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Gender Discrimination and Patriarchal Identity in Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting*

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ABSTRACT

This paper deals with theme of the defenselessness of females and their passive nature in the patriarchal society. This paper explores the difficulties of family dynamics within a traditional, upper-middle-class family. Gender discrimination is one of the key concepts in this novel. This novel highlights the subjects like patriarchal identity, gender conflicts, and cultural traditions. Novel reveals the heart of a close-knit Indian household, with its limitations and discrimination, its deafening warmness and sensual pleasure of food, to the cool centre of an American household, with its liberty and oddly self-denying feelings to eating. This paper includes the significance of individuality and self-sufficiency and how family ties can be disgusting for an individual.

Keywords: Gender, discrimination, patriarchal, identity, traditional and experiences

INTRODUCTION

Anita Desai is a prominent Indian novelist known for her significant contributions to Indian English literature. In literature the image of women in fiction has undergone a change during the last four decades. Women writers have considerably moved away from traditional portrayals of enduring self-sacrificing women, towards conflicts, female characters searching for identity, no longer characterized simply in terms of their victimized status. One such prominent Indian author, who's writing addresses issues focusing on the condition of women in India, is Anita Desai. Anits Desai's novel highlights the representations of women and their struggle against patriarchal and colonial oppression.

Fasting, Feasting is a feast of character and stories. The novel portrays several women characters-Mama, Uma, Mira-Masi, Anamika, Aruna, Mrs. Patton and her daughter Melanie. Amongst these women, we have the life of an aging married woman, a single woman, a widow, and three married women, and a young grown-up girl. In varying shapes and sizes, their stories are never truly happy. This paper attempts to critically examine Anita Desai's outlook and standpoint on the socio-cultural issues of patriarchal oppression, ideological conditioning, female freedom and empowerment with special reference to her novel Fasting Feasting. The paper brings into focus the interaction of women's traumatic experiences, the psychological plight of the female characters, and the state of their oppression in a male dominated patriarchal framework. At the same time the paper also attempts to bring to the fore the resistance exerted by these female characters against such oppressive bondage, although not expressly but through certain other modes. The novel underscores the dialectical relationship between 'fasting' and 'feasting' and the entangled politics of gender and cultural inequality. In the process, it raises questions about the possible locations of female individual agency.

The luckiest of these women is Mama whose own existence has been submerged with that a Papa, so much so that the two are referred to one in breath as MamaPapa or PapaMama. Her freedom are few-a game of cards with a neighbor often enjoyed in secret. She is an unlettered child in a large merchant family of Kanpur. She gives us a peep into the attitude towards the girl child in one of her reflections. "In my day, girls in the family were not given sweets, nuts, good things to eat. If something special had been bought in the market, like sweets or nuts, it was given to the boys in the family. But ours was not such an orthodox home that our mother and aunts did not slip us something on the sly"(Fasting Feasting 56).

And she fondly remembers and relishes the words, "sweets, sly". But she has found her happiness after marriage to Papa and the two are "joined together in their Siamese twin existence on the veranda swing", lording it over the hapless Uma. Uma is an eager, thwarted character of genuine pathos. Clumsy, near slighted, slow, she is treated with neglected impatience by her parents and with some condescension by her smart and pretty younger sister, Aruna. Her greatest happiness occurs in moment of near oblivion, as when she succumbs to a fit in the ashram to which the pious Mira-masi has taken her (the fit is interpreted as possession by the Lord), or when she nearly drowns in the Gannges during a religious ritual but is saved, much to her dismay, by scolding relatives.

Uma resembles the good, frustrated woman in a Victorian novel given this family's traditional structure. When Aruna is born, the family's resources are poured into his physical and intellectual nourishment. For the girls, the sole future is marriage. Twice the family is

duped into handing over dowry a part of an unsuccessful engagement and the sham of marriage – a shame that clings to Uma forever after, though she is blameless in both situations. MamaPapa then given up all efforts to "dispose of" Uma and she is condemned to a life of drudgery as an unpaid servant and slave to her aging parents. "Desai draws the foods and textures of an Indian small town and of an American suburb. In both, she suggests, family life is a complex mixture of generosity and meanness, license and restriction: The novel's subtle revelation is in the unlikely similarities"(Brownrigg, Sylvia 34).

Uma's younger sister is, however, more fortunate. Smarter and prettier than Uma, she makes a discreet choice and marries "the wisest….the handsomest, the richest, the most exciting of suitors who presented themselves"(Fasting Feasting 52). Aruna's marriage to Arvind is a glamorous affair, taking her off to a new metropolitan life in Bombay where Arun has a job and a flat in Juhu, facing the beach. It is, indeed, a dream-come-true. But she ends up as an irritating control freak.

To live that dream-life fully, Aruna transforms herself and desperately seeks to introduce changes in the lives of others including her husband. She cuts her hair, takes her make-up kit wherever she goes, and calls her sister and mother "villagers" once they refuse to accept her sophisticated and flashy style of life. For that reason, she avoids visiting her parents' home and the rare visits are spent in blaming the untidiness of the surroundings and the inhabitants. Aruna even scolds her husband Arvind when he spills tea in his saucer, or wears a shirt which does not match with his trousers. She wears a permanent frown on her face and one doubt whether she is really happy and contended.

Mira-masi is a widow, a distant relative of Mama. She is perpetually on a pilgrimage to the various places in India. Whenever she comes to stay with Uma's parents, she is treated as an unwelcome visitor. But she supplies the much-needed gossip about distant relatives spread over various parts of the country and her famous ladoos to Uma. Religion is Mira-masi's "vocation". She eats single, frugal vegetarian meals during the day and undergoes various rituals to seek salvation. When she takes Uma for a bath to the river Uma nearly drowns and Mira-masi is blamed by MamaPapa for the mishap. It is she who interprets Uma's fits as a visitation from the Lord and her unsuccessful marriage to the already-married Harish as being rejected by the Lord as he has chosen Uma for Himself. An aging and weak Mira-masi disappears into an ashram in the Himalayas to spend her last days there – the fate of most widows in India.

The unluckiest of the lot is the beautiful, cultured and accomplished Anamika, Uma's cousin, the daughter of Papa's elder brother Bakul Uncle and his wife Lila Aunty in Bombay. Anamika does so excellently in her school Final exams that she wins a scholarship to Oxford. Yet Anamika lives in a patriarchal society that considers higher education the prerogative of males and marriage as the major preoccupation of females.

The scholarship obtained is used only as a means to win her a husband who is considered an equal to the family's prestige. Anamika's parents are unperturbed by the fact that he is much older than her, so grim-faced and conscious of his own, superiority, and is "totally impervious to Anamika's beauty and grace and distinction"(Mies, Maria 101). Anamika starts another life of entrapment the moment she steps into her in-laws' house. Her husband is a typical "Mama's boy" to the extent that he is a silent witness to his mother's beating of his wife regularly. Anamika, who won a scholarship to Oxford, spends all her time cooking for a very large family that eats in shifts – "first the men, then the children, finally the women". After a miscarriage, which follows a brutal beating and the belief that she cannot bear more children, finally, the family ties her up in a nylon saree, pours the kerosene over her, and burns her to death. Strangely, her parents do nothing about this atrocity and accept it as her fate and destiny.

In Anita Desai's world, there is only one winner. The bubbly and cheerful Mrs. Joshi, Uma's next-door neighbor, has suffered under her "evil" mother-in-law but her loving husband has always acted as an anchor in her life. He contrives to smuggle her out of the house and take her to the movies while the old lady glares "futilely". This is what keeps "her eyes so bright, her cheeks so plump"(Fasting Feasting77)

When the "old tyrant" dies. Mrs. Joshi comes into her own. Under her "benevolent rule", the family prospers. The boys get jobs and move into the big cities. The girl are married off. Only the youngest, Moyna, has "in explicably" developed a desire to pursue a career of her own, and Mrs. Joshi allows her to "pursue her little whim", waiting for her to return from Delhi. Uma desperately wants Joshi Aunty to adopt her as a daughter so that she can have a life of her own.

Anita Desai then offers the American version to counter the plight of women in middle-class Indian society. Through Arun's eyes, and to some extent as a result of his culturally challenging presence, Anita Desai presents a picture off middle-class American life that is utterly dysfunctional. But it is again the women who are most deeply affected Mrs. Patton does all the shopping and cooking to feed the unappreciative men and Melanie, the daughter who cannot eat. Mrs. Patton fantasies about Arun's cultural authenticity, sees in him qualities that she herself years for. Melanie, the daughter, is a complete head case. She is fat wanting to be thin, eating to fast, stuffing sweets until she vomits, perhaps a slave to the

male-generated concept of female perfection. At one point, Arun comes upon Melanie, in the kitchen, devouring, alone, a tub of ice cream, "with renewed ferocity" ice cream she will immediately throw up in the bathroom.

Arun discovers that Mrs. Patton is afraid and defeated in her own home and no less a prisoner in her own home than Uma. Her only refuge is the supermarket, where she becomes suddenly independent and confident and where the colourful array of food items from all over the world gives her a passing sense off expensiveness. Through the eyes off Arun we discover that Mrs. Patton and Melanie suffer like the women he knew in India. The manifestations are different, but the dynamics similar.

He (Arun) stares at her to see if her (Melanie's) feelings reflect his, but he cannot decipher her expression. It is certainly not the sullen mask he usually sees, but it is not one he can recognize… Then Arun sees a resemblance to something he knows: a resemblance to the contorted face of an engaged sister (Uma) who, failing to express her outrage against neglect, against misunderstanding, against inattention to her unique and singular being and its hungers, merely spits and froths in ineffectual protest. And so we learn, as we learn of these women, that cultures may differ and the details of an experience may differ, but the pain and suffering inflicts all.

Fasting, Feasting, says Philip Spires, presents apparent opposites, two contrasting, if imbalanced scenarios, India and the USA. It has two deformed observers, Uma and Arun. It unpicks two contrasting cultures and finds that women are slaves in both. The opposites are thus ultimately similar, hardly opposed. Finally then taking into account Arun's experiences in America together with the outcome of the first part of the novel the observation can be made that the possibilities of woman to escape the suffering in the bonds of patriarchy depend essentially both on recognition and action. Actual liberation could be possible only with the consciousness (recognition of her inner strength) of the younger generation of women. Such an effort can be seen in Uma in the novel, who in spite of her dullness craves for education and wishes to be economically free of her parents.

CONCLUSION

Anita Desai focuses on how different customs share a lot of commonalities when it comes to ancestral relationships**.** Simple, unmarriageable Uma has failed to outgrow her childhood home. Uma represents the symbol for the revoltingly submissive role of women, particularly in Indian households. Anita Desai presents the lives of the siblings Uma and Arun rising up in India and America. The novel explores the role of family on the individual through Uma's influential experience in India. This novel deals with themes of dispossession, profusion and being fascinated in Indian society. She presents the cultural differences and connections between India and the United States.

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