

A Critique Of Gender Discrimination In Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting*

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Abstract

*The present research critiques gender discrimination in **Fasting, Feasting** by Anita Desai. A close analysis of the novel clearly reveals that Desai projects marginalizations of several types through the themes like gender discrimination, marriage failures, isolation and loneliness due to the adverse situation in the family, survival strategies, domestic violence to the newly married young girls, overpowering patriarchal forces, East-West confrontation etc. Desai's role as an artist is not to provide solutions to social problems but to raise issues deep in their implications so that society can think of solutions in the long run.*

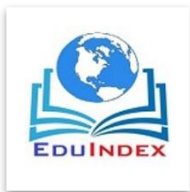
Keywords: *gender discrimination, marginalization, isolation, domestic violence, East-west confrontation.*

In *Fasting, Feasting* (1999), Anita Desai explores the values existing in the East and the West. In a closely – knit narrative of deep psychological insight, Desai has taken us into the value systems of the two cultures present in India, the economically backward land of scarcity and America, the land of plenty. Desai also brings out in clear perspective the conflicts arising out of false values in a middle class Indian family constituted of Mama, Papa, Uma, Aruna and Arun.

Uma, the eldest child, is supposed to get everything done by the servants. She is surprised to see Mama's clandestine visits to Mrs. Joshi for a game of rummy in a "flirtatious" mood with cheeks "filled out plumpy" and return home to show "guarded restraint" and "tired decorum". She has learnt the art of "survival through evasion" and replies to Papa's queries nonchalantly: "It was so-o hot, what can one do? Nothing." (Desai 7)

It is not only Mama, but also Papa who lives in a false sense of values. Papa is highly status conscious. He gives curt orders to his secretary or clients and plays tennis as part of his game plan to project himself as a big shot: all mechanical sets of values to enhance the so-called society prestige. Even at parties false society faces are maintained. If ever the usually taciturn Papa tries to be jocular, it is to settle previous scores: "success of his jokes was measured according to the discomfort it caused others" (Desai 9).

Disaster comes when Mama- which may not be read as Papa this time- becomes pregnant for the third time. For the first time MamaPapa become Mama as against Papa. The woman wants to abort the baby out of shame, as the daughters are quite grown-up now. But the man does not want to "give up the chance of a son" (Desai 16). And in due course of time, he is blessed with a son. The arrival of Arun changes the scene a little, but the control that Papa

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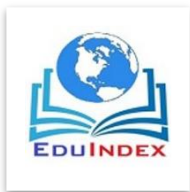
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has over his family does not loosen. The only difference was in the increase in the number of victims from two to three. However, though the life of her two siblings change later on, that of Uma remains much the same, from the beginning to the end of the novel. She undergoes two sad experiences relating to matrimony, but finally she remains unwed-physically and mentally. On the other hand, Mama becomes Papa's equal more than ever now as if she were wearing a medal (Desai 31).

After Arun's birth, on feeling marginalized, Aruna shows defiance and "determined self-assertion". As a result, no one is able to bully her into obedience. She has been presented as a foil to Uma. She has a happier fate as she is bold and assertive and even sly should the occasion demand. However, Uma being docile, innocent and sensitive is made to suffer. Uma's imprisoned soul yearns for a space of its own. She wants to escape into her own spiritual or mental world of abandonment. The spirit of revolt welling up inside her surfaces strikingly in one occasion when Uma is engrossed in reading Wilcox's poems, ignoring Mama's persistent calls to bring coffee. She finds comfort in her spiritual niche where she yearns to be left alone forever.

Marriage is a lottery in which prizes are few. Uma's cousin Anamika is talented and beautiful and even wins a scholarship for further studies at Oxford. However, the traditional parents use the letter of acceptance as a medal for exciting grooms rather than allowing further studies. Anamika's life at her in-laws becomes a trauma because of her husband's tacit support to his mother and the apathetic attitude of her parents. Mama, in a typical woman's veins feels: "How can she be happy if she is sent home? What will people say? What will they think?" (Desai 71) This widely spread fallacy proves to be the undoing for Anamika who meets a violent death. At the river, where Anamika's ashes are immersed, Uma asks a pertinent question: "The letter-the letter from Oxford-where is it? Did you-did you burn it? (Desai 152) The lines quoted show that Uma is not a dull insensate thing, but a quiet, sensitive observer of the false values in society.

Regarding marriage, Uma is equally unfortunate, though in a different way. Aruna's jibes, Papa's facaded 'scowls' and 'howls' at Aruna (Desai 61), Mama's incessant orders, and Arun's evasive tendency- jointly contribute to further shattering of Uma's psyche: "the tightly knit fabric of family that had seemed so stifling and confining revealed holes and gaps that were frightening" (Desai 86). The gaps in the social values are strongly revealed in the instance of Uma's marriage to Harish. It is soon revealed that it is Harish's second marriage caused out of pecuniary considerations. After this marriage he goes off immediately to live with his wife and children leaving Uma under the policing of his relatives. No more attempts are made to marry off ill-fated Uma who feels that she is "an outcast from the world of marriage".



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Ironically, it is Uma, the so – called handicapped child in the family who senses intuitively, a welcome bond in her relationship with another handicapped cousin in the family, Ramu, Bakul uncle's son: "He has club foot and wears an orthopedic boot to steady him; so he clomps across the terrace towards them. The bag weights him down in one arm so his progress is slow." (Desai 46). Uma and Ramu begin to vibe with each other at the very sight. Probably, the former, who suffers at times with 'fits,' a relatively invisible malady, strikes up an immediate, responsive warmth, to the latter whose suffering is so obvious. The young pair of cousins feel not only at home with each other, but in their gregarious moments, find themselves in harmony with the entire world at large, as suggested by a telling metaphor in the novel:

There is silence for a bit because both parents seem to have decided to use silence as weapon...in that silence, Ramu lowers himself into a creaking basket chair and spreads out his legs and throws back his head. A mynah on the neem tree that overhangs the terrace is watching his movements and lets out a series of whistles as if to comment upon them. Ramu bhai returns a whistle to it (Desai 46)

The above aural/visual imagery admirably communicates the contrast between the discords marking the parents' attitude towards Ramu through the grating noise of the creaking basket chair at home and the concord between the conspiring youngsters through the melodious notes of the mynah, as well as the still more remarkable contrast between the silence of the taciturn parents with the spontaneous, full – songs of the bird.

Perhaps the only moments of joy Uma experiences in her youth are those fleeting hours she spends with Ramu. The harmonies they strike in their attitudes towards each other are conveyed through a kind of echoing verbal harmony as in the following instance:

"Ramu!" Uma squeals, spluttering into her glass.

"Hop, hop, hop!" warbles Ramu, making his fingers dance backwards.

"Funny bunny, funny bunny." Uma is choking with laughter. She has laughed so much; she has tears in her eyes. (Desai 51)

It should be noted here that aural imagery is intentionally employed by the novelist on this occasion, as the phrases 'hiccups,' 'sings,' 'squeals,' 'warbles' and 'sings' – all pertain to a certain boisterous kind of harmony above the daily tenor of life the youth involved here find, in each other's company.

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In striking contrast to ramu's innocuous sense of humour, Uma's cynical father makes"...rather frightening attempts at jocularity. His jokes were always directed at other, and they were quite ferocious under cover of the geniality." "The success of his joke was measured according to the amount of discomfort it caused others. It was his way of scoring." But the family was not fooled: they knew she was actually rattled, shaken by what he saw as a possible challenge to his status."(Desai 9)

Part one of the novel centres mostly on Uma. Unable to bear the suffocating atmosphere of her home where her own life seems to be nothing more than "full of barks, howls and messages" Uma clandestinely goes to the convent to seek admission once more. She is drawn to its mesmerizing tranquillity. She cannot articulate where the appeal of the convent school lay. The unvarying rhythms of the hymns sung to the accompaniment of the piano with Mother Agnes, her feet squarely planted in her sandals, reading out from her prayer book "in her deep unhurried voice that seemed to move between the girls like a slow brown river"(Desai 19) are things that impress Uma in the convent. Again there is the picture of the golden-haired Jesus holding the lamb, or the warmth of being wanted or loved as reflected in the hymn that she sang the loudest of all as an infant:

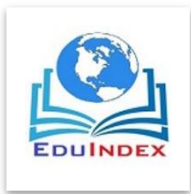
Jesus loves me; this I know,

For the Bible tells me so!(Desai 20)

The memory of it always remained an oasis in the arid desert of her life. Her attempt to break the prison walls of her house and meet Mother Agnes, plead with her to take her back despite her failure, is a vignette etched with deep sensitivity and pathos.

Part two deals with the summer vacation that Arun spends in the USA with the Pattons. Part one deals with summer in India and the shawl that has to be packed and sent to Arun. Part two also deals with summer in America and ends with the shawl that he calmly rids himself of by giving it away to the lady of the house. Nevertheless, between the two 'folds' lies the life of the boy who has been 'grown to order', developed according to parental dictates and decrees.

However, even in America Arun feels he has not escaped his parents. When the letter comes instructing him to get in touch with the Pattons and spend the summer vacations with them, "he floundered, he sank". He wondered if they still had not stopped discussing him, plotting and planning his life for him. Two attitudes are contrasted: the Patton's total blindness to their daughter Melanie's deteriorating condition and the over possessiveness of Arun's parents. Even in Mr. Patton Arun saw a reflection of his own father: "he reacted by not reacting, as if he had simply not heard or understood" (Desai 185). Mr Patton somehow had



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the same expression that forestalled any opposition to his authority: "Once again its grey vaporous chill crept into his life like asthma" (Desai 186).

As the novel comes to a close, Arun at last experiences the "total freedom of anonymity". With a quiet determination, he breaks the tangled sugar-sticky web of filial bondage and family ties. As he gives the packet of tea to Mrs. Patton and wraps the Kashmiri shawl sent by his parents around her shoulders, he cuts with the deftness of a surgeon's knife, the 'umbilical cord' that had tied him to the 'two-in-one' identity of his parents. It is the last act of severance. As he steps out in the receding heat of the feverish summer, the USA stretches before him "open, clear and blank" and he has "every intention of keeping it so". Breaking away into freedom, he felt different. At last, "He was Arun. He had no past, no family and no country" (Desai 172).

Desai's text may invite the charge of stereotyping American culture in a way that matches the stereotyping of the Orient by the West. Such a reading would again assume an identity of perspective between fictional character and narrative voice. Read in the context of the earlier part of the novel, it is clear that Desai's account of Arun's experience is part of a larger critique of parents' blind adherence to social codes without attending to emotional needs of their children. Desai's scrutiny is unsparing in its indictment of social and familial attitudes in both India and America, suggesting links between apparently different cultures. Her approach to the use of language becomes, in this context, a form of cross-cultural social critique. This juxtaposition comes out in the succinct title of the novel, the comma splitting it into two halves. The apparent meaning lies in the contrast between plenty and scarcity. The comma, splitting the title gives an idea of the structure of the novel. The book is divided into two, though unequal parts. The rigidity in the lives of the Indian family in the first part is set against the frankness of the Patton family in the second.

It may be concluded that *Fasting, Feasting* is the story of a family that seeks to exist against the backdrop of the Indian society with all its common and universal elements. Of all Desai's novels, this particular one puts the focus of attention on the probing of the essence of existence. Here, Desai intends to present a simple human situation in the simplest way to establish her credibility as a contemporary Indian English fiction writer.

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