreted as a metonym pointing to herself:

Like her, the garden seemed to have arrived, simply by a process of age, of withering away and elimination, at a state of elegant perfection... She no more wished to add to them than she wished to add to her own pared, reduced existence and radiantly single life (pp.30-31).

Thus the untended garden in its barrenness stands for Nanda’s barren existence and her unwillingness to change.

The use of animal and nature imagery bestows realism on the depiction of the inner world of the characters. Nanda’s thoughts regarding Raka, vivifies Raka’s physical features as much as it throws light on Nanda’s astute observation and astringent humour. Nanda’s musings over Raka begin with her name. “Raka meant the moon, but this child was not round-faced, calm or radiant. . . . she looked like one of those dark crickets . . . or a mosquito, minute and fine, on thin, precarious legs.(p.43). But soon after she grows attached to Raka she thinks of her as “daemon”(p.70),“the elusive fish, the golden catch” (p.108). It
underscores the sea-change in her attitude towards Raka. Her eyes are also “extravagantly large and somewhat bulging” (p.43) like that of a fly. She compares Raka to a “mosquito flown up from the plains to tease and worry” (p.44). All these images bring out not only Raka’s emaciated looks but also Nanda’s irritation with this fresh burden on her.

The animal imagery continues to encompass Raka’s reactions which justify Nanda’s observations. Raka is followed to her room as she “walked about as the newly caged, the newly tamed wild ones do, sliding from wall to wall on silent, investigating pads.” (p.45) Intrigued by Raka’s silence and sudden disappearance Nanda watches her “emerge from the dark like a soundless moth” or “like a rabbit conjured up by a magician ... then vanishing in the dark of a bagful of tricks” (p.51). With her growing interest in the child, Nanda Kaul feels hurt to watch Raka sharing special moments with Ram Lal and not with her. In her jealousy, she calls her “an anxious monkey” (p.88), or an “uninvited mouse or cricket” (p.88). But Ila Das also said to Nanda that Raka looks like a “little bird, or an insect that hides” (p.144) and this seals Raka’s similarity to an insect or an animal and reveals Nanda’s astute observation.
Nanda’s growing jealousy of the friendship between Ram Lal and Raka is highlighted when we see her comment on Raka’s legs: “spindly legs snapping at his heels like a pair of scissors” (p.60). If Raka is presented as an insect, Nanda Kaul is shown as stiff and unbending as a tree:

She was grey, tall and thin and her silk sari made a sweeping, shivering sound and she fancied she could merge with the pine trees and be mistaken for one (p.4).

Even Raka sees her as “another pine-tree, the grey sari a rock-all components of the barrenness and stillness of the Carignano garden” (p.44).

Besides the animal imagery, the novel uses symbols like the house, the mountain, and quoted poems. House, considered as the abode of peace, love, safety and nurture takes on fatalistic hues in this novel. The barrenness and starkness of the house make Nanda gloat over the same:

Everything she wanted was here, at Carignano, in Kasauli. Here, on the ridge of the mountain, in this quiet house. It was
the place and time of her life, that she had wanted and prepared for all her life ...( p.3).

This house of Nanda is not a ‘home’. It is a place to which both Nanda and Raka have been banished. The arrival of Ila Das completes the picture of the deserted and dilapidated house. Each of them has erected a smoke-screen to hide herself from the outer world. Raka is interested in the charred houses on the knoll, Nanda wants to maintain the sparseness of Carignano, and Ila Das wants Nanda’s company that would provide succour to her dismal existence, by reminding her of her glorious past. Thus the difference between their professed need for a shelter and the reality brings out the pathos of their lives. And the pathos is heightened by the narration of Nanda’s fantasy houses: the house of her father surrounded by gardens and full of fascinating pets, wild animals in zoos and caged birds; and the house of her husband, a devoted father filling the house with object-de-art and even a badminton court for children. Such fantasy, seen against the father’s apathy and the husband’s infidelity, brings home to the readers Nanda’s frustrated life.

Fantasy in Fire on the Mountain sustains Nanda Kaul’s “life- lie” and thus plays a major role in character delineation. Nanda Kaul’s fantasy is of
an exotic nature. Her fantasy of becoming a tree or an eagle reveals her desire to transcend the position which life has placed her in. She also uses fantasy to captivate and possess “the elusive fish, the golden catch” (p.108) Raka. The exotic stories learnt from the book on Marco Polo, and her musical voice initially captivate the child. Ila Das’s fantasy world revolves round Nanda Kaul, which invokes her own past. It provides a momentary escape from her dreary and penurious existence. While she finds solace in recreating her affluent childhood, Raka runs away from her past, from the memory of a harrowing family life. Her fantasy world depends upon her tactile and sensory perception: she revels in the deserted, decimated surrounding and fantasizes about the factory as a “square dragon” and Ram Lal’s kitchen as a “fire-blasted cave”. She also exults in the rocky, barren surrounding:

I’m shipwrecked and alone. She clung to a rock – my boat, alone in my boat on the sea, she sang (p.68).

Her fantasy is thus primarily of nightmarish quality occasioned by her harrowing life with her parents.
Nanda’s frustration and humiliation is delineated through the image of the badminton court in their house. The husband played there with Miss David, the woman for whom he cheated Nanda. She expunges the humiliation of this memory by imagining her husband to be a dedicated father who had made a badminton court especially for the family. As she narrates: “and we’d have such games out on the lawn, all of us, at times even by moonlight” (p.100). The image of the badminton court thus stands for Nanda’s years of humiliation and hurt.

Like the garden, the Kasauli mountain serves as a powerful image. Burnt and charred, bearing proof of age and destruction it reflects aptly Nanda’s lonely, sparse existence. The gorges and cliffs are like so many sores in Nanda’s heart created by her cheating husband and apathetic children. The mountain also provides a perfect foil to Raka’s violent life at her young age. She revels at the sight of the burnt forest or the stories Nanda Kaul or Ram Lal feed her with about forest fire. Although these two females look on the mountain from two different angles, their views converge through their mutual appreciation of the open space and lack of human contact.
As in some novels of Anita Desai, quoted passages or poems at crucial points of narration reveal a key psychic condition. Nanda Kaul keeps a few books from which she reads continually as, for example the book on Marco polo that helps her to create the fabled world of her past in her story told to Raka. The other book she reads is The Pillow Book of Sei Shonegan. Coincidentally the poem she reads is about "A woman who lives alone":

When a woman lives alone, her house should be extremely dilapidated, the mud walls should be falling to pieces . . . for this gives the place a poignantly desolate look . . . (p.29).

The pleasure Nanda feels in reading this book as well as these descriptions bear proof of Nanda’s acceptance of her sparse life.

One more device used to represent Nanda is delineation of Nanda’s body language and her voice. When she receives Asha’s letter she “said clearly but in a voice of suffering “Thank You” (p.13) to the postman. When later she wants to draw Raka’s attention, she effectively uses a “high, musical voice” (p.90 ). As she weaves her fantasy for around Raka her voice would “drop” and “pick up again” or the voice at time “joined in
the rain, in the rush” (p.91). And her voice may be altered “that is hoarse with a true remembrance” (p.95) when she tells about Raka’s mother as a child.

Like her voice, her body language also reveals her inner tension and confusion. When she walks, she makes it a point to keep her back straight, which reveals her need not to give in any further. When she receives the letter, she takes the letter from the postman “Holding it with her fingers, at a little distance from her side” (p.13). This reveals her annoyance as she knows this can only be a request for something. When Ila Das inadvertently lets slip about Miss David in front of Raka, she notices “her great-grandmother carefully build a cage with her long fingers” (p.133), a revealing gesture of her need to protect herself. Thus her body language saves her at times from giving herself away. There is also the representation of the serene face of a bronze Buddha statue which stands unmoved in the face of raging storm inside or outside, which Nanda feels is humanly impossible to replicate.

The delineation of time as an image is frequently used by Anita Desai in her novels. Nanda’s mind moving from present to past to present, parodies movement in stillness. The movement from past to
present is marked by sound of birds: the call of the cuckoo, "its domestic
tone" (p.21) that precedes Nanda’s decision to give that “ironic bow”
(p.21) to duty; the “wild, mad” (p.100) sound of the cuckoo that narrates
the mad scampering of Raka and Nanda’s breathless waiting for her; or Ila
Das, who like the “late cuckoo” (p.145) fails to reach her hut. This primary
kinetic mode of time reflects various emotional states of the represented
character. The novel opens with Nanda sighting the postman plodding up
to Carignano. The first three chapters are given to her waiting and
watching the postman and the postman’s musings over Carignano’s past.
This deceleration in the narration is an indication of Nanda’s existential
stasis. But the fourth and fifth chapter relating the content of the letter
calls Nanda to fresh duty. Through associative memory her mind takes
her back to her busy life as the Vice-Chancellor’s wife – all within the
short span of seven pages. Thus the short textual segment is devoted to a
long span of life. But the acceleration of time signifies Nanda’s reluctance
to linger over resurrecting the buried memory and reopening her wound.
The repeated acceleration and deceleration serves to reveal Nanda’s
reaction to these memories. As S. Rimmon-Kenan observes:
... acceleration and deceleration are often evaluated by the reader as indicators of importance and centrality. Ordinarily, the more important events or conversations are given in detail (i.e. decelerated) whereas the less important ones are compressed (i.e. accelerated) (Kenan: 1983,p.56).

The narrated duree reveals Nanda’s need to be rid of painful memory, the reawakening of which gives her more hurt than solace.

The most telling image in the novel is its title. Although the forest fire is ignited by Raka and she appears to gloat over her incendiary act, an in-depth study reveals the fire as the one burning symbolically in the mind and heart of Nanda Kaul to be directly related to Nanda’s life. Since the arrival of the letter from Asha, Nanda has been accosted with the problem of relationship with Raka and later as she undergoes the process of purification set in motion by the symbolic fire burning in her mind and soul, it is possible to visualise her coming out from the fire with the dross of her existence purged off her completely.

Apart from literally referring to the fire burning on the Kasauli mountain, the fire in the novel recalls the title of the second chapter of
Golding's *Lord of the Flies*. Like the fire lit by the children in Golding's novel that unleashes their subconscious violence, here the forest fire started by Raka has symbolic implication in as much as it exposes the world of lies and falsehoods of her Nani. Nanda Kaul has been living a life of lies and affectations in order to gain the affection of Raka, but the forest fire ignited by Raka purges Nanda of her 'life-lies'. The process of purification as undergone by Nanda results in Raka's final loving address to her as Nani.

In the character of Nanda Kaul, Anita Desai has again succeeded in bringing out the untold agonies and trauma of a woman's life. The symbols, the images, the thought presentation all bear proof of Nanda's barren existence as opposed to her busy past life. Cheated by the husband and deserted by the children, she suffers ignominy of her lonely existence. Her forced exile takes away the remnant of self-respect. She shuns human company and weaves a world of fantasy around her to sustain her crumbling ego. But her life changes in relation to her attitude towards Raka which forces her to go through the cleansing fire of self-analysis that purges off all her anger, affectations and agony.

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