

Vol. 6, Issue-1
February 2015

ISSN: 0976-8165

The Criterion

An International Journal in English



6th Year of Open Access

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Marginalized Women in Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting*

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We may have to admit that the existence of a 'margin category' validates the presence of a 'centre category' which controls it by adopting exploitive and suppressive practices. The victims are marginalized either in the name of religion, race, region, community, caste, gender, nationality or even ideology. An attempt is being made here to understand the marginalized voices on the basis of gender.

Gender plays a significant role in our lives for the first question asked when a child is born is 'a boy or a girl?' and our lives are shaped by our gender ensuing in gender bias. Despite aiding in the advancement of civilization women down the ages have been suffering utter discrimination. In Indian patriarchal set up with the man at the centre, the woman is pushed to the margin, for he believes in conquering and subjugating with the unbridled power in his hands. If unable to wield his power outside to its fullest, he satisfies his ego by wielding it at home. Ultimately, it is the woman at home who has to bear the brunt of his frustrations. With this as a canvas an attempt is made to sketch and listen to the cries of a few victimized women characters, in Anita Desai's novel "*Fasting, Feasting*".

It is a general experience that where a boy's birth is supposed to bring happiness, a girl's birth a bane. The woman in India takes a subordinate position from her birth. The middle class Indian woman hardly has any choice but to live on the physical and emotional leftovers of her brothers. The parents would gladly spend a fortune in nurturing and ensuring coveted education for their sons, while the girl is expected to live with the limited resources. The typical discrimination against the female child is well explicated in "*Fasting, Feasting*" as the parents of Uma, aim all promoting education of their son Arun, a male child, whereas, the girls are "being raised for marriage". Arun is allowed to go to USA for the best education whereas, Uma's going to the convent close to home is not permitted. On the birth of Arun, Uma's education is terminated and she is entrusted with child care and housekeeping by her mother who says that until her marriage, "you can help and look after Arun. And learn to run the house." This is the lot of Indian female child, for the supremacy of the male child is a predominant feature of Hindu families in India. Uma is a victim of the typical Hindu family system in India. As the eldest child and that too, a girl child she has had to carry the burden of her guilt for being a woman. She stands betrayed by her father, who didn't support her on the question of schooling and also by her mother who, being a woman, could not support her daughter.

Unlike her sister Aruna, Uma, does not possess the immense strength, courage and determination to wade through the family crisis. She is rather presented as a victim of the Indian patriarchal system, social evil of dowry and also her own destiny. At forty-three, engaged, married and divorced, she is a woman without a man, living with her parents, catering to their taunts and snatching a moment of privacy now and then.

Uma seems to be victimized more by her destiny than anyone else. Uma is a slow starter, not very good at studies and on the average all her escapades end in disaster. Year after year, she is held back in the same class. Her failure in the examinations is due to her inferior and substandard brain that she possesses. Due to this, she is made to discontinue her studies. Her mother says,

“You know you failed your exams again. You’re not being moved up. What’s the use of going back to school? Stay at home and look after your baby brother.” (F.F. p. 21)

When she is forced into domestic responsibilities she runs to Mother Agnes begging for promotion in the class, which when refused makes her faint, ending in seizures. Deprived of convent education which she longed to have, she is entrusted with the job of looking after her baby brother, feeding, bathing and babysitting him. She is also made to run on errands attending to the needs of her parents while they relax all the time. At one point of time her father even feels that Uma could take the position of their ayah as money could be saved; and such is the sad plight of Uma. Moreover, her facial and bodily features are also not attractive enough to please men so that marriage offers do not fructify. The tragedy of a girl rejected by many parties in marriage is pathetically drawn in the case of Uma. When the marriage arrangement does take place it proves to be a fraud and her parents are shorn of their major part of income. They always offer a fair dowry to the aspirant for Uma’s hand in marriage out in vain. Unfortunately she is drawn into another deceitful marriage with Harish, an already married man with children, only for the sake of dowry. After this marriage she is considered a blighted illiterate girl.

“Having cost her parents two dowries, without a marriage to show in return, Uma was considered ill-fated by all and no more attempts were made to marry her off.” (F.F P.96).

The pathos of situation is that such unlucky girls are not allowed even genuine remedies and cures. Uma is prevented by her parents from going to Bombay, to her own sister Aruna for an eye test which was recommended by the doctor. Again it is a fatal incident that at the party on the previous day of her sister Aruna’s wedding Uma suffers a bout of epilepsy creating an appalling scene that annoys Aruna:

“She should be put away, locked up, Aruna sobbed. I should be locked up, Uma moaned, along with her. Lock me up, mama, lock me up!” (F.F P.102)

This is very pathetic.

Uma loves freedom, socializing and has the ability to relate to people. But there is a systematic withdrawal of opportunities and of freedom. She seeks refuge in the company of Miramasi and her cousin Ramu and relates well with Mrs.O’Henry and Dr.Dutt. When Mrs.O’Henry invites Uma for a tea party the parents do not permit her to go. Even an offer of job to Uma by Dr.Dutt is declined by her parents saying that they need her to nurse her mother who might undergo hysterectomy. She is even deprived of using the telephone at home as they keep it locked. When once stealthily she uses the telephone in their parent’s absence to speak to Dr.Dutt about the job offer in which she is interested, she forgets to lock it and the father finding the evidence of her crime accuses her:

“Costs money! Costs money! ...Never earned anything in her life, made me spend and spend, on her dowry and her wedding. Oh, yes, spend till I’m ruined, till I am a pauper.” (F.F. P.146)

Uma is not as docile as a ‘good woman’ should be; she wants freedom and privacy, she needs love. But she is deprived of all these by her parents. Even the little moment of privacy in her room that she enjoys, reading poetry and looking at her collection of greeting cards is interrupted by her mother. She can get along with people, loves writing letters, enjoys reading poetry, collects cards but at forty-three has nothing really to show for it.

Anamika, Uma’s cousin is another victimized woman- a victim of the Indian marriage system- a tragedy of arranged marriage or perhaps social disease of dowry or destiny. Anamika was very sober, not only was very pretty but also an outstanding student, to be privileged to win a scholarship to Oxford. She was an obedient child to her parents and would neither contradict them nor cause them grief. She “was cool, poised, mannerly and graceful. Wherever Anamika, was there was moderation, good sense and calm.” (F.F. P.68). Even in her choice of her husband she remained passive leaving it to her parents who searched for a suitor who had qualifications equal to hers, but were wrong in their choice, for the suitor was “totally impervious to Anamika’s beauty and grace and distinction. He was too occupied with maintaining his superiority.” (F.F. P.70). The Indian system of arranged marriage fails, for Anamika was regularly beaten by her mother-in-law which was approved by her husband resulting in her miscarriage. Her parents, carried away by their own pretentiousness, turn callous and are responsible for the marriage which ends in Anamika’s death. Having sustained the torture and harassment for nearly twenty years, she finds no meaning in her life and like Monisha of ‘Voices in the City’, she too commits suicide by setting herself ablaze.

Indian woman has carried the burden of the family. She has slaved, for her husband, for her children and for her family. Indian women take pride in suffering and live with the idea of subjugation entrusted to them for years in inculcation about the necessity to accept and abide by the rules assigned to them by patriarchy that runs through their blood. In a male dominated society, woman is supposed to be an ideal wife, a mother and an excellent homemaker with multiple roles in the family. As a wife and a mother, service, sacrifice, submissiveness and tolerance are her required attributes. Mild submissiveness, domesticated, unprotesting and self-sacrificing woman was an essential adornment of the patriarchal social set up all over the world. Uma’s mother is one such victim of this patriarchal set up. She is a woman who has not only surrendered her individuality but also that of her daughter. It is believed that mothers who yield to patriarchal power betray their daughters. They pay a heavy price for self-preservation.

In Desai’s novels, women do not necessarily inflict violence directly, but very often become willing agencies of violence by submitting to male oppression and ignoring their own feminine needs as well as those of the younger women in their families. These women, shadowy figure in themselves have suppressed their own individuality. Uma’s mother(mama), married at the age of sixteen, has long given up all her rights and now with her retirement she has also given up her secret little card-playing sessions which she had enjoyed and which had revived in her a certain youthfulness. Mama did not have a separate existence. “Mamaandpapa. Mamapapa. Papamama. It was hard to believe they had ever had separate existences” (F.F.p.5). They were representatives of typical middleclass parents in a patriarchal set up. The character of papa is predominant and mama yields to him most often and does everything to suit his interest and pleasure; they are two halves of one place as per

Indian Philosophy of husband and wife relationship. The family is over scrupulous in taking care of the food of papa (as he is the male member and the head of the family), the mother peeling segments of orange and giving them to papa to eat. Papa is the very epitome of male-chauvinism. He believes in the concept of male superiority and exercises his authority over women at every little opportunity. The patriarch expects all members of his family to ally his joys with his happiness. His desires and demands have to be fulfilled by his wife. The patriarchal society does not even give women a right over their bodies. When Papa desires to have a son from mama to satisfy his ego, raising his status to a proud father of a son, she has to yield to it. When mama becomes pregnant for the third time after having two grown up daughters, she wants to abort it out of shame but, is prevented. She is a victim of patriarchy for in a male dominated society a woman must always yield to the bodily pleasures demanded by her husband. This Kate Millet rightly states in her book "Sexual Politics", "whereby one group of persons is controlled by another." (Millet, 23) The birth of their son Arun makes both the father and the mother delightful and elevated. The irony is that after begetting a son the woman forgets all the humiliations that she was subjected to.

In India if mama shows silent obedience to Papa's whims, Mrs. Patton in Massachusetts shows similar servile attitude. In a country of supposedly strong and independent women Mrs. Patton's compromising over every small matter comes as a surprise. She is deprived of her freedom even in her choice of food. Though she despised non-vegetarian food and had an ardent love for vegetarian food she had to meekly submit to the wishes of her husband who strongly felt that non-vegetarian is the only kind of food. Despite the location, the cultures and the social-familial values being different, the patriarchal attitude is the same everywhere victimizing women.

One can not only blame male chauvinism and patriarchy for the present status of women's existence, but also female reluctance, easy acquiescence and lethargy. What makes matters worse is the women joining men in their pride as unchallengeable legislators of a patriarchal society. A tradition of violence perpetrated by woman on other woman is exemplified in Uma's mother, exerting on her own daughter Uma. A good mother, who has been a victim of patriarchy, would not wish her daughters to be victimized. But Uma's mother experiences joy in 'Feasting' at the cost of Uma's depression and sorrow in 'Fasting'. It is the mother who uses Uma to her own selfish needs depriving her of her freedom and privacy in life. Having subjected to humiliations at the hands of her husband, deprived of her personal freedom she could have saved her daughter Uma from being victimized. Instead she becomes a party to her husband in wielding the patriarchal powers on her daughter. In order to have her freedom she has snatched away Uma's freedom. Had she at least supported Uma in her education, it would have made her financially independent in helping for her sustenance and survival after the death of her parents.

The question of 'margin' or 'marginalization' is related to identity and self. The woman who does not hold an individual identity and who has a subordinate identity feels marginalized for she gets her identity through the 'centre'. Identity, self and individual were the major concerns of the West, and not India which considered the surrender of the self as ideal. But the modern woman with the gain of education and love for freedom strives to establish her own identity. When she fails in this endeavour she suffers marginalization.

The marginality or centrality of voices is determined by their inability or ability to sustain them in the face of marginalizing forces. The centre can marginalize voices, suppress them, be indifferent to them; but by understanding the strategies and design of the oppressive centre

and resisting it in an unprotesting manner, the seemingly meek margin can subvert the homogeneity of centre. In the case of Mama and Uma, they get pushed to the margin as they are weak to resist the forces from the centre and are marginalized, whereas, Aruna on feeling marginalized after her brother Arun's birth, shows defiance and 'determined self-assertion' as a result of which no one is able to bully her into obedience. Uma's mother prefers to stay in the marginal category as she gains some incentives (an equal status with Papa) by completely surrendering to the patriarchal forces. Ultimately, it is Uma who suffers marginalization by lacking the courage to resist.

R.S. Pathak rightly suggests that the marginal has no other option but to speak. "It has to speak, voice, not hide its tears, fears and angst and wrath in as many forms as possible. Tongue, if unused, is a fleshy burden, tantamounting to its own detonguing. Moreover, marginals cannot for long persist with their monologue of identity or difference. It has to disidentify itself and open itself to intervening positive influences for larger identity." (Pathak, 15) Modern women with their newly gained education should be courageous enough to defend and resist the forces from the centre that tries to push them to the margin and should cease to be marginal.

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