

ISSN 0976-8165

The Criterion

An International Journal in English

August 2015 Vol. 6, Issue-4



6th Year of Open Access

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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

www.galaxyimrj.com

Familial Discrimination in Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting*

Priyanka Aggarwal

Research Scholar
Mewar University, Rajasthan

Abstract:

Apart from personal response, social factors like the norms and values of society play a significant role in the development of a person. And when the society is divided on the basis of racism and gender, the situation becomes complex. The identity crisis of individuals and classes in society is central to the 20th century thought and psyche. During the period, when many movements for individual freedom were taking birth, the question of women's independence too developed into an all-encompassing movement called feminism.

Anita Desai, the acclaimed feminist writer of India, in her novel *Fasting, Feasting* (1999), makes a departure from her earlier major works in that it depicts a simple story in a straight forward narrative structure. The evolution of the protagonist in the novel is basically influenced by the patriarchal set-up in our society. This analysis of evolution of a female protagonist especially in the context of sexually biased social system is significant. But what makes the novel singular is that the male-biased attitude of Indian society pampers a young boy so much that he is unable to fit in the Western culture also. The values of their own culture and society are an intrinsic part of their personality, but at the same time, they are judged by the values of dominant culture and are declared as inferior and not worthy enough to be accepted in the main stream of society. This compels them to follow the values of dominant culture and they make futile efforts to emulate the prescribed standards of beauty and social acceptability. Family plays an important role in the evolution of a person. In a socially prejudiced society, the attitude of parents towards gender matters goes a long way in determining the outlook of a child.

Keywords: Colonialism, Feminine sensibility, Alienation, Socialism and sexism.

Introduction:

Anita Desai is one of the literary luminaries of the contemporary fiction writing in the Indian English. She has become an epoch-making voice in the realm of "creative release of the feminine sensibility" (Rao 50) which emerged after the Second World War. Being a celebrity novelist, she is not happy with the prevalent mode of novel writing. She candidly analyses the creative urge and energy of woman writing in framework. She suggest that "with all the richness of material at hand, Indian women writers have stopped short- from a lack of imagination, courage ,nerve or gusto- of the satirical edge, the ironic tone, the inspired criticism have brought their novels to life" (Quest 65).

The mutual interaction of gender identity and social identity is the bone and blood of post-colonial women's writing. In Indian literary scenario, the crux of feminism is that the Indian woman is caught in the trap of transition from tradition to modernity. To explore human psyche and self, the writing of such novels gives her shelter, privacy and solitude. It is commonly assumed that third world literature is caught in psychological realism while first world literatures have graduated into language games. The most recurrent theme in her novels is the hazards and

complexities of man- woman relationships, the founding and nurturing of individuality, the establishing of individualism,” (Narasimhan 22) of her characters. This novel is a wonderful demonstration of what Anita Desai called, “the terror of facing single handed, the ferocious assaults of existence” (The Times of India 13). It is a post- modern novel in its knotting and knitting of narrative threads in its artistic vision.

In present century, women are greatly facilitated in their work by the technological changes which brought about new methods of production. They are now required none arduous physical labour but rather mechanical skill, diligence, intelligence and patience- abilities with which women are no less endowed than men. On the social front, there is a transition from the family to the individual, the society having lost faith in family as a unit, and fragmented into the existentialism unit of the individual. The trauma of alienation that the individual feels, going along with this fragmentation. This greatly affects marriage relation and also gives a new meaning to the term sexual incompatibility and raises the issue of woman’s status as an independent person with in marriage. During early twentieth century, Psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists set out to prove that feminism, as we see it, is an artifact dependent on group norms presented to women. In the age being dealt with in this study, women has rejected the group norms handed down by their family and are experimenting with the new identity of liberated women. Some thinkers are of the view than men and women should be treated identically under the law and within the social and economic structure, but there may be differences between sexes. The essentialists believe that women have different values, temperaments and concerns, and cannot and should not be treated identically with men. They take pity on women who do not fit the sexual role straight jacket.

While, on the one hand, the post-1990 Indian English fiction has made significant progress in the direction of occupying a commendable place in the post- colonial literature. On the other hand, it has gained considerable range and depth in the thematic as well as technical explorations. Apart from the various technical innovations and new thematic use, it is the variety of approaches and experimental modes that have added new dimension to the Indian English fiction. Some of the writers like Salman Rushdie, Arun Joshi and Anita Desai have been immensely successful in creating new images in their latest work ‘*Fasting, Feasting*’ (1999). Desai’s novel marks a departure from all her earlier major works. The most striking feature of this novel is that the Plot is in simple and lucid manner without any trace of complexity. It depicts a simple long story in a straight forward narrative structure. Every person is more or less, a product of his/her circumstances. Various factor of his/her environment play a decisive role in his/her development. The evolution of the protagonist in the respective novel is basically influenced by two factors i.e. socialism and sexism. This analysis of evolution of a female protagonist especially in the context of sexually biased social system is significant. The struggle, dilemma of identity crisis is faced by women who has been recognized and voiced by Anita Desai. A complex situation arises when people have to live in a society which is characterized by conflict of cultural and social values. Such conflicts put persons in a dilemmatic situation. The values of their own culture and society are an intrinsic part of their personality. But, at the same time, they are judged by the values of dominant culture and are declared as inferior and not worthy enough to be accepted in the main stream of society. This compels them (women) to follow the values of dominant culture and they make futile efforts to emulate the prescribed standards of beauty and social acceptability. Family plays an important role in the evolution of a

person. In a socially prejudiced society, the attitude of parents towards gender matters goes a long way in determining the outlook of a child.

Anita Desai is a remarkable painter of moods and wills, of minds and hearts. She is a wonderful subtle writer who achieves her powerful and poignant effects by stealth rather than by direct action. Her novel *Fasting, Feasting* is short listed for the Booker prize's, tells the apparently spare story of one Indian family and the varying fates of its two daughter and single son. In many ways, *Fasting, Feasting* is a continuation of her earlier themes such as: the pangs of loneliness, psychological concerns, and changing trends in filial ties. But in other ways, this novel presents a striking deviation from her earlier works both at thematic level and the structural level. In almost all her earlier novels, the protagonists had to suffer the limitations caused by only single parent; the other parent either being expired or ailing or estranged or being totally ineffective. In this novel, the presence of both the parents' mama- papa makes a complete whole-not only physically but mentally also. They never talk of separate identity. They are hardly called by their names. They remain mama papa, always together. They have similar views, identical expression and their decisions too are always the same.

Fasting, Feasting is the story of human hungers and cravings on one hand and satiation and surfeit on the other. Anita Desai explores human psyche through her study of motives and actions. Desai opens her story with a busy domestic scene. Mama papa with their two growing daughters initially and then a son's entry quite late into the family form the typical Indian family with traditional mind and modern living. Being a typical Indian family, the whole attention of mama- papa moves around their children. Initially Uma and Aruna, the two daughters, are the chief concern of their life. The novel is the story of Uma and captures her dreams and desires as well as her frustrations and despairs. Uma is a woman who becomes the victim of a patriarchal society where women are not allowed to hold their own. Uma is the oldest of three siblings. As a child she is quite normal despite and dictatorial attitude of her father. The father is dominated not only on his children but also on his wife. A special bond is seen between the mother and the two girls, all of them being the victims of papa. The mother indulges in many such activities as are not approved by papa and the girls are her confidants. But with the birth of Arun- the precious son- things change for the girls. The mother drifts -away from the girls, and son becomes the central force in the family. All the activities in the family resolve around him. Uma is forced to drop out of school on the pretext that she is not good in studies. She is burdened with the responsibility of Arun. Since then, life becomes an arid journey in a desert for Uma. She is always there to take care of everything about the house. She has to be on her toes all the time. Her life becomes a tale of oppression and the strange fact about the matter is that it is the mother who blames more than father. This novel reflects mother- daughter relationship is a new light. Mother- daughter relationship is unique and determines the future development of a woman. This relationship helps the daughter to overcome all the difficulties, and gain confidence to go out into the world. The first bonding of an infant daughter with the mother is very deep. The initial bonding between the relationships is true but a boy breaks away this root. Nancy Chodorow maintains: 'A daughter continues to identify with the mother' (Nancy 292). It is because of this emotional bonding and initial identification that the daughters struggle all their lives to separate from their mothers. The love life of the daughter depends on the relations with mother and precisely on the relations of mother with father. Uma is oppressed not so much by the patriarch as by her mother. Uma, a normal child grows into a dull, insipid shadow of woman and going

through various trials and tribulations finally attains a mental state which borders on inanity. Since her (Uma) childhood even before she could learn to do her hair properly, she is taught: “the correct way of folding nappies, of preparing watered milk, of rocking the screaming infant to sleep when he was covered with prickly heat as with a burn” (Desai 18).

The innocent life of a child is maimed by the forces and very pathetically to know that it is the mother who proves instrumental in this type of connivance. The birth of male child in the family does not make any change in the life of the mother. If any change, it is for the lady’s chin held high with pride to be a mother of baby boy. But for Uma, all her dreams come to an end. Since then she is burdened with the responsibility of taking care of her brother. Identity crisis is an issue facing all alert and aware women in a patriarchal society where identity is considered a preposterous concept for women. A daughter’s identity begins with the identification of a mother. But in this novel, the irony is that the conflict in the relationship comes when the daughter is the considered less than a son.

Uma is a submissive, docile girl who seems to have a subordinate position in her mother’s home. Day and night, she works for the comforts of her parents. All the household responsibilities have been given to her while her Mama enjoys the freedom from all responsibilities. Uma entraps in the household chores while her parents enjoy parties, invitations and friends. She has no right to lead her life on her own accord. She is refused even to accept the invitation of her favorite teacher- Mrs. O’ Henry.

“Poor Uma [...] if she is invited by her favorite teacher for a cup of coffee even that was not liked by mama papa. “Coffee? Why coffee?” asked mama. “Uma grows violent [...] ‘why? What is wrong?’ [...] ‘Stay home and do your work- that is best’. Mama opines with an air of piety” (p.114).

She cannot call even to telephone anyone because calls cost money. Papa keeps on grumbling, “Costs money! Costs money! [---]. Never earned anything in her life, made me spend and spend on her dowry. And her wedding [---] spend till I’ m ruined, till I am a pauper [---]” (p.147).

If she tries to steal some moments of fun away from the dull, dreary existence at home, she is rebuked badly. An evening out with Ramu Bhai gives her immense joy but her mother is out of her mind with anger:

‘Quiet, you hussy! Not another word from you, you idiot child!’ Mama’s face glints like a knife in the dark, growing narrower and fiercer as it comes closer. ‘You, you disgrace to the family- nothing but disgrace, ever!’ (p.52-53).

Even a few moments of privacy in her own room; little time to watch her collection of cards of her childhood days in peace are snatched away from her and she is not even allowed to go out either for work or enjoyment. This makes her life very depressive and full of miseries. Not a moment passes when mama papa does not need the help of Uma. Uma is neither beautiful nor good at studies. She often disappoints them in their hopes and expectations. The second child in the family was expected a son. They even named it ‘Arun’ but when a baby girl was born, it was later changed into Aruna.

Aruna, the second daughter of the house is totally opposite in nature to her elder sister in nature. She is arrogant, obsessive from the early childhood. She spurns Uma's docility and slavish nature. She is a smart, active and self confident. Her perfect manners of walking, talking and social delicious impress others very much. She would not do any household work; she would go out with friends. She often bullies and threatens Uma.

When the girls quite grown up, there were expectations in the family of another child, which made "mama's eyes swollen with crime as she lay across her bed and wept. Papa scowled his concern and embarrassment [...]". Finally the family was blessed with a son. "Arriving home, however he (papa) sprang out of the car [...] shouted the news [...]". Papa in his elation, leaping over three chairs in the hall [...] his arms flung up in the air [...]. "A boy!" he screams, "A bo-oy! Arun, Arun at last!"(p.17). Even Uma noticed the extremely happiness of her parents with the arrival of her baby brother, "how mama and papa looked upon Arun with an identical expression" (p.31).

"Arun's birth did not mean that mama papa were finally separated into two entities- mama papa- not at all, rather Arun appeared to be the glue that held them together even more inextricably [...]" (p.30).

Uma was made to give up her schooling to help mama look after Arun. Girls had to learn how to look after babies and that was more important than education in the opinion of that Indian family. Uma protested and told her mother for ayah to look after but "Mama's expression made it clear it was quite a different matter now, and she repeated threateningly: 'proper attention' (p.48). After all, the attention on the daughters got would not be enough for a son!

Papa's dream of sending his son abroad grew very strong when the son started to go to school. Papa said to the family- "the education for his son; the best, the most, the highest, tutors came in a regular sequence, an hour allotted to each, for tuition in math, in physics, in chemistry, in Hindi, in English composition [...]" (p.118). Papa's memories of studying under the street lights and of the painful beginning in dusty provincial courts filled him with this almost manic determination [...]. Was he fulfilling through Arun a dream, he had had there under the street lights, or in the shabby district courts?" (p.121)

In an anxiety to rear him up, the best possible way the best health, the best education, the best life they all grow over possessive of the boy. Arun remained busy every time with papa's dream at the centre, living merely a mechanical and his face lost all expression. After hard work and efforts when the dream of foreign education was fulfilled and "the letter of acceptance finally arrived, papa [...] collapsed from sheer exhaustion [...] (he) was not even able to rise to a celebration [...]. He lay back weakly on the swing, his face grey [...]" (p.121). The thought of Arun going away did not appeal to mama as she was full of sorrow, doubt, fear, anything at all. Uma too watched and searched for an expression but there was none. "With Arun gone to another phase of existence arranged by papa for him, papa retired life was confined to the veranda, the swing, the intermittent exchanges, the gaps between them longer and longer" (p.122).

For the girls, the sole future is marriage. The arranged marriages produce their own painful comedy when Uma proves difficult to pair off:

Mama worked hard at trying to dispose of Uma, sent her photograph around to everyone who advertised---but it was always returned with the comment ‘we are looking for someone taller/fairer/more educated, for Sanju/Pinku/Dimpu. “There were so many marriage proposals for Aruna that Uma’s unmarried state was not only an embarrassment but an obstruction [---]. Mama watched and wondered, papa humped and hawed and scowled [---]” (p.85).

This made Uma upset but she did express it to others. After great efforts twice, the marriage of Uma settled. The first time, it broke off after the engagement ceremony. Somehow the parents once again tried to settle her life with a boy (Harish) of another city. The auspicious ceremony was performed at home. Later on, Uma learnt that the boy was already married in another city and had four children. She was deceived by her husband and her in laws and was brought back by her father. But she enjoyed no independence of thought or action. Even at the age of almost forty, she still required permission to take up a job, or to go to party. Mama papa kept on intruding upon her privacy. They did not like her shutting herself in her own room. Uma has a servile existence in her own home.

On the other hand, Aruna was well settled after her own marriage as she gave orders to her husband and lived happily. Even after her marriage, she visited her mama papa along with her in laws. She would dictate everything. Everything had to be done and presented in perfect order till they stayed there. Aruna would remain busy with her friends and outing while Uma had to look after her tiny tots. Aruna advised Uma to cut her hair short and should use perfumes and deodorants but refused to invite her at her home in Bombay as it would involve lots of efforts and money too.

The structure of the novel is interesting and takes off from the title. Fasting seems to refer to the first part and Feasting to the second. Fasting synonymous with Indian society and feasting with the American. Arun, the third child of mama papa stood bewildered in an alien land of U.S. The cross cultural problems cropped up. He had never seen so much freedom and so much stress in his own land. The poor child, who had ever been in dictated terms, was to stand on his own feet now, had also to make his own decisions. He found difficult and critical while living there. His letter eagerly awaited at home-were very small, formal and always complaining about the food there.

During summer break when the hostel was vacated, Arun’s boarding arrangements was made with an Indian family settled there, the Pattons. Mr. and Mrs. Pattons welcomed ‘Ahroon’ to their home. They tried their best to make him feel comfortable but Arun feels awkward there. Mrs. Patton tries to be over caring, over friendly and even over bearing, which Arun resents in his heart. She often asked him ‘I am not fat- am I, Ahroon?’ ‘Or young,’ she added, ‘am I? Ahroon? [...] Hi! Come and enjoy the sun? [...] the very idea appalled Arun, if it means the bearing of flesh in public. He has never seen so much female flesh before [...]’ (p.184).

Arun visited a supermarket with Mrs. Patton which revealed his thought process:

He had travelled and he had stumbled into what was like a plastic representation of what he had known a home; not the real thing- which was plain unbeautiful, misshapen fraught and compromised-but, the unreal thing- clean, bright, gleaming, without taste, savour or nourishment (p.185).

Arun did not know any cooking and Mrs. Patton tried her best to make Indian food for him but he did not relish. Mrs. Patton only cooked non vegetarian food at home which he hated very much. Even the Patton's children did not like him in their home, so the time had passed with such great difficulties. Finally, the vacation was over. He went to Mrs. Patton and told that he had packed his luggage as the next semester would start from tomorrow. He presented a gift (tea and shawl) to Mrs. Patton, sent by his parents. Mrs. Patton was thrilled by the gesture, even though the gift was small but her face spreads into a flush of wonder and joy.

Poor Arun, he did not even learn the meaning of any dream or desire and simply lived a mechanical existence. Of course, the other characters in this novel such as Anamika, Mira masi, Ramu et al., too have their share of dreams and desires and ambitions but as stated earlier, the main concern of this paper revolves around the close-knit family of mama papa and their three children.

Conclusion:

Fasting, Feasting is "rich in the sensuous atmosphere, elegiac pathos, and bleak comedy at which the author excels". From the overpowering warmth of Indian culture to the cool centre of the American family, it captures the physical- and emotional- fasting and feasting that define two distinct cultures. Anita Desai has focused her capacious vision on questions of culture and identity.

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