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Identity Crisis, Isolation and Gender Bias in Anita Desai's *Fasting Feasting*

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Abstract:

This paper focuses on “PLURALITY AND DIFFERENCES” in ANITA DESAI’S novel *Fasting Feasting*. The major theme of this novel is based on gender and social roles. Uma like a maid or a slave, is raised, educated and groomed only with marriage in mind. As an Indian woman she is also tied up or bound with many traditional customs and responsibilities. Arun is another striking character of this novel who is moved from India to the USA (migrated for his higher studies). He is not able to cope with his classmates because of their free life as he is bound to be “monitored”. Melanie is an American teenager suffering from over-eating habits because of her parents’ inattention or love for her. This paper discusses crisis of identity, isolation, gender bias and individual freedom

Keywords: Gender, Identity, Isolation, Social roles, Loneliness and togetherness, Traditional India and, Family life and individual freedom.

Gender bias and identity crisis are the major elements in the Diaspora literature. Anita Desai’s *Fasting Feasting* mainly focuses on the livelihood of the women in a parents-dominated society where children are being curbed to be obedient and follow what their parents bid to. This novel throws light on the livelihood of two women belonging to the different social conditions and living under depression over their being negligent by their over dominating parents. The two female characters are Uma, an Indian middle aged spinster suffering from epileptic seizures due to the suppression that she goes through and, Melanie, an American living unnoticed by her struggle with bulimia and anorexia. This novel talks about two different societies, one is a conservative Indian society and the other is a free society, but women like the protagonists face serious problems such as belongingness, isolation and identity crisis.

Uma belongs to a family in which parents are like gods and the children are like worshippers. The family considers that father is the decision maker and mother is the home maker. She is being shuttled between her desires to be what she wants to be and her parents’ decision to see what they want her to be. It is quite pathetic to see Uma’s suffering as a first girl child in the family with the shabby look and extremely coy. She considers, “...rather, these were only what edged something much darker wilder, more thrilling, a kind of execution-it was exactly what she had always wanted, she realized”.(94). She has a sister Aruna, a smarter one

than Uma, a second favourite to her parents. Her parents are blessed with the male child, Arun, pride to the family as Indian society considers male child is the gift of the god whereas female is considered to be a burden and "expenditure". Uma lives a life with the condition to the desires of her mama and papa. She thinks a,

"...A CAREER. Leaving home. Living alone. These troubling, secret possibilities now entered Uma's mind - as Mama would have pointed out had she known - whenever Uma was idle. They were like seeds dropped on the stony, arid land that Uma inhabited. Sometimes, miraculously, they sprouted forth the idea: run away, escape. But Uma could not visualise escape in the form of a career. What was a career? She had no idea. Her vision of an escape, a refuge..." (111)

Her liking towards the convent life and the nuns she admires, in particular Mother Agnes, is being rejected by her parents. Her parents' negligence to her after Arun's birth, distraught her and lands her up in seizures in the convent in one of her visits. She loves chanting the music that is played in the church and is being pulled by the European "convent" life as she feels that the convent is filled with peace and hopes that she belongs to the place. She joins the convent to work with nuns. But, after a while, she is taken back to her house forcibly by her parents. She helplessly adapts to her parents' condition.

Uma, seeing her parents 'overgrowing demands even at old age, is forced to do all the household stuff like a maid to satisfy their demands as they consider that she remains unmarried and is a punishment to her destiny, feels disgusted. She finds comfort being lonely while her parents attending a marriage in the nearby village. In her parents' absence, Ayah, a housemaid since her childhood, is a comfort to her to share or do the things that she wishes to do in the kitchen. Ayah's daughter Lakshmi has left her husband for some domestic issues that has irritated ayah, who swears at her bemoaning that she is a burden. It infuriates Uma and she scolds ayah saying that she should not disgrace her daughter and reminds her of the fact that ayah is leading a much better life than any other maid as she is helped on and off by her parents with the provisions like clothes, money. Hearing this, Ayah shows her old sari that is how she is "better". Uma offers her old saris to ayah and tells her to take care of her daughter and chides at her disgraceful comment over her daughter.

Uma always wishes to fly away from her parents but is bound by the restrictions. she feels like a caged bird. Her liking towards her cousin Ramu, an adventurous freedom loving whimsical man, is being shunned by her parents as they see him a threat to the family but she likes his adventurous free life. He takes her to a hotel where she drinks sandy wine. This is the moment in which she finds herself free from her parents' influence or tantrum. She, "insists on turning around and telling her mother, 'I had shandy to drink, Mama - and the band played - and Ramu and I danced -' (47). Her mama chides at her behavior and thinks her behavior a threat to the family reputation. Uma feels isolated from other members of the family as she finds that she is an outcast and a machine that has to do what it is bidden to.

Uma's acquaintance with her aunt Mira Masi, a widow who dedicated her life to the Hindu god lord Shiva, puts her in a comfort zone. Uma loves Mira's company and longs for her free life but Uma's father has hatred towards Mira as he feels that she is too traditional and, disapproves of her free life. Mira takes Uma along with her to the ashram but, Uma's parents want their daughter back home but, Mira is resistant enough to send Uma back even though Ramu comes to pick Uma back home. Uma feels at home in the ashram than her mama papa's home. She pleads to Mira not to send her back as she could sense her identity through spiritual connections and by living free.

Mrs. O. Henry, a good friend of Uma, invites her to the Christmas bazaar but Uma's parent's complaints about her going to the event. Irritated Uma breaks away from them and attends the event. She finds the event the more relaxing and entertaining, and, gives her a short independence from her dominating household. While Arun is in the USA for his studies, Uma suggests him to spend his summer at Mrs. Henry's sister's house. But, in the beginning, her parents disapprove of her suggestion and her father chides her for writing slowly. He smirks at her saying that she is weak and dull. The furious Uma raises her voice saying that her visibility has reduced and already requested him to arrange an appointment with the doctor. Her mother supports her daughter in this case. Non-working unmarried women in Indian society are considered to be a burden; their parents treat them that they bring bad luck to the family. Uma's parents lose their hope in getting her married at one point when her marriage alliance shows interest in her younger sister Aruna than her.

Uma always goes to the edge of the river that passes through her village and loves seeing the freedom the river has. Whenever she gets a chance to take a dip in the river during any rituals or any occasion that offers her bath, she "...Uma tucked her frock up into her knickers and waded in with such thoughtless abandon dips herself into the river and tries to see the bottom of it..."(39). She finds freedom in there and her identity as a free "Uma" is shown there. When Dr. Dutt invites her to work in her place, Uma's heart pounds for the freedom as she always wished to have a life of her choice but her parents gently deny Dutt's offer saying that Uma has to take care of her mother as she is going through regular medical checkups but the poor Uma secretly informs Dutt that it was a lie but in vain. Dutt promises to call her soon to her place but she doesn't. Only hope to leave her home is smashed with this.

In her entire life, Uma remains a "dependent" to social and emotional boundaries. Her identity as a woman is at stake in her life with her parents. She feels outcast as her independency is always wavered off at the cost her parents' dominance over her. Her dream of living a free life remains hollow to her. She heaves for the life of the daughter of Mrs. Joshi, a neighbour and close friend to her mother. Mrs. Joshi's daughter chooses her choice of the career and lives an independent life far away from being "monitored". Her cousin Anamika's death news brings a change in her mother's heart for her. While submerging the Anamika's ash, Uma's mother compassionately presses Uma's hand to show the indication that they are here for each other. Uma sees love in her mother's eyes for the first time in her entire life. Anamika "... had been

married for twenty five years, the twenty five that Uma had no, Now, she is dead, a jar of grey ashes. Uma, clasping her knees, can feel that she is still flesh, not ashes. But, she feels like ash-cold colourless, motionless ash..." (129). Her death is considered to be more of a murder than a suicide from the words of the neighbours but, Anamika's parents consider that it is her destiny that their daughter has gone through.

The character Uma is a victim of the stereotypical Indian society that robs off women's freedom and makes lose their identity. Uma always longs for freedom and her identity in the society. She is stopped from going to school as her grades slow down and put into babysitting her younger brother arun. It is not her life that she lives but her parents' identity and interest. She remains the shadow of her parents. The novel ends with the saying that Anamika's ashes mixed in the river where once Uma drowned herself to die though it is not considered to be suicidal but her intention of reaching the bottom of the river symbolizes her hatred towards her life with her parents.

The second part of the novel deals with the character Melanie, a white girl living in the USA, having more or like the same family structure Uma lives. She is the daughter of Pattons, Mrs.Henry's cousins. The novel flows through her lifestyle and her parents' negligence; her characterization is very much like that of the teenage Uma. She secludes herself away from family and always munches something or the other as her loneliness has given bulimia and anorexia. Arun agrees to spend his summer with Pattons as he has become a loner as he could not cope with either the Indian students who entertain themselves with night outs and smokes whereas the foreigners seem to him aliens. He could not accept either of them so he has to walk out their group. After living a life monitored by his parents, he ponders that he desires solitude more than anything.

Arun takes up the accommodation in Pattons. He feels his family structure there as Mrs. Patton is a very strict like his father and Mrs. Patton none other than his mother in many of her behaviours. Their son Rod is very much like his father Mr.Payton as he is an athlete and often taunts Arun to be a weak and dull man the way he used to treat his sister in India. He feels a fish out of water in father and son's company. When Arun is served with the steak in his first day with Pattons, he politely refuses and says that he is a vegetarian. Mr. Patton just wonders at his words stating that he has to be strong to be an adult and the meat fulfils the need. Arun's father used to scold him on the same ground when it comes to food. Mrs. Patton is the only one in the household who can understand his problem being a vegetarian in a house where except her everyone is a "meat" lover.

Mrs. Patton wants to learn cooking vegetarian Indian food from Arun as he is a vegetarian. He finds her a bit comfortable to move with. He has isolated himself from the rest of the family though he has a soft corner for Melanie as her actions are similar to that of his sister. Melanie's isolation and her eating disorder just make him understand that she actually wants love that she longs for but her family thinks her a teenage child. He wants to be a hero to save her but

he is not. When he happens to stand outside the bathroom for the turn of his shower, Melanie takes so much time in the bathtub and he could hear her weeping. He tells Rod that she might be ill, but Rod just shrugs his shoulder saying that she eats all the candy bars and stuff without focusing on her health in the way he maintains. He feels sorry for Melanie at the same time, his family guilt haunts him. He sees himself in Rod as how he treated his sister in India.

Arun wonders at the sulky behavior of Melanie and she behaves so strange to him. He could not figure out what he lacks either love from his family or wants to break free from her family. He often happens to see Melanie frequently vomit in the toilet sink because of her excessive eating habit. She could not control over it. She always munches something or other; Arun compares her eating habit with that of Uma's suicidal attempt by jumping into the river. He wonders that they do this stuff because they want the family's attention for them. Mr. Patton is as rude as Arun's father by his inattentive and strict attitude towards children. He passes out remarks like,

“...Where's everybody? Sitting on their butts in front of the TV?...Doesn't anyone in this house do any work? That lawn could do with some cutting. Where's Rod?'...Jogging, huh? Jogging. ...That boy spends so much time getting into shape he hasn't time left over to do anything with it...” (175).

Arun happens to see Melanie collapsing in the swimming pool vomiting. He sees her

“... twitches and grunts, 'Hhh, hhh,' then rubs her face with her hands. It is smudged with dirt and soiled with vomit. Her eyes are tightly shut. 'Go. Go 'way,' she burst out, and thrashes her arms upon the ground. Then, with a groan, she lifts herself onto her knees, thrusts her finger down her throat and vomits again, copiously...” (195).

She lays her head on own vomit and is taken to hospital. Her family realizes how bad they have been. Pattons put Melanie to receive treatment at a temporary recovery home in the Berkshires, for teen girls with mental and emotional illnesses. After a few days, the Reports are sent from the home that Melanie is making friends, playing tennis, and beginning to eat again without throwing up.

In the end, Arun realizes the importance of being a “mixed”. Arun enjoys the return to normalcy. At Pattons' house though they have fallen apart together, they must find their peace individually. He realizes that the answer to Melanie's sickness is outside of her family. By sending her to a facility for treatment, they have shown her first time that they care for her and provide her with all their attention. They make sacrifices to help her recover her health by Mr. Patton working to settle down Melanie medical bills. At last, Arun leaves his family ties behind and Uma too. He just leaves the Package that Uma has sent for him from India. The guilt-ridden Ram, hands over the package to Patton stating that it weighs too much for his journey. It symbolizes that Ram has left his family ties with that.

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