

FIRE ON THE MOUNTAIN

Anita Desai

(1977)

Story

The plot of Desai's seventh novel, *Fire on the Mountain*, is neither complex nor full of dramatic events. In fact, a large amount of the 'action' occurs inside the mind of Nanda and, to a lesser extent, that of her great-granddaughter, Raka. The story, set in the early 1970s, is divided into two parts.

Part I Nanda Kaul has lost her husband, who was a Vice Chancellor of Punjab University, and has chosen to live a life of seclusion in the Himalayan region of Kausali. She has found an old colonial house, called Carignano, which is perched on a hillside. The postman arrives with a letter from her daughter, Asha, who asks her to take in Raka, Nanda's great-granddaughter, who has just recovered from typhoid and is in need of some 'good, clean air.' We also learn that Tara, Asha's daughter and Raka's mother, has been abused by her diplomat husband. The impending visit and stay of Raka disturbs Nanda's peace of mind, which is further disrupted by a phone call. The caller is an old friend, Ila Das, who suggests that she would like to visit her in her mountain retreat. Triggered by these intrusions, Nanda's memories wander back to her life as the VC's wife in the Punjab some years ago. Then she talks with her servant and cook, Ram Lal, about how to prepare for Raka and what to feed her.

Part II Raka arrives at Carignano, where Nanda attempts to make her feel at home, even though she herself is internally upset. Raka settles in, explores the area and is particularly interested in a new structure being built nearby. Ram Lal explains that the factory is run by the Pasteur Institute and that they 'make serum for mad dogs,' that is, people with dog bites are taken there for treatment. Raka spends hours climbing about the hills and comes home full of scratches, which annoys Nanda until she realises that the young girl is like herself: fiercely private and independent. That is when Nanda begins to develop an affection for this strange creature, whom she first described as an 'insect' because of her 'sickly figure and round protruding eyes.' Now, Nanda tries to form a bond with Raka by sharing stories of her past, including tales of her father as a Marco Polo figure, but Raka is suspicious that the stories are largely invented.

Both Nanda and Ram Lal attempt to protect and guide Raka, suggesting that she go to school and to the Club, where she can meet other children her age, but she is not interested. Finally, with Ram Lal's encouragement, Raka goes to a military ball at the Club. Before entering, however, she looks through the windows and sees frightening scenes that remind her of her father's violence toward her mother.

One day, Nanda and Raka notice a fire glowing in the distance, which frightens them, but it dies out and only leaves a film of ash in the sky. Nanda then receives a letter from Asha informing her of Tara's breakdown in Geneva, but Nanda keeps this information from Raka. Ila Das then arrives in the isolated house and the old friends catch up on each other's news. Ila is a Christian spinster, who now lives in a nearby town where she works as a social welfare officer. She is not financially well-off after her brothers squandered the family's money, but she is happy. One of her campaigns is to implement the government's new law prohibiting child-marriage. She leaves the house, wishing she had asked Nanda if she could stay with her, but she has too much pride.

Raka, bored by the older ladies' talk of the past, grabs a box of matches and goes on a walk. Ila goes into town, where she is mocked by young boys for her strange dress and odd behaviour. On her way home, she is raped and killed by a man who was trying to marry his young daughter to a rich man, a marriage that Ila had opposed. Nanda goes to the police station and identifies the body. She is shocked and begins to realise that she has been telling lies all her life, about her father, her husband

and herself. In the final scene, Raka tells her that she has started a fire on the mountain and together they watch it burn.

Themes

Memory The constrained action of this novel, packaged into a few days and amounting to very little, except the dramatic ending, highlights the power of memory. Our lives, the author suggests, are lived largely through our memories, which recall events and people and feelings that live on long after they have vanished in the 'real world.' It is memory that supplies us with the contents of the stories we tell ourselves and our children, who in turn pass on those stories and so memories transcend our life-spans. But Nanda's memories can also contain distortions, even falsehoods. She creates a false image of her own father by telling stories to Raka, in which he is a great explorer, in the manner of Marco Polo (who was a great tale-teller himself). Again and again, Nanda and Ila Das, her friend from long ago, live through remembering events in the past. They sit and recall the cooling evenings in the plains when they went to the Club, or played badminton on a lawn, laughing and light-hearted. But in the next moment, all this seems untrue, and the truth of their dried up lives is thrust upon them. The power of memory to both distort the past and create a bond between people is illustrated in a scene when Nanda is talking to Raka. Nanda speaks of the university-owned house she lived in when she was married, enumerating its luxuries, the Persian carpets and Venetian glass, things collected over centuries that were wondrous and rare. Raka is sceptical of the reliability of her great-grandmother's reminiscences and wants to know why she left such a perfect house, but Nanda is not able to give a suitable answer because she can't remember how much of what she has said is true. Then, in an abrupt shift of tone, Nanda looks at the rain outside and says that she remembers something her own mother used to say: 'Rainy days are lily days.' Raka doesn't understand, until she wakes up the next morning and sees pink flowers covering the ground, 'like pieces of paper thrown around after a party.' Raka, we suspect, will tell this little story to her children, and so a memory of a memory will continue to shape lives in the future.

Retreat The dominant theme of this contemplative novel is the conflict between a need to withdraw from society and a need to be connected to people. That conflict is played out primarily in the character of Nanda Kaul. Nanda did not have a happy marriage as the wife of a university vice-chancellor. Her husband treated her like a useful decoration and cheated on her. Still, Nanda dutifully fulfilled her obligations to him, to her children and to society. When the novel begins, she has retreated to the mountains in order to find solace: 'Away from the world of letters, messages and demands, she wanted to be left alone with the pines and the cicadas.' She does not want to 'discharge' any more duties; she wants to be discharged from all obligations. Her peace, however, is disturbed by a letter from her daughter, Asha, asking her to take in Raka, Asha's granddaughter. The author describes her thoughts this way: 'Now, she will bow again and let that noose slip once more round her neck, the noose that she had thought was freed fully, finally. Now she will converse again when it was silence she wished.' Raka, however, draws Nanda out of herself, where she admits she wasn't totally happy. Nanda becomes fascinated with Raka's own display of independence, as the young girl explores the rough landscape around the secluded house. In fact, Nanda becomes attached to her, against her will, and begins to find ways to bring her closer. Nanda tells her stories about her own father and about Raka's father, but Raka remains distant, emotionally isolated from her great-grandmother who lives like a hermit in the mountains. Raka builds her own fantasy world of isolation, safe from the realities of her drunken father and abused mother, whom she has always wanted to escape. She cannot relate to Nanda because she has not yet learned to trust. Ila Das, Nanda's old friend, who comes to Carignano for a brief visit, also struggles with the conflict between detachment and attachment. Although she wishes she could stay with Nanda in her big house on the mountain, she is too proud to ask. Ila leaves the house and returns to the town, disappointed in herself. When the novel ends, with a murder and a fire on the mountain, we are not sure if happiness is to be found in isolation or in connection with others.

Women The three main characters of this novel (Nanda, Raka and Ila) are women, and all three of them suffer at the hands of men. Nanda was stifled in a boring marriage that was full of duties and events, but very little joy or unbridled enthusiasm. Her husband had an extra-marital affair, which he didn't even bother to hide from her, and yet he wanted her to produce his children. In one of Nanda's remembered moments, she is out on the lawn after a party and watches her husband slip away with his lover, 'just to take her home,' he later says. It is painful, especially since Nanda is close enough to smell his cigar smoke. The second character, Raka, her great-granddaughter, has had her young life already battered by a man, her father. She remembers how he abused her mother, hit her in a

drunken fury and then screamed at her 'to get up.' She, like Nanda, finds some peace in the isolation of the mountains, but the images of abuse still plague her and prevent her from connecting with other people. On one occasion, when she looks through the windows at a dance and sees men moving with women, the old images resurface and prevent her from joining the dance. Then, there is the spinster Ila, who once lived a life of relative affluence until her three brothers squandered her family's money. Like both Nanda and Raka, she too finds refuge in the mountain, where she works as a social welfare officer. But, in the end, she cannot help herself from opposing illegal child-marriages and is raped and murdered by a man who is hoping to marry his daughter to an older, rich man. It is appropriate, one realises after a moment's reflection, that the cause Ila championed and died for was to halt the injustice of marrying off young girls for money.

Characters

Nanda Kaul Nanda Kaul is a widow, the wife of a university vice-chancellor who has died. She now lives in a mountain retreat, where she is visited first by her great-granddaughter, Raka, and then by her friend, Ila.

Raka Raka is Nanda's teenage great-granddaughter, who is recovering from typhoid fever and comes to stay with her in the mountains after her parents move to Geneva. She is, like Nanda, a reclusive person.

Ila Das Ila Das is a friend of Nanda's from her earlier life. Having lived in some comfort, she now struggles after her brothers spent the family money. She works as a welfare officer in a town not far from Nanda's house. In the final scene, she is raped and killed because of her opposition to child-marriage.

Ram Lal Ram Lal is Nanda's servant and cook at Carignano, her hillside home. He becomes close to Raka after they meet and talk during her mountainous rambles.

Nanda (Reclusive)

Character Nanda Kaul is the key figure in this slight but poignant novel. She is now in old age, living in an isolated house on a hillside outside an old British hill station in the low Himalayas. She lives alone, seeing only her servant and cook, Ram Lal. She is a woman in retreat, especially from her previous life as wife to a university vice-chancellor and mother to three sons and two daughters. She had 'discharged all her duties', as she puts it, and now she feels nothing for others. 'The care of other was a habit that she had mislaid,' the author tells us. 'It had been a religious calling that she had believed in till she found it a fake.' Now her husband is dead, and her children, brought up to be responsible, are busy with their own lives. They make no appearance in the story, except through a single letter. Instead, Nanda's serene privacy is disturbed by visits from her great-granddaughter, Raka, and an old friend, Ila. These two visitors will test her desire to withdraw from all human contact. Nanda lives in the past, through memories, mostly painful memories, of her marriage. Although there were moments of joy, they occurred when she found herself alone in the middle of the day or at midnight wandering in the moonlight on the wet lawns around her large house. The external world, consisting of her husband's friends and colleagues, thought that she was 'like a queen' the way she rules over the large house and arranges dinner parties. But the reality of her painful marriage is neatly summed up by the author: 'Her husband had not 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 were all alien to her nature.'

This is the life she has left behind by choosing to live in the mountains. When the two visitors arrive, Raka for an extended stay, and Ila for only a day, we see that Nanda retains a reservoir of empathy. She understands others, even if she does not want to form any attachment with them. She can be a harsh observer, too, calling out the imperfections in her visitors and in her servant. And, finally, she possesses a lively imagination and a deep sensitivity to the natural world, in which she always revelled. These are the sources of her greatest joys.

Activities Nanda Kaul used to be a busy mother and wife. AS the wife and mother in the plains, she used to knit clothes, arrange meals with servants, look after her husband and smile at the guests arranged on either side of a long rosewood dining table. She used to wear silk saris, despite all the

extra work for the servants, because that is what he wanted. Now, widowed and having escaped to the mountains, she mostly sits on her veranda and looks at the sky. She takes long walks and reads a lot. The only person she talks with is Ram Lal, her servant and cook. Otherwise, she is blissfully alone. Until her great-granddaughter arrives and she begins to tell her stories.

Illustrative moments

Anger Nanda Kaul appears to be serene in her mountain retreat, enjoying the smell of the pines and wild flowers, far away from hustle and bustle of life in the plains down below. But this is a novel about memory, and she cannot forget the anger that she felt while still the wife of the university vice-chancellor. A particularly good illustration of that never-forgotten anger is described when Nanda is sitting in a wicker chair on her veranda and remembering sitting in a similar chair on a similar veranda in her husband's house. In her mind's eye, she sees a carriage draw up and 'disgorge a flurry of guests in their visiting saris, all to play with their palm-leaf hand-fans ...the wives and daughters of the lecturers and professors over whom her husband rules. She thought of that hubbub and of who she had managed and how everyone had said, pretending to think that she couldn't hear but really wanting her to, "Isn't she splendid? Isn't she like a queen? The Vice-Chancellor is lucky to have a wife who can run everything as she does." Her eyes had flashed when she heard them, like a pair of black blades, wanting to cut them, despising them, those crawling grey bugs about her fastidious feet.' This is a powerful description of the disdain and contempt that has been built up over decades when Nanda performed her wifely duties with such silent perfection. Only now, when she is safe in the high mountains, released from the humiliation of acting the loving wife (when she knew her husband was cheating on her), can she express, in her mind, the anger she felt.

Privacy The most important moments in Nanda's life are those when she can escape into herself and find peace. That is why she has left the plains and hidden herself away in the mountains. However, even while living with her husband, at the university, acting as hostess for his parties and a mother to their many children, she did sometimes find privacy. Those moments were the sweetest precisely because they were so rare. She had to teach herself how to be alone in the middle of her busy life and a house full of children and servants. As the author puts it, 'She had practiced this stillness, this composure, for years, for an hour every afternoon. It was an art not easily acquired.' One particularly significant moment of privacy that Nanda remembers occurred after one of the innumerable dinner parties. When all the guests have left, she steals out onto the wet grass surrounding her large house. It is near midnight, and she watches a lapwing rise up from the mustard fields beyond the garden hedge. She is alone, deliciously alone. Then she sees her husband open the door of his car to allow Miss David to climb in. He will drive her home, but that is not all because Nanda knows that they are having an affair. Now, 'she felt like a grey cat, a night prowler, rubbing her feet in the grass and relishing the sensation of being alone again. That was a very special time that she had been alone: a moment of private triumph, cold and proud.' Nanda never confronts her husband about his infidelity, preferring to keep that secret knowledge to herself, where it has even more power, where she can consult it and live again this moment of a 'private triumph.'

Simplicity Nanda Kaul is not just an angry and proud woman. She also has a deep love of the natural world, especially of its austere wilderness and its lack of restraining formality. One afternoon, in her mountain retreat, she finds a book that shares her love of simple, natural beauty. It is a famous Japanese book, the *Pillow Book of Sei Shonagon*. In it, Nanda comes across a passage, in which the Japanese female author explains her own love of simplicity: 'When a woman lives alone her house should be extremely dilapidated. If there is a wall, it should be falling to pieces, and if there is a pond, it should be choked with water plants. It is not essential that the garden be covered with sage brush, but weeds should be growing through the sand in patches, for this gives the house a poignantly desolate look. I greatly dislike a woman's house when it is clear that she has scurried about with a knowing look on her face, arranging everything just it should be, and when the gate is shut tight.' As she reads this passage, Nanda thinks back to the vice-chancellor's house, where she had to make sure that everything was in its right place, and where there were too many things. Too many servants, and too many children. Even the garden had too many trees. Nanda then looks up and sees the light settling on the distant hills. No artist, she thinks, could capture that scene, but the Japanese author would have loved it. There is an indescribable simplicity, a clarity and an authenticity. It is all so very far, so very refreshingly far, from the nights she had spent in a starched sari presiding over a dinner table covered with cut-glass and platters of food. It is moments like this that sustain Nanda, all alone in the mountains, and make this deceptively simple novel shine like the diamond that it is.

Ila Das

(Vulnerable)

Character Ila Das is an old friend of Nanda's, who has fallen on tough times. When she visits Nanda's house in the mountains, she has a low-paying job as a social welfare worker, but before this she had suffered the early deaths of her parents and the squandering of the family fortune by her brothers. We see Ila mainly through Nanda's eyes and through their conversations, which range back over the years, especially to the time when Ila worked as a lecturer in Home Sciences in the university where Nanda's husband was the Vice-Chancellor. Ila appears as a quirky, strange person, who speaks in a voice that irks everyone, a shriek so loud that Nanda calls it 'the tragedy of her life.' Ila is also a Christian, which sets her somewhat apart from mainstream society, and she is a spinster, which makes her vulnerable to taunting from the public. Dressed in odd and bedraggled clothes, swinging her battered umbrella and walking unevenly, she cuts a comic figure. She also appears to be erratic and unpredictable, making comments that don't fit in the conversation and suddenly shifting the topic. This harmless old lady, however, does show considerable steel in her campaign against child-marriage. This cause was particularly strong among Indian Christians, who were influenced by western standards, and Ila pays the ultimate price for her commitment to the campaign.

Activities In her earlier life, we learn that Ila was fastidious about what she ate and wore. She loved to play badminton and to dance at parties. She has a good ear for music and loves to play the piano. While at Nanda's mountain retreat, she once again plays music with her 'horribly knotted and yellowed hands' and sings a Scottish tune in the rasping, attacking voice that drives Nanda mad. She reminisces about the 'lovely' time she had at the university, with its wide lawns and luxurious gardens, in the heat of the summer, with 'the enormous melons, and the lichee trees and jamon trees hanging with fruit.' Those happy memories alternate with sad realities of more recent years of struggle. Ila laughs and cries, in equal measure.

Illustrative moments

Vulnerable Ila Das is the kind of person whom others like to mock and taunt. She stands out from the crowd and is easily preyed upon, like the 'ugly duckling.' The best illustration of her vulnerability is the scene when she first appears in the novel, on her way to visit Nanda at Carignano, her mountain retreat. We have heard her voice before, talking on the telephone, and it is a voice that Nanda says is the source of all her trouble—loud, shrill and annoying. Now, we see her as she walks through the town on the way to Nanda's house. 'Commotion preceded her like a band of langurs [monkeys]. Unfortunately, it took the form of schoolboys who were unfortunately let out from school at just the same time as Ila Das was proceeding towards Carignano with her uneven, rushing step, in her ancient white court shoes, prodding the tip of her great brown umbrella into the dust with an air of faked determination. Like monkeys, the boys swung about her, careless and insulting. They hooted at her little grey top-knot that wobbled on top of her head, at her spectacles that slipped down to the tip of her nose, at the grey rag of a petticoat that gaped dismally beneath the lace hem of her sari—at everything, in short, that was Ila Das.' The mocking gets physical when the boys deliberately bump into her and send her crocheted handbag flying. She stoops down and retrieves it, and then 'made the mistake of opening her mouth, saying harmless things, like "I'll tell your teacher." No matter what she said, it would make them bellow—that was the way her voice acted upon everyone.' Finally, Ila decides to use her umbrella as a weapon and charges at the boys, but the umbrella is broken and proves ineffective. Immediately, the boys fall upon it, knock it to the ground and kick it down the road until it gets stuck in iron railings. This is a distressing scene of an older woman so defenceless against the cruelty of the world around her.

Regretful Ila has struggled all through her life. Not receiving any inheritance, losing her parents and then having to find low-paying government work. When Ila looks back at her life, while talking to Nanda on the day she visits her in the mountain retreat, she is full of regrets. The most poignant of these misgivings is that she wishes she had resigned her job at the Home Sciences college at the university. Before joining the college, Ila had been suffering badly, unable to make ends meet. Then Nanda stepped in and urged her husband to find her a position in the college. Ila worked hard and efficiently for a decade, and revelled in the life of the university. 'How I wish I could go back,' Ila now says to Nanda in the mountains. 'I loved the badminton, the parties, the nights on the lawn.' She then explains that she resigned her job in a fit of pique that she had been overlooked when promotions came. She got furious and, in order to maintain her self-respect, left a good-paying job that she loved. 'Oh, I wish I had had more humility,' she cries to Nanda. 'A little humility would have made the difference.' Nanda nods her head, and Ila sits still, wringing her hands and wiping away the tears with her soiled handkerchief. 'If only...' These are the words audible between her sobs. This is

a moment of painful regret, when the whole of Ila's life flashes before her eyes, and she realises that a small shift in her attitude would have made an enormous difference. It is also immensely sad because, as readers, we know that Ila Das actually should have been given the promotion and that she did the right thing in standing up for herself. But Ila is so overcome with regret that she cannot give herself credit.

Committed Another element of Ila's character is her commitment to the cause of eradicating child-marriage. This is a side of Ila that we do not expect, not in a 'funny old lady,' who speaks in a strange voice and walks with a slight limp. It is not the kind of thing we associate with Ila, who has shown no sign of inner strength or conviction to any cause. She is the impoverished Christian lady, struggling to make ends meet, and lost in the past when her life included parties at the Vice-Chancellor's mansion. We first hear of her commitment when she is talking to Nanda about her work as a social welfare officer. 'Now I've run into all this problem trying to stop child-marriage,' she says. 'It's the law of the land, isn't it? And that's what I'm paid to do, isn't it? Enforce the law?' Ila then tells Nanda how, whenever she hears about a possible child-marriage, she goes to the house and explains that the family could go to prison. 'It's the women who listen to me,' she says. 'Not the men. Oh, no. The women know what it is like to have a child at twelve.' Ila says that she is often followed by a Hindu priest who harasses her and sets people against her. Nanda cautions her to be careful, but Ila is not afraid and tells her about a particular case. She has been arguing with the mother and father, trying day after day to stop the marriage of their ten-year-old daughter. Ila has been threatened, but she won't stop her campaigning. Her commitment is unwavering, and she is only stopped when, on the last page, she is raped and killed by the father with whom she'd been arguing.

Raka (Independent)

Character Raka is Nanda's great-granddaughter, who comes to stay with her in the mountains because her parents (her abusive father and victimised mother) have left India for Geneva and because she needs to recover from typhoid fever. Raka is an awkward, gangly teenager, whom Nanda describes as like 'one of those dark crickets who leap up in fright, but do not sing, or like a mosquito on fine, thin, precarious legs.' She has large, protruding ears, bulging eyes and closely cropped hair. She, very much like Nanda, is a private person. Having suffered from her father's drunken rages, she has not learned to trust anyone. Unlike most children of her age, she does not like the stories of adventure and fantasy that Nanda tells her. Nor does she seek affection or protection. Instead, she explores the rocky hills and pine trees around the house, where she begins to build her own imaginary world. She shows an interest in deserted places and destroyed things, like burnt-out houses, creaking pine trees and barren landscapes. Her own destructive streak is expressed when, on the last page of the novel, she lights the 'fire on the mountain.' No wonder that one of the locals refers to her as 'the crazy one.'

Activities Raka spends most of the day wandering around the mountainous landscape surrounding Nanda's house. She especially loves the empty ravines and pine tree-covered hills, but also the wild flowers she finds. She likes to explore the buildings she discovers, including an abandoned cement factory and a burnt-out cottage. She does not go to school. She eats very little at meals, preferring instead to consume the wild fruit, berries and nuts that she collects on her rambles. She sits down at tea but not with any enthusiasm and shows little interest in the stories that Nanda tells her. She is somewhere inside her mind, free to go wherever she wants.

Illustrative moments

Haunted Raka has come to Nanda's mountain retreat as a refugee. The ostensible reason is to recuperate from a bout of typhoid fever, but she also needs healing from the trauma she has suffered as a result of living with her drunken and abusive father. She has had to witness him beat her mother in front of her own eyes, and those memories still haunt her even in the mountains. A powerful illustration of those un-exorcised demons occurs one evening when Raka decides to go to the Club. Ram Lal, the servant, has told her that young people enjoy themselves there and that she, who roams alone on the hills, should go visit. It is dark by the time she arrives and stands on the veranda outside the ballroom, sliding in between pots of plants and old wine racks. When she peers inside, she 'fell back on her knees in shock.' This was not what she had expected. Instead of the 'kings and queens swirling around,' as Ram Lal had described it, she saw 'madmen and rioters' jumping around in

'rampant lunacy.' She stands rigid with fear, unable to move, as the wild scene becomes more and more hallucinatory, more dangerous and frightening. Then she runs, sobbing 'I hate them...hate them.' The author explains: 'Somewhere behind the figures, behind it all, was her father, home from a party, stumbling and crashing...beating at her mother with the hammers and fists of abuse, harsh, filthy abuse that made Raka cower under her bedcovers and wet the bed.' These are the scenes burnt into her memory, so deep that not even the isolation of the mountains can dissolve them. Raka may hide from them, as she did under the bedcovers, but they will not disappear. When, on the final page of the novel, she lights a fire on the mountain, we sense a glimmer of understanding. As with nearly all Anita Desai's female characters, the experiences of childhood shape the later life.

Solitary Raka is a solitary person, even as a little girl. Her love of solitude baffles Nanda, who is herself a reclusive woman. When Nanda tells her fairy tales or magical adventure stories, Raka remains detached, not drawn into the story because she needs to stay separate, even from her great-grandmother. A good example of Raka's independence, of both mind and body, occurs in a scene when Nanda waits for her to return from one of her wanderings among the hills and trees. Raka comes back, her legs scratched and her dress torn, and Nanda looks at her with disapproval. But Raka ignores her, so wilfully and completely that Nanda is shocked. Raka rejects her and turns her eyes toward the pine cone in her own palm. She is totally different to Nanda's other children and grandchildren. She has no demands, no wishes, no pleas. 'Like an insect burrowing through the sandy loam and pine-needles of the hillside, she wanted only one thing: to be left alone to pursue her own secret life.' Nanda became a recluse by a deliberate decision to leave behind her life of duty and obligation, but Raka is different. Raka is a recluse by instinct, by nature. It might be said that Raka's instinctive solitude is also a protective reaction to her trauma from early childhood, but it has become an integral part of her character.

Destructive Raka harbours a destructive streak inside her young body and mind. One of the satisfying elements of this otherwise slight novel is that the author lays a trail of incidents that hint at her tendency to destroy things and will culminate on the final page in her lighting a fire on the mountain. Early on, we see that Raka likes to crush leaves and step on crawling things, but a more developed example of her fascination with fire itself comes midway through the book. She is with Ram Lal, the servant, who is watching a pot of water, waiting for it to boil, so that he can give her hot water for her bath. The pot is boiling on an outside fire, and the wind is kicking up, and so Ram Lal is afraid that the flames might spread and set fire to a nearby building. Hearing him speak of his fears, Raka gets excited, and says, 'Will it set fire to the shed? Will it set fire to the hill?' Ram Lal looks at her and sees the young girl's eyes aflame with delight. 'I found a cottage, all burned to the ground,' she says gleefully. 'Yes,' says Ram Lal, 'it burned because the fire truck could not reach it. An English lady lived there and she went mad and was taken to the asylum.' Listening to that, Raka's eyes widen even further, as if the destruction and the insanity were pleasures that she enjoyed.