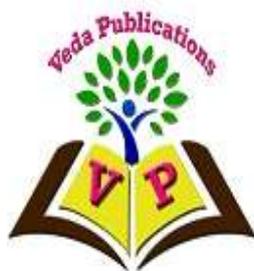


**ANITA DESAI'S FASTING, FEASTING IN FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE**

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Anita Desai is post independent feminist writer who occupies a unique place in the history of Indian English fiction. She has been immensely successful in creating new images in her works from a feminist perspective. The transformative power of Anita Desai's novel lies in her taking up the task of revealing the process of self-awareness at work in feminine psyches. The novel *Fasting, Feasting* focuses on a sense of deep rooted pathos over the plight of mankind and particularly women. The novel deals with a very sensitive story depicting the human values through her characters, namely, Uma , Aruna , Arun and the Patton family. Anita Desai presents woman as an embodiment of sacrifice , silent suffering, humility, faith and knowledge in *Fasting, Feasting* from a feminist perspective.

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Anita Desai is a post independent feminist writer who occupies a unique place in the history of Indian English fiction. Her distinguished literary career spans more than three decades. She is known for her sensitive portrayal of the inner feelings of her female characters. Her novels explore the tension between family members and the alienation of middle class women and also the sufferings and agonies of women. A close study of Anita Desai's works reveals her struggle for female autonomy played out against the backdrop of the patriarchal culture pattern. Her writing can be viewed as a self-conscious reaction to overwhelming masculinity for the analysis of society in general.

She has been immensely successful in creating new images in her works from a feminist perspective. Feminism refers to the belief that women should have the same rights, power and opportunity that men have. The demand of feminists are women's control over their own lives. Feminists consider that male authored texts have obtained double standards in their treatment of male and female characters.

Feminism in the Indian context is a by-product of the western liberalism in general and feminist thought in particular. The indigenous contributing factors have been the legacy of equality of sexes inherited from the freedom struggle, constitutional rights of women, spread of education and the consequent new awareness among women. The Indian woman caught in the flux of tradition and modernity saddled with the burden of the past but both to cast off her aspirations constitutes the crux of feminism in Indian literature. In literary term it participates in a search for identity and quest for the definition of the self.

Fiction by Anita Desai provides "insights, a wealth of understanding, a reservoir of meanings and a basic of discussion. Through women writer's eyes we can see a different world" (Dhawn,10). Anita Desai who is undoubtedly one of the major voices states: "writing is my way of plunging to the depths and exploring this underlying truth. All my writing is an effort to discover, and to underline and convey the true significance of

things" (Dalmia, 4). The analysis of Desai's novels would unfold not a totalitarian ideology of their unified goal or a metaphysical absolute; rather it will reveal a prospect of achieving a feminine consensus where each novel voices her story.

The transformative power of Anita Desai's novel lies in her taking up the task of revealing the process of self-awareness at work in feminine psyches. Her novels are an engrossing study in the progression of women from feminine to female as stipulated by Elaine Showalter. Her women characters are sensitively portrayed and therefore, are best appreciated in their psychological depths. Desai's feminism is not the same as halting man or abandoning families and relationships or indulging in lesbianism, etc. As a feminist she wants women to be accepted as responsible human being.

The novels of Anita Desai are basically female oriented. She probes into their problems, be it of a daughter, sister, mother, grandmother or a wife. Her female figure appears as a victim in a patriarchal, patrilineal and father dominated Indian family. Anita Desai depicts the Indian woman as a fighter, a victim, a heroine and in later novels ultimately a winner because of her indomitable spirit and attitude of compromise. She has portrayed both kinds of women – those who are symbols of growth and change, those who are powerful means of withdrawal, regression, decay, death and distraction.

She declares that a woman is a being. She is not an appendage a subordinate of man. Rather she is an autonomous being, capable of trial and error, finding her own way to salvation. We come across such women figures in the novels by Anita Desai, who are consciously trying to come to terms with themselves as individuals. Their voice is now gradually becoming audible and there is definitely a protest in their own voice. There is a clear tone of resentment and a pressing demand for freedom from traditional fetters which have been imposed on them and their gender.

The novel *Fasting, Feasting* focuses on a sense of deep rooted pathos over the plight of mankind and particularly women all over the globe. The novel deals with a very sensitive story



depicting the human values through her characters, namely, Uma, Aruna, Arun and the Patton family. The first part of the novel covers the life of Uma and her family whereas the second part deals with the life of Patton family; the binding link is Arun. Uma is the pivotal figure who sees life in its sheen and observes how others live through it. In the first section, Uma presents life the way she perceives; her parents lead a life of twins not because they love each other to such a great extent but because the father has completely overshadowed the mother though it is a pity that he himself had nothing specific to cling to. Uma, the eldest daughter, turns out to be the dullest of all with a good deal of follies and foibles that make her a failure in every walk of life. The next section deals with Arun, the only son who is sent to America for his higher studies in order to fulfil the wishes and expectations of his parents.

In the novel Uma is presented as the most subdued and crushed member of the Indian family. Uma is the oldest of three siblings. As a child she is quite normal despite the dictatorial attitude of her father. There is nothing more painful for a girl than the pressure to grow up even before she has enjoyed her childhood. To feminists, women are not mentally different since birth. The patriarchal set-up has been plotting against woman's rights since her birth. After the birth of Arun, things become worse for Uma. Arun becomes the central force in the family. As a young girl, Uma has her own dreams and desires. But when her dreams come in conflict with the comforts of her parents it is she who has to sacrifice and she does.

Uma is a representative of all other women who are suffering from bitter agony and sorrows caused by their parents and relatives. Uma has argued with her mother to free her from unequal treatment and injustice. But her parents refused to act according to their daughter's desires. Her parents become an obstacle for her dreams. In Indian culture, there are many Umans who become a prey for their parents' demands by sacrificing their desires and wishes and also some elder sisters who have forced to stop their education

in order to look after their younger brothers. The story starts off with a busy domestic scene where Mamapapa were thoroughly asking Uma to order food for Arun, who is studying in Massachusetts in United States of America. Arun is a baby boy in the family, whereas Uma is a spinster, an elder sister who lives with her parents under their demanding rule, and is treated as clumsy, nearsighted and slow. However, her younger sister is treated as smart and pretty compared to Uma. As mentioned in the article by Poon, the words "fasting" and "feasting" can stand for the two parts of the novel respectively. The first part is situated in India, a country of fasting which refers not only to the religious aspect, but also to an unwilling fasting of the many poor of the country. And the second part is in the United States, the country of feasting abundance.

Desai once stated: "women think I am doing a disservice to the feminist movement by writing about women, who have no control over their lives. But I was trying, as every writer tries to do, even in fiction, to get at the truth, write the truth." (Tandon). People have a notion that when she writes stories of the unprivileged, this will affect the real life of women in the society, but she writes in order to let the universal know the truth of what really the women are going through.

The story has many situations where the family even makes the comparison of the inequalities portrayed within small families, between a father and mother, between a son and daughters. In this story, Desai portrays a mother and Uma as working women at home. Mama orders Uma to bring orange and "she picks out the largest orange in the bowl and hands it to Mama who peels it in strips, then divides into separate segments. Each segment is then peeled and freed of pips and threads till only the perfect globules of juice are left, and then passed one by one to edge of Papa's plate" (Desai, 23). This shows how females are made to work at home and how the males enjoy their hard work and pain. Even for peeling the orange, the simplest work, Uma and mother have



to work for the father. This tells us the height of authority and the supremacy at home.

Uma was treated as if she has no emotions and desires in her life by her parents. She was treated more like a servant in the family. Anita Desai portrays the inequalities in the family among their own children. She says: "the characters in the novel compromises family living in small town in India, where local customs, culture and traditions state the future of the all children. It states that girls under this region should be married off and boys should be educated" (Desai,34). The statement itself is so strong that, without analysing, we can see the differences between men and women, a daughter and son. The statement "boys should be educated" indicates that the education is must for males and not for the females and the girls have no meaning, desires and wishes in their lives. Here, the word "should" indicates a strong command or order one must follow in one's life.

The eldest daughter Uma was forced to give up her convent school education in order to look after the only son in the family. "When Uma pointed out that Ayah had looked after her and Aruna as babies, Mama's expression made it clear, it was quite a different matter now, and she repeated threateningly, 'proper attention' (Desai,30). Ayah is the servant in the family, who looked after the younger Daughter, Aruna, however this time mother wants Uma to look after him instead of Ayah. Uma was protesting and fighting back against her Mama to make her understand that she needs to be educated rather than being a baby sitter at home, but all her efforts of fighting back seems to be in vain when Mama stood firm to her decision to make Uma look after her younger brother and sacrifice going to the school Mama feels that Arun, being the baby boy in the family needs a good attention, care and guidance, so she insists that Uma should look after him.

Her marriage is arranged by her parents. "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" (Desai, 22). To make the matter worse, her marriage fails

and there is no escape from the prison that is her home. "Marriage is the destiny traditionally offered to women by society" (Beauvoir, 445). Her parents try their best to get a good groom of their standard only to be duped by the Goyals, the cloth merchant family that takes a sum of Rupees one lakh in advance towards dowry. Soon after they break the engagement, they refuse to make any refund. Finally, she is married to Harish, who swindles them in order to take thirty thousand to pay his own debt. He runs to join his factory leaving the bride untouched and uncared for on the very first day of their marriage. When the shocked parents realize their mistake, it is too late. Ultimately they take away Uma to their house when they come to know that Harish is a married man with four children. Uma, therefore, is resigned to live in the house like a dumb and mute animal unable to give vent to her feelings. Her life is jinxed, she bears the stigma on her face but there is no one to comfort her. She is forced into a life of drudgery and is denied even basic human rights. Thus her life becomes a tale of oppression, a normal girl child grows into a dull, insipid shadow of a woman and going through various trials and tribulations, finally, attains a mental state which borders on insanity.

Desai has mentioned in her story how the mothers reacts when their daughters are offered a job. '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 out to work'. Mama was so selfish that she does not like her daughter to take up the job when she was offered a job; it seems that, mama was jealous of her daughter being on her own feet and being independent in her life since her mama was not independent, she was under the control of her husband. So it was hard for mama to bear the freedom her daughter will enjoy if she was sent out to work. When Dr. Dutt was shocked and said "but she works all the time! At home. now you must give her a chance to go out to work".

Dr. Dutt had pity on Uma seeing her condition at home. But papa interrupted and said



"there is no need". Dr. Dutt persisted and said "shouldn't we ask Uma for her view? perhaps she would like to go out and work?". Dr. Dutt was requesting Uma's parents and explaining in his own best way to persuade them, at the end what mama says to Uma is that "go and take the tray away" and as a daughter she has no right to fight back in front of the guest so "Uma's head was bobbing, her lips were fluttering: yes, yes please yes". She wanted to say yes to Dr. Dutt when he offered her a job, but she could not. She has to let go off the opportunities that comes to her due to her parents. Unequal opportunities were not just bounded to Uma but with all the Indian families around her premises. Uma becomes a victim to the tendency of society to condition a girl child to submit to the norms of the patriarchal set up. Anita Desai chiefly puts the blame not only on men who are suffering with the complex of male superiority but also on women who oppress their own kind. In the novel Uma is presented as the most subdued and crushed member of the Indian family. Uma is the oldest of three siblings. As a child she is quite normal despite the dictatorial attitude of her father. There is nothing more painful for a girl than the pressure to grow up even before she has enjoyed her childhood.

To feminists, women are not mentally different since birth, as Simone de Beauvoir writes: "One is not born a woman; one becomes one". The patriarchal set-up has been plotting against woman's rights since her birth. the conditioning begins at home and women are supposed to walk from mother's womb into mother's shoes. Uma is still a child when her baby brother Arun, the precious son is born. With the birth of the son, things become worse for Uma. Arun becomes the central force in the family. Uma is burdened with the responsibility of Arun. Since then life becomes an arid journey in a desert for Uma. She is "a woman lost in the jungle of duties - sometimes to her Mama, Papa, at other times to her brother Arun and at still other times to her sister Aruna. She is ..... everything but an individual".

As a young girl, Uma has her dreams, her desires but when her dreams come in conflict with the comfort of her parents it is she who has to sacrifice and she does. Her parents turn deaf ears to the needs of their daughter Uma and consider her only a body, not a soul. Uma is even denied the pleasure of ordinary living. If she enjoys the cheerful evening out with Ramu bhai, she has to bear her mother's curse.

In short, Anita Desai presents woman as an embodiment of sacrifice, silent suffering, humility, faith and knowledge. In *Fasting, Feasting* from a feminist perspective. The novel deals with a very sensitive story depicting the human values through her characters, namely, Uma, Aruna, Arun and the Patton family. She concentrates on the unequal treatment given to women seeking education and alternatives to marriage and motherhood and successfully portrays the predicament of women in the patriarchal society.

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