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Feminism in the fiction of Anita Desai: A study

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Abstract

Feminism is a recent theory to influence literature both in the West and East by portraying women and their problems. The feminism is against the patriarchal society which stands on the way of the women's freedom. The women do not stand on equal footing with men in very sphere of life. So, they struggled throughout all the ages for their freedom. But *The Second Sex* by Simon de Behavior brought a worldwide revolution to fight against such socio-economic inequality. The literature picked it up and portrayed how the women are treated in a patriarchal society where they tortured both physically and mentally. Anita Desai's fictions belong to such categories of texts which portrayed how the women suffer due to lack of freedom.

Keywords: Feminism, fiction, second sex, equality, apex, law, Bhagavad Gita & apathy

Introduction

Feminism is differently perceived in different countries. In western countries, though the women are socially and economically empowered, they are still restricted for the top political and military posts. In the USA women are not really preferred for the top political posts like president, chief justices of the apex court etc. In India the women are socially, politically, and religiously empowered but their constitutional rights cannot be enjoyed due to financial dependence and the hurdles of outdated social taboos. The silent sufferings of women, starting from cradle to the grave, have been portrayed by both the male and female writers. But the portrayal perspectives of women's agony differ from writer to writer as per their experiences and understanding the society.

Feminism, though a recently coined concept, had its exhaustive analysis in the ancient Indian epics like *The Ramayan*, *Mahabharata*, and many others. Though the Hinduism treats torturing of women as a sin, many women are seen mentally tortured despite getting all sorts of protections by religions and laws.

Feminism has been portrayed in literature explaining in detail how the women silently and violently suffer despite legally and religiously sanctioned status of equalities with men. The women writers like Anita Desai, Kiran Desai, Arundhati Roy, Chitra Banarjee, Manju Kapoor and many others have scanned the unseen sufferings of women even in themselves.

The silent sufferings stem from family are generally unlooked and uncared which torment a lady in the family. Amidst all sorts of protections how a woman suffers in family, how she is misunderstood and mistaken has been accurately portrayed in the fiction of Anita Desai.

When Anita Desai was writing her debut novel, the feminist movement in west was on the verge of subsided but its influences were found in the third world countries. Indian writers picked up the plots and sketched women and their suffering through their men's counterparts. Here society and men were the villains that torture them.

Anita Desai does to allow her women characters to cross social and moral limits that have been prescribed for centuries like Sova De rather her female characters struggle to overcome their sufferings by gentle way. Sometimes they succeed and sometimes they escape the situation by taking the extreme steps to eliminate themselves.

A common reader can smell the flavor of feminism in her fiction like *Clear Light of Day* (1980), *Fasting, Feasting* (1999), *In Custody* (1984)^[3], *The Village by the Sea* (1982)^[2], *Cry, the Peacock* (1963)^[1] and *In Custody* (1984)^[3]. The later part of the feminist movement in the USA and Europe found its larger impacts in her writings. All her heroines are seeing struggling against a bitter realism of hegemonies of patriarchy inside the family. Desai wields her pens empowering the women to amass courage to lock their horns against the

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social structures and social processes of India that stand their ways to live like human being.

Cry, The Peacock was written when feminism was in its climax in the west. *The Guide* of R.K. Narayan was also composed during the time. The characters of Rosie in *The Guide* and Maya in *Cry, the Peacock* are feminist who rebel the conventions and the rules and regulations of society made it belittle women.

Anita Desai's time in India was patriarchy in structures. The women did not have any voice except accepting everything the domination of men. They had to obey; they could not raise their voice even though the minimum basic requirements sustaining life is denied to them. Maya, the mollycoddle of her father, who is her entire world, lives measurably due to her husband Goutam's apathy. The husband wife differences may not be painful if these are social and financial. The women have to maintain celibacy in case of their husbands' apathy for love and romances. Maya wants to make her bed warm with Goutam, but he spoils such things by verses of The Bhagavad Gita which denies romances and prescribes celibacy.

Here Sigmund Freud's theory of sex to sane the senses may be analyzed that keeps both men and women healthy both mentally and physically. Maya's mental health begins to deteriorate due to Goutam's spiritual and superstitious state of mind. He could not understand or did not try to understand his wife and her state of mind. Goutam, an educated and legally expert, fails to understand the basic natural laws that control life and living.

Goutam regularly reads the Gita. He is an avid reader but cannot read his wife and her wants which is the real tragic fall in the fiction. His education and expert in laws have been satirized by Anita Desai. The feminist writers point out where the men fail to cope up with the women as a result the disputes originate. *Cry, The Peacock* really scans the intuitions of women who live and love as per the desire and whims of their husbands. Goutam, ten years older than his wife, Maya, is some extent suffering from libido.

In the husband wife differences, a wife suffers a lot in a patriarchal family. The differences surface on the activities then it is rooted to mind. The incompatible marriage attempts to adjust in family tolerating all the atrocities of life and sustaining traumas after repeated failure to adapt with the partner has been portrayed in the fiction. How much troublesome it is living a life of incompatible marriage. Anita Desai sketches herself through the character of Maya though she did not go through a life portrayed here. Fact mingles with fiction; events and incidents gathered from her surroundings crafted to shape a text revealing the risk which an educated and rational husband fails to undertake.

Problems inside the bedroom of a couple rarely come out. It remains within the four walls of the bedroom as per the social customs. When it comes out, it bursts eliminating the couple. The problems of Maya are unbearable. She commits the horrible crime by pushing her husband from the roof. She jumps from the roof. Both meet a pathetic death. It is not planned, but the sudden outburst of impulse which flushes out from her prolonged mental health.

She could have overcome such problems if she is taken care of by love, affection and fellow feelings. It is proved that one can even live happily in poverty, but it is difficult to live without care and love in amidst self and power. Sigmund Freud came out with the discovery of sexual activities and its direct impact on the body and mind. Unfulfilled desires,

dissatisfied conjugal love and lack of emotional contact between husband and wife are the main reasons of the mental crises. Anita Desai realizes such problems of women and sketches such beautiful character Maya.

Maya is the microcosm of the Indian women and a metaphor stands for the race of women who silently suffer and either get permanently mentally damaged or die killing other members' of her family what Maya does out of hysteria.

The age gap in marriage is another problem. The decade long gap in age between Goutam and Maya is the problems of gap in mind and ways of thinking sorting out family crises.

In her other novels also, Desai deals with the sufferings of women in the patriarchal society where the opinions of ladies are looked down upon. *Fire on the Mountain* deals with how women suffer due to the atrocities of men. Social created inequalities between men and women have empowered men to inflict torture on their wives. Such tortures inflict both mental and physical tortures on women. The recluse life of Nanda Kaur, an aged widow, and a child have delineated in *Fire on the Mountain*. These two characters live in their own imaginary world getting escaped from the hard realities of life. Raka, a child, is disturbed by the behavior of her own drunken father who physically and mentally hurts his wife before his children. Raka is shocked and is afraid of the beastly qualities of her father. She does not like her father and slipped from her home to an imaginary world to derive comfort. The same things are found in the case of Nanda. Her life as a widow is unbearable. She lives a life secluded and full of socially restricted. Times lingered to hunt her reminiscing the bygone days of her dreams days which came out opposite. Dreams rarely translated into realities because the society is the villain for women. They have nothing to say rather to accept everything like a beast.

Anita Desai started writing in the late sixties when feminism and the movement liberating women were widespread both in the West and East. Indian women had been suffering for social disparities since time immemorial, but Desai wields her pen portraying the suffering of women and finds out paths for their liberation. All most all her fictions are the reflection of feminist temper of her contemporary time.

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