

Feminist Existentialism: A Psychological Trauma in Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting* and Githa Hariharan's *Thousand Faces of Night*

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Abstract:

Existentialism is a cultural and philosophical movement which states ones growth and depends upon his efforts that one takes. Feminist Existentialism highlights and restates freedom, interpersonal relationships, and the drastic experience. Githa Hariharan and Anita Desai both the Indian English writers depicts the intricacy and various issues of India. The suppressed longing their fervor and the inner skill of the protagonists explore the nature of the desire and struggle to reach self identity. The novels of Margaret Atwood, Doris Lessing, Githa Hariharan and Anita Desai depict existential woman as protagonists. The trios – Sita, Mayamma, and Devi – in the Thousand Faces Of Night suffer in the families due to male – domination. Among them, Devi is here viewed as a feminist existentialist who wants to find a new identity. Anita Desai presents various female characters in the novel of Fasting Feasting, Uma who suffers the most in the patriarchal society.

Keywords: Existentialism, identity, feminism, patriarchal

The modern woman suffers within herself from inner depths of seclusion, insignificant in her way of existence. The psychological crisis is so critical that it terrifies every field of life. In this condition women writers like Anita Desai, Githa Hariharan, Arundhati Roy, Kamala Markandaya and several more show deep feministic approach. Anita Desai and Githa Hariharan, the two dexterous novelists portray the complication and different feministic issues of India; focusing on the problem of their women protagonists caught in identity crisis, and their quest for autonomy. Generally observed behavioral qualities associated with women and men are not caused by biology, rather, they culturally learned. In her book *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir states that. (295)

Feminists have argued that behavioral and psychological differences social, rather than biological causes. As Beauvoir states, “social discrimination produces in women moral and intellectual effects so profound that they appear to be caused by nature” (5). Existentialism proposes that one exists first, and through ones operates, one becomes something. She reasoned that an individual has absolute control over her fate, and neither society, nor organized religious

group should limit the freedom of women. The characteristics of existentialism are as follows; firstly existence always precedes essence. Existence as an infinite situation prevails over the concepts of meaning. Secondly, man at first has to exist and define himself afterwards. The meaning of existence is only a result produced by his consciousness that comes after he attained existence. Thirdly, the “meaning” is a result of existence which obtains human consciousness. Fourthly there is neither determination nor destiny. Man is free and his freedom includes the freedom to create his destiny. Finally, choices and decisions made can be remarkable. The gender discrimination and the limitations of the women’s self determination in the name of culture. They interrogate the feminists of post-structuralism for their denial of the intrinsic freedom of every individual woman. A woman suffers from her freedom of choice resulting in isolation, estrangement and non conformation because of which she aspires for the doctrines of existentialism.

Thus the category of women has no basis apart from as an extension of male castle in the sky and fears. The entire cultures of world around us have been produced by men, women must ‘dream through the dream of men’. Therefore, it is necessary for a woman to accept her status of other, ‘make herself object’ and gave up her autonomy.’ Simone de Beauvoir has coined the term of woman as ‘The Other’, who does not fit in the paradigm of men. In her revolutionary book, *The Second Sex*, she mentioned.

The situation of woman is that she is free and autonomous being like all human creatures nevertheless finds herself living in the world where men compel her to assume the status of the other (29).

In the present day the Indian women writers have started questioning the famous old patriarchal domination. The most prominent works of kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Githa Hariharan, Shashi Deshpande, Kiran Desai and Manju Kapur have left an ineradicable imprint on the readers of Indian fiction in English. The intensification of a feminist or a woman centered approach is the major and remarkable development in the modern fiction. In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir points out that the status of women as the other is constantly maintained within the society through constant mythologizing. In the beginning of childhood when the family members and the society in general try to prepare a girl child as a woman and teach her to be “feminine”. This practice for feminine involves training the girl in domestic chores which fixes her particular role within the society. From the childhood to the end of the life, a woman is surrounded by shackles of conflicts and the residues of which every adult woman carries with her in the recesses of her personality.

In order to remain psychologically alive, women can combat the encroachment of her physical deterioration. However, one cannot accept that first to be alive or not to be sick, means a healthy and fit. Women’s growth should be viewed from the conflicts, inner and outer in which her vital personality weathers re-emerges from each crisis with an increased sense of inner unity,

with an increase of good judgment and can completely rely on her own self. The dominant male identity is based on the gigantic institutionalized of society in which man has kept woman within the typologies and cosmologies. Man has by his disposition made her slave and has limited her freedom. It is very unfortunate that in the deepest strata of the man's mind, woman is only a slave and a work machine to accomplish masters' command.

Anita Desai represents through her works the female characters who are the victims of male dominated society and only the character of Uma who suffers the most although at the climax of the novel. She realises her condition and she tries many ways to break the chain of patriarchal society, but it was not so easy for the Anamika to cut down the age's long tradition of male domination. The narrative of the novel travels between the two worlds one stands for fasting, signifying self depression and longings, represented by Uma and the other of feasting which stands for liberation which represents Aruns world. Uma being the eldest of the three children had to bear the family responsibility. She comes all their ordeals and succeeds to create her own identity and live an independent life. Desai portrays typical Indian scenario with customs like dowry arranged marriage the gender bias and unparallel role of parents. She emphasized the themes like loneliness, alienation, and self isolation. Another character identity gets under the shadow of patriarchal society is Uma's cousin Anamika. Although through her novel she depicts middle class society, her emphasis is more on the inner depths of human vision rather than on the outer action of her characters. In the instance of extreme conditions of the house Uma hopes gets a glimpse of hope when Dr.Dutt offers her work, but unfortunately, her father discovered the matter and scolded her. In fact it is not only the males but females too are responsible for their humiliation, exploitation, sufferings of the women of the society. This attitude towards women folk makes the world of women worse and literally easier for mail to tighten the change around their feet of the women.

Githa Hariharan is one of the major writers who make readers think about the circumstances in the society. Her works simultaneously depict the patriarchal and at the same time attempt to celebrate the women's self and freedom. The style and skill Githa Hariharan use to prove the social structure in the thousand faces of night is worth reading and noticing. Hariharan deconstruct the common sense notion which supports that patriarchal society and constructs an image of ideal woman in the male dominated society. She depicts the role of the society which imposes their virtues and epitomizes womanhood can lucidly seen in the character of Sita. Society gives freedom to men to develop whereas puts obstacles in the development of womanhood but expect this fully that women will shoulder all responsibilities which come to her way. They face difficulties at different stages of life and social barrier creates hurdle in self development. In her childhood Sita the mother of Devi e has the aim to become a Veena player and with much hard work she achieves the aim although she is being not beautiful yet excels in music and other domestic chores. After marriage she finds herself in totally another world where she finds herself only a slave to accomplish her in laws commands. Once she gets rebuked by her

father-in-law and in anger she pulls out the strings of Veena in order to become the so-called ideal daughter in law. Githa Hariharan portrays through Mayamma the old family retainer of Devis in -law, the helplessness of traditionally suppressed rather illiterate women. One fact is common to almost all the societies are that a woman has never been considered equal to man. Hariharan portrays all kinds of character be it uneducated Mayamma, the self-controlled Sita or the educated Devi woman has been treated as property of men. Devi tries to move on in life and goes against the current. She realizes that life is worth to be lived.

She knows the importance of “lush in spite of it is sand - choked roots”(139). In this way she represents picture of new modern woman she understands and makes her mind to "stay and fight to make sense of it all. She would have to start from the very beginning"(139) on the other hand her mother Sita, kills her aim and goes with the flow but very soon she realizes the futility of her existence. Hariharan makes the readers to think themselves for the positive change so that it would be seen with positive vibes and much broader vision. The existing novel of Githa Hariharan is full of such characters. Both Sita and her educated daughter Devi are brought up in two different environments. While one was much away from the spoken world of mass communication and other got there opportunity to have passed her significant period of her life in America. The life of Sita was full of vicissitudes which she overcomes from all hurdles with her intelligence. On the other hand Devi, who spends a couple of years in America, enjoys all sorts of freedom. She was not able to adjust in a traditional life as she had been influenced by the modern ideas of the west. She accepts those ideas out of maternal love. At the crucial point of her life she thinks over all the happening which has happened in her life and all of a sudden she finds no charm in her life and and gets back to her mother. Hariharan in *Thousand Faces of Night* has portrayed characters of day to day life with their petty issues reflects upon the larger issues of gender discrimination. Through Devis character who are equally strong are depicts through the chain of series which develops the strata of their mind in changing scenario of their life.

Conclusion

Today modern woman faces the most agonizing and existential problems. They fail to receive the purpose behind life and the significance of their being in an unsympathetic world. The existence of encounter with nothingness is a typical modern woman's life. Anita Desai and Githa Hariharan seriously set the mute voice miseries of women fortune by existential problems and predicaments. Both the writers explore the inner world of women presenting an exceptional imaginative awareness of various deeper forces and insightful understanding of feminine sensibility as well as psychological trauma. Anita Desai and Githa Hariharan are more interested in the interior landscape of the mind than in social and political realities. Githa Hariharan is presenting women in challenge against their conditioning and predicaments to get own choice and self. Finally both the writers agree with feminist ideologies and supports and suggest a changed system where women have greater control of their lives. However, questions have been

asked and alternatives have been suggested. A study of both the writers revealed that they tried to explore the psychological state of their characters', because they reflect that the inner life of a man or a woman decides his or her character more than the external conditions of life.

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