ABSTRACT

“Family Feminism”: A Comparative Study of the Women Characters in the Select Novels of Anita Desai and Bharati Mukherjee

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This thesis attempts at a comparative study of the women characters in the select novels of Anita Desai and Bharati Mukherjee in the light of ‘family feminism’. As these writers present their women in different geographical domain, a comparative study is attempted to find out whether they converge or diverge in their views on women. Working on women characters invariably means working within the theoretical perspective of feminism. In the Indian context, as there is no one particular theory of feminism, this study has to be placed in the larger context of Western feminism. However, the Western theories with its liberal and radical views may not be applicable to women in the Indian context. Therefore, we cannot arrive at a more comprehensive understanding of the Indian women by just applying the tools of Western feminist theories; instead, we have to move beyond mainstream feminism towards a ‘new feminism’ like ‘family feminism’, ‘power feminism’ or ‘womanism’ to understand the situation of women in the Indian context. Elizabeth Fox- Genovese recommends a new and more responsive feminism called ‘family feminism’ which unlike its predecessor, attends to the real-life needs and aspirations of a wide range of women; sees men and women as partners rather than antagonists in the quest of life. A study of the women characters of these two writers traces out a development in the feminine consciousness of the women protagonists from a victimised status to an
emancipated woman. The women in the prime of youth seem to reject the idea of being submissive, suffering, and sacrificing. The conventional mode of arranged marriage and joint-family system do not seem to suit them. They feel the need for self-expression, individual fulfilment, and crave for individual freedom which makes them to go against the general current. The elder generation too long for freedom, suffering a passive rebellion within themselves; but do not go against the general current; instead, live servile and submissive lives according to the precepts of the patriarchal tradition. It is observed that even the younger lot of women in their rebellion are not antagonistic towards their men. Though they refuse to conform to the image of the feminine, docile, silent, and long suffering women, they desire to find self-fulfilment while conforming to the values of the past without compromising them. They do not seem to have the notion of ‘self’ which is competitive individualism, but believe that an individual is a part of the larger family and therefore sustain their relationships in the family with self-realisation or reconciliation. This comparative study shows that these two women writers, despite presenting their women in their preferred worlds, ultimately seem to converge in their ideas in showing the plight of women to be the same, irrespective of their different geographical domain. They have gone beyond ‘feminism’ towards ‘womanism’ and also have shown an extended vision of ‘humanism’ in their writings. Both the writers have exhibited a wider world of all human beings. At the primary level, they are recognised for their movement from feminism to womanism; however, one infers that their underlying concern is only humanism.