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Feminism in Anita Desai's *Fasting Feasting*

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In this paper, the basic intention is to portray feminism in the novels of Anita Desai who is one of the great Indo-Anglican writers. Anita Mazumdar Desai was born at Mussoorie in India on 24 June 1937, the issue of a German mother and a Bengali father. Though she learned German at home yet she is greatly skilled in English at her school which helped her in becoming a prominent literary figure. As a writer of English, she was shortlisted thrice times for the Booker Prize. Among all her novels, her major works include *Fire on the Mountain*, *Clear Light of Day*, *The Village by the Sea*, *In Custody* and *Fasting Feasting*. Her latest novel is *The Artist of Disappearance*. She received Sahitya Academy Award, the most prestigious award of India in the field of literature for her novel *Fire on the Mountain* in the year 1978.

Women are an inherent part of any culture or society and cannot be overlooked or neglected. In primitive times, life was simple: men hunted/protected while women took care of domestic responsibilities and nurtured the young. There was a division of labour and mutual understanding. However as time passed, and societies, nations and cultures developed, a marginalization of women began to take place. Though it may seem that women have a great deal of freedom and independence, the overall condition of women even in the world of today is not as it should be. Most women are confined to household work. So it can be said that even in our so called modern world woman is still living in chains. Women have always been an important part of literature as well. If we take a quick glance at literature we will observe the evolution of women from mere family caretakers to self dependent personalities of the present times.

Mention can be made of Anita Desai, an Indian writer who kept her eyes on the subjugation of women in society and seriously depicted feminism in her novels. Furthermore, Desai is concerned not only with the marginalization of women but with their psychological aspects too. It would not be inappropriate to say that Desai is a psycho-analyst par excellence too apart from being a feminist. Feminists have campaigned for women's legal rights (rights of contract, property, voting); for the protection of women and girls from domestic violence, sexual harassment and other specific discriminations. All these things have been beautifully depicted by Desai in her novel entitled *Fasting Feasting*. Taking into consideration Anita Desai's famous novel *Fasting Feasting*, it can be said that it is a novel about cross-cultural experiences in India and America. It is a novel about the protagonist Uma and the mentality of the Indian middle class families who always give priority to the sons in comparison to their daughters. The novel begins with Mama and Papa who always keep their daughter Uma busy in domestic affairs because of the fact that she is a girl who will have to go her in law one day so she should do those works which is beneficial for her future. Unfortunately Uma bears all the oppressions because she does not want to hurt them as they are her parents. They are represented as the typical middle class parents who always interfere in the lives of their children without even considering the fact that

their children have their own freedom. This is the reason why Uma always feel entrapped in the nets of her parents. Despite having an appetite for knowledge, Uma has been deprived of the right of getting knowledge by her own parents just because she is a girl and girls do not need higher studies as they have to confine themselves within their houses so there is no need to waste money on them, on the contrary boys must have given the chance of getting professional or higher qualification because of the fact that they are men and it is the job of men to look over their families, not of the women. In this way we can say that Uma has been shown as a subjugated and marginalized girl who is oppressed not only at her parent's home but also at her husband's home as there is always a kind of disharmony between the two because of the reason that Uma is not as beautiful as her younger sister Aruna and it is we who always give preference to the outer beauty in comparison to the inner one and the same becomes the cause of the sufferings of Uma. Here Desai is compelling on the ideas of Alfred Lord Tennyson, the representative poet of the Victorian Age who also represented the same idea in one of his poems:

“Man for the field and woman for the hearth:
Man for the sword and for the needle she:
Man with the head and woman with the heart:
Man to command and woman to obey;
All else confusion” (427-431)

So from this perspective, we can say that women have been oppressed from the ancient times and in all the ages. It is an evil which prevailed all over the world. Furthermore, girls are still enchained on the name of family, duty, sacrifice and many others. Still there are several families who oppressed women just because they think them much lower to men and thinks that women can do nothing. Their families always try to impose their own wishes upon them. It is the culture of middle class Indian families that the parents decide everything about the future of their offspring. Even the decisions like which type of education and where to get education from are some common things which are snatched from the children by their family. Uma is miserable because her education is prohibited by her parents at the time of the birth of her younger brother and their only son—Arun. The reason for such a decision is the mentality of the Indian families that daughters have to go to their in-laws' houses and it is the son who will take care of his parents, whether physically or economically. So, the opportunity of getting an education should be given to the sons while daughters should concern themselves with the household work. The same is applicable in the case of Uma whose education has been prohibited by her own parents though she requested them a lot:

“But ayah can do this—ayah can do this’— Uma tried to protest when the orders began to come thick and fast. This made Mama look stern again. ‘You know we can't leave the baby to the servant’, she said severely ‘He needs proper attention’. When Uma pointed out that ayah had looked after her and Aruna as babies, Mama's expression made it clear it was a quite different matter now, and she repeated threateningly: ‘Proper attention’.(52)

Again, Desai has beautifully portrayed the mentality of the Indian families when Uma returned to her parents after getting divorce from her husband and who always find faults within

a woman in case of divorces and thinks that a married girl is a burden on them and the same happens in case of Uma. After returning to her parents, she is again confined to the household works just because they think that now they have to bear the burden of their daughter as no one now will marry her because she is a divorcee so there must be something wrong with her. The condition is the same in case of Anamika—a cousin of Uma who is severely and brutally beaten by her mother in law but her husband remains silent. As a result, Anamika has a miscarriage and, after learning the fact that she will never be able to give birth to a child, her in laws burn her alive. It is the most disgusting fact of our society who always treated women as toys and a machine who will produce their coming generations. They never feel that women are also human beings who have emotions, who need love and care. On the contrary, they think that women are their domestic servants who work free of cost throughout their lives. The mother in law of Anamika burns her without even considering the fact that Anamika too is a woman like her and it is not her fault if she is unable to conceive. She must think that her daughter in law is a highly qualified girl who is able to make her in laws proud by doing works other than domestic affairs but unfortunately she too belongs to the so called above mentioned society and can not be keep aloof from that mentality.

Female subjugation has been represented by the above mentioned two women characters in this novel by Desai. Here, in this novel, Desai's main aim is to highlight domestic violence which every women face in Indian society and she talks about their rights too which are snatched by their families. It is understandable on the part of Indian society as to why women are treated only as cozy thing? If a man has the right to do whatever he wants then why the same right is not given to women? It is such a shameful thing that even in the case of rapes, our great Indian society put all the blame on the shoulders of a girl and thinks that the girl must have wear short skirts or flirted with some boy which became the cause of her suffering and declare that boy innocent. But is it justifiable to put the blame on the victim and declare the culprit innocent?

Through the story of entanglements in *Fasting Feasting*, Desai aims to highlight the fact that patriarchal society always tries to subjugate women from all sides. If one says that Uma's lack of education brings her to misfortune, the fact can not be ignored that Anamika's scholarship does the same for her. So, Uma is the girl who fasts in the novel just in order to feed her brother Arun whose education is the priority of her parents. Unfortunately her feelings as well as her sufferings are suppressed by her parents. In this way, we can say that a continual marginalization of women led to such assumptions as: women are weak, emotional, and vulnerable and to be looked at in opposition to men as strong, intellectual and dominant. Women were given characteristic traits as 'weak', 'emotional', 'palpable' and 'passive' because the so called 'strong' men never gave them a chance to come forward. The present novel is not an exception to this. Through this novel Desai has delved deep into the mentality of Indian society where the parents have all the rights to take decisions in the lives of their children and give preference to their sons for the betterment of their own future. It is a most disgusting fact that just for leading a better life, the parents strangled the wishes of their own daughters. But they

forget that the present age is one where women also walk shoulder to shoulder with men. Thus, it is crystal clear that with the help of the present novel, Desai has attempted to highlight the evils rampant in Indian society and suggests that if a person wants to get over these entrapments, he or she will have to raise a voice against it. Had Uma the opportunities available to a modern woman, she would have led a better life.

But it is our misfortune that the present situation is not just found in India but across the world where women have been subjugated from the time immemorial and are bearing all the atrocities keeping their mouths shut. It is the mentality of Indian society that women have to endure all the oppressions just because they are girls who are created to bear all these things. But the bitter reality is that the parents do not want to take the burden of their daughters after their marriage and want to keep their selves free from their responsibilities. But this patriarchal society forgets that if we want to develop ourselves and our society from the core, the development of the condition of women is also needed. We should never think that a society can come into existence without the contribution of women. A woman makes a family, family makes a home and home makes a society/nation. And it is with the help of literature that many feminists are trying to uplift the condition of women from all perspectives, whether social, political or economic. The same aim has been achieved by Desai in this novel. In fact, other literary figures such as J.S. Mill, Mary Wollstonecraft, Vladimir Nabokov and many others have also focused on the same evil and tried to raise women above from all sides. So, it is clear that like all other feminists, Desai too wants to lay emphasis over the over all condition of women in the society and to make it better through the present novel.

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