



Gender Inequality in Kiran Desai's Fiction

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Abstract

Feminist approach is the prominent in a modern and postmodern literature. It is first inaugurated with publication of Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights for Women* in 1792 and since then there brought revolution in the women's issues as women's culture roles and achievements, their social political rights, equal rights for women, injustices etc. The modern and postmodern women novelists advocated feminist approach in their writings. Feminist literature in English is not a recent innovation. It is a product of the western liberalization in general and feminist thought in particular. The Indian women caught in the flux of tradition and modernity saddled with the burden of the past but both to cast off her aspirations constitute the crux of feminism in Indian Literature. Feminism is an ideology against oppression and exploitation of women in patriarchal system.

Keywords: Gender Inequality, Feminism

Introduction:

The goal of feminism is to establish and defend equal political, economic and social rights and equal opportunities for women. It has been minutely handled in the works of Indian English fiction especially Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Bharthi Mukherjee, Githa Hariharan, Kamala Markandaya, Shobha De, Suniti Namjoshi, Arundhati Roy, Mahashweta Devi, Nayantara Sahgal etc. These Indian women Novelists have portrayed women's issues realistically both psychologically and physically in their novels. They broke the literary and social norms of the past. They studied deep into psyche of their characters and projected various images of women and their status in society. They have written about women in a varied cultural perspective. In fiction, some women characters have attitude of rejection and negation of life while others have an affirmation and acceptance of life with a compromising attitude leading to deep sense of fulfillment. In this sense, the postmodern Indian women writers create a pattern of new study because they have dared to shatter the myth of a male dominated social system. They laid a firm foundation in the realm of female study in Indian Literature in English.

Gender Inequality in Kiran Desai's Fiction:

One has to consider Anita Desai's novels in such a social context or in such a transitional state of Indian feminism. As her novels deal with the middle and upper middle class society, the complexities of the "have-not" section would be safely left out while considering the feminist issues in her writing. Considered as a whole, her novels reveal a progression in the psychic awareness of women about their position in a society. It is difficult to refer to any direct source for any of Anita Desai's novels. The writer herself refers to none. However, her novels like *Cry the Peacock*, *Voices in the City*, *Where Shall We Go this Summer?* and her recent novel *Fasting, Feasting* explore the issues of gender from the Indian socio-historical perspective. Desai's first three novels are a study of women's depression resulting from their inability to grapple with their family situations. The latest novel deals with the issues related to women's



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education and their aspiration to obtain self-sufficiency and a meaningful existence. Anita Desai writes about women who have had the privilege of receiving education. But as her novels reveal, educational qualification and degrees did not until recently impel women to create their space in the outer world and acquire self-sufficiency. The Victorian ideal of the lady continued to dominate the social consciousness even in the 1980s and early 90s. The repression had taken a psychic dimension and women continued to restrict themselves to the “interior space” as that was more acceptable to the respectability of the middle class household. The “mad women” or the “hysterical” women in Anita Desai’s novels belong to this generation of women as daughters and wives in the Indian society of late 80s and early 90s of the twentieth century. The drudgery of daily chores, of catering to the needs of husbands and children often led women to feel depressed, isolated and bored. Repression of desires and a breakdown of communication within the family often drove women to commit suicide or made them suffer from neurotic disorders from time to time. It is possible to analyze her women characters in this light to identify their psychic disorders and find justification for their actions.

Throughout her novels and short stories, Desai focuses on the personal struggles of anglicized, middle class women in contemporary India as they attempt to overcome the societal limitations imposed by a tradition bound patriarchal culture. Her novels move around women characters although she is preoccupied with the theme of incompatible marital couplets. Most of Desai’s works engage the complexities of modern Indian culture far from feminine perspective while highlighting the female Indian predicament of maintaining a self identity as an individual.

Cry, the Peacock is a novel mainly concerned with the theme of disharmony between husband and wife relationship. It deals with the psychological consciousness of the female protagonists and is aptly illustrated amidst detail images, monologues and flashbacks. The female character Maya, in the novel, envelopes the reader as she unfolds the growth, development and climax of her neurosis. Maya is a young girl obsessed by a childhood prediction of disaster. The story unfolds that Maya’s father without thinking much married her off to his own lawyer friend – Gautam who was middle aged man. The marriage was never fruitful and slowly Maya turns into a psychopath whose emotional needs were seen to be collided with that of the extremely practical outlook of her husband. The climax of the story lies when Maya’s attachment with her father further develops into an ‘Electra Complex’ which again acts as the catalyst in the deflowering of her marital relationship with her husband. Extremely frustrated Maya then looks back to the class of her childhood spent with her father. This reminiscence of those long lost days serves as the defense mechanism to set her free from her inner frustration and conflict. This dark state of affair is again unacceptable by the conscious mind of Maya. She relaxes her tension by pondering unconsciously on how “Peacock breaks their bodies” in order to receive their own pain. Here comes the sense of violence, the feeling of killing or get killed which engulfs Maya. The violent desire of killing her husband awakening from her own frustration as revenge against his icy cold impressiveness and indifference weaves the story *Cry, The Peacock*. The very concept that woman needs something more than just food, clothes and accommodation, is aptly illustrated in this novel. The hyper sensitive mind of the women is illustrated by Anita Desai in the most tender way where the atmosphere of tension is set ideally against the backdrop. In Anita Desai’s novels *Cry the Peacock*, *Voices in the City*, *Fire on the Mountain*, She has explored the psyche of both Childless woman and women with Children. She has covered women of all age groups and types.

The novel *Clear Light Of Day* is published in 1980. It set in old Delhi. The novel is divided into four sections covering the Das family from the children’s perspective in this order: adulthood, adolescence, childhood and the time perspective returns to adulthood. It starts with Tara, the wife of Bakul, India’s ambassador to America, greeting her sister Bimla (Bim), who is a teacher of history living in Old Delhi as well as their autistic brother Baba’s caretaker. Their conversation comes to Raja, their



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brother who lives in Hyderabad. Bim doesn't want to go to the wedding of Raja's daughter, showing Tara an old letter from when Raja became her landlord, unintentionally insulting her after the death of his father-in-law. In second part, the setting switches to partition era India, when the characters are adolescents in what is now Bim's house. Raja is severely ill with tuberculosis and is left to Bim's ministrations. Aunt Mira (Mira Masi), their supposed caretaker after the death of the children's often absent parents, becomes alcoholic and alcoholism. Earlier Raja's fascination with Urdu attracts the attention of the family's Muslim landlord, Hyder Ali, whom Raja idolizes. When he heals, Raja follows Hyder Ali to Hyderabad. Tara escapes from the situation through marriage to Bakul. Bim is the chief and simplest protagonist of Anita Desai. Her ambition was two-fold; to be emotionally and economically independent. She never wanted to marry. The whole novel revolves around 'Time' drawing different impressions from the characters. Anita Desai herself says, "My novel is about time as a destroyer as a preserver and about what the bondage of time does to people. I have tried to tunnel under the mundane surface of domesticity."

The novel *Fasting Feasting* relates with the disastrous attempts of an Indian daughter to leave her parents home and achieve independence without marriage. Her parents barely notice their daughter's aspirations as they lavish all of their attention on their only son. Anita Desai highlights on a different types of women liberation through the character of Mira-Masi; a distant relative developed the habit of travelling all over the country alone, visiting one place of pilgrimage after other. Through the portrayal of Mira-Masi character, Anita Desai divulges the practicability of the confluence of the social and the spiritual. Anita Desai's works represent a unique blending of the Indian and the western. Her novels catch the bewilderment of the individual psyche confronted with the overbearing socio-cultural environment and the ever-beckoning modern promise of self-gratification and self-fulfillment. In the face of this dual onslaught, her protagonists- Male or Female – Maya, Sita, Monish, and Alma; Sarah, Nanda, and Rakha; Bim and Tara; Devan, Baumgartner- are seen poised tantalizingly at different juncture of the philosophic spectrum. In every country, there is common contemporary issue of women facing to the people. It is the issue of women who are seen as launching themselves for their identity. It is in western or Indian literary tradition. Today the 'New Women' challenges the traditional notions of 'Angel in the house' and 'sexually voracious' image. The 'New women' is a woman of awareness and consciousness of her low position in the family and society. Anita Desai has presented image of a new women who challenges the old traditions. She wants to create her own place in the family. Anita Desai asserts that her protagonist's are new and different. "I am interested in characters who are not average but have retreated or been driven into some extremity of despair and so turned against ... the general current".

Desai (1999) takes up the issue of marriage, dowry and education in *Fasting, Feasting* as comprehended by the Indian patriarchal system. She depicts in her novel values and beliefs prevailing in the society only to interrogate them. The writers does not delve deep into the 'other nesses' of the other (woman) but questions the conditions that determine the 'other' in Indian society. The title *Fasting, Feasting* is ironical with its binary implications. The birth of a son always is to be fe[a]sted upon. This is a common Indian belief, for a daughter spells misery. She is to be married off with a dowry and she is to be educated to qualify as a desirable bride to a prospective groom. So a daughter instead of bringing any good fortune only adds to the compulsive expenditure in a family. Such are the implications of 'fasting'. The novel consists of three chief characters: Uma, Aruna and Anamika besides the aunt and mother in the first part referred to as 'fasting'. While the narration chiefly revolves around Uma and her frustrated efforts at education, the readers gets to know about Anamika's educational achievements. If Uma is plain and stupid, Anamika is beautiful and clever. Yet it is plainness which escapes tragedy. Anamika, in spite of her being attractive and good in academics, has the only choice in life; to marry according to her parent's wishes. Her admission letter to Oxford University is tucked away carefully to be revealed to the



prospective grooms as one of the requisites for 'good' marriage. The efforts yield fruit and Anamika is married off to a joint family household. For the parents and her relatives the story of Anamika ends. Her people do not see her again as her in-laws do not like her to visit her people. So the relatives only hear about her from various sources. The reader learns about Anamika's groveling existence in her husband's family and finally her gruesome death from hearsay reports.

Conclusion:

Anita Desai (1999) in her novel ironically unfolds the acceptance of such events as mere fate or 'God's will' to mock at the patriarchal gaze and its blindness to these gruesome details of life. The Indian circumstances, the patriarchy is not just male authority. It chiefly the authority of mothers-in-law who unleash their frustrations on their daughters-in-law to maintain the power structure in the family. The mother and relatives of the girl are meant to be mute observers in their subservience to the patriarchal belief and control: 'Marriage is the only destiny even if it kills you. Compromise, the only choice, no matter how unhappy you are.' The actual 'feminism' in this sense of liberation could be possible with the consciousness of the younger generation of women. So Uma, in spite of her dullness craves for education and wishes to be economically free of her parents. She belongs to the "doorway poise" category. Yet she too suffers the brunt of the patriarchal structure which makes her a hysteric. As the common Indian belief is in vogue, a dowry is what one needs to offer, to marry off a daughter. So Uma is married to a man much older than herself. The story does not end here, for after going through the humiliation of her in-laws' place she realized with a shock that she is married to a man already married. He has married her for a dowry that he needed to cater to the needs of his already existing family. Unlike Anamika's parents, Uma's father is sensible to bring his daughter home. So Uma is saved. She does not die but she has no life either in her parental home where she is expected to serve her parents and be of use to them. Uma's predicament in the novel is of daughter that the parents have not been able to get rid of and has to bear with shameful fortitude.

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