

FEMINISM AND MARRIAGE IN THE NOVELS OF ANITA DESAI

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Abstract

Women always face many problems in their life in various ways. Women were suppressed and ill treated by the opposite sex. Women were slaves to them and under their control. They didn't have the liberty or equality. Women were not free to act on their own. Many illegal activities and cruelties were done to them. Education was refused to them but the suppression was broke out by some of the great women and they proved their power.

Naturally Literature is a reflection of life. It was evident through the works. Feminism was like a medium to speak about their problems and through their works the world came to know about their problem and so the feminism in India has flourished.

Anita Desai has been writing some of the best English language fiction in India for almost four decades. She's been shortlisted for the Man Booker prize thrice and won the Sahitya Akademi Award, one of India's most prestigious literary prizes, in 1978 for her second novel, *Fire on the Mountain*. Familial relationships and their evolution have been the main themes of Desai's fiction. This paper deals with Feminism and Marriage in the novels of Anita Desai.

Equality of Women

Feminism is a collection of movements and ideologies aimed at defining, establishing, and defending equal political, economic, and social rights for women. In addition, feminism seeks to establish equal opportunities for women in education and employment. A **feminist** is "an advocate or supporter of the rights and equality of women".

Feminist theory, which emerged from these feminist movements, aims to understand the nature of gender inequality by examining women's social roles and lived experience; it has developed theories in a variety of disciplines in order to respond to issues such as the social construction of sex and gender. Some of the earlier forms of feminism have been criticized for taking into account only white, middle-class, educated perspectives. This led to the creation of ethnically specific or multiculturalists forms of feminism. Feminism is the belief that all people should be treated equally in legal, economic and social arenas- regardless of gender, religion, sexual orientation, ethnicity and other similar pre-dominant identifying traits. Feminism includes the idea that a person's gender does not define who they are or their worth; that being a woman (or a man) should not put a person at an overall- and especially institutionalized- disadvantage. Language in India .

Feminism as a social movement sought to redress the imbalance in society by providing women with same rights and opportunities as men, in order to be able to take their rightful place in the world. After the feminist re-awakening in the 1970's feminist began to realize that equal rights alone cannot free women from sexual and social subordination. Intellectual starvation,

economic expression, commercial exploitation, domestic domination, physical abuse, sexual harassment and lack of personal freedom continued to affect the lives of women in spite of laws to the contrary. Hence, Western feminist writers and critics were forced to re-analyze and re-access the socio-cultural setp looking for clues to explain the mechanism of patriarchy that contrived to keep women eternally subjugated.

Reflection in Literature

Since the rise of feminism, which began in the nineteenth century and surged again in the last decades of the twentieth, there has been an explosion of literature, in every genre, by women. Studies of women's literature have shown that there are certain common themes that tend to play out in women's writing.

Since the beginning of the women's movement, there has been a strong rise in the amount of literature that is self-consciously feminist in tone, clearly espousing the ideals of female equality. Feminists have also studied other women's writings, including those of an earlier time, probing them with renewed interest about what sets women's writings apart and what commonalities they may have.

One of the primary themes of feminist writing is its insistence on expressing and valuing women's point of view about their own lives. While earlier in history, it was primarily men who wrote, from their own point of view, about women, the concern of feminist writing is to place women in the position of authority about their own lives and experiences, to hear and believe women's voices.

If one main theme could be claimed for feminist literature, and for feminist evaluation of literature, it would be the importance of listening to female voices of all colors in addition to those of males, and of taking women's experiences seriously. Indian women writers have garnered critical praise for their scintillating literary prowess and making social issues a key part of their work. Indian women authors writing in English such as Kiran Desai and Arundhati Roy have earned international renown.

The Issue of Marriage in India

Few would disagree that in India the most important social and religious occasion in a person's life is his or her marriage. "Everything here seems to begin and end with marriage." Even in a society where celibacy is a religious virtue, it is clear that to become a celibate ascetic without first having experienced marriage and parenthood is to act contrary to social and religious norms. In fact, marriage is so important among Indians that the decision to marry is rarely entrusted to the individuals involved.

Marriage "arrangements" and "negotiations" are caste and clan concerns. "Love marriages," those in which a man and woman decide to marry independently of family consultation, are regarded as anti-traditional and even dangerous. When a couple marries, their union is not one of individuals, but of lineages. Each marriage must be arranged in reference to rather strict rules of exogamy and endogamy, for each marriage is a public statement of a family's and a lineage's social and ritual status. In short, every marriage constitutes a public act whereby a family or lineage defines its formal relations with other lineages.

An act of marriage is an act of choosing kinsmen. But it is less with the social meanings of marriage and more with the religious meanings of marriage. In one sense, it is difficult to separate the two. It is not simply - as the people in the West view sacraments - "an outward, visible sign of inward, invisible grace." It does something. It changes things. It is necessary for a person's salvation because it changes a person in a way that nothing else can.

Marriage in the Lives of Women

A common Indian proverb states, "Raising girls is like watering someone else's lawn." Marriage provides a woman with an acceptable social identity in the same way that initiation into the caste does so for a man. Marriage is a crucial need for the woman. The traditional responsibility of the woman for child care, looking after other members of the family and her less physical strength make her subordinate to her husband in most of the countries of the world. Family is treated as the institutional structure through which concepts of sex inequality are enforced. The woman's fate is considered to be tied to the family whose fate, in turn, is related to society.

A woman as life partner has a fourfold character: she is ardhagini, one half of the her husband, metaphorically speaking; sahadharmini, an associate in the fulfilment of human and divine goals; sahakarmini, a part to all her husband's action and sahayogini, a veritable co-operator in all his ventures. Husband and wife together are called dampati, joint owners of the household, sharing work in terms of their biological, psychological and individual dharma.

However, in recent times the status of women has received considerable 'attention from the social scientists owing to modernization of the society and female economic participation. The employment of the wife in a professional occupation does empower her with resources and higher levels of prestige which, in turn, affect the structure of power in the family.

Married Life in Feminist Indian Writing

Women's writing continues to occupy a place of importance for more reasons than one. It projects the responses of more than half of humanity and reflects a consciousness constructed by gender. Women's writing has questioned the existing viewpoints which are essentially patriarchal. All women's writing need not necessarily be feminist. But feminist interpretations can emerge through absence and negation. The sufferings of Indian women, marital disharmony, existentialism, anger, dual tradition are the major themes of feminist writing. Female quest for identity has been a pet theme for many a woman novelist.

We have established women novelists like Jane Austen, George Eliot, the Brontes, Virginia Woolf and so on and today a woman novelist in England does not suffer from financial dependence. She has also a room of her own, to be sure. Coming to the Indian scenario the first name that would come to one's mind is that of Toru Dutt who wrote both a French and an English novel. Several women writers have since made their mark in Indian fiction in English. Early novels by women writers in India include Raj Lakshmi Debi's *The Hindu Wife, or The Enchanted Fruit* (1876) and Krupabai Sathianandhan's *Kamala, A Story of Hindu Life* (1894) and *Saguna, A Story of Native Christian Life* (1895). Two novels of Ghoshal (Swarnakumari Debi), the first woman novelist in Bengali were translated into English, *An Unfinished Song* (1913) and *The*

Fatal Garland (1915). Santa and Sita Chatterjee wrote novels and short stories in Bengali and then translated into English: Tales of Bengal (1922) The Cage of Gold (1923) and The Garden Creeper (1931).

Anita Desai

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Marriage Life in Anita Desai's Novels

Marital discord recurs as the theme of the novels of Anita Desai. Her novels, with a touch of feminist concern, portray the failed marriage relationship which often leads to alienation and loneliness of the characters. Her novels, like, **Cry the Peacock, Where Shall We Go This Summer? Voices in the City, and Bye-Bye Blackbird** also deal with the theme of marital disharmony,

The novel **Cry, the Peacock**, is mainly concerned with the theme of disharmony between husband and wife relationship. Desai looks in to the reasons for marital discord and illustrates how such discord affects the family. Sometimes, the inability of an individual to be responsive to the behaviour patterns of her partner leads to strain and tension in the relationship, while sometimes it is on account of varied levels of sensitivity that strained relationships occur. In this novel, Maya and Gautama have strained relationships because of their incompatible temperament. Maya is dreamy, sensitive and emotional, while Gautama realistic, insensitive and rational. Maya is poetic and high-strung Gautama detached, philosophical and remote. Maya has tenderness, softness and warmth, Gautama is hard and cold. The matrimonial bonds that bind the two are very fragile and tenuous, the growing tension between them reaches its climax when Maya kills Gautama and then commits suicide.

In **Voices in the City**, Anita Desai's concern is primarily with human relationships and how in the absence of meaningful relationships the individual suffers. She probes the psychic compulsion that may affect an individual in forging long term and significant relationships and how an individual is affected if he is unable to forge such relationships. Nirode, one of the main characters, is obsessed with the relationship of his mother with major Chadha and considers her a she-cannibal. She is having an affair in Kalimpong which itself is a consequence of dissonance in husband-wife relationship. Nirode's relationship with his mother is a love-hate relationship. We have veiled suggestions of his mother fixation and according to psychologists' hatred often is a defense mechanism of the psyche to stop one from committing incest.

If Maya's tragedy in **Cry, the Peacock** emanated from her obsession with a father figure, Nirode's tragedy lies in his love-hate relationship with the mother.

The novel also deals with the incompatible marriage of Monisha and Jiban. Monisha's husband is the prisoner of conventional culture .He believes that a woman's most important roles

besides child bearing are cooking, cutting vegetables, serving food and brushing small children's hair under the authority of a stern mother-in-law. Monisha feels that her privacy is denied to her. Her husband is busy with his middle rank government job with no time for Monisha and no desire to share her feeling. The theme of alienation is treated in terms of mother-children relationship which itself is a consequence of dissonance in husband-wife relationship. Monisha leads an equally fragmented and starved life. She is alienated from her mother as well as her husband. The graph of her mental life can be constructed from her long searching and self – confronting entire in the diary. Her relationship with her husband is characterized only by loneliness and lack of communication. He reckons his wife as worth nothing in consequence. He does not bother to ask his wife, when he finds some money missing from his pocket even.

Monisha's ill matched marriage, her loneliness, sterility and stress of living in a joint family with an insensitive husband push her to breaking point. The element of love is missing in her life and finally she commits suicide.

In '**Where Shall We Go This Summer?**' Anita Desai chooses marital discord as the subject matter of this novel and highlights how the inability to lay bare one's soul and express freely one's fear and anguish result in the snapping of communication between husband and wife. Different attitudes, individual complexes and fears add to this distancing between the husband and the wife resulting in conjugal disharmony. Raman and Sita have irreconcilable temperaments and attitudes to life. The ill-assorted couple of Raman and Sita are confronted with the same problem of husband-wife discord. Sita represents a world of emotion and feminine sensibility while Raman is a man with an active view of life and the sense of the practical. Sita is a nervous, sensitive middle-aged woman with explosive and emotional reactions to many things that happen to her, she always wants to escape reality and does not want to grow up and face the responsibilities of adult life. On the contrary, Raman represents the prose of life. He represents sanity, rationality and an acceptance of the norms and values of society. He is unable to understand the violence and passion with which Sita reacts against every incident. His reaction to his wife's frequent outbursts is a mixture of puzzlement, weariness, fear and finally a resigned acceptance of her abnormality. He cannot comprehend her boredom, her frustration with her. In this novel theme of alienation and lack of communication in married life is discussed by writer. Sita finds herself alienated from her husband and children. She remains an ignored personality since childhood. She is the product of broken family. She yearns to have the attention and love of others but her father remains busy with his chelas and patients. Even after marriage, she remains lonely. Her husband also is busy. He fails to fulfil her expectation. As a result, there is marital discord, tension between husband and wife.

Where Shall We Go This Summer? may thus be seen as a parable on the inability of human beings to relate the inner with the outer, the individual with society. It is a story of illusions melting away in the cold light of the everyday and the commonplace. It does suggest that a life of complete inwardness is not the solution to the problems of life. Nor is the other extreme of complete conformity and total draining out of the individuality and of the imagination of the

human being the proper way out of the dilemma. It shows that human happiness consists in harmonising the opposites of life.

Her novel **Fire on the Mountain** grapples with the theme of in communication and lack of understanding in marital life. The novel records the story of Nanda Kaul, the Vice-Chancellor's wife who has chosen the house of top of a mountain in Carignano in the village of Kasauli, as her shelter away from the disturbances of family and society. Life with the Vice-Chancellor had long ordeal with only the duties and responsibilities of her position without any love attached to it. She is disillusioned with her selfish, infidel husband, who "treated her simply as some useful object". She played the gracious hostess all the time for her husband, who "wanted her always in silk, at the head of the long rosewood table in the dining-room, entertaining his guests". In the words of Gopal N.R., "She is so busy raising the family and discharging the duties of mother, housewife and hostess that in the evening of her life she is happy in her seclusion even though it is partly voluntary and partly circumstantial." Mrs. Desai probes deep into the problematic life of Nanda Kaul, who, besides being the wife of a Vice-Chancellor and leading a luxurious life, is satiated by it. "Outwardly Kauls were an ideal couple to university community but from inside it was all empty, the whole social role and socializing was a mere sham". Her life with her husband was "lacking in composition and harmony".

The psychological seclusion of the lady is echoed by the landscape of the mountain - rocky and barren. Her wish to be lonely and secluded is seen in her apathy to receive her great grand-daughter. "Discharge me, she groaned. I've discharged all my duties. Discharge". Carignano offered her the anonymity and escape she longed for. Mrinalini Solunki rightly observed:

"Her option for total isolation is not related to the spirituality of Indian thought. She does not opt for this isolation willingly, but circumstances have left no other way out for her. Her long involvement with the people and the affairs of the world gave her neither satisfaction nor a sense of belongingness. Therefore, in a bid to survive she opts for withdrawal, for an existence away from the world of messages and visitors"

The novel tells of falsity to which Nanda is forced to. Her conjugal life was not peaceful. It was not all love and sincerity but the terrible betrayal of her husband prompted her to a life of silence. The children were alien. The graces and glories were a fabrication, to drive the present. "Her relation with her husband did not involve her inner "self". The novel gives an impression of her happy life with her husband, but the last page of the novel reveals that the whole story was a white lie.

There occurs another failed marital relationship in the novel – the relationship between Raka's mother and her excessive drinking and aggressive father. But the writer has focused on the plight of Nanda Kaul, who is deceived and betrayed by her husband. "Lack of understanding of the partner's expectations and temperaments is chiefly responsible for the marital discord of Mrs. Kaul" Thus Anita Desai lodges her protest against unhappy married life in the phoney world through her female characters.

Custody He welter focuses on theme of marital discord and relationship problem of. Deven and Sarla lead an unhappy marital life. They are quite different from each other in their

temperaments. Deven is a Hindi lecturer in a college and Sarla has no interest in literature. She is ignorant that she concludes her husband's frequent visits to Delhi for meeting his girlfriend. Sarla is a picture of an abandoned wife.

Conclusion

The status of women in modern India is a sort of a paradox. If on one hand she is at the peak of ladder of success, on the other hand she is mutely suffering the violence afflicted on her by her own family members. As compared with past, women in modern times have achieved a lot but in reality they have travel a long way. Their path is full of roadblocks. The women have left the secured domain of their home and are now in the battlefield of life, fully armoured with their talent. They had proved themselves. But in India they are yet to get their dues.

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