

Existential Crisis of Female Characters in Sita Pandey's *Fever*

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Abstract

This article examines Sita Pandey's Fever, an anthology of stories about pain, suffering, and stereotypical depictions of women. The story deals with the oppression of women in patriarchy. Women do housework, serve their husbands, and work long hours and after-hours. They become alienated, frustrated, and mentally and physically broken. The cause of their suffering is none other than patriarchy. Patriarchy imposes laws on women that affect their identity and existence. Society gives them difficult roles and limits their roles. Women live according to patriarchal norms and values, suppressing their own desires. Female characters are depicted as mere servants guided by their emotions. Society is a great example of the ignorance and blind exploitation of women. Society requires women to have passion in their eyes, lust for women's bodies, and admire the beauty of women's bodies. Just as Prema is compared to wine in the story 'Own Question Mark', men compare women to inanimate objects. Female characters are seen by men simply as objects of beauty, pleasure, and satisfaction. The stories contained in Fever visualize the memories of women's oppression, alienation, and depression in society. This article creates an overview of the pain, grief, suffering, hardship, and haunting memories of female characters, exploring their lost identity, respect, and dignity.

Key Words: Existentialism, identity, resistance, feminism, criticism, domination

Introduction

Fever is an explosive anthology of short stories from an author who has been at the centre of literary commotion in Nepal for last two decades. Mature and skillfully structured, these stories investigate the hidden recesses of a woman's mind. Bold, intense and honest, they narrate life-struggle of a young woman from the Nepalese countryside hankering for a fresh emotional plateau of faith in a callously modernized cityscape of legendary Shangri-la kingdom.

Pandey's works portray the bitter societal reality that the slogan of equality, which was raised forward by the society, is being discriminate to give in practice. The equality can only be seen in books, papers, laws and people's speeches but in practice those equalities of women were ignored. In this situation, women were treated as the mere object of beauty, pleasure and playing things of patriarchal society where the norms, values, systems, and rules were made by society to restrict females not to respect them. The subordination of females' voices in so-called patriarchal society is beautifully portrayed in her stories.

For Sita's stories are songs of a famished road where children play with broken earthen pieces instead of moons, where a husband permits his wife to sleep with her former boss before his own eyes, where a girl-child is molested by an old guard whose ugly touch triggers an onrush of torpid fever, where a lover is reduced to a naked child helplessly crawling towards his beloved where a wife's body has been lying like a log in a river for years, where a young girl stuff dreams and desires along with her lipstick rogue into her handbag and adventures into open spaces, to public squares, lanes, streets, looking for a pair of strong muscular arms that would save her from sinking into snow (Fever I). Pandey's stories show the discrimination prevalent everywhere in the society on the basis of gender. The role of women is determined by their feminine gender. Females were restricted only to household activities for what? Not because their duty is to do household chores but that is their compulsion created by the society.

Analysis

Existential crisis" refers to a form of internal conflict. It is characterized by the impression that life has no meaning and is accompanied by various negative experiences such as stress, anxiety, despair and depression. An existential crisis is a recurring thought pattern that affects your identity, life purpose, and legacy, among other things. Existential questions can arise at any time in your life and can affect your mood and overall quality of life.

Pandey's stories show the characters as rebellious, strong, bold and determined but gradually powerless women who cannot stand themselves dependently. They are presented as dependent to their husbands, fathers or the male superiority or the patriarchal society. The representation of Pandey's female characters demonstrates the contemporary society reality. It shows the patriarchal society still dominant, and the women's voices are still dominated in society. The females are taken as the second class citizens where their role is like servants of patriarchy. Women are compelled to follow rules at the cost of their personal identity. Their role is mere subordinating and loses their rights and become passive and parasitical.

My paper focuses on the expressions and elaborations of females which display the characteristics such as domination of patriarchy, identity crisis, self-awakening, protest, self-realization, representation, male's attitude, and the sorrows, sufferings, pains and pathos of females. The study is a survey of the stories from the feminist perspective. Pandey's story *Once Upon a Time* portrays the pathetic condition of children especially girls. The beginning of the story shows that whole village is disheveled and diseased which symbolizes that there is no fair relationship between the social classes or races, "None seemed healthy or strong there" (13). This shows that something unhealthy culture has been established there by the society. She further describes their physical appearance as dry and wrinkled faces are seen there, bodies are skinny and pallid eyes, with dark patches shows the sorrows of people in their appearance. The dry and wrinkled face symbolizes that they are not happy at all. The skinny and pallid body suggests that proper food is not given to them and the 'eyes with dark patches', symbolizes the fragmented

mentality of the women in society. The women were put in ignorance in society since they were owned by someone as she asserts, “Their dresses looked so dirty that no one could tell the original color except the owners themselves” (13). This suggests that their identity has been put in crisis since only their owners know them, their color. It further implies that women have been totally put under the owners’ control which refers to the fact that patriarchy is controlling the women’s color and their identity and suppresses their identity.

The ignorance of women is clarified by the fact that their childhood is spent inside the womb, “This made one wonder whether they had spent their entire childhood inside the womb itself” (13). This shows the female children were too much ignorant about their needs and desires as they are in the womb. The womb symbolically tells the innocence of female children. The innocence and ignorance is clarified by the fact that the children were naked in their early ages as she asserts, “Children under twelve went about naked in that village. A child usually would feel uneasy and ashamed if his parents compelled him to wear clothes which they sometimes did” (13-14). This shows that that the nakedness of the female is their identity since they feel ashamed when their parents compel them to wear clothes and that is done sometimes only. This further displays that for the satisfaction of male desires the females are taught to remain naked in society. Pandey says, “Some of the girls had just started draping a piece of cloth around their chests, while others were found wrapped in a piece of cloth below their waists. Whenever the wrapping got loose or fell down every one would ogle at them” (14). Hence girls’ activities of draping are being celebrated by patriarchy, the vulgar eyes of the males stared at females’ chests. The loose wrapping falling down and ogling at them show the patriarchal lust by making females naked and their entertainment from it. The inner sexual passion of the male patriarchy has been beautifully presented in the story.

The paper applies feminist criticism as a perspective to analyze the text. The task of feminist criticism is to concentrate in women’s access to language in the lexical range from which words can be selected on the ideological and cultural determinants of expression. Toril Moi has indicated the advantage of recognition of feminist criticism and theory which are useful to learn social institutional and personal power relation between the sexes. She further says, “Feminist criticism then is specific kind of political discourse, a critical and theoretical practice, committed to the struggle against patriarchy and sexism, not simply a concern for genders in literature” (204). Feminist criticism questions about phallicentric ideologies, attitudes, and male interpretation in literature and criticism to attack the male notions of values in literature and criticism. To subvert the complacent centuries of patriarchal culture, it offers critiques of male authors and representations of men in literature, and also privileges of women writers.

Twentieth century major feminist writers like Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir had made a great contribution in the field of feminist theories with their major works. Woolf, in her *A Room of Her Own* (1928) has explored the situation of women writers explaining how women are imprisoned within the domestic premises and are stopped from trying the pen. Her central argument is that women do not have money and a room of her

own where they do not have separate space for writing. The social and economic obstacles extended before them always obstructed the women's creativity. She attacks that a patriarchal society has prevented women from realizing their creative possibilities. She asserts that libraries can be locked but freedom of women mind cannot be locked. In another essay, "The Idea of the Angel in the House" called for women to be sympathetic, genuine and unselfish. She says that the literary genres were made by men for their own utilization not for women. Only the novel gives women workable space and even then the form has to be reworked for its new purpose expressing the female body and experiences.

Simone de Beauvoir's existential feminism is used as an approach to express the human condition. We then analyze the forms of alienation of women as other and how women as a form of existence exercise forms of resistance. In addition, forms of alienation of women as Other and forms of resistance as expressions of the presence of female protagonists in fiction are also analyzed and insights are gained from them (Yusuf et al 68). Feminist criticism's main task is to make the patriarchal society realize that their rigid rules and regulations to make women conscious of the age. Feminism accepting Foucauldian theory claims that power being exercised by men who pretend to have knowledge about everything including women. A power relation varies according to circumstance the power of men no longer holds constancy. Beauvoir talks about what society held women to be:

Women are weaker than men; she has less muscular strength, fewer red blood corpuscles less lung capacity. She runs more slowly can lift less heavy weights, can compete with man in hardly any sport. She cannot stand up to him in a fight. To all this weakness must be added the instability, the lack of control and the fragility already discussed: there are facts her grasp on the world is thus more restricted; she has less firmness and less steadiness available for projects that in general she is less capable of carrying out. In other words, her individual life is less rich than man's. (38)

If we talk about the life of female and male after and before the marriage, women suffer more from marriage. More wives depress from domination and problem in comparison to husband. The society is structured in such a way that a woman has to depend upon her husband and the family for her social existence. People think marriage is the social stage, which provides social status for women and plunges into the relation that is strange to her. Similarly, Pandey does express the domination of males over females in her stories. The inner sexual passion of the male patriarchy has been beautifully presented in the story. The words "knives, salt, red chilies and their game Khopi" shows the tricks of male patriarchy to celebrate the female's beauty. The pathetic situation of females is shown as, "The village mothers usually tied their babies on the back of their elderly offshoots and forgot about them the whole day until they realized that their blouses were wet and hot with sweat" (15). It shows the hard labor of the females in society. The females were bound to work in the field with the load of their babies on their back. This shows the double load for females.

Feminism is an ideology of women's liberation, supported by any approach that suggests that women are treated unfairly because of their sex. This movement arose because women were always considered the second gender and were discriminated against in social life.

This does not mean an extreme rebellion of women against men, but rather against social castes and the static mythological paradigm in society. Women are not weak creatures because they have unique abilities to establish themselves in society. In other words, this movement is about women recognizing their identities in order to destroy hierarchies that undermine their status, such as exploitation of women and slavery by men.

This patriarchy created by the male superiority has been observed at the end of the story by an old man who is almost naked and clutching the hand of his son he says in a feeble voice “Son! Over there . . . was our small beautiful village. And that fish pond . . . a mango tree stood there once. We used to play khopi . . . sinners” (17). The lesson of the old man teaches his son that the patriarchal rule of beautifying village, fish, pond, and mango tree, the dominated self of women. The old man actually wants to do the way his father did in the village—to dominate and celebrate the beauty of woman.

Women experience a major shift in their well-being, autonomy and property rights when they move from joint to nuclear households and become the wife of the male head. As compared to when they were daughter-in-laws in joint households, as married women in nuclear households they acquire more property rights over joint property they no longer have to share rights with their in-laws (Pradhan et al, 2018, p. 30). Violence particularly gender-based violence is ubiquitous. It refers to violence against a person because of her or his sex and the place a society gives her or him. Similarly, violence against women and girls mean violence against a person based sex that recognizes the link between the lower status of women in society and their increasing vulnerabilities to violence (Masson et al, p. 21). Women in patriarchal framework become vulnerable and happen to lose both their prestige and right to freedom. They live in fear because of spousal domination and violence. Domestic/spousal violence is the most frequently reported type of violence among Nepalese women. The impact of violence on women is even more harmful if they do not have the opportunity to seek treatment.

Furthermore, the views and opinions of community members influence the attitudes of fathers and mothers towards access to health services. The consequences of these social norms, and the domination of women and girls by their husbands, are particularly restrictive in terms of women's own health and well-being but also for those of their children and, in general, for their home. As a result, social inequalities reduce the human capital of survivors and aggravate their vulnerabilities during periods of food-shortages (Masson et al, p.39). Whether confronted with violence or not, women face daily social and economic inequalities that can edge their opportunities to develop their physical capital. Unequal access to school education for women compared with men and inequalities in the control of the family budget amplify differences in women and men's

skills, knowledge and even self-confidence in deciding to change their role in the family and the community.

After all, women may have access to certain resources to develop an economic activity, such as a trade, but without knowledge or skills in budget management, or without the availability of sufficient finance, this activity does not necessarily result in a sufficient or sustainable income. If situation is so, they are likely to become the victims of violence and domination in patriarchy.

Conclusion

The paper concludes that Pandey's *Fever* is anthology of females' grieved desires, lost identity, loss of self, ignorance, chaos, coexistence of their identity and physical existence with boredom. The female characters throughout her stories are shown as slaves, servants, workers and of low rank. The female characters cannot resist against the domination of patriarchal society. The laws of society are shown being made by males not the females. Whoever breaks the law should be punished in society but that does not happen since the Guard in *Fever* tries to seduce a small girl who was returning from school. The society remains silent and even the female girl cannot resist against the guard rather she helplessly cries for help. The guard actually brandishes the society boundary but he is given no punishment for his crime. The society being patriarchal crops the laws for females not for males. The interpretation of females has been heavily undercut by the social disbeliefs, orthodox and conventions which were favorable only for males not for females. The pathetic and fragmented characters as presented in *Fever* show the reality of modern society where still the norms and values are alive and under the domination of males. The rights of women are actually burned up by the patriarchal society.

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