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GENDER EQUALITY AND RIGHTS IN JENNIE MELAMED'S *GATHER THE DAUGHTERS*

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Jennie Melamed is a psychiatric nurse practitioner, specialized in working with traumatized children. During her doctoral work at the University of Washington, she investigated anthropological, biological, and culture aspects of child abuse. This influenced her to write a novel on the lives and struggles of women for gender equality. This novel is also considered as a dystopian fiction as she used the experience of reality and the world of fantasy to express her views for freedom and equality for the girl child. The novel has a different type of freedom for girls that they can experience the world on their own for summer seasons before their puberty. But that had a turning point in the novel which was the beginning of their struggle for freedom and questioning the culture. "Vanessa can't help but think that they were doing something right in the wastelands if they invented such miraculous devices" (12-13).

The novel opens with the introduction of small community people living in an island, following their own set of rules and regulations as a part of culture of their clan. People of the community think that the worlds outside their island as the wasteland because they feel that theirs is the only place that is rich in culture and order. The head members of the clan called "wanderers" are only allowed to go outside for trade and other things. The author shows the lack of gender equality by portraying that men should rule both inside and outside the house but women should bear children and obey men. They also have a strange culture of balancing the population of the clan with rules like limitations of two children for a couple and if the pair had grandchildren or if the husband loses the capability of working for their survival, they must kill themselves. "Thou shalt not raise more than two children" (23). They celebrate boys' birth and cry on the birth of a girl child. "Laughter for a boy, tears for a girl, everyone at the birth is supposed to weep if it's a girl, and now everyone is dutifully crying" (41).

The island they live is filled with mystery as they have freedom for girls and not for women. They allow girl children to study in school, even when books and papers are not in much of availability to them. They are also allowed to roam and enjoy the world by living on their own, fighting for their shelter in summer seasons until their puberty. But soon after their first period of puberty they are married and not allowed to do anything but to obey the orders of men and bear children.

Vanessa Adams is only thirteen years old and is the most loved daughter of the island wanderer, James Adams. Her father has his own library since their ancestral period when they first came to that island. Vanessa excelled in both learning and household chores from her father and mother respectively. She has her own ideas to improve the island but she never shares with anybody. She is still at home as she is not reached her summer of fruition, that is she has not started her menses. "Thou shalt not touch a daughter who has bled until she enters her summer of fruition" (23). She is an obedient daughter to her parents but hates the culture of celebrating boys and not girls. Through the character of Vanessa the author expresses the thought that though a girl child is educated she is not allowed to cross her limitations and express her own point of view. This shows the domination of the male society and lack of gender equality.

Unlike Vanessa, other girls are not fortunate of having a loving father. Amanda, a girl of fifteen who had her summer of fruition the previous year and is married to Andrew, a gentle young man who loves her

deeply. They are also expecting their first baby. Next is Caitlin Jacob who is always beaten by her father and the following summer was her time of fruition after which she will be married to a young man.

Then there is Janey Solomon, a seventeen year old who starves herself for years to delay her first menses so that she will be free from the bonds of marriage. She loves her sister, Mary and her parents so much. People in the island are afraid of Janey's strong determination and personality. Janey does not want her life to be like her mother and all other women in the island and she always dreams a life of a woman who has control over her own destiny. The author has portrayed the character of Janey as someone strong to stand up against the cruelty that occurs in the reality. She wants the character to stand aloof from other characters like a wonder woman who can do anything for equality. Here, Janey starves herself to prove that she can do anything to have her equality. "Janey's not sure how long she can go without coming to fruition, but she hopes its forever. She can't imagine herself with a husband, cooking dinner, looking up into a man's face....Never. Death first" (51).

The novel has a turning point when these girls find the world outside is better than theirs and when they want to share the truth that the head members of the island are controlling their clan by introducing or imposing various laws to overpower them. "Father told her once that there used to be only ten or so, but the numbers rose as the wisdom of the wanderers increased" (23). Janey finds the truth on her summer fruition wandering and she comes up with lot of questions for everything that they ask her to do. This starts weaving in the minds of every woman in the island but unfortunately, Janey faces her death because of her starving. Though she is no more, the truth that she found has a great impact in the hearts of women in the island.

Melamed shows the reality of gender inequality in the world of fantasy. She made the character Janey the strongest in opposing the idea of domination and she also dreams on liberty of women with equality. Janey struggles till her last breath to reveal the truth that she found and her strong determination of hoping that the changes will occur in her life one day. Thus, the author wants to stop child abuse, gender inequality and domination of the male society.

The novel talks about the oppression of women as imposed within the psychic structure and reinforced by repeated dynamics from infancy and childhood. The Psychoanalytic feminist theory addresses the political and social factors affecting women subject development by their inferiority division. The novel shows the female characters as inferior to men, people in the novel believe that is the culture and they obey men by giving up their basic rights and they also inculcate the same thing to their children from the beginning. Thus, the psychoanalytic feminist theory is applied and analyzed in the work of Jennie's *Gather the Daughters*.

"If a whole society is committing an aberration does that diffuse responsibility?"

– Jennie Melamed.

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