

Psychic Isolation and Alienation of Subarna and Nanda Kaul in Ashapura Devi's Subarnalata and Anita Desai's Fire on the Mountain respectively.

Pragati Das¹

Abstract: Representation of mental agony, isolation, and psychic crisis is a significant trend in literary writings especially in novels. Ours is an age of great spiritual stress and strain. Here people suffer from inner problem---a conviction of isolation, alienation, detachment, meaninglessness in every sphere of life. These things are delineated both in Bangla and English novels. Almost all the novelists try to explore these themes in their writings. Ashapura Devi is a prominent Bengali novelist and Anita Desai is a renowned novelist who writes in English. Though they are from different ages and the medium of their writings is different, their perspectives and the ways of representations can be merged. Their views are to focus on the predicament of women in the male dominated society. In Indian subcontinent women are crushed by social pressure. This pressure creates isolated people, who are dislocated from their environment and from their own reality, that is to say their vision of life and of the world. Society alienates them and this deep feeling of isolation appears in different ways in the novels. They have tried to uphold these crises in their novels. This paper attempts to uphold the psychic isolation and alienation of these two novelists' female characters- Subarna and Nanda Kaul who have suffered from privation and humiliations, negligence and silence, alienation and seclusion.

Key Words: Self-exploration, Anguish, Frustration, Patriarchy, Alienation.

Subarnalata published in 1967 is about an age which has just gone by, whose impact on the contemporary society is still quite visible. Subarna, the protagonist of the novel, belonged to a time when it was taken as an offence if women even stepped out of the house. It was then unheard that a mother could wish to educate her daughter and not agree to get her married at a very young age. It was even more unprecedented that the mother would leave home as a

¹ Lecturer of English, School of Education, Bangladesh Open University, Gazipur-1705., pragati.liberty@yahoo.com.

mark of protest when her daughter was married off without her knowledge. Subarna's life was sketched largely based on Ashapura Devi's personal experiences and those of the contemporary women around her [1]. According to Ashapura Devi, Subarna is an emissary from the world she herself had dwelt in as a child. She epitomizes an age which has witnessed the helplessness of women locked within four walls in the city.

Subarna, the daughter of Satyabati, is fashioned in the same metal, displaying the same spirit, the same grit and determination. Early in the novel, Subarna was constantly subjected to derogatory comments about her mother who had left her family and gone away on a pilgrimage. But nobody even had any idea about the enormity of Satya's pain and frustration. Nobody would ever understand why she left the first place. But the readers realize that the flame that was alight in Satyabati, keeps burning within Subarna, and singes anybody who tries to counter her. Subarna had to fight at every step. Subarna herself could never really adjust herself to the narrow-minded insensitivity of her in-laws' household. She never ceased to protest and kept up an effort to rationalize with people around her. Even during her labour pain, she had to fight with Muktakeshi, her mother-in-law, for some clean sheets.

The reader experiences Subarna's excitement about the *baranda* which her husband promised her to be built while their family house was being built. Subarna ran up to the first floor in search of her balcony. Instead, she just came across more and more walls. She rushed towards the second floor and terrace, but that part hadn't been constructed due to lack of funds. Furious Subarna told her husband- Prabodh that she was taking an oath that her sons would build a house with a balcony for her to avenge the insult of their mother. Deeply saddened and humiliated, she took a vow: "God, you shall be my witness, I will build a nice house with a *baranda*, I will, I will, I will. When my sons grow up and become self sufficient, I shall avenge this insult" Then the authorial voice intervened, "But what about her previous oath? Hadn't she said that if the house didn't have a balcony she would not even stay there! Alas, wife of a Bengali household, oaths were meaningless for her." (Devi 1988: p.11) [2]. Nobody in the family understood or appreciated her need for an outlet and the only emotion she managed to generate within the family, was either fear or criticism. She failed to convince even her husband how necessary it was for people to get a glimpse of the outer world in order to broaden their mind. Subarna felt that "nowhere is there a ventilator through which even an iota of the moving air can gain entry into this house [...] there is an absence of ventilator in their understanding as well" (Devi 1988:p.32)[3]. From the depths of rural Bengal, Ashapura Devi has dragged us into the heart of the city, but then the city does not spell freedom. Inside Subarna's house, the air stands still, stagnant, timeless. But Subarna yearned for a breath of that fresh air, that contact with the outside world which was full of promise, the promise of freedom. The claustrophobic ambience of her in-laws' house was like a steadily tightening noose around her neck.

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Subarna and her husband cherished different interests, ideas and values. Her husband wanted sexual union without caring her psychic poise. Ashapura depicts in her novel the dissolution and disintegration of the feminine sensibility in marriage. It denotes a collative neurosis which shatters the identity of women in our male-dominated patriarchal society where women longing for love and security are driven mad or forced into suicide. It is the alienated self's frantic and frenetic struggle for a socio-psychic release from the drab reality of existence in order to find a voice and a vision[4]. According to Gopa Mazumder, in her English translation of *Subarnalata* "Their duties were simple—raise the children, get them married, then perhaps in one's old age, go and visit holy places. And the biggest duty of all was to keep the women under control. One's mother had to be both respected and feared, it was true. But one's wife? All expected from her was total obedience." (Devi 1997:p.14)[5].

Ann Foreman considers women's alienation profoundly disturbing because women experience themselves as fulfillment of other people's needs:

Man exists in the social world [.....] for the woman, however, her place within the home [.....] the effect of it is on even more oppressive form. Men seek relief from this alienation through their relations with women; for women there is no relief. For these intimate relations are the very ones that are the essential structures of her oppression (Ann 1977:pp. 101-02)[6].

Within the claustrophobic airless confines of the family house, Subarna found an ally in a young relative, a boy called Dulo. Dulo supplied her with books which widened the windows of Subarna's mind, helped her to satiate her unquenchable thirst for knowledge. Dulo used to bring these books from the collection of an enigmatic person called Mallikbabu, whom Dulo quoted often: "Until our womenfolk get emancipated and self sufficient, the sorrowful state of our country will not change for the better" (Devi 1988:p. 91)[7]. When Dulo recounted the discussions about the crisis of the country held at Mallikbabu's place, a shiver went down Subarna's spine. These words were right after her heart. They echoed her emotions, her fears and her frustrations. But a chance of encounter with Mallikbabu led to a calamity, with fingers being raised at her fidelity. One more window of Subarna's soul got shut and screwed closed permanently.

During the outbreak of plague in Kolkata, hordes of people left the city to escape its clutches and took refuge in the countryside. Subarna was sent to her husband's younger sister Subala in the countryside. During this visit, she encountered Ambika, a free soul, somewhat eccentric, distantly related to her sister-in-law. Ambika epitomized all that was lacking in the men in her family. He was deeply aware of what was going on in the world around them, was clear-thinking and rational and displayed a sensitivity that Subarna had always yearned for. When Ambika teased her about her detective-like interrogation, she

retorted without any hesitation whatsoever: "Who else but us women would understand the pangs of slavery? We serve even the servants" (Devi 1988:p.163)[8]. She visited Ambika's house in search of poems, in search of books and was amazed at the collection she stumbled upon. The strong nationalistic feelings conveyed in the poems composed by Ambika brought tears to her eyes and at the same time enraged her. In Ambika's words, echoing the spirit of nationalism, Subarna found an echo of the pain and sufferings endured by all womenfolk — "their lack of independence, their silent sufferings, their pains and frustrations as the downtrodden beings." (Devi 1988:p.182)[9].

In Subarnalata's anguish Ashapura Devi has captured the anguish, helplessness and frustration of thousands of women. They lived in a world where women were not supposed to dream of any independence. They were born to provide, to suffer, to sacrifice and then to drown into oblivion [10]. After bringing up her sons with what she thought was the right kind of education, they disappointed Subarna and offered no help in the education of the two young sisters Parul and Bakul. She had tried to bring up her sons but they turned out to be more like their uncles, carrying deep within them that disdain towards women that were a marker of the father's side of their family. In fact, all they offered their mother was the standard taunt and disdain that women were traditionally being subjected to. When Ambika was released from the jail and came to Kolkata to meet Subarna and her family, he faced tremendous insult. Subarna tells him:

"As it is, the sins committed during previous births have led to my being born as a

Bengali girl, and further sins have thrust me in this household of 'saints'. What more do you expect? Actually it is you people who should be saluted, you who have neglected your personal welfare, and have made an effort to dispel the shame of the country." (Devi 1988:p.275)[11].

Subarna wrote about her experiences, her dreams, her sufferings and was audacious enough to try and get these writings published. The inexperienced publisher and his lack of editing led to a disaster, and the volume which could be the harbinger of some kind of emancipation, instead became a butt of ridicule and brought the aspiring author further embarrassment. Being frustrated, towards the end of the novel, Subarna lit a fire on the terrace and the hungry fire devoured all her literary endeavours, all her imagination, her dreams and her creations. Finally withdrawing from all mundane activities, she became apathetic and bade farewell to the world. The fire is lit out of the realization that her efforts have all failed, that the sons have not really grown up to be sensitive human beings. The fire consumes yellowed sheaves of paper with scribbling all over them, bunches of exercise books telling the story of a woman, one among many who throng the villages and cities of Bengal down generations.

All her agony, her seclusion was clearly upheld in the voice of Bakul, the only person who carried forward her dream and vowed never to let it die or be forgotten. At the end of the novel, she says, "Mother, dear mother. I shall find all

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your writings that were burnt out and lost. I shall find all those writings that never saw the light of the day. I shall convey to the sunlit earth the tale of the silent trauma of the world of darkness." (Devi 1988:p.396)[12].

Ashapura's trilogy spans the past, present and future as the texts situate themselves within the immediate past of the late nineteenth century and both colonial twentieth century and postcolonial twentieth century. The severe marginalization and determined resistance are represented through the dominant voices of resistance as Subarnalata and Subarnalata's daughter Bakul etch their road maps.

Similarly, Anita Desai is more interested in the interior landscape of the mind than in social and political realities. She explores the emotional world of women especially the married women, revealing a rare imaginative awareness of various deeper forces and a profound understanding of feminine sensibility and their psychology as well [13]. She deals with alienation, quest for ultimate meaning in life, detachment, isolation and loneliness. It develops an emotional insecurity and thus they develop a tendency to revolt. They make an effort to move against the current and so develop an obsession for death. It happens in the life of Nanda Kaul who has a close similarity with Subarna in Ashapura Devi's *Subarnalata*.

As the novel opens we see Nanda Kaul, as an aged woman standing under the pine trees at Carignano, 'her home on the ridge,' her hill-top house on Kasauli. She is aged but still very beautiful, self consciously graceful and straight in her bearing. The chapter subtly introduces Nanda Kaul as a person as well as her present situation. Apparently the lady has withdrawn from the plains, from friends and relatives, from all mundane superfluities of daily life, and also from her own past. She is determined to love her loneliness. We are also allowed a glimpse of her house as well as the view commanded from the spot, through Nanda Kaul's own point of view.

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. (F.O.M. p.3) [14].

The very first chapter introduces the keynote of the novel, and simultaneously lets loose a number of ideas which will be gradually crystallized in course of the novel. But even at this stage it is quite evident that Anita Desai's primary interest is not the description of the landscape but the psychology of the protagonist and

the landscape is used only to reflect symbolically mindscape of Nanda Kaul. In the words of N.R. Gopal, in the very first chapter nature imagery has been used to portray the character of Nanda Kaul. She has had such a busy family life that in the evening of her life she wants to do nothing with family or society [15]. She prefers her lonely isolated existence guarding her privacy fiercely and the news of Raka's arrival, conveyed to her through a letter, unsettles her.

Nanda Kaul paused under the pine trees to take in their scented sibilance and listen to the cicadas fiddling invisibly under the mesh of 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 for him, inexorably closing in with his swollen bag, rolled a flat ball of irritation into the cool cave of her day, blocking it stupidity: bags and letters, messages and demands, requests, promises and queries, she had wanted to be done with them all, at Carignano. She asked to be left to the pines and cicadas alone. She hoped he would not stop. (F.O.M. p.3) [16].

What she wanted was total withdrawal from society hating human society so much so as to yearn to be a tree, a part of nature. In the authorial description in the Chapter I a parallel has been shown between her and a tree:

She was grey, tall and thin and her silk saree made a sweeping, shivering sound and she fancied she could merge with the pine trees and be mistaken for one. To be a tree, no more and no less, was all she was prepared to undertake. (F.O.M.p4)[17].

Nanda Kaul sits in the shaded cool veranda of Carignano in her accustomed posture in the old cane chair, with the letter on her lap. After reading that letter Nanda kaul felt so disgusted that she did not care to reply. And now she feels equally reluctant to open those follow-up message from Asha. However, when at last she opens the letter, it is to find the message that Raka, her great-grandchild is already on her way to Kasauli. Nanda feels both anger and disappointment, – angry because of her daughter's insensitive meddling into others' lives and disappointed at this unwanted intrusion into her own space. Arrived at the fag end of her life, Nanda Kaul feels she wants only stillness and calmness; she only wants Carignano, and the little space—all to herself. But now an intrusion is thrust upon her, and it is imminent, she feels so dissatisfied that the perpetually soothing scenario around her fails to soothe her at this moment.

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As Nanda Kaul tries to remember the house, again the same feeling of un-belonging, un-possession, comes back. It had been "his house, never hers," where she had only obeyed the calls of 'duty' like a slave. Who told her that all this was her duty? Who defined her 'duties,' or forced them upon her? The author suggests it was but self imposed, and yet the self imposition itself was conditioned by the patriarchal ideology that governed the society [18]. The first journey of Nanda Kaul's life helps us to understand her frustration and feeling of emptiness, the vacuity of un-fulfillment.

The life-long faithlessness of Mr. Kaul to Nanda Kaul and the hypocritical situation force her to avow this severance. Nanda Kaul has conceded this after passing through psychic suffering and bitter experiences of a marital life. This wedding is veritably based on physical lust and circumstantial convenience for Mr. Kaul. Mr Kaul does not love her as a wife. She plays the gracious hostess all the time and enjoys the comforts and social status of the wife of a dignified person. Nanda Kaul becomes a mother, grandmother and great-grandmother of many unwanted and unloved children. Her life as the Vice-Chancellor's wife though crowded and full of social activity, was truly empty and insatiable. There have been too many guests coming and going all the time, leaving little privacy for her. She ever passes her life to arrange the dinner table as a hard working hostess. The novelist presents the trauma of a housewife through the following passages:

The old house, the full house, of that period of her life when she was the Vice-Chancellor's wife and at the hub of a small but intense busy world, had not pleased her. Its crowding had stifled her [...]. There had been too many guests coming and going, Tongas and rickshaws piled up under the eucalyptus trees and the bougainvilleas, their drivers asleep on the seats with their feet hanging over the bars. The many rooms of the house had always been full, extra beds would have had to be made up, often in not very private corners of the hall or veranda, so that there was a shortage of privacy that vexed her. Too many trays of tea would have to be made and carried to her husband's study, to her mother-in-law's bedroom, to the veranda that was the gathering-place for all, at all times of the day. Too many meals, too many dishes on the table, too much to wash up after. They had had so many children, they had gone to so many different schools and colleges at different times of the day, and had so many tutors—one for mathematics who was harsh and slapped the unruly boys, one for drawing who was lazy and smiled and did nothing, and others equally incompetent and irritating. Then there had been their friends, all of different ages and sizes and families (F.O.M.p.29-30) [19].

Externally everything appears to be free from harshness but internally Mrs Kaul burns with a fire of frustration. She feels lonely and neglected. Above all Mr. Kaul carried on a life-long illicit affair with Miss Davidson, a member of the teaching staff. In spite of this she appears as smooth and free from heart-

breaking agony. Nanda Kaul keeps the congealed smile on her face. She looks after the children, family, his house, servants, shutting the doors, cooking food, lunch, dinner and guiding supper table, keeping the visitors at ease and waiting, ever waiting with a singular, burning, soul-destroying enmity for her husband and to stop all these perpetually, she craves for a blessed widowhood, the complete separation sans man and children around. These are the situations which have forced her to get such a dreamed house at Kasauli. It produces in Nanda Kaul such a disease of spirit that she distrusts all attachments and affairs. After the death of her husband:

She has been so glad when it was over. She had been glad
To leave it all behind in the plains, like a great, heavy,
Difficult book that she had read through and was not
Required to read again [...] 'discharge me' she groaned,
I have discharged all my duties. Discharge (F.O.M.p.30) [20].

The novel presents marital incongruity. Nanda Kaul attempts to conceal it, she has been violently injured and disappointed in her earlier life as a wife, mother and housewife. She prefers seclusion not because she favours it but to rest her pain-filled psyche, her stagnated pulses, bits and pieces of identity. But she attempts to get in the shelter of Carignano doubtless need that rock-like exterior to give them a wholesome structure, a hopeful destination.

The following passage from Simone de Beauvoir's observation on the plight of 'the married woman' seems to be particularly relevant in studying Nanda Kaul's personality, and in understanding her deliberate posture of a stiff withdrawal.

A[married] woman determined, in spite of her condition, to go on living in a clear-sighted and genuine manner may have no other resort than a stoic pride. Being in every material way dependent, she can know only an inner, abstract freedom; she refuses to accept ready-made principles and values, she uses her judgment, she questions, and thus she escapes conjugal slavery; but for her aloofness, her fidelity to the rule: 'Bear and abstain,' constitute but a negative attitude. Immobilized, in renunciation and cynics, she lack positive employment for her power; she aids other, protects, gives, does this that; but she suffers from finding no truly demanding task, no real aim. Consumed in her solitude and sterility, she may deny and destroy herself.

(The Second Sex. p. 495) [21].

Again, Nanda Kaul at Carignano, seems to fit amazingly to Beauvoir's description of the predicament of the old woman in her concluding paragraph to the chapter "From Maturity to Old Age":

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Old women take pride in their independence; they begin at last to view the world through their own eyes; they note that they have been duped and deceived all their lives; sane and mistrustful, they often develop a pungent cynicism. In particular, the woman who 'has lived' knows men as no man does, for she has seen in man not the image on public view but the contingent individual, the creature of circumstance, that each man in the absence of his peers shows himself to be. She knows women also, for they show themselves without reserve only to other women: she has been behind the scenes. But if her experience enables to unmask deceits and lies, it is not sufficient to show her the truth. Amused or bitter, the wisdom of the old woman still remains wholly negative: it is the nature of the opposition, indictment, denial; it is sterile. In her thinking as in her acts, the highest form of liberty available to the woman parasite is stoical defiance or skeptical irony. At no time of her life does she succeed in being at once effective and independent.

(The Second Sex.p.607-08) [22].

The novel presents the traumatic self of Nanda Kaul, an old woman, who has had too much of the world with her and so she longs for a quiet, retired life. Her busy past now looks like "a box of sweets" ((F.O.M.p.31) [23] positively sickening. After coming to Kasauli Nanda Kaul had thought that at last she was released from the shackles of those endless 'duties.' Nanda Kaul performed the duties of her married life very well, but her husband and children never bothered about her inner psyche. This indifference of her husband and children made her pine for privacy which could be hers only. It is because of this very reason she pines for seclusion in Carignano, and does not like the idea of Raka's staying with her. Naturally she feels bitter that she should be forced against her wishes into harness, once more, compelled to accept once more the call for caring, confronting, communicating with another human. Nanda Kaul feels she would have preferred to be an eagle freely gliding in the sky.

An eagle swept over it, far below her, a thousand feet below, its wings outspread, gliding on currents of air without once moving its great muscular wings which remained in repose, in control. She had wished it occurred to her, to imitate that eagle-gliding, with eyes closed. (F.O.M. p.19) [24].

Like Subarna in *Subarnalata* Nanda Kaul knows that all her life has been spent or wasted caring for other, and now she has lost the motivation. In this house, at last a house of her own, she just wants to reveal in her freedom from obligations. Now she finds a projection of her own condition in the bare, empty garden of this house. So, she does not want to change it or plant any new thing in it just as she does not want to add anything to her shrunk, parked, but 'radiantly single life' at this stage. Like her the garden also seems to have aged with withered till it has reached an 'elegant perfection.' She just can't imagine a child in the garden. Very subtly but surely Anita Desai calls our attention to the affinity between Nanda Kaul and the garden. The garden is as barren as empty as she is. The garden thus becomes an 'objective correlative' for the feelings of Nanda Kaul after she has lived her life only to realize, rather late in the day, that it has all been barren and empty. The author attempts to draw a parallel between Nanda Kaul and her garden in Carignano.

Like her, the garden seemed to have arrived, simply by a process of age, of withering away and an elimination, at a state of elegant perfection. It was made up of a very elements, but they were exact and germane as the strokes in a Japanese scroll. She is no more wished to add to them than she wished to add to her own pared, reduced and radiantly single life. (F.O.M. p.31) [25].

The introduction of Ila Das is meant to present another section of marginalized women. Unlike Nanda Kaul she is poor and spinster, but it will be gradually revealed that in spite of the very many contrasts in their social positions, in their figures, and in their ways of living there is a basic affinity between the two. Apart from the fact that they are old friends, right from their school days, and know each other pretty well, both are also victims of a dominantly patriarchal society in their respective ways. In this brief chapter talks becomes punctured with silence, which becomes weighed down with the sadness of shared memories of frustration and betrayal, failure and bitterness.

In the last chapter of the novel we find that Anita Desai is at one of her best feats of artistic excellence. The telephone rings at Carignano. Nanda Kaul feels reluctant to answer. Then Ram Lal comes out of the kitchen, and calls her; it is her telephone. It is from the police station carrying the news of Ila Das. The police asks her to come to the police station and 'identify.' While holding the receiver Nanda Kaul takes a plunge within, and identifies herself with Ila Das. Ila Das had been stripped before being killed. Nanda Kaul strips herself of all the delusions, all the dreams, all the myth she had so carefully adorned her stories with. She stands face with naked truth, and dies holding the receiver. The news comes to Nanda Kaul as a rude shock and she is jolted into the self-perception that all the glittering stories she had yarned all these days were false, and that her true identity lay with Ila Das, the humiliated mutilated woman. The

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shock of the perception kills her. She dies while holding the receiver.

But Nanda Kaul had ceased to listen. She had dropped the telephone. With her head still thrown back, far back, she gasped. No, no, it is a lie. No it can't be. It was a lie—Ila was not raped, nor 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 Budha from a traveling peddler. They had not had bears and leopards in their home, nothing but outfed 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 lifelong affair with Miss David, the mathematics mistress, whom he had loved, all his life loved. And her children—the children were alien to her nature. She neither understood nor loved them. She did not live here by choice—she lived here alone because that was what he was forced to do, reduced to doing. (F.O.M. p.145) [26].

In the mean time Raka has come back to tell Nani that she has set the forest on fire.

“Look nani, I have set the forest on fire. Look nani look, the forest is on fire.” (F.O.M.-145). It symbolizes fire which burns in the heart of an old lady- Nanda kaul, the protagonist of the novel. Here we find a close affinity between Nanda Kaul and Subarna who lost her hope and burnt all her literary endeavors. For this purpose R.S. Sharma rightly states that the words are expressive of Raka's resolve to destroy a world where a woman can't hope to be happy without being unnatural. Mrs Desai makes use of the flash back technique in describing the central theme of the trauma of a housewife [27].

Fire on the Mountain limns out the existentialist problems and predicaments in the middle class people, particularly women. Tired of a life of duties and responsibilities for so long, Nanda seeks refuge in the sequestered life of an undisturbed privacy. Existential anguish makes a person feel alienated—alienated from society, alienated from the family, and finally alienated from one's own self [28].

Thus *Fire on the Mountain* emerges to be parallel to Nanda in her isolation and withering, as well as her elegance, grandeur. The fictionalized mountain space emerges as a site that symbolically implies Nanda Kaul's tragic predicament as well as wistful dream,—the long-cherished and long suppressed longing for 'a room of her own,' a world of her own. In *Subarnalata*, Subarna also secluded herself from family at the end. All through her life she wanted to have a house with open veranda which symbolizes freedom of thoughts. Ultimately she got it when she refrained herself from all kinds of worldly things and rejecting the house she found her abode in the veranda which symbolizes alienation from the mundane activities and finally breathed her last. In fine it can be said that despite different circumstances, socio-cultural backdrop, the two novelists have tried to focus the psychological torments of their female characters from different angles but their motifs are same.

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