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WOMAN IN INDIAN SOCIETY: ANITA DESAI'S FASTING FEASTING

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Indian culture and mythology treated woman as goddess. A symbol of strength and knowledge and glorified her virtues of divinity and purity. The worth of Indian civilization can be judged from the position that it gives to woman. According to Rig Veda women in ancient India enjoyed equal status with men in all aspects of life. Patriarchy never denied women their rights and privileges. They participate in all Vedic sacrifices individually. Works by grammarians such as Patanjali and Katyayana suggest that women were educated in the early Vedic period. There existed Upanayana for both boys and girls. Rig-Veda suggests that women married at a mature age and they were probably free to select their own husbands and education is regarded as very essential to secure a suitable marriage. Upanishads mention several women sages and seers like Gargi and Maitreyi. "Manu" the great Indian law giver said long ago that "where women are honored there reside gods". According to ancient Hindu scriptures no religious rite can be performed by a man without the participation of his wife. So wives are befittingly called ardhangani (better half). they are given not only importance but equal position with men. They enjoyed economic independence too. They are allowed to attend fairs and sabhas of learned ones and were free to move in the society with their husbands and loved ones.

But in today's practical life woman is considered inferior to man a second- class citizen, a liability, an embodiment of sacrifice and humility. She is forced to live a life of suffocation, suppression and dependency. In this male dominated society she is never allowed to live "her" life. In childhood she is under the control of her father, in youth under her husband's and at old age under her son's. Hence the physical and psychological identity of woman is defined through the role and control of man. At every stage she has to sacrifice her happiness and desires for the sake of her responsibilities. She is never looked upon as an individual. She is always merged in other relations and lost her identity. She is treated as an instrument to produce children.



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We profess morality; we preach values and write scriptures in the honor of women. We praise Sita, Savitri and Damayanti but we are hollow within. We have given equal rights to women in our constitution. We talk of women liberation movement but no one gives them real freedom. It is a sad reality that our women are still considered slaves as they were ages ago. In our society we give more preference to sons than daughters because we think that they will shelter the aged parents and carry the family generations. But we forget that basically woman, who is endowed with genuine qualities like acceptance, association and affection in her domestic sphere and helps to create conducive atmosphere in her home. She plays many roles as an obedient daughter, a dutiful wife and a lovable mother. Still she has to strive to attain recognition. But now she sought to change within her home and society. She is coming out of her cocoon and joining her hands with men to work to attain self respect. Today we have women in leading position in all respectable fields and they are not inferior to men. We have many women engineers, doctors, scientists, politicians. Today the world belongs to woman but it is sad to say that their homes do not belong to them.

The most striking feature of the contemporary Indian English fiction has been the emergence of feminist literature; feminist in the sense of being written by women novelists as well as of giving voice to the sufferings, aspirations of women in the male dominated world. In the early phase of Indian English novel woman is presented as an embodiment of endurance understanding and sacrifice, as a custodian of Indian culture. But for the last four decades the image of woman has changed. She is being depicted as a victim of barbarous cruelty of men that they made her rise against the male domination and portrayed her as a free thinking and self reliant individual who is in search of identity defying marriage and mother hood. Since literature is a mirror to reflect all the aspects of society, once we need to check the status of woman in our society through literature.

Anita Desai is an eminent writer in the realm of Indian English fiction. She is a great analyst of psychological insights and inner concerns. She has added new and significant dimensions to the fiction with her portrayal of the sufferings of woman. Her novels depict the kaleidoscopic image of the minds of her characters with a mesmerizing art. Her novels are reflective of social realities which she depicts through a psychological perspective, but does not look at them as a social reformer. Her earlier novels revolve around woman's quest for identity, the repression she faces within the family and society, marital disharmony and generation conflicts. Her later novels focus on the spirit of nationality, social problems existing in the contemporary society and East-West



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cultural collision, Vedanta and philosophy though her central theme is existential predicament of individuals. She prefers inner reality to outer. Her search for truth is related to the search for soul.

Gender discrimination is one of the prominent themes of Anita Desai's novels. She portrays it through characters who suffer from the existential problems and passions. The present novel taken for study, *Fasting Feasting* shows how woman has to lead a life of suffocation and undeserved suffering in a male dominated society. How a girl child craves for parental affection but at the end gets nothing but frustration and isolation. The novel portrays a typical Indian conservative family consisting of three children Uma, Aruna and Arun and their parents. Children call their parents collectively 'Mamapapa' as they never find their existence separately. They discuss, plan control and govern the activities of their children be it marriage or academic pursuits. In that process they forget the fact that their children also have a life of their own.

The story moves around an unattractive, not so intelligent elder daughter Uma. Trapped at home, she lives under the demanding rule of her parents who are highly insensible to her dreams and aspirations. Her education and independence are all dampened by the dictatorial attitude of her parents. She is an ordinary girl who is not so fortunate to be endowed with beauty and intelligence. Her life is not like her ambitious sister Aruna who brings of a good marriage and their younger brother Arun the disappointing son and heir, who goes to America for studies. Uma being the eldest and spinster has to share the family responsibilities. She is expected to be an obedient daughter to her parents, an affectionate and motherly sister to her siblings but never recognized as an individual. Through this character, Anita Desai exposes how a woman in modern society falls, victim to hypocrisy and male eccentricity.

The novel opens with a scene where parents sitting in a creaking sofa-swing dangling their legs and give orders to their daughter to do many works at a time. (Pg.1) In the due course of the novel it is revealed that Uma who, returned home as a divorcee has to accept the duty of serving the whole family. Uma suppressed and imprisoned accepts everyone's orders. The family in which Uma brought up is highly conservative where girl children are neglected and felt like burden by their own parents.

If Uma hung over her shoulders to look or Aruna edged to closer to see, she(mama) swatted at her daughters as if they are pair of troublesome flies. (Pg.7)



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Parents are more interested in son than daughters. Son is pampered and held in more esteem than daughters. They feel boy as an asset and girl, a liability. Once, mother recalls her past days when she was a child. She remembers,

In my days girls in the family were not given sweets or nuts or any good things to eat. It was given only to the boys in the family. (Pg 6)

Here what the author observes through the point of view of mother is not uncommon or surprising in Indian society. In our society men are treated more respectfully and carefully in all matters like food, education or having any other facilities. For the family they are the future bread earners.

After having two grown daughters, parents at their middle age plan to give birth to a third child expecting that should be a boy. Parents feel it an achievement to give birth to a boy. A man's self esteem rises when he fathers a son. The birth of a son against two daughters in a conservative Indian family is a matter of great enthusiasm and enjoyment. More than the boy himself, it was the idea of having a son that is important to him. Father celebrates the birth of the boy as he had never done at the birth of his two daughters.

Arriving at home he sprang out of the car and raced into the house and shouted the news to whoever was there to hear. A boy he screamed a boy at last (Pg.17).

Not only father but mother also feels proud and happy as the status of women also rises when she bears a son. Now she is more equal to father as she is the mother of a son who will take care of family responsibilities in future. So mother feels proud on that occasion and celebrates it.

Mama's chin lifted a little into the air. She looked around her to make sure that everyone saw and noticed she might have been wearing a medal. Now she is more equal to papa. (Pg.31)

With these examples the author brings into focus parental apathy which scars the daughters permanently. First it is parents craving for a boy that hurts the daughters because it brings out the truth of their accidental birth. If the parents were given a choice they would never have wished to give birth to a female child. Even educated parents show their rustic and primitive face when it comes to choosing between daughter and son. After the birth of her younger brother Arun, Uma is forced to stop going to school. She is asked to take care of her baby brother.

Girls are not only less preferred but also they are more burdened with responsibilities. Women are expected to take care of their siblings. A woman is never allowed to be a child right from her childhood. She is



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supposed to act as a mother to her younger brothers and sisters. Since the birth of her younger brother Arun, Uma has been trained to sacrifice her private pleasures and her education. Uma is forced to nurse her baby brother even when she is herself a child.

When mama came home from hospital, she tried to teach Uma the correct way of folding nappies, of preparing watered milk or the screaming infant to sleep when he was covered with prickly heat as with a burn. Uma, unfortunately was her clumsy and undependable self, dropping and breaking things, frightenedly pulling away from her much too small, too precious and too fragile brother. (Pg.18).

With this example Anita Desai as a true humanist puts the blame not only on men who are suffering with the complex of male superiority but also on women who too oppress their own kind. Uma as a young girl has her dreams and desires, but when her dreams come in conflict with the comforts of the parents, it is she who has to sacrifice. Thus Uma's life gets reduced to a baby sitter since mother has to fulfill the role of papa's help mate. When Uma insists that ayah can do all this, and points out that ayah looked after her and Aruna as babies, mama's expression was clear that it is quite a different matter now and she repeats threateningly "proper attention. You know we can't leave the boy to the servant; he needs proper attention" (Pg.30)

Arun, the only son and heir of the family is brought up with much more care and attention than the two girls in all matters whether it is food or education. "A fixed quantity of milk is poured down his gullet whether he wanted it or not."(pg.30) Tutors are engaged for him as papa is determined that he get a foreign degree. Why this difference in treatment is because boys bring in dowry when they marry, whereas girls are given away with a dowry that is being expenditure for their natal families. Again once they are married, girls are seen to belong to another family. So the money spent on girl does not bear any fruit in future.

To get relief from this environment when Uma looks forward for her marriage, she under goes two traumatic experiences, related to matrimony. In the first proposal she gets engaged and the negotiated amount of dowry is given but later they reject the proposal showing the reason that groom wants to pursue higher education. The groom's party not even returns the dowry. At last she had to marry a man of her father's age who never behaves like a husband. Later it is revealed that he is already married and has a wife and four children and runs a pharmaceutical factory. To save that factory he needs another dowry. For that he marries Uma. Her marriage gets cancelled and she comes back home and stays with her parents. Now she is considered ill-fated and no more



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attempts are made to get her married. She remains virgin all through her life. But the parents are much concerned about their loss of two dowries than her loss. Father always blames her and shows his resentment, saying,

Never earned anything in her life made me spend and spend till I am ruined. (Pg 146)

The primary concern of middle class parents is to get the daughter married off. Parents seem to be in hot haste to dispose their liability as soon as possible. In that process they even ignore to check the whereabouts of groom. In this regard Ms. Joshi, Uma's neighbor's words to mama are true.

Yes, that's why the Goyels are able to do such things. Because, parents being in too much of a hurry that they will not take time for proper enquiries. (Pg.83)

Now, Uma under the strict control of her parents is not allowed to meet any one outside or allowed to do any job. She is not even allowed to have her own aspirations or opinions. When she is invited by her school teacher Mrs. O. Henry to her home on a coffee party, she is restricted to go there as parents feel that her teacher might convert her as nun. In other situation, when her cousin Ramu takes her out to dinner and makes her so happy that tears drop out from her eyes(Pg.51). On her return, mama calls it a disgrace to the family reputation to go out with a man alone.

Quiet, you hussy! Not another word from you, you idiot child! You, you disgrace to the family – nothing but disgrace, ever! (Pg-53)

Now, she is all alone and desperate. Once she thinks of writing a letter to a friend to share her grief, but it only ends with a realization that she has no friend.

She could write a letter to a friend a private message of despair dissatisfaction. But, who is the friend? Mrs. Joshi? Since she lives next door, she would be surprised. Aruna? She would pay no attention. Cousin Ramu? Where is he? (Pg.134).

Even a single phone call is not allowed for her as Papa feels it as waste of money. (Pg.146). Parents who are ready to send their son to America for higher studies deny daughter for the small pleasures. Every moment of Uma is controlled and all her decisions are taken for her by her parents. They regard with great disapproval if anyone attempts to open the outside world a little for her.

A rare job opportunity comes for Uma from their family doctor at her hospital but Papa refuses to send her reminding her of their family reputation. Papa responds piously that as long as they are there to provide for her she would not ever need to work. Like a typical middle class Indian Uma's father believes that it is below



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dignity for a daughter to work how so ever decent the work may be. He believes that it is an undesirable intrusion in the male world. He frowns; the frown is filled with everything. He has a thought of working women who dared to step into the world, he occupied. (Pg.145)

Furthermore, women in the family are not allowed for outing usually but only when Papa feels for that. On one such an occasion when they go to a park, Uma feels to buy some eatables but she donot dare to ask her father.

Uma finds saliva gathering at the corners of her mouth at the smell of the spiced roasted gram but decided to say nothing. (Pg.13)

MamaPapa are deaf and blind towards the needs of her daughter. Her existence gets reduced an unpaid servant who has so many duties but, no rights. Uma's parents, who failed to get her married, now see her as a possession and use her to make their life more comfortable.

All morning MamaPapa find things for Uma to do. It is as if Papa's retirement is to be spent in this manner. Sitting on the swing in the Varanda, finding ways to keep Uma occupied. (Pg. 133) They feel if she kept occupied with one or the other work, she shall not get time to think about her personal life. With this example the novel hints the fate of women who remain single in this society.

In Uma's life hope comes when Meera Masi, a distant widowed relative of her mother visits their home. She religious type, filled with joy and enthusiasm. Brief moments of respite come into Uma's life through Meera masi. Going to the river side or to the temple, in her company, makes Uma joyful despite the objections of her parents.

Here, Anita Desai not only portrays child's simple joys and sorrows but also expects her readers to share her world. She wants to escape in to her own spiritual or mental world

Once, when Meera Masi takes her to the river and during the religious ritual, Uma nearly gets drowned in the river but gets saved in time. Then Meera Masi says that she is blessed by the Lord. The Lord has rejected the men, we selected for her because God has chosen her for Himself. (Pg. 96). Uma, thereafter, succumbs into a state of trance and at a heightened state she falls on the floor, rolling and tossing her head and drumming her



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heels. Meera Masi recognizes and says she is possessed and that the Lord has taken possession of her. At last her spiritual experience transmits her into a new personality leading to the realization that her domestic, familial and social obligation will continue. There is no escape from sufferings. So she should be stronger in spirit and ready herself for a meaningful life.

On the other hand the life of Anamika in the novel discloses harsh realities of our conservative society. That does not in any way support women. Anamika a cousin of Uma is simply lovely “as a flower. Soft petal skinned, bumblebee- eyed, pink- lipped, always on the verge of bubbling dove like laughter and with a radiance of good nature. Where ever she was there were peace, contentment and wellbeing. (pg.67) She was not only pretty and good natured but an outstanding student as well. She did so brilliantly in her final exams that she won a scholarship to Oxford. But the parents did not allow the girl to go to oxford. They use the letter of acceptance from oxford to get her a groom. They use it as trump cards to get her married.

Anamika marries a person who is totally mismatched to her beauty, grace and distinction. Not only her husband but her in- laws too treat her worse than animal. After many abortions as a result of physical violence meted on her, Anamika fails to bear a child. Her own parents do not interfere as they do not want her back in their home because they feel it a great shame for woman once given in marriage to return to her parent’s home. At last Anamika is burnt to ashes and killed by her in-laws who show it as suicide.

Anamika’s sad saga is a strong statement against the cruel apathetic society which does not care for lives instead gives more importance to its customs.

The novel presents a fine contrast of title *Fasting Feasting* which reveals that there are some characters who are feasting with joy and some characters that are fasting physically and spiritually. The daughters Uma and Aruna long for parental affection but they are seldom given. On the other hand, Mama and Papa are feasting and enjoy the zenith of peace and happiness for themselves. Again, we can see contrasts in the lives of two sisters Uma and Aruna. Uma faced both Physical and spiritual fasting in her life due to marital discord while Aruna enjoyed a happy and blissful marital life. Even when Uma’s life is compared to that of her younger brother Arun, Uma is forced to discontinue her studies at school and her brother gets sent to America for higher studies. So, in all ways, we see Uma’s life of fasting and her family on feasting by using her.



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In this novel, Anita Desai has tried to picture the stifling social system with its conservative customs like dowry, arranged marriage, gender bias and dominating role of parents. It also speaks the impact of these social systems on the psyche of woman right from their young age and recognizes the urgency to question this kind of domineering attitude in order to attain the independent full-fledged personality. This novel exposes the religious sanction of the system which emphasizes the hierarchy of men and servility of women, which only succeeds in suffocating the life of women even in the contemporary society. Especially the novel exposes the degrading and explosive nature of the dowry system. In India, dowry has become a means of procuring money for various purposes and much deception is practiced to obtain it.

Anita Desai a great analyst of men and manners aptly shows the constant urge in women's freedom. Her treatment of feminism is different in the sense that her protagonists are generally not rebellious in nature rather they suffer and suffer only to learn how to encounter with the harsh realities of life. In this complex book, without no simple answer, Desai writes about the emotional and moral isolation of an individual and explores the nature of aspiration to reach self definition.

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