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Feminist Reading in Amulya Malladi's *A Breath In Fresh Air*

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ABSTRACT

Whenever any movement takes place in a particular age, all those who live in that age come under its influence consciously or unconsciously, directly or indirectly. This is truer in the case of creative writers and artists who are said to be the product of that particular age. Literature is the reflection of life and creative writers, in most of the cases faithfully portray what is going on around them and incorporate them in their art as it is perceived by them. Amulya Malladi, a prolific novelist is no exception to this. Her novels portray the women characters that stand the demand of feminism and quest for identity. This paper attempts to apply the feminist yardstick to the character of Anjali in her maiden novel, *A Breath In Fresh Air*.

Key words: survival, catastrophic, feminism, revolutionary, rebellion

Though the seeds of the feminism were sown long back in western countries its roots reached India when the country was struggling from the clutches of slavery of Great Britain. India was raising its voice for Liberty from political rule of Britishers as well as fighting the patriarchal norms of the existing society of pre independent India. Literature was a medium of expression for aspirant female writers to pour their hearts into words. Many feminist writers like Tarabai Shinde, Pandita Ramabai, Sarojini Naidu, Savitribai Phule, Jasodha Bagchi, Malati Bedekar and others ruled the literary World of pre independent India trying to shatter the existing social order.

This legacy was carried forward by many other female writers after independence. Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Shagal, Anita Desai, Kamala Das, Kiran Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Arunditi Roy, Githa Hariharan, Namita Gokhale, Manju Kapur and many other vernacular feminist writers of India have carved out a niche for themselves even at international fronts. Through

their writings they have symbolized that women and their issues all across the globe are identical irrespective of its geographical boundaries. Amulya Malladi is yet another Indian woman author who writes with feminist frame of mind.

Amulya Malladi was born in 1974 in a small town Sagar in Madhya Pradesh. She is an engineer from Osmania University, Hyderabad but as she was more interested in writing she joined journalism for a master's degree from the University of Memphis, Tennessee. Her experience as a journalist gave her a great boost as a writer. Her experience with the real world and real people has helped a lot to create her characters based on real life. She has 7 famous novels to her credit namely *A Breath In Fresh Air* (2002), *The Mango Season* (2003), *Serving Crazy With Curry* (2004), *Song of the Cuckoo Bird* (2005), *The Sound of Languages* (2007), *A House for Happy Mothers* (2016) and *The Copenhagen Affair* (2017).

Her novels pivot on themes like domestic conflicts, generation gap and the changing position

of women from following traditional values to adapting modern lifestyle. The female protagonists in her novels undergo the process of self-actualization and psychological transformation. Her first novel *A Breath in Fresh Air* is the combination of emotions like love, hate, blame, forgiveness, approval, recrimination, betrayal, jealousy and guilt.

Amulya Malladi's novel *A Breath in the Fresh Air* highlights Anjali, the protagonist as a feminist character who instead of breaking down after being deserted by her husband at the time of Bhopal gas tragedy keeps on fighting for her survival. She does not leave things to fate. She boldly stands against all the odds of life. Her struggle to reconcile the rules of wife, ex wife, working woman and mother, illuminates the status of modern Indian women and the difficult choices made by her. The qualities that she exhibits show her as a feminist in her attitude.' In flashback, we see Anjali as a naive young woman being introduced to dashing army officer Prakash; a match is made the same evening, and a wedding date is set. Wanting to be a good, traditional Indian wife, Anjali is shocked that their marriage hardly resembles those in romantic films. Prakash treats her poorly and cheats on her; all her fine meals and sweet smiles don't win him over. After the Bhopal accident, she does the unthinkable for a woman of her culture and gets a divorce.'

The novel *A Breath in Fresh Air* revolves around the disaster caused by fate in Anjali's life and her courage to overcome the crisis. 'On the night of December 3, 1984, Anjali waits for her army officer husband to pick her up at the train station in Bhopal, India. In an instant, her world changes forever. Her anger at his being late turns to horror when a catastrophic gas leak poisons the city air. Anjali miraculously survives but her marriage does not.

Anjali is a modern educated girl who refuses to give into the disaster she is facing. She decides not to allow her past to spoil her present and future. Feminism for women is rising above all odds with all required bravery and courage to overcome all the difficult circumstances that prove

obstacles on the way to a smooth life. Since there is no trace of her husband, she decides to rebuild her life overcoming all the barriers that age-old traditions present before an Indian woman. She decides to remarry without bothering what the rest of the world would think about her. A smart, successful school teacher, Anjali remarries Sandeep, a loving and stable professor. This is a revolutionary and rebellion act on her part symbolising feminist attitude.

An article on Wikipedia very well elaborates the fact of Anjali's life. It says, 'Anjali's arranged marriage to army officer Prakash Mehra proves to be a disaster: he hits her, lies to her and carries on an adulterous affair. After a tryst with his lover, Prakash neglects to pick up Anjali at the railroad station in Bhopal on the night in 1984 when a cloud of poisonous gas leaks from Union Carbide; Anjali almost dies. Courageously, she decides to divorce Prakash, despite the fierce disapproval of her parents and society.

Anjali and Sandeep live a happy and comfortable life but the element of faith has its own role to play in her life. Anjali hardly gets settled in her remarried life when a sudden development takes place. Her first husband reappears in her life. Now this becomes a real testing time for Anjali. Fantasies are always easy to conjure but reality is difficult to comprehend. Anjali's first husband 's entry now becomes a nightmare to her. She says, 'It was amazing how the post that had become foggy with the passage of time and had come into clear focus again because of a small trigger because I had seen Prakash'(BFA 20). It is true that Anjali wishes to live a comfortable life. Her thoughts run, 'An army officer seemed glamorous and polished, for from the unsophisticated men an army officer means quality (26) and Anjali wanted to marry quality. This beacon of hope gets shattered when she finds Prakash unreliable, uncommitted, careless and uncaring. About Sandeep she says, 'Sandeep has kindest eyes and I found comfort in knowing that they would always be kind. Tomorrow might not have many possibilities but Sandeep would always be there for and with me.'(29).

Anjali's views are substantiated in an article on Wikipedia that explains:

'Her first husband's return brings back all the uncertainty Anjali thought time and conviction had healed—about her decision to divorce, and about her place in a society that views her as scandalous for having walked away from her arranged marriage. As events unfold, feelings she had guarded like gold begin to leak away from her, spreading out into the world and challenging her once firm beliefs. A feminist approach is always constructive and a feminist woman has the power and wisdom to balance the things as it is seen in Anjali.

However, Anjali is not free from human weaknesses. When she meets Prakash's present wife Indu who leads the luxurious life of the wife of an army officer. Anjali unconsciously compares her own life with that of Indu and feels envy for her. She says, 'it was envy, pure and simple, that was supposed to be my life, I was supposed to be an army officer's wife. I was supposed to be wearing pretty sarees and carrying expensive purses. I was supposed to be going to all the parties and living the frivolous life. Instead I was living a life that didn't compare to what I had thought to be wanted. I felt guilty as soon as I thought that. I love Sandeep and I was thankful that I was not married to Prakash anymore.'(56)

Anjali is a representation of feminism in the Indian context. She is not a radical feminist who does not care for the family setup. Rather she stands for such a feminism that is socially constructive. Being modern and educated, brave and courageous she is ready to face the challenges of life. Anjali represents that class of modern educated women who are capable of making their own decisions for themselves. She plays not only the role of a dedicated wife of her second husband and a caring mother for her ailing son but also carries out her duties at professional level. Anjali is a modern Indian woman who does not confine herself to the domestic limits. She dares to step outside her thoughts and constraints and tries to bring a change in her surroundings as well as her

mindset. She emerges as a winner conquering all the yardsticks of feministic scales.

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