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The Voice of Sensibility in Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting*

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Abstract

This paper addresses the feminine sensibility at the backdrop of cultural and gender discomfort that exists in the contemporary India. It intends to reflect the psychological conflicts, agony and the precarious condition of Uma in particular and Indian women predicament in general who suffer being a victim in the hands of the rigid, orthodox and conservative attitude. Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting* was shortlisted for the 1999 Booker Prize showcasing her immense skill in handling complex relationships. It centers on the cultural boundaries and reflects the universality of human aspirations and dilemma. Being divided into two parts, first part deals with a family in India (parents with three children, Uma, Aruna and Arun) and the second part deals with a family in America (parents with two children, one son and a daughter). Arun is the link between the both who goes to USA for further studies and spends his summer

break with the American family. *Fasting, Feasting* takes as its subject some of society's most uncomfortable and pathological aspects that is stern, unflinching and tragic. This literary work gives an excruciating account of the rigid conservative ways of Indian society and family that seize control of individuals portraying the sensibility of women.

Keywords

Patriarchy; Gender Discrimination; Identity Crisis; Sensibility; Subjugation; Anita Desai; *Fasting, Feasting*.



Anita Desai, an acclaimed and accomplished writer of moods, psyche and sensibility has long proved herself as an admired chronicler of middle class India. One of the distinguished and remarkable features of her writings is the unique use of language and style which depicts human life in close quarters and a depth of insight unraveling the obscurity of human existence. She is endorsed with an extraordinary quality or power that mirrors a true or authentic India.

Uma, the protagonist of the novel *Fasting, Feasting* being the eldest daughter to the traditional and conventional parents is trained and made to believe the very Indian way since her childhood that the place of woman in a man made world is in the kitchen; taking care of the household chores, satisfying the needs of the family members, listening to the decisions of the parents and brothers before marriage and husband, son after marriage without questioning. Her own self is lost behind the curtain of many dominant identities. The unaccountable agony and suffering Uma undergoes remains uncomprehended by everyone. The ability of woman is projected by Mary Daly, the Feminist Theologian:

The process of liberation involves the creation of new space in which women are free to become who we are, in which they are real and

significant alternatives to the prefabricated identities provided within the enclosed spaces of patriarchal institutions. (40)

The vicious threads of this web is so deeply rooted in the attitude, perception, acceptance and in the heart, mind and soul of the very breath of human existence that it becomes not only a part of life but takes the pride of being crowned as a perfect and successful ideal life itself. This paper is an attempt to knock at the conscience of the traditional well-knit family of rigid attitude and value system whether it has left any scope for the Indian women sensibility in a deep patriarchal society to create a space for themselves in the journey of quest for identity.

Even after giving birth to two daughters Uma's mother again becomes pregnant with a strong desire of a son in spite of her being frantic to have it terminated and her feelings of sickness and exhaustion. "Would any man give up the chance of a son" (16)? Fortunately third child happens to be a boy who is named Arun. "It turned out that when a second daughter had been born, the name Arun had already been chosen in anticipation of a son. It had to be changed in disappointment to Aruna" (17).

To help her mother and look after Arun, Uma is compelled to give up her education. She takes care of the household works and Arun but fails in her school exams regularly. In the eyes of the Indian family system, for a girl it is more important to learn how to cook, look after babies and win the heart of her husband than education. Her role in the family is next to the servant. She has no achievements to her credit. She is known to be 'an idiot' and 'a hysteric'. In Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* Virmati also goes through the same kind of agony. Being the eldest child in the family at the age of ten she is shouldered with the responsibility of upholding the culture of a Hindu Punjabi family. She is burdened with the duty of not only the household works neglecting her studies but becomes a second mother to her eleven siblings. In case of Virmati she dared to cross the patriarchal boundary pursuing her education, taking up a job and

marrying a person of her choice at the cost of being criticized, ill treated and humiliated by the family and society. But Uma could not take a bold step to cross it rather leading a mechanical life accepting everything as her destiny. Even she was too ignorant and innocent to admit the fact that she was deprived of her very humane right. In Thrity Umrigar's *Bombay Times*, Dosamai also suffers in a similar way when she is forced to get married to a man by her father without her consent because she has another two unmarried sisters in the queue. She sacrifices her dream of becoming a doctor and enters into the bond of marriage but psychologically suffers to a great extent. Similar is the case with Malathi in *One Amazing Thing* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. Malathi wants to study further, take up a job and lead an independent life. She does not want to marry knowing the deplorable condition of her two married sisters suffering owing to unending dowry demands. But her parents plan for her marriage.

If a woman's husband has a number of unpleasant habits she is made to accept it as the general ways of men and is taken to be quite negligible, a point not to be discussed so seriously but if any one of her actions goes against his expectations she is compelled to change herself and it becomes a matter of great concern. She is made accustomed to the belief that husband is always right. She is made to hear it again and again that she is fortunate to have got a sacrificing husband who has given her all comforts in life but when it comes to her own sacrifice for the family it is named as duty and she is accused of exaggeration.

The term 'woman' is identified as a construct devised by the patriarchal order which attributes certain qualities to the female gender as suitable and certain others as forbidden. Judith Butler points out that gender is constructed rather than inherited. Society shapes a woman and makes her fit into the norms put forward by it. Femaleness is not an essential quality, but is constantly made and redistributed. One of the earliest manifestations of liberal first-wave feminism in Europe, Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*

(1792), was written in the wake of the French Revolution and is still read as a seminal text. Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) are central to the canon as well, even though both authors were also laying the groundwork for radical second wave feminism. Woolf introduced the notion of female bisexuality and a unique woman's voice and writing and Beauvoir introduced the notion of women's radical otherness or, rather, the cognitive and social process of "othering" women as the second sex in patriarchal societies.

Though Uma has a strong desire to study, to go out of home, see the world and know its ways, many factors distract her dreams. She is a below average student, weak in memory and finds difficulty in trying out sums. In spite of all these she tries hard to remember the subjects and solve out sums even if she hardly gets any time from the household works and taking care of his brother. After repeated failures her parents get a chance of motivating her to give up her studies and concentrate on housework.

So Mama was able to say, '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'. Then, seeing Uma's hand shake as she tried to continue with folding the nappies, she seemed to feel a little pity. 'What is the use of going back to school if you keep failing, Uma?' she asked in a reasonable tone. 'You will be happier at home. You won't need to do any lessons. You are a big girl now. We are trying to arrange a marriage for you. Not now,' she added, seeing the panic on Uma's face. 'But soon. Till then, you can help me look after Arun. And learn to run the house.' (22)

At the same time Arun grows gradually with all the freedom and encouragement for his studies with the hope of a bright future and is even sent to USA for further studies. In a patriarchal society it is the fasting of Uma and Indian women in general –the deprivation, the unhappiness, the compromise,

the sacrifice on which the feasting of Arun and Indian men in general depends. Faithfully, Anita Desai has presented the realistic picture of the traditional upbringing accorded to the girls in Indian society.

Uma's engagement fails two times and marriage becomes a failure as she comes to know her husband was already married and the purpose of marrying her was only to get more dowry. The unaccountable agony and suffering Uma undergoes remains uncomprehended by everyone. Rather she has to bear the pain of unpalatable remarks arrowed upon her by her parents owing to the loss of heavy expenses for the arrangements of the engagement and wedding.

The practices and customs in Indian society has always bestowed upon men complete liberty and authority to have an upper hand giving a big blow to the sensibility of women. The fate of women has always been decided under the mercy of this powerful force. If a marriage fails, everyone blames the woman, her ill-fate, her inability to hold the bond. If the children go wayward, it is the negligence of a mother. It is a very shameful attitude of Indian society that with the achievement of success, man takes all the praise but in the face of failure woman is forced to take all the blame.

The sin committed by Uma's parents was to stop her education, not encouraging her to build her own career strong, always giving the impression of a dream world which is quite opposite from the world of reality. Even they did not allow her to take up any job when the opportunity came in the form of Dr. Dutt, who wanted Uma's help to nurse her patients. But her parents gave her a proud explanation that they do not need money so badly that the woman has to go outside to work. They closed all the possible doors towards creating her own identity, to know her own self and allow her to grow her own individuality.

But Papa did not appear to have noticed the honour this time. He was locking his face up into a frown of great degree. The frown was filled with everything he thought of working women, of women who dared presume to step into the world he occupied. Uma knew that ,

and cringed. “Papa,” she said pleadingly. It was Mama who spoke, however- As usual for Papa. Very clearly and decisively. “Our daughter does not need to go out to work, Dr Dutt,” she said, “As long as we are here to provide for her, she will never need to go to work.” (146)

Uma’s brother, Arun develops a strong sympathy towards her sister when he goes to USA for further studies. Because he stays with the American family, and is exposed to a life and culture with complete freedom, where the woman of the house is not compelled to cook and each member of the house has his own individual existence. He is confused and uncomfortable to cope with such culture of complete independence to have come from a family where women hardly have any scope to give space to their own independent thoughts.

It is the ruthless crude nature of the patriarchal attitude that is responsible for a meaningless and empty life of Uma. With the rise of the 21st century everyone is talking about growth, development, prosperity, modern vision, ideologies, and equal rights at home- society - workplace. But one can not deny the very fact that today women in India continue to face atrocities. This shows the crude picture of the human conscience that has failed to get rid of the narrow, conservative and patriarchal attitude. If one hopes for a truly healthy and developed society, it has to begin with a change in every individual attitude sowing its seed in every home.

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