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Oppressed Women in Anita Desai's Novel "Fire on the Mountain" And Margaret Atwood's "The Handmaid's Tale"

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Abstract

Anita Desai and Margaret Atwood both are 21st Century writers. Anita Desai was born in 1937 in Mussoorie, India. Anita Desai was an Indian writer and Margaret Atwood was a Canadian writer. Both writers were novelist, poetess, and story writers. They also wrote children books and script for film making. But they were famous especially for novels. They studied in depth of woman psychology. Anita Desai very deeply studied the mental condition of Indian women that is imposed on them by patriarchal society. She exposed the oppressed condition of women in her novel "Fire on the Mountain". There are mainly three characters in this novel Nanda Kaul, Raka, and Illa Das. Nanda Kaul is oppressed by her unfaithful husband and her children. Raka is oppressed by her abusing father and Illa Das is tortured and murdered by Preet Singh.

Margaret Atwood was born in 1939 in Ottawa, Canada. She is a famous Canadian poetess, novelist, and activist. But she is very famous as a novelist. In her novel, "The Handmaid's Tale", she also showed the oppressed condition of women that is imposed on them by Gilead's society. In this novel, she showed that women are the reproduction of machine and made for 'other'. At that time women were sexually exploited by men. In Gilead society the high class women who were not capable to bear the child. These women were called Handmaid at that time. These women had not their own life. They had not any kind of freedom. They were forced to sacrifice their life for others. They were physically exploited by the male dominated society.

Keywords- Physical exploitation of women, Mental exploitation of women, Gender discrimination, Patriarchal society, Subjugation of women, Isolation.

Introduction-

Anita Desai is one of the well known novelists in Indian writing. Her "Fire

on the Mountain" is a famous novel. This novel was published in 1977. She got Sahitya Academy Award in 1978. In most of her novel Anita Desai showed the psychological condition of women. Fire on the Mountain is one of them. She is a keen observer of human mind and described this feeling in her novel. Anita Desai writes- "All my writing is an effort to discover, to underline and convey the true significance of themes".

'Fire on the Mountain' is a story of women characters. The protagonist of this novel is Nanda Kaul. The whole novel is divided into three parts. In the first part of the novel, "Nanda Kaul at Carignano" describes Nanda Kaul's life as a 'saint' where she does not want anybody to disturb her. In the second part of the novel Desai depicts Raka's coming and its effect on Nanda. In the third part of the novel she describes the story of Illa Das, she is raped and murdered. Nanda does not believe about this event.

Margaret Atwood was also a feminist writer like Anita Desai. Atwood was born on 18, November 1939, at Ottawa, Canada. She is a Canadian writer, she also wrote many novels; "The Handmaid's Tale" is one of them. In this novel Atwood depicts the oppressed condition of women of that time. Through the novel "The Handmaid's Tale" Atwood attempted to show the changing that came into Gilead's power. In this novel the protagonist is 'Offred'. She is a handmaid. Before becoming handmaid her married life was very happy. But after becoming handmaid her life was like a slave. In Gilead's society women were considered as machine of reproduction of child and they were also sexually exploited. In this novel Atwood showed the same problem that was prevailed at that time.

Objective-

In the present study I have selected mainly two objectives-

- 1) Oppressed condition of women in Anita Desai's "Fire on the Mountain"
- 2) Oppressed condition of women in Margaret Atwood's "The Handmaid's Tale"

Methodology-

In the present study secondary sources of data has been used from academic libraries, research paper from Google Scholar, and book.

Oppressed Condition of Women in Anita Desai's 'Fire on the Mountain'-

In Anita Desai's 'Fire on the Mountain' the main focus is on Nanda Kaul. All the other characters in this novel are connected to Nanda Kaul. In this novel mainly there are three women characters, Nanda Kaul, Raka, and

Illa Das. Desai focused on these three characters. Nada Kaul is the heroine of the novel. She is the victim of loveless marriage. She is the vice-chancellor's wife in spite of this she is mentally disturbed due to her husband's extra marital affairs. The second woman character is Raka, she is also the victim of mental torture by her abusing father. The third woman character is Illa Das friend of Nanda Kaul. She is physically tortured and raped by Preet Singh because Illa Das revolted Preet Singh to marry his daughter in small age.

In this way we see in 'Fire on the Mountain' mentally and physical exploitation of women. In the words of B.R. Nagpal- "The women protagonists are portrayed as victims of an aberrant urban milieu, patriarchal family structures and bourgeoisie, bureaucratic, imperialistic, colonized, social scenario. It is in this context that the characters are in a state of revolt, despondency, morbidity, and are driven to grapple with duality, fragmentation "(P-49).

In our Indian culture it is thought that women should have the quality of politeness, obedience and dutiful. Nanda Kaul has all these qualities. Through out of her life she is devoted to her husband but her husband is unfaithful to her because he had an illicit relationship with Miss David who was a Christian woman. When we meet Nanda Kaul in the first part of the novel she is a widow woman. After completing the responsibilities of her life as a dutiful wife and mother she left Kasauli to live alone in Carignano. In Carignano she is detached herself from the worldly life. She passed her life lonely with her servant Ram Lal. Nanda Kaul's children were also selfish like their father. They did not care the sacrifice of their mother. Now Nanda Kaul does not care the memories of her husband or children. Now she has only memories about her duties, her love and affection.

But after the death of her husband and children's departure to their work places, she is "left to the pines and cicadas alone" -(P-3) at Carignano. But this tranquility or calmness is disturbed by the appearance of a post man. The letter was posted by her daughter Asha to take care of her granddaughter Raka. Nanda wants to ask..-"Have I not done what's needed and had enough? Can I not be let alone with not all that much". (Desai-17)

Raka in 'Fire on the Mountain' is perplexing and complicated character. Nobody can understand her extraordinary behaviour. Her great grandmother Nanda Kaul describes her like "One of those dark crickets that leap up in fright but do not sing, or a mosquito, minute and fine or thin, precarious legs". (P-39). Nanda Kaul feels Raka's eyes are like insects but her ears are large and exposing. Raka's actions are very

mysterious that Nanda can not penetrate the thoughts of Raka. She finds out that "The child had gift for disappearing suddenly, silently. She would be gone totally, not return for hours" (P-45).

When Raka returned home her legs were scratched by something and knees were injured. Her eyes were very pensive as if "She has visited strange lands and seen fantastic improbable things she lingered in the mind"- (P-46). Like Nanda Kaul, Raka disliked the company of men. She did not like "The very thought of school, of hostels, of discipline, order and obedience". (P-59). Nanda Kaul was very astonished to see the behaviour of Raka, because she was not like ordinary child. The main reason for this Raka's parents did not care the child. Her mother Tara was the victim of difficult situation. Her father was used to drinking and always abused her mother, so her parents had not sufficient time to take care of the child. Raka was also the victim of difficult situation so she did not like listen the stories like an ordinary child. She had the courage to go such places where no ordinary person can go. She was attracted by the physical beauty of nature "Where there was no sound, only silence, no light, only shed and skeletons kept in the beds of ash on which the footprint of jackals flowered in grey". (P-90)

The next character in this novel is Illa Das. She was the victim of attack of school boys. The life of Illa Das was full of hardship in spite of this she cared for the social problem which is prevailed in our society. One day Illa Das was the victim of sudden attack and anger of Preet Singh who wanted to marry his 7 years old girl from a widowed man. Illa Das revolted it but Preet Singh did not like it. So he raped and killed Illa Das. The death of Illa Das announced on phone call from the police station to Nanda Kaul. Having heard the news of Illa Das's death and rape Nanda Kaul was shocked to know it. After this incident Raka set fire in the forest and come to say Nanda Kaul, "Look nani I have set the forest on fire". (P-145)

In this way we see that the three characters Nanda Kaul, Raka and Illa Das are in oppressed condition throughout of the novel.

Oppressed Condition of Women in Margaret Atwood's 'The Handmaid's Tale' -

Margaret Atwood was a Canadian writer. She depicted in her novel social and political issues. She studied very deeply the psychological condition of women of that time and picturised it in her novels. "The Handmaid's Tale" is one of them. The protagonist of the novel is 'Offred'. She is oppressed physically by the society of high people in Gilead's power. Gilead gave importance only to male. In Gilead society women were

considered as a tool according to the wishes of men. At that time women were oppressed sexually and they were thought a machine for reproduction of child. At that time there was the problem of infertility of women. So high status of women who were find infertility in themselves, their husbands keep handmaids to sex them for bearing a child. 'Offred' the protagonist of the novel is one of them. She kept as a handmaid by a commander to get a child. But after many attempts Offred was not pregnant. The doctor told her that commander was infertile. So the doctor forced 'Offred' to make a physical relationship with her. The doctor was the second person who wanted to oppress Offred. This activity clearly showed that women were considered only sexual objects. As an example, Offred describes an inferior situation "Resign my body freely, to the use of others. They can do what they like with me. I am object." (The Handmaid's Tale- 282)

Women also have feelings or emotions. They also have a mind but in spite of this they are used as an instrument by the men. The Handmaids lost everything in their life. They had not their identity and name. They had not given any kind of freedom except to buy things from the shop. When Offred was not pregnant after a long time, commander's wife Serena suggested Offred to have sex with her driver 'Nick' on the condition that Serena will give the picture of Offred's daughter. At thi Offred was agreed to have sex with Nick. In this way Offred was forced to sleep with many persons.

The Handmaid's Tale describes such kind of society in which men are considered supreme power and women as others. Women are thought of sexual objects for men's entertainment. In 'The Handmaid's Tale' it shows that in the patriarchal society women's independence is ignored. They were not considered as human beings but they are considered as men's possession. It shows that in Gilead society the condition of women was very weak and miserable. In Gilead society the handmaids are exploited and treated badly due to their conceiving power to her body. Offred describes a pitiable situation. The handmaids are devoted to their roles as biological mothers in Gilead. In the oppressive society of Gilead women are reduced to their biological functions. Their bodies are capable of bearing children, define their worth and dictate their roles. Women are expected to embody warmth and nurturing qualities, with motherhood being their primary purpose. They are forced into submission and expected to obey men and ignored their individuality. In Atwood's novel we see the body of female is considered like something that is debased and sexualized. In the patriarchal society of Gilead the supremacy of men over women as well as their bodies and women are suffering from this. So the

conditions of women are like a prisoner. They have not their own desires.

In Gilead society the women are always the source of victimization and they are not humanized by the controlling power of men. So this kind of relationship is called "master-slave relationship". So master is always benefitted by the slave and everything is in favour of oppressor 'master' and against the oppressed (slave), (Beauvoir). In *The Handmaid's Tale* Offred is treated like the prostitute by the commander. The condition of Offred is like a slave and she is like an object for the commander's desire. There was tag on the wrist of Offred that her condition was like a slave and an object of commander's property.

In the novel of Atwood the sexual desires of women are always oppressed and the inferiority of women and superiority of men are presented. The handmaids are required to make physical relationship with their commander only to get a child. In Gilead society sexuality is just for bearing a child and man's entertainment. For handmaids it was only a job.

In this way it is clear that the story of 'The Handmaid's Tale' is the story of the oppression of women. Atwood in this novel showed women as the second status in the society. She describes such kind of world where there is no freedom for women, not only choice and opinion for them. She describes a society in which women are physically and mentally slave and men are their masters. Atwood showed that society for women accordance with their desires. There is not any kind of shape of women they are treated only as objects. She tried to show that women in our patriarchal society are hopeless.

Conclusion-

Thus we see both Anita Desai and Margaret Atwood showed the oppressed condition of women. Anita Desai showed in her novel 'Fire on the Mountain' mental torture of women. Through out of her novel Nanda Kaul is mentally oppressed by her husband and children. As a result of it she becomes introvert and her granddaughter Raka is also mentally disturbed by her abusing father. Raka does not care for anybody. She did not get love feeling from her parents.

Margaret Atwood showed in her novel 'The Handmaid's Tale' sexual oppression of women. In this novel Offred is sexually oppressed. She is used for the reproduction of child and for the pleasure of men. She behaved by the society of men only as objects and the 'other'. They have not their own desires. Women are used only according to the needs of men. They have not any kind of freedom. They can do nothing without the permission of men.

So the condition of women in Atwood's novel is worse than the novel of Anita Desai.

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