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Liberal Feminism as Reflected in the Select Short Stories of Anjana Appachana: A Perspective

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Abstract:

Anjana Appachana is one of the significant writers of the Indian Diaspora who gained wide acclaim with her collection of short stories *Incantations and Other Stories* (1991) and her popular novels *Listening Now* (1998) and *Fear and Lovely* (2023). Her fictional works discernibly focus on seminal themes like gender issues, isolation, marginalization, displacement, supremacy, suppression, and dominance of the male over the female in patriarchal society. One can find an ardent urge for the liberation and empowerment of women in her writings. To trace the streaks of feminism in her works is always a meaningful exercise. Anjana explores the predicament of women and the problems of existence through her writings.

Liberal feminism believes that equality between sexes can be achieved through education and by eradicating rigid patriarchal norms. Prominent liberal feminists such as Mary Wollstonecraft, John Stuart Mill, Helen Taylor, and Simon De Beauvoir propagated liberal feminism to emancipate women from cultural, traditional, and financial constraints through their writings. The present paper titled Liberal Feminism as Reflected in the Select Short Stories of Anjana Appachana makes a humble attempt to examine the feminist issues in some of her selected short stories in the light of liberal feminism and its implications.

Keywords: Gender Inequality, Liberation, Equal rights, Gender issues, Dominance and Suppression.

Introduction

Anjana Appachana is considered to be an eminent fictional writer of the Indian Diaspora. Her works include “Incantations and Other Stories” a short story collection and two novels Fear and Lovely and Listening Now. Her collection of short stories depicts the struggles and challenges on account of gender inequality in India. The protagonists in her stories seek liberation from traditional norms and taboos. Liberal feminists believe that education plays a vital role in reducing gender discrimination. They strongly affirm that providing equal education opportunities to women is essential to achieve equality between the sexes. Giddens in his work Equality and Social Inequality (2001) opines that discrimination exists because of low access for women for the rights to get education and employment. (Giddens,2001)

Most of the prominent feminist activists like Wollstonecraft, Simon de Beauvoir, John Stuart Mill, and Charles Fourier opposed the oppression of women and gender bias and

argued that women should get equal opportunities in all spheres as men and should be treated without discrimination.

Historical Context of Liberal Feminism

The concept of liberal feminism originated in the 17th and 18th centuries to empower the legal and political rights of women. It emphasizes the individual rights of women and their freedom. It brought various remedies for gender inequalities through social and legal reforms. The dominant aspects of liberal feminism are freedom, democracy, equal opportunities, and equal rights. Liberal feminists suggest that gender inequality exists both at domestic and social levels. The family can be seen as a social institution according to liberal feminists. The most prominent writers include Mary Wollstonecraft, John Stuart Mill, and Harriet Taylor and Harriet propagated liberal feminism. Among them, one of the liberal feminist activists who gained a global reputation is Mary Wollstonecraft, a British writer and philosopher who explores about importance of women's education in her famous writing *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*. In her writings, she is vocal about women's education which is in her opinion crucial for their self-reliance. However, another important advocate of liberal feminism is Stuart Mill, an eminent philosopher and political economist legitimate right to vote in his essay *On the Subjection of Women* who is vociferous about women and their civic and legal rights.

A host of women writers from the Indian diaspora address the themes of gender inequality, particularly the traditional roles assigned to women in both Indian society and within the diaspora community. They raise their voice for women's roles in family,

marriage, and society, highlighting the need for equal opportunities in education, employment, and social participation. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni portrays internal and external struggles faced by women who are urged to define their ways owing to cultural constraints in her novels *The Mistress of Spices* and *Sister of My Heart*. One can trace the similar situations in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*, where the protagonist embarks on a journey to self-discovery, moving from a traditional Indian village to the United States and seeking liberation by committing a murder.

Anita Desai is known for her deeper exploration of psychic issues and her works *Clear Light of Day* and *Fasting, Feasting*, delve into the roles of women within the family, their search for identity, and the struggle for independence in patriarchal societies. Kiran Desai in her novel *The Inheritance of Loss*, explores the post-colonial identity of her characters and the convergence of culture, gender, and modernity, advocating for the retrospection of traditional roles for women. Anjana, one of the renowned novelists in *True Colors* prescribes the predicament of women in her work *Incantations and Other Stories*. Anjana is concerned with the problems and challenges faced by Indian women. The characters of her short stories are docile to the rules of tradition that are imposed on them in a patriarchal male-chauvinism society.

The present paper takes a look at the features of liberal feminism in selected short stories of Anjana. *Bahu* centers around the predicament of a woman in a patriarchal family as a daughter-in-law. It is all about a newly married girl who suffers from ferocity with her mother-in-law and her intimate partner. One can trace the situations that she came across in the viewpoint of liberal feminism. The daughter-in-law in the story is unnamed as she has no significance in her in-laws' home and her identity is

merely by her husband Sidharth. She survives under social, political, and economic constraints. She is denied her freedom to express her wish to meet her parents and her desire to continue her job but those were denied and her entire hopes become crestfallen after entering her in-laws' house. She has her own choices and aspirations but circumstances never allowed her to pursue them. Even her privacy is at stake and the following lines reflect her anxiety about it:

“Her husband and she never had time for spending time together and if she desires to get time with her husband the in-laws and relatives also accompany with them (p.12).

Her voice is curbed and not allowed to speak her opinions (p.14). Her husband feels superior and wants her to blindly obey him and satisfy his mother. She becomes victimized and treated with discrimination and it gets intensified with the arrival of her sister-in-law. Her mother-in-law believes that bahu is supposed to perform all the domestic chores and it is her responsibility. At the same time, she wants her daughter to be compatible with doing no work. The discrimination is evident in the following lines:

On the third day, my mother-in-law came to our room and told us, my heart is breaking to see my poor daughter working in the kitchen. The poor child does not want to see her mother work. She is working chapatis with her own hands for us (p.24).

On account of the indifferent and negligent attitude of her husband made her become a victim of oppression. It is at this juncture that liberal feminism can be traced. Owing to tough circumstances Bahu seeks liberation as she longs for freedom. She has become a victim of male chauvinism. She feels so disturbed because of conjugal unrest in her life.

Liberal feminism depicts the family as a social institution in which men and women have to share the responsibilities equally but here in this story, on account of chores, she feels isolated and detached from her family and friends. The recklessness, irresponsibility, and ignorance of her husband push her into depression. Her wish to work remains unfulfilled owing to traditional constraints and lack of freedom. The domestic abuse by her in-laws makes her stay away from responsibilities. Her feelings and emotions are ignored. She becomes emotionally drained as she does not want to remain as a traditional bahu. She receives no support, comfort, and psychological relief. The male domination in the house makes her docile and silent. The society and the family-imposed restrictions on her that adjustment is necessary in marriage and Siddarth also says that if you can't adjust in our family, please don't take it out on me. (p.25). She yearns for protection and Siddarth's attention but fails to get them. He never supports his wife but rather blames her to make his family happy. She has no privacy and independence (p.30). She does not want to remain a good bahu with the ill-treatment of her in-law's family. Her urge for liberation is noticed when she says:

I could not change it. Especially since Siddarth accepted it. Did I then also accept it? Could I? How could I go backward? Acceptance would mean that I would live this way, always. It would never mean that I could accept it as the right thing to do. How then could I do it, day after day, year after year? For whom and why?

She wishes to liberate herself and wants to be an independent woman yearning to lead a life on her terms. At the end of the story, she rejects everything and walks out of the house with confidence due to those unbearable traditional constraints. Eventually, she

decides to quit the clutches of her in-laws' family. She wants to live her life (p.29). Her anguish is explained in the following lines;

I could not leave this city. Where else could I find such a good job? I had just four years' work experience and jobs were so hard to come by, I could leave and take up a barsati one to a woman separated from her husband. I would have joined the slender bandwagon of 'those women'. No, it would not be easy to find a place (Incantations, p.31). She feels happy about her decision and lives independently after leaving her in-laws' home. She quits her in-laws house to live independently and peacefully. Bahu is portrayed as the one who liberates herself from traditional fetters and seeks to lead life.

The next short story collection that offers insights about liberal feminism is Her Mother. It depicts the life of Indian middle-class people especially those who aspire to go the West to seek greener pastures. It voices the anguish of a mother towards her daughter after her daughter leaves abroad to pursue a Ph.D. The entire story revolves around the prescription of a mother to her daughter in the form of letters. In this story, gender discrimination is portrayed by Anjana as men are allowed to go abroad to study while women are not supposed to go there on account of traditional restrictions. In this story mother is unnamed and the mother calls her daughter, Rani Bati and she does not want her daughter to break traditional rules as she obeys values and culture.

She wishes her daughter to be a woman of performs household chores and fulfills the desires of her husband and his family once she gets married. She wants her daughter to be a common woman. The mother wishes her daughter to be a woman who should know all household chores.

However, her daughter Rani leaves her mother's home to become independent and pursue education abroad. In the entire story, one can witness the clash between a traditional mother and

a daughter who wants to embrace modernity. It is clear that the mother is imposed with societal restrictions and she wants her daughter to preserve culture. Anjana exposes the discrimination in restricting women from seeking opportunities abroad and fixing marriage as a precondition. (p.167)

As the story progresses, the mother tries to insist her daughter not to follow the culture of America but to adhere to all norms. Instead of supporting her daughter to pursue higher education mother blames and disapproves of her (p.169). Moreover, the mother never wants to allow her daughter to marry Americans as they don't know the value of marriage. In the entire story, the mother is against her daughter's decision due to Americans' ill practices such as leaving their parents in old age, abusing their wives, and receiving provocation from their parents(p.171-172).

Rani is always in conflict as she differs from her mother and as she seeks independence. She desires to achieve higher positions rather to be like her mother who is confined to household chores. As a result, she liberates herself from the clutches that are ingrained in society.

The most rendering of all the stories in the collection is "Incantations". It highlights the unspeakable truth of abuse, guilt, and self-recrimination. It centers around the narrator's elder sister Sangeetha who is exploited by Abhinay, her brother-in-law during her wedding despite which she gets married to Nikhil. After her wedding, Sangeeta expresses her agony with her twelve-year-old sister Geeti recounting how "*every morning...Abhinay raped her and at night Nikhil did*" (Appachana 120). She conceals about her exploitation with her parents as Abhinay insists her no one would believe her if she disclosed it. She explains her trauma with her sister Geeti and confesses she could not resist it.(p.112).

Her parents obliviously find nothing wrong with her since she hides her pain and pretends like a woman who is very happy with her husband (p.121). Meanwhile, she is scared of society as she will be ill-treated for losing her virginity. She hesitates to express her pain because she thinks of the humiliation and disgust of their parents by society and words like despoiled woman by people once it is known (p.115).

Her sister opined that Sangeeta conceals her agony with her parents since she would be treated as a woman who does not protect the values and morals of society (p.115). As a result, Sangeeta becomes a victimized young woman who does not find enough confidence in her husband to share her horrid experience of rape and has to undergo the dual trauma of marital rape as well as the repeated rape by her brother-in-law daily in the absence of Nikhil until she decides to end her life before killing her brother-in-law.

One can trace the dimension of liberal feminism when she is denied individual freedom and autonomy in the hands of Abhinay and Nikhil. She cannot liberate herself from their clutches on account of terror and violence. She remains subordinate to her exploiters rather than emancipating herself from the clutches of them. Liberal feminism ensures individuals fair and just treatment without discrimination or exploitation. But here in this story, Sangeetha never tries to escape from her trauma since she is weak and accepts suffering showing resistance. Her suffering, which had been consuming her slowly, and unable to bear the agony any longer, she ends her life after killing her brother-in-law. She had never felt comfortable sharing her heart out to him. Sangeeta would have been alive, and possibly, happy if she freed herself from that trauma and made an attempt from sexual violence.

Anjana implicitly and skillfully puts forth the feminist concerns in *Incantations and Other Stories* which come under the pursuit of liberal feminism. The very first story Bahu explores the hardship of the daughter-in-law seeking liberation to come out of the mire created by circumstances. Her mother reflects the passionate desire of a daughter to pursue higher education abroad and to become financially independent by resisting the taboos of society. *Incantations* is about the predicament of Sangeeta who is exploited by Abhinay and how she liberates herself by killing her brother-in-law and ends her own life. A careful reading of other fictional works also offers sufficient scope to look at the aspects of liberal feminism and such an exercise will be truly fruitful.

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