



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Alienation and Emancipation of Women in Fire on the Mountain

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Abstract

Feminism in the Indian context is the recent renovation of early Vedic concepts of man-woman relationship and a byproduct of Western liberalism in particular and feminist thought in general. The indigenous contributing factors have been the legacy of equality of sexes inherited from the freedom struggle, constitutional rights of women, thrust on women education, and new awareness due to electronic media among women. The Indian woman caught in the flux of tradition and modernity, saddled with the burden of the past and the present to cast off her aspirations, constitutes the crux of aspirations, in fact constitutes the crux of feminism in Indian literature. In literary terms it precipitates in search for identity and a quest for the definition of the women self. In critical practice, it boils down to scrutinizing empathetically the plight of women characters and their struggle for emancipation of self.

The voices emanating there from vary from the traditional -but conscious- of their selves to exclusively self-seeking with a seeming vengeance. When clearly articulated well-argued and precisely defined, feminist sentiments rather than mere faint echoes thereof can be traced as already referred in early works of Mary Shelley and Jane Austen, one feels chary of dubbing feminism as merely a late twentieth century phenomenon. The feminist perspective on literature- creative or critical- whether in a third world country or elsewhere has had to confront issues of similar persuasion: male chauvinism, sexist-bias, psychological and even physical exploitation, hegemonistic inclinations in not merely the male but also the female sections of the society, the utter disregard for females psychological, cultural, familial, and spiritual quests. Predictably enough the ways out suggested subtly or propagated more avowedly have ranged from mild protest seeking accommodation through moderation, love, persuasion and in the last separation to carving out of a self-sufficient exclusivist self.

Keywords: Alienation, Subjugation, Self-Assertion, Self-Existence, Emancipation.

Introduction

Feminist theory is by no means a single or homogeneous body of speculation and argument. If one discerns a common strand in the great diversity of the feminist scholarship it is its critique of the patriarchal modes of thinking and its political and humanistic approach to literature and literary criticism. Feminist literary theory has evolved according to the needs and demands of the international woman's movement. This women's liberation movement

was initiated in 1960s by women who were politically committed- women who were active participants in the civil rights movements or in the protest actions against the war in Vietnam or those who belonged to the various progressive or Marxist groups. It was their bitter experience of the blatantly sexist attitudes that were evinced by their male associates in these politically progressive movements that finally led women to form their own groups and associations. For instance, in America Betty Friedan, the author of the 'Feminine Mystique', founded National Organization of Women popularly known as NOW, so that women could voice their grievances and fight for their. By the late 60s and 70s feminism had emerged as a political force in the western world.

As the early feminists were mainly concerned with social and political change, little attention was paid to literature and literary criticism at the initial stage of the women's movement. But soon enough their political action was extended, to the cultural field, as it is here that gender differences are created and naturalized. The feminists who worked in academic institutions became convinced that literature and literary criticism were powerful cultural weapons in the hands of male hegemony to perpetuate its sexual politics in the name of universality objectivity and neutrality. Opposed to their claims made by the humanist discourse is the central tenet of feminist criticism that no account whether creative, critical or theoretical, can be neutral. A work of literature invariably reflects the personal or cultural bias of its author. The first task of the feminists, therefore, was to lay bare the patriarchal practices in literary discourse as they had done it in other walks of life. That is why, as Elaine Showalter observes:

In its earliest years, feminist criticism concentrated on exposing the misogyny of literary practice: the stereotyped images of women in literature as angels or monsters, the literary abuse or textual harassments or women in classic and popular male literature and exclusion of women from literary history. (The New Feminist Criticism 5)

Katharine M. Rogers claims that patriarchal feeling or the desire to keep women subject to men is the "most important cause of misogyny, because the most widely and firmly entrenched in society". (Rogers 272).

In "Sexual Politics", Kate Millett defines sexual politics as the process whereby the ruling sex seeks to maintain and extend its power over the subordinate sex. In the first place, she emphasizes the need to study social and cultural contexts if a work or art is to be properly understood. Recent feminist scholarship is alert to the manner in which women's subjectivities are formed by the cultural mores and values. As Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan has remarked, "The construction of women in terms of recognizable roles, images, models and labels occurs in discourse in response to specific social imperatives even where it may be offered in terms of the universal and abstract rhetoric of "woman" or "women" (or the "Indian Woman" as the case may be)....If we acknowledge (a) that femaleness is constructed, (b) that the terms of such construction are to be sought in the dominant modes of ideology (patriarchy, colonialism, capitalism) and (c) that therefore what is at stake is the investments of desire and the politics of control that representation both signifies and serves, then the task of feminist critic becomes what Jacqueline Rose describes as "the critique of male discourse" born of "a radical distrust of representation which allies itself with a semiotic critique of the sign." what is required here is an alertness to the political process by which such representation becomes naturalized and ultimately coercive in structuring women's self-representation." (Real and Imagined Women, 129)

One may find all varieties of feminist critics, from liberalism to de-construction. This creates disagreements and differences among the feminists. For example, there are de-constructionists like Toril Moi who charge Elaine Showalter and others for their empiricism and bourgeois humanism, while a radical critic like Josephine Donovan

feels that deconstructionist theory magnifies the assertion of political identity. There are then feminists who would like to do away with gender differences as they lead to the discrimination against and repression of women, while there are others who celebrate these differences between men and women and even valorize womanhood as a part of their political strategy against male domination.

Analysis

Fire on the Mountain is pervaded by an over-powering sense of loneliness and isolation in the deserted life of the protagonist, Nanda Kaul and her great granddaughter Rekha. It portrays a reverberating and pathetic picture of old age through the protagonist. Nanda Kaul is an old lady who lives a life of recluse in her village at Carignano in the Shimla hills. Ramlal is the only other person in the house who helps and cooks for Nanda Kaul. Carignano is exactly to Nanda Kaul's expectations and liking. Its "barrenness" and its "starriness" please her most. She has preferred to live at Carignano because she does not wish her privacy to be disturbed at any cost. Nanda Kaul's desire for privacy is so domineering that the very sight of the postman slowly approaching the house, irritates her quiet mind. The letter brought by the postman breaks the news of the arrival of her great granddaughter at Carignano. It is the most unwelcome news to Nanda Kaul. She is living in an atmosphere of self-imposed exile at Carignano. Rekha's arrival at Carignano is a threat to Nanda Kaul's consciously guarded "privacy."

Nanda Kaul's alienation with her husband is the most unpleasant fact of her life which she deliberately suppresses in the subconscious mind. Mr. Kaul was madly in love with a Christian lady whom he could not marry. Nanda Kaul endures all the sufferings in her married life patiently. The married life on Nanda and Mr. Kaul appeared quiet attractive, at the beginning. But, for Mr. Kaul, a wife is a none-entity. In this connection it has been rightly observed:

Far from being a happy wife, she felt like an animal put into a cage and very skillfully trained to dance at the command of the ring master-her domineering husband, whom she could not defy. (127)

Even her children were alien to her and that was why she was living alone:

And her children- the children were to her nature. She did not live here alone by choice – She lived here alone because that was what she was forced to do, reduce to doing. (Mountain.145).

Rekha too loves a life of loneliness: "Rekha wanted only one thing- to be left alone and pursue her own secret life amongst the racks and pines of Kasauli" (48). There is a similarity between Nanda and Rekha but with a difference as well. Nanda Kaul was "a recluse out of vengeance. For a long line of duty, obligation and her great granddaughter was a recluse by nature, by instinct." (48).

Violence and death form and aspect of the theme of loneliness in the novels of Anita Desai: **In Fire on the Mountain**, Anita Desai exploits the situations of Ila's rape murder and Nanda's death to highlight problems that confront women in a male dominated society. Exploration of this theme is the central focus of the novel. The rape of Ila is presented in elaborate detail. Preet Singh's rape is an act of vengeance. It was the only successful revenge that Preet Singh could inflict on Ila who had interfered in the matter of his seven years old daughter's marriage to an old man. He worked to humiliate Ila for the injury she had caused to his male ego.

Rape implies the highest insult and injury to the woman's pride and dignity. It symbolizes the rape of woman's dignity and her worth as a woman. Nanda's death and Ila's rape murder point out the process of

disintegration- social – economic- political- emotional- psychological- ethical- spiritual disintegration woman suffers in a male- dominated society. Nanda too suffers the psychological shock of rape and feels, like Ila, that her womanhood is defiled and insulted. She realizes the helplessness of women in the world.

The anger and pain with which Anita Desai narrates Ila Das's rape and murder, is a pointer towards universal violence against the Female. Rekha's final utterance – against the death of two sensitive lives- "Look, Nani, I have set the forest on fire. Look Nani, Look, the forest is on fire" (145) acquires tremendous symbolic significance. It is expressive of Rekha's resolve to destroy a world where a woman cannot hope to be happy without being unnatural. Anita Desai seems to suggest that loneliness is the problem for all women- girls' spinsters as well as married women- and death alone serves as release from loneliness.

Nanda Kaul is an old woman caught in the web of self- contradictions. She wavers between two contradictory forces withdrawal and involvement, detachment and attachment, "the need to withdraw in order to preserve ones wholeness and sanity and the need to be involved in the painful process of life" (218) as Martin Buber would put it. Nanda, the oldest of Anita Desai's Protagonists and Rekha, the youngest character take recourse to self-destructive isolation. While the older woman has a tendency to look back and regret, the younger one is terrified of past, present and future, striving to shut out the agony of experiences. Both of them suffer from self-alienation of a severe kind leading them towards.

They suggest a sickness of soul which is imposed upon from inside. Other forces to affect the working of their minds. Rekha's predicament, for instance, is identified in her confrontation with the painful reality of her home; the "harsh filthy abuse" her mother is subjected to and her pathetic condition. Nanda's difficulties arise out of her intense self-contempt resulting from her failure in life.

Rekha's psychological alienation can be considered to be the result of her unfortunate home which leaves the child insecure and isolated. Rekha's childhood impressions of reckless and dissipating revelries associated with social life in clubs play an important role in making her unsocial. Her reactions after watching secretly the fancy free ball in the club of Kasauli reveal how she associates these entertainments with her father who ill treats her mother. She is reminded of her father returning home from parties in the club late in the night, beating her mother that made Rekha hide herself under bed clothes and wet the mattress in fright. These traumatic experiences make her dislike any need "to socialize".

The telephone call, announcing the death of Ila Das overwhelms Nanda Kaul with spite of herself. The deaths of Ila and Nanda are interpreted as the final reality. Ila dies because of her concern for others. Nanda dies because of her concern for her loneliness. Usha Bande has very cogently observed.

Feminist criticism out a social reality
in their deaths, signifying the social forces
which destroy woman from within. (100).

If one reads the major novels of Anita Desai. One can realize that Desai belong to the "female" phase as identified by Elaine Showalter- during which phase" the focus on uncovering misogyny in male texts- is being replaced by a turn inward for identity and a resulting rediscovery of women's text and women." This inward search for identity is a common factor among the central women of Desai- right from Maya up to Nanda Kaul. Whether it is the immature and psychologically alienated Maya, or the cultural alienated English girl Sarah, or the rebellious Sita or the stoic Nanda Kaul, - all the four suffer owing to male domination. This can be interpreted in terms of Millett's concept as revealed in her sexual politics (1970, 1971), Millett wrote that "the essence of politics is Power", and that the fundamental and pervasive concept of power is our society in male dominance. (25)

If Maya and Sarah suffer as the “other”- as women- married women, Sita and Nanda Kaul suffer both as women and as mothers. Major grievance of Sita is her children are more attached with the father rather than with the mother. Sita has mixed feeling:

The thought of his adult, quiet, critical company gave her a sense of sharp pleasure. But the sight of the children's almost unbearable excitement dashed cold water on her delight. She thought, bitterly, that they were being disloyal to her...(Where shall We Go this Summer ? 129)

The plight of Nanda Kaul is equally bad and that is why she chooses to abandon her whole family and lives alone. In *The lost Tradition: Mothers and Daughters in Literature* (1980) Rich argues through myth that motherhood is the feminine status. She distinguishes between the fact and motherhood and the institution a patriarchal culture makes of it, finding that society's oppression of women comes precisely from its need romanticize the terrible and wonderful powers of the mother.

Anita Desai may not be a Radical Feminist, in the real sense of the term. But then, given the context, Anita Desai, the woman- novelist presents the woman's problems which such an understanding that she is feministic, to say the least. In the four novels taken for discussion, Sarah is the only girl with an employment and that too, that of a teacher. The other women are housewives. By presenting the stereotype woman and her problems in an understanding and sympathetic way, she makes everybody realize the predicament of the woman, in a male-chauvinistic society. The protest element is implicit.

To say that Anita Desai is a feminist writer is not to deny her artistic achievement. She is not just a propagandist. Socio, psycho, philosophic dimensions in her novels are quite impressive. That woman is the center of her novels is not only natural but quite convincing. All said and done, Desai is an artist. Marinalini Solanki in *Anita Desai's Fiction Categorically* states:

As a consummate creative artist, Anita Desai shows tremendous potential and vitality. In her writings she not only offers an expose of human life in its shacking shallowness or outward show, but also provides, down deep, a philosophical probe or basis to sustain out life, she emerges neither as a downright pessimist nor an incorrigible optimist. All along, her earnest the process, to unravel the mystery of human existence. (185)

In the process she does present the plight of the woman, the underdog and that makes her a feminist. In the patriarchal structure it is always that the girl is given in marriage by one male to another. Simone de Beauvoir rightly says that woman is disposed of like a thing by the paternal clan. She writes:

The situation is not much modified when marriage assumes a contractual form in the course of its evolutions; when dowered or having her share in the inheritance woman would seem to have civil standing as a person but dowry and inheritance still enslave her to the family.

(Beauvoir 446).

It certainly reflects one of the major reasons for woman's miserable position in the society. Not only has it been the plight of the Indian women but the woman of world all over. In Victorian age she had no right over her own inheritance which belonged to her husband after the marriage. Elizabeth Helsingr makes it clear in her book, the woman question that she could not obtain a divorce even if her husband mistreated her, but the husband could abandon his wife and still retain her property.

As woman is not herself responsible for her own pitiable subjugation. It is brought by right from childhood by a powerful urge in men to dominate women. It is the consequence of their childhood training as pointed out by Nancy Chodorow in *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the sociology of gender*:

The sexual division of labour and women's responsibility for child are linked to and generate male dominance. Psychologists have demonstrated unequivocally that the very fact of being mothered by a woman generates in men conflicts over masculinity, a psychology of male dominance and a need to be superior to woman. (214).

Conclusion

Feelings of love, peace, harmony, equality, identity, existence, survival and dominance are the basic instincts of human beings but biological construct, deprivation, ignorance, irresistibility, customs, and traditions allow "one" to dominate the "other", to enslave and to oppress and to exploit.

Woman since ages has been victimized for the assigned reasons and male for his hidden agenda has been displacing, de-stabilizing, destroying and dismantling the female world. Women's subjugation has been a fact in real life as well as in literature but the lack of vision, deliberate or in-deliberate, failed to draw attention of the world community as a whole. In this connection as Anne Z. Mickelson has rightly pointed out:

"Woman has been regarded as inferior, Yet somehow meant to be man's spiritual guide, half divine, intermediary between God and Man, but looked as temptress/sinner as well. She is passive but inclined to mysterious activity during certain phases of moon; intuitive, but lacking the practical sense to select the correct- biologically weak, yet able to lift heavy bags of groceries and husky children; incapable of logic but full of cunning arguments; sexually pure if watched, uncontrollably sensual if not curbed; too feather-brained to create a great work of art; psychological subject to breakdown if faced with business or professional competition; yet designed to bear, nurture, children, act as her husband's helpmate, help him fulfill his potential, and resign herself to her 'limitation'." (455)

To change the existing patterns of gender relationships and to explore the new possibilities of humanistic development, and to discover the potential strength of women to the betterment of future of humanity, sensitive writers from social, political and literary field have taken up the task.

Western feminists go to the extent of divergence of family for the purpose, as there is necessarily a difference in concepts of family and social and cultural set-up and difference of literacy and economy but Indian feminists believe in convergence of family, harmony, mutual understanding and adjustment though the problems of women being the same.

Anita Desai in her novels have tested and examined all possibilities of western feminism applying to Indian context and simultaneously as oriental feminist writers are the spokesperson of feminine sensibility and advocates of female rights of equality. The depiction of middle class educated women in these novels doesn't dismantle the respected image of Indian woman remaining within the family and loyal to the family, she asserts her own presence and individuality and identity. Though the three novelists differ in their approaches in the portrayal of characters and the problems of conjugal relationship yet they vindicate the same women's cause.

Anita Desai penetrates deep into the women psyche and delineates psychic disorders and analyses the psychological problems of women in male oriented, patriarchal Indian Society. She adopts liberal feminist approach to visualize the invisible neurotic, schizophrenic and paranoiac agony of women formulated by male dicta and their fight against those forces which decentered and marginalized them. Her characters search all possibilities to avert the on-going repression by suicide, exile separation, and alienation turning to poetry and religion but fail to find any solution. By reconciliation and adjustment and by mutual understandings they re-establish relationship as enlightened New Woman asserting individuality and identity.

In all the worlds, the woman is the loser as the male restricts her world to certain limits, economically, and emotionally, she grows dependent on the male and male take liberty to exploit her. She has to constantly struggle and carve out her passage in the dark, between the penalty for expression or suppression of sexuality.

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