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## EXPLORING WOMAN'S CONDITIONS IN ANITA DESAI'S *FASTING, FEASTING*

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### ABSTRACT:

*At the outset I would like to present two famous statements about the status of women- "Because you are women, people will force their thinking on you, their boundaries on you. They will tell you how to dress, how to behave, who you can meet where you can go. Don't live in the shadows of peoples' Judgment. Make your own choices in the light of your own wisdom" - Amitabh Bachchan.*

*"There are two powers in the world; one is the sword and the other is the pen. There is a great competition and rivalry between the two. There is a third power stronger than both, that is of women" - Muhammad Ali Jinnah.*

*Anita Desai is recognized as the first Indian author writing in English who addresses feminist themes focusing on the condition of women in India seriously. Unlike Nayantara Sehgal or Kamala Markandaya, who respond primarily to the external social and political circumstances of their female characters, Desai concentrates on the exploration of the psychological condition of the oppressed heroines who are at first entirely passive but revolt in the course of time.*

*From the early ages, women have always been exploited in the society. Women writers have written about their status and role in the society. Problems of women is the central theme of the most of the women writers. It is quite natural to explore the problems of the individual in the universal point of view. However, it is quite ridiculous to think of how a woman is being exploited in many ways even after seven decades of independent India.*

*Anita Desai's novel *Fasting, Feasting* describes the condition of women in general, their role in a family and the status of single women in particular. Uma, the protagonist of the novel is a spinster and her individual life is reduced to that of a maid in the family.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Exploration, Social, Political, Psychological Condition, Women, Sufferings, Problems, Exploited, Love, Betrayal, Status.*

### INTRODUCTION

*Fasting, Feasting* (2000), Desai's latest novel, is, above all, a work in which her main concern is the condition of women in India and is related to women in general. Anita Desai is widely recognized as

an Indian feminist writing in English. She deals with the situation of women in India, in a typical Indian manner and not in terms of feminism in the Western sense. In each of her novel she deals with different sets of values and sensitivity associated with its

main woman character. These different sets of values are alluded by Desai in the title itself. The title *Fasting, Feasting* clearly suggests 'fasting' and 'feasting' as two parts of the novel respectively. The first term 'fasting' refers to India as the country of fasting not only in the



religious aspect but also in the perspective of the 'force' which is inherent part of 'fasting' of many poor people in India and the second term refers to 'feasting' in The United States which is the country of abundance.

Anita Desai always tries to project the misery and problems of women in India. Anita Desai is one such writer, who tries to change the mindset and outlook of society towards women and to free them from the sufferings and hardships due to social conditions and to give her a status equal to men through her most absorbing and appealing work *Fasting, Feasting*. She deals with this theme seriously and always tries to highlight the problems of women in a male dominated society.

In *Fasting, Feasting* the central character is Uma, an Indian girl who lives in the household of her parents even when she is grown up. She represents an ordinary unmarried Indian woman who is forced to practice 'fasting'. These women don't have access to education and the free development of personality. Indian women novelists occupy a distinct place in Indian English literature. They describe the true condition of these women in their novels. They fearlessly state the loopholes of patriarchal society and describe in a vivid manner the plight of women in their writings. Anita Desai is among the best of these women novelists and one of India's foremost writers. She occupies a distinct position in Indian English literature.

The title of the novel suggests severity of 'fasting' and 'hunger' in the life of Indian women. Uma's awareness of her own hunger and suffering goes on increasing as she becomes more and more reactive to the complete or partial 'feasting' in the life of other women characters due to power of freedom and education. Her emotions and feelings are trampled by her family. Even her parents and 'Superiors' force her to 'fasting' part of the novel. It is only Arun the protagonist of the second part who becomes aware of her suffering. It is he who himself, contrary to her, is (forced into) 'feasting' as to education (and in the first part on the literary level of abundance), simply because he is a 'male child' in the family and he must get 'the best' in all respects, whether he deserves it or not.

*Fasting, Feasting* is, nevertheless above all a genuinely Indian novel. To understand this, the sophisticated pattern of the fabric of the novel, which determines the way the novel is built up around its main protagonists, must be disclosed. For this purpose, it is necessary to work with structures which have been formed by the cultural tradition to which the novel belongs.

The novel is divided into two parts. The first part is set in India and the second part is set in the USA. In the beginning of the novel, the readers are provided with a picture of a typical Indian house hold where all the love and care is bestowed to a boy child. In the family 'Papa' is the head of the family and 'Mama' is the helper who assists him in each and every walk of life. The family is ruled by customs and traditions and their sole aim is to marry off the girls and educate the boys. The fact of weight age being given to the boys was present in the society from the past generations, that is why Mama says –

"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." (Page-5)<sup>1</sup>

In this novel, Anita Desai presents both female and male characters to present the actual face of a patriarchal society. She presents various female characters in this novel, who are the victims of patriarchal society and mainly the character of a woman Uma, who suffers the most. Though at the end of the novel she realizes her condition and she tried different means and ways to break the patriarchal norms. But it was not enough to strike and cut down the age long tradition of male domination to gain freedom and liberation. Whereas, Arun brother of Uma enjoys full freedom only because of being a male.

Eldest daughter Uma has stayed at home to look after her parents, after two failed attempts of marriage, middle child Aruna has a successful marriage and has almost forgotten her roots, and the third a son named Arun has gone to the US where the women have the freedom to do as only like even though their real happiness is a matter of question. Mrs. Patton seems to find her happiness in the super market and Melanie, their daughter takes comfort in her bulimia which seems to give her a kind of relief from the strains of her life (page 134).<sup>2</sup>

The novel introduces us to Indian contemporary middle-class urban Hindu (most probably Brahmin) nuclear (not joint) family. The story revolves around the life of a woman in general and the

life of an unmarried woman in particular. Uma's pilgrimage, then, begins shortly after the birth of her brother Arun when she is in her early teens. "A son, a son," is heard everywhere in the house; when pronounced it can be confused with the sound of, 'sun'. The atmosphere of the household is changing, Mama is proud to have fulfilled her life's role by giving birth to a son, Papa is proud to have been able to produce, finally, a male offspring and lets Mama into the realm of patriarchal structures, although only as an instrument as pointed out previously. Mama and Papa do not allow Uma, who has previously been sent to a Catholic convent school, to continue her education and she, although not a good student, is an eager one and opposes fervently her parents' decision. Now that there is a son in the family, "there is no need" (a famous phrase of Papa) to waste money and education as such on girls which will be necessary to spend on the boy.

Another character whose identity is submerged in the family is Uma's cousin Anamika. Anamika is the graceful and every one's favorite in the family. But unfortunately, even though she won a scholarship to Oxford, her parents didn't even consider allowing her to go just because she is a girl. And after her marriage to a rich, educated man she spent her entire time in the kitchen and had a miscarriage due to the beatings by her in-laws. The miscarriage made her infertile and her value was that of damaged goods with no perfection. When Uma hopes for Anamika's return to her home, Mama says-

"How can she be happy if she is sent home? What will people say? What will they think?" (page-72).

And when Uma showed her indifference to the views of people in the society, once again Mama comes up with her view-

"Don't talk like that, 'Mama scolded them.'

I don't want to hear all these modern ideas. Is this what you learnt from the nuns at the convent. (Page-72)

So, it is very clear from the sayings of Mama -what woman thinks about woman, what is their role in the society and their contribution towards the family. Ironically, Mama and other woman characters in the novel have no sympathy for Uma or Anamika even though they themselves belong to the same category.

Consequently, Uma feels she has to escape but she does not know yet exactly what for. It is the 'secret chambers' of the inner world what Uma cherishes, for the outer world which is dreary and grey. She is progressively introduced into the inner world of Hindu legends and tales by Mira-masi, an ardent worshiper of Shiva. Mira-masi's stories show the dual character of the woman's fate: one of the heroines is a victim, dies after having been abandoned by her husband; the other is a poetess, independent, struggling for recognition; in the meantime she is considered a mad woman (allusion to Mira-Bai, a legendary 16<sup>th</sup> century poet and Krishna's devotee known for her rebellious attitude). With Mira-masi, Uma feels that she is "admitted into some sanctuary that had been previously closed to her." The nuns at St. Mary's had not admitted her into their chapel, where she had always wanted to go. Now, "She was counted in, a member, although of what, she could not say."

From the point of view of fasting and feasting, Uma's pilgrimage is that of hunger. The items of food are used more significantly as markers of Arun's Journey. Food being of significant importance in Indian culture, ways of disposing it have been strictly prescribed since the time of Manu (a supposed ancient law-giver, between 200 B.C. 200 A.D.) and food has been closely related to matters of ritual hierarchy, and worship. Thus, the motives of food are favored and often employed by Indian authors. Food in modern Indian literature is used to stress the importance of what the particular literary work is dealing with and is often associated with social problems. In *Fasting, Feasting* this is particularly apparent when it concerns the introductory passages of each part respectively, which deal with the distribution of power and its hierarchy.

Uma's behavior, however, comes, before all, very close to how a pativrata (the ideal Hindu wife) is supposed to act, almost again, because she stays unmarried. In India, more than in Western Cultures, a woman lives for the sake of others, namely for the sake of her husband. Nabar informs us Brihaspati's (a law giver between 300-500A.D.) definition of 'pativrata': "She is someone whose state of mind

reflects that of her husband. She shares his distress, his delight, grows sickly and dresses unattractively in his absence, and dies when he does."

Within the huge body of Hindu mythology numerous representations women exist and they have different names, but in each myth, she plays the role of the loyal wife. She is meek, docile, trusting, faithful and forgiving. The goal and fulfillment of the woman's life is the marriage and the birth of (male) children: "Woman is created only to enable man to continue his species through sons and gods." This is deeply rooted in the Hindu socio-religious code as fulfillment of a woman's 'dharma' (duty, law) and has a direct impact on the perception of her future lives' representations.

An unmarried (and subsequently childless) woman has even a lower status than a widow. An unmarried woman living in the house of her parents can be neither a 'pativrata' nor an angel, do what she will, and so she is condemned to be a monstrous outcast. The description is fitting: Uma, impresses us in her appearance of blinking her myopic eyes behind the thick glasses. However, she is not found attractive either by her family or by any of the possible suitors and desirous husbands. When still at school, she fails in almost all exams, grown up she is often reprimanded for being childish, slow, and "always sleeping" (*Fasting, Feasting* -101).

Arun himself, although receiving a first-class education, is starving because he has difficulties to adapt to the American 'diet' both literal and metaphorical, the food and the American culture.

Anita Desai has made a clear distinction between the male and female characters in the novel. The man is an epitome of freedom while the woman is struggling for freedom and identity. They are discriminated only on gender bias. To quote Simone de Beauvoir-

"One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman."

(*The Second Sex*)

Desai is often known for her sensitive portrayal of the inner life of her female characters successfully portrays the woman characters in the novel. The stark reality along with the shocking and sad story of woman's suffering is presented through the characters of Uma and Anamika.

In view of the analysis of the story of the novel and appropriate quotations cited above, we can state with ample confidence that Anita Desai is one of the most promising Indian Woman Novelist who has delineated the condition of women in India in general and educated women in particular in most convincing manner. All of us will agree that women have a long way to go for getting equal position with men not only in India but anywhere in the world. However, the condition of Indian women is more worrisome because they still have no voice in their respective families like the central character Uma in *Fasting, Feasting*. The researcher herself being a woman has total sympathy and empathy for Uma and Anamika.

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