



Research Paper

## Feminism in the Novels of Anita Desai

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### ABSTRACT

Feminism is a belief and movement that aims at defining, establishing and defending equal rights for women. These are political, economic and social rights. It seeks for equal opportunities for women in education and employment. So it is about all genders having equal rights and opportunities. Traditionally, women have always been considered inferior and subservient to men. In patriarchal society, women have been humiliated, afflicted, silenced and tortured. They have experienced bias, discrimination and humiliation. Women have been exploited for centuries all over the world. Feminism is a movement aimed at the liberation of women in male dominated society. It believes in social, economic and political equality for women. Feminist theory aims to understand gender inequality and focuses on gender politics and power relations. It also focuses on the promotion of women's rights and interests. In India, even today, women are treated badly in the male dominated society. The modern Indian urban woman struggles to free herself from the repressive traditional social norms. The situation is worse in rural Indian orthodox society where women have much less access to education. Indian women's struggle against patriarchy manifested itself in literature especially in women's writings. Anita Desai is a leading Indian novelist who wrote novels that depicted the condition and psyche of Indian women in Indian society. Message of women empowerment runs through her novels. She has dealt with the themes of marital discord, isolation and alienation in her novels. This paper is an attempt to study her novels "Cry , the Peacock", "Voices in the City" and "Where Shall We Go This Summer?" in the light of feminism.

**KEYWORDS:** Feminism, alienation, patriarchy, gender discrimination, oppression.

Feminism is a movement and ideology that advocates for the equal political, economic and social rights for women. It seeks to establish equal opportunities for women in education and employment. It campaigns for women's rights and interests. Women's rights include the right to vote, hold public office, work, earn equal pay, own property, receive education, enter contracts etc. Feminists work to ensure access to legal abortions and social integration and to protect women and girls from rape, sexual harassment and domestic violence. The history of the modern western feminist movement is divided into four waves. First-wave feminism is associated with the period during 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries in the U.K. and U.S.A. Its major concerns were the promotion of equal contract, marriage, parenting and property rights for women. New legislations for women's rights included the Custody of Infants Act 1839 and the Married Women's Property Act 1870 in the U.K. In U.K. feminists campaigned for the women's suffrage that is, the right to vote and stand for parliamentary office, as a result the Representation of the People Act was passed in 1918. The second- wave feminism began in the 1960s. It is largely concerned with issues of equality beyond suffrage such as ending gender discrimination. It was a women's liberation movement which campaigned for legal and social equality for women. The feminist author Carol Hanisch coined the slogan - "the personal is political", which became synonymous with the second wave.

Third- wave feminism began in the early 1990s. It seeks to challenge what it deems the second wave's essentialist definitions of femininity which overemphasizes the experiences of upper middle class white woman. Third- wave feminists tended to use a post- structuralist interpretation of gender. Fourth- wave feminism began around 2012 and is associated with the use of social media. It is concerned with the justice for women and opposition to harassment and violence against women. According to Kira Cochrane , it is defined by technology and is characterized by the use of facebook, Twitter, Instagram, You Tube and blogs. Examples of fourth- wave feminists campaigns include No more page 3, One Billion Rising and the 2017 Women's March etc.

Feminism extended itself into the feminist theory. Feminist theory encompasses work in a variety of disciplines including sociology, anthropology, philosophy, economics, psychoanalysis, women's studies and literary criticism. Feminist theory explores the themes related to discrimination, stereotyping objectification, oppression and patriarchy. In "Toward a Feminist Poetics." Elaine Showalter divides feminist criticism into two

varieties. The first type is “Feminist critique” in which the feminist reader examines the ideologies behind literary phenomena. The second type is “gynocriticism” in which the woman is producer of textual meaning. She also describes three phases of feminism. The “feminine” phase (1840 – 1880) in which woman writers imitate men, the “feminist” phase in which women advocated women’s rights and protested and the “female” phase in which the focus is now on women’s texts as opposed to merely uncovering misogyny in men’s texts.

The major kinds of feminism are liberal feminism, radical feminism, Marxist and socialist feminism, Eco- feminism etc. Liberal feminism seeks equality of men and women through political and legal reform within a liberal democratic framework, without radically altering the structure of society. Radical feminism concerns itself with the oppression of women and aims at social change. It calls for a radical reordering of society to eliminate male supremacy. Socialist and Marxist feminists connect the oppression of women to Marxist ideas about exploitation, oppression and labour. Marx felt when class oppression was overcome, gender oppression would vanish as well. Socialist feminists see prostitution, domestic work, childcare and marriage as ways in which women are exploited. Marxists feminists attribute the oppression of women to the capitalist/ private property system. They insist that the only way to end the oppression of women is to overthrow the capitalist system. Post-colonial feminists argue that oppression relating to the colonial experience, particularly racial, class and ethnic oppression has marginalized women societies. Ecofeminism sees men’s control of land as responsible for the oppression of women and destruction of the natural environment. Profeminism is the support of feminism without implying that the supporter is a member of the feminist movement. The term profeminism is often used in reference to men who actively support feminism and its efforts to bring about gender equality.

In ancient India, women were respected and granted all rights. Religious literature depicted women characters as dutiful daughters, self- sacrificing mothers and devoted wives. The condition of women deteriorated in medieval ages and afterwards. Women were kept veiled and hidden under the roof till modern times. Women could not enjoy liberty and equality. Exploitation and oppression were in their destiny. They wanted to be educated and fulfill their duties in more improved manner. Indian women novelists have significantly portrayed the condition of women in their novels. Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Praver Jhabwala, Nayan Tara Sehgal, Anita Desai, Shoba De, Shashi Deshpande and Arundhati Roy have been the leading feminist writers.

Anita Desai is a major Indian fiction writer in English. She is the winner of the Sahitya Akademi Award. Her novels depict the inner life of the characters. She has dealt her fiction with feminine sensationalism and vivid themes concerning the miserable, drudgery plight of the women. She focuses on the subtle images of tormented, tortured, toiled, trodden and self- frustrated women with their inner heart, soul and mind. She presents their depression, melancholy and pessimism in the male dominated society. In her novels most heroines are segmented and alienated from the world, society, family, parents and even from their own selves because they are individuals who hardly enable to cope with the patriarchy.

Her first novel, “Cry, the Peacock” was published in 1963. This novel is based on disharmony between husband and wife relationship. Maya, the protagonist is poetic, sensitive and dreamy while Gautama, her husband, is realistic, insensitive, rational, hard and cold, and philosophical. There is lack of communication between Maya and Gautama, who is twice of her age. Gautama is a prosperous, middle- aged lawyer who was a friend of Maya’s father. Maya is obsessed with the fear of death as an astrologer predicted that one of the spouses would die in the fourth year of their marriage. Maya’s life is woven to her impulses and yearns for passionate and physical fulfillment in marital life, however, both of these are denied to her due to Gautama’s learnedness, age and indifference. Due to it Maya remains neglected, tormented and melancholic. She is a hypersensitive young urban wife. Maya needs a beloved spouse with broad understandings, extremely conscious, caring and creative. Gautama lacks these qualities. So alienation grows between Maya and him. Maya feels miserable and lonely. She suffers a lot in her entire life. This affects her consciousness badly and she craves for an urgent outlet of her emotions. So she kills Gautama and commits suicide. Her unconscious desire to kill her husband is a revenge reaction arising out of her own basic frustrations- unhappy married life, unfulfilled longings and a reaction against Gautama’s cold unresponsiveness. Maya yearns for freedom. In the novel, Desai represents a hysterical and neurotic woman who fails to cope with the patriarchal order and system where she revolts silently and helplessly like an inferior being. In this novel, themes of alienation, marital discord and domestic violence are present.

In her novel, “Voices in the City” (1965), Desai depicts the incompatible marriage of Monisha and Jiban. Jiban is an orthodox man and believes that women besides child bearing are for cooking, cutting vegetables and serving food etc. under the authority of a stern mother- in – law. Jiban is busy with his job with no time for Monisha. As a result, she leads a fragmented life and is alienated and experiences loneliness. There is lack of communication between them. She is frustrated and helpless due to ill matched marriage, loneliness, monotony, and stress of living in a joint family with an insensitive husband. The element of love is missing in her life. Monisha seeks solace, love and dignity in a rigid society and is disillusioned in the end. As a result, she commits suicide. Thus the novel presents the plight and traumatic experience of Monish. Desai has been

successful in this novel in bringing out the fact that women are ill-treated and oppressed in the male dominated patriarchal society.

“Where Shall We Go This Summer?” (1975) is another novel by Anita Desai woven with feminist message. The protagonist cum heroine in the novel, Sita, is a nervous, oversensitive middle aged woman who experiences loneliness and alienation. She is a mother of four children pregnant for the fifth time. She is isolated from her husband and children. She lives in a Bombay flat with her husband, Raman, an upper middle class factory owner. She feels herself to be an encaged bird in a house which offers her nothing but boredom, hopelessness and disappointment. Themes of alienation, estrangement and non-communication run through the novel. She leads an empty and meaningless married life. Sita represents a world of emotion and feminine sensibility and wants to escape the reality. She remains an ignored personality since childhood. On the contrary, Raman represents sanity, rationality and an acceptance of the norms and values of society. Sita’s smoking is a trace of silent rebellion, of self-identity. She thinks that her decisions to say ‘No’ to society, to break its norms and not give birth to baby are correct. So she escapes to the island of Manori in quest of happiness and spiritual purification. Her stay at Manori has refreshed her pressed psychology and she can now look at the world realistically. She cannot find peace and solace whether she is in Bombay or in Manori. She realized that true courage is in facing the complexities and realities of life and that an escape from the realities is an act of cowardice. Real courage lies in standing up and trying to tackle the circumstances. Sita reconciles herself to her fate. This realization and subsequent reconciliation is a positive change in the heroine’s attitude. She emerges as a compromising woman who shows perfect balance between her inner self and the outer world. This novel presents the real picture of an Indian woman who rebels against the conventions and old modes of life.

Anita Desai has highlighted the matriarchal struggle, self- freedom, self- identity and self- power against the male dominated world. She has dealt with the themes of alienation, isolation, family relationship, marital discord and domestic violence in her novels. She has beautifully portrayed the inner self of her women characters who struggle to free from the traditional norms of the society which are causes of their exploitation. The women characters in her novels are representatives of repressed female community. The women in her novels suffer the violence afflicted on them by their family members. So Desai is one of the best- known women writers of Indian fiction in English and she is a feminist writer who portrays women’s desire and struggle for freedom from social and traditional bondages in the patriarchal society in her novels.

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