

ISSN: 2278-9529

July 2017 Vol. 6, Issue-IV

GALAXY

International Multidisciplinary Research Journal



Bi-monthly refereed and Indexed Open Access eJournal

Editor-In-Chief: Dr. Vishwanath Bite

www.galaxyimrj.com

About Us: <http://www.galaxyimrj.com/about-us/>

Archive: <http://www.galaxyimrj.com/archive/>

Contact Us: <http://www.galaxyimrj.com/contact-us/>

Editorial Board: <http://www.galaxyimrj.com/editorial-board/>

Submission: <http://www.galaxyimrj.com/submission/>

FAQ: <http://www.galaxyimrj.com/faq/>



Gender Discrimination and Suppression of Identity: Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting*

T.Gnanasekaran

Ph.D English,
Full Time Research Scholar,
P.G. Department &
Research Centre in English,
Alagappa Govt Arts College,
Karaikudi,
Tamilnadu,
India.

Article History: Submitted-13/07/2017, Revised-29/07/2017, Accepted-31/07/2017, Published-10/08/2017.

Abstract:

The present paper analyses the predicament of Anita Desai's fictional world as well as her sensitive women characters who find it difficult to adjust in the present mechanical and urbanized set up. Her artistry is seen in the perfect co-relation through the psychic plight of her characters, their relationships, thematic previews and art of characterization. She has done well in exploring different facets of feminine psyche. She delineates female characters who try to prove their own value system and if fail, then their inner-potentiality enables them to resist unjust social pressure and they protest. In *Fasting, Feasting* (1999) 'claustrophobic feminine' existentialism is the major theme. The feminine struggle for survival in the East as well as the West has been presented perfectly. The claustrophobic feminine existentialism has been well exemplified through the characters of Uma, Aruna, Anamika and Malanie. Desai stipulates that just as the women of the East fail to emancipate themselves from the shackles of their traditional life style, similarly the women in West feel burdened by the excess of their own society.

Keywords: Familial relationship, trauma, gender discrimination.

Anita Desai is considered the writer who introduced the psychological novel in the tradition of Virginia Woolf. Desai's novels span an extensive range of issues. They map the evolution of a writer from obsession with the unrevealed inner-world of her female characters to themes of perennial interest to all. Her preoccupation with the female psyche provides way to issues of larger human interests demonstrating the authors own growth to maturity. Desai explores the state of nothingness in some of her women's lives. Their soft simmering anger and lackadaisical attitude arouses contrary emotions of sympathy and irritation. Desai describes her women characters as 'slipper dragging' i.e. gesture of defiance and of dissatisfaction. Majority of her females are comfortably placed in their homes and married yet unhappy and gloomy. To these highly strung, self-consuming and disintegrated women, Desai raises a voice and a desire. The external calm is a surprising contrast to their internal-displacement and discontentment. When one interacts with the gallery of female characters in

Desai's fictional world, it can be observed that her intention as a writer is to discern her women characters as human with their weaknesses and potentialities who are indeed caught in the web of their own compulsions and mental traumas. Her novels have been examined as the manifesto of feminist predicaments and anxieties and creative release of the feminist consciousness.

Her feminism cannot be considered as anti-male because her woman craves for man's love, affection and longs for the bliss and thrill of life which are ever denied to her. She perceives the dilemma of the fair-sex and visualizes life of a female as a series of obligations, compulsions and commitments. In addition to existentialist reality of life she evokes the sentiments and sensibility of women for their role, status and respect in society. She minutely observes the emotional world of them. She sets herself to voice the mute miseries and helplessness of millions of women, particularly married, tormented by existentialist problems and predicaments. She focuses on how her heroines in the contemporary urban milieu are bravely struggling against or ultimately submitting to the relentless forces of absurd life.

They feel observed and trapped when society imposes its norms on them and demand conformity and on refusal by them, ostracize them. She has explored various aspects of feminine psyche which include their isolation that leads them to the verge of neurosis. A. Hariprasanna, in his critical scrutiny of Desai's novels rightly argues:

Her novel is concerned with the emotional world of women, revealing a rare, imaginative awareness of various deeper forces at work and a profound understanding of feminine sensibility. (81)

Desai's female protagonists all belong to the upper class of urban India. Economic or financial freedom is not an important issue for them. Yet all of them directly or indirectly question the accepted codes of a patriarchal society. They develop fears, obsessions, neurosis, paranoia or schizophrenia and gradually withdraw from the society including their families and husbands. Consequently many of them encounter a very violent unnatural end.

They are torn . . . her novels chart a peculiar path of circularity where text only begin and rebegin, and end by coming back to the point of beginning once more. (Ghosh, 256)

From Maya in *Cry, the Peacock* to Nanda Kaul and Raka in *Fire and the Mountain*, Desai's women characters, particularly the protagonists, are unable to tread on the off-trodden path which is considered as the only correct and suitable way for the Indian woman. These peculiar, introspective, hypersensitive occasionally eccentric women live in a world of fantasy like Maya, seek an Eldorado like Sita, flee to Carignano like Nanda Kaul, or commit suicide like Monisha. The peculiar traits of the women characters in the novels of Desai provide the basic raw material for her novels.

The study of feminine psychology in Desai's novels cannot be completed without



discussing her novel *Fasting, Feasting*, the magnum opus of her literary career. In *Fasting, Feasting* Desai's concern is with the social and cultural construction of gender, her protest against the oppression of women, her defiance of the stereotyped roles allotted to women and her bold efforts to project the old prejudiced attitude of the society towards women. Though Desai is a psychological novelist, she deals with these aspects with the view point of psychological concept and exhibits the bitter impact of the ill treatment, gender discrimination, and indifferent attitude of family members on her women in her novels which lead them to the verge of neurosis and psychic discrepancy.

Fasting, Feasting suggests that the exploitation of women in India is directly related to corrupt customs and culture. The novel throws light on certain social practices along with the psychic condition of Uma, Anamika, Aruna and Malanie. Desai's subversion of this manifestation of patriarchal values is apparent in her tone.

Desai's *Fasting, Feasting* exhibits, apart from many other things, how women have to lead a life of suffocation and undeserved suffering - both physical and mental in a male dominated society; how a girl-child craves for parental affection but in the end gets nothing but frustration, isolation and unhomey treatment which lead her on the verge of neurosis. The novel deals with the story of two very different worlds- an extremely orthodox and domineering Indian family and an unusually idiosyncratic family in Massachusetts. Uma, the protagonist of the first part of the book represents the attitude of the author. Through this woman character, Desai endeavours to expose the hypocrisy and male -chauvinism in a particular conservative society or family. She shows how Uma bears the brunt of many insults and abuse flung by her own parents.

The family in which the protagonist, Uma is brought up is highly conservative, traditional and bragging. Everything is in the direct control of her parents called as 'Mamapapa'. The very opening of the book, connotatively presents the luxurious life of the parents through the image of the 'swinging sofa'. The opening passage is so rich in both manner and matter that it is enough to suggest the ensuing events and the discriminating attitude of the parents to their daughters:

On the verandah overlooking the garden, the drive and the gate, they sit together on the creaking sofa-swing suspended from its iron frame, dangling their legs so that the slippers on their feet hang loose. Before them a low round table is covered with a faded cloth, embroidered in the centre with flowers. Behind them a pedestal fan blows warm air at the back of their heads and neck. (*Fasting, Feasting*, 1)

The atmosphere of Uma's home is highly affected with surreptitious intrigues. The parents have nothing to do except visiting the coffee house and attending clubs. Uma, the docile daughter, would stifle her emotions merely to please Mamapapa while Aruna, her sister makes no efforts whatsoever to conceal her rebelliousness. She seldom rebels against the step-motherly conduct of the family. Mama once recalled her past days when she was a child in her parent's house. She presents her own experiences and reminds:

In my days girls in the family were not given sweets, nuts, and good things to eat. If something especial had been bought in the market, like sweets and nuts, it was given to the boys in the family. (6)

What Desai observes through the viewpoint of Mama is not unusual or surprising in the Indian scenario. Woman has always been a subject of great mystery and controversy in our history and tradition, myth and legend. She is allegedly charged with so many drawbacks mostly imaginary. She is endowed with the greater power of endurance and patience. She may be less a jingoist than man, having more power to stay at one place and stick to a regulated pattern of existence.

A cyclonic weave comes to sweep off the remaining affection, when Uma's mother becomes pregnant for the third time. The birth of Arun, the long awaited heir of the family declared the death knell of Uma's academic pursuits.

In spite of her keenness to be educated, Uma was repeatedly unsuccessful leading to the final discontinuation of her formal education, a decision which suited Mama well for Arun had to be looked after by someone and the time was appropriate to train Uma in a proper domestic lifestyle which apparently was her ultimate future. Mama used to say:

You know you failed your exams again. You are not being moved up. What is the use of going back to school - stay home and look after your baby brother. (21)

It is a great irony of the conservative Indian society that compels Uma to discontinue her study owing to her brother's well being while Arun is sent to America for higher education. This situation is quite similar to Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* in which Chacko, the brother of Ammu, is sent to Oxford for higher education, but on the other hand, Ammu is prevented from getting primary education up to matriculation.

Uma's frustration grows stronger and intense. The parents make frantic attempts to marry Uma- perhaps the final terminus for every Indian girl. She undergoes two traumatic experiences related to matrimony. Firstly, a suitor waits in the wings when the boy's family visits Uma's family and demands the hand of Aruna, the younger sister instead. Meanwhile, another proposal comes for Uma in which the boy's parents ask for dowry under the pretext of using it to build a house for Uma and their son. After the engagement, when negotiation began for the wedding, the prospective groom's parents break off the betrothal with the excuse that the boy was opting for higher education. Uma is a shattered girl when fuel was added to fire in the form of numerous marriage proposals for her younger sister. Aruna was better in many ways, physically, academically and even in fortune.

Subsequently, Uma gets married to Harish, a man of fatherly age, who never behaves like a husband. After the nuptial ceremony, Uma notices very little enthusiasm in her in-law's home. Her husband leaves for Meerut soon after marriage though it was discovered



later that he was an already married man with a wife and four children in Meerut where he ran an ailing pharmaceutical factory. To save it he needed another dowry. Consequently Uma is brought back to her parents' home as divorcees compelling her to recede into the background while "she relinquished all her foolishly unrealistic hopes" (87).

The claustrophobic feminine existentialism has been well exemplified through the character of Uma. After attempts at arranged marriages have ended in humiliation and disaster, Uma has nothing to look forward to, henceforth; she is at the beck and call of her parents.

The look of concern on her parents face compelled Uma to brood and to consider herself as an 'outcaste' for she had not experienced the world of a married woman.

Uma's state of mind has been narrated by Desai adequately:

. . . That she had not had their experience, that her's was others: that of an outcaste from the world of marriage, the world which all the murmuring and whispering and muttering implied, was all that mattered. Retreating to her room, she sank down on the floor, against the wall, and put her arms around her knees and wondered what it would have been like to have the Lord Shiva for a husband, have Him put His arms around her. (96-97)

The sense of isolation and alienation grips Uma when her parents leave her alone at home on the occasion of a bridge game at the club. Uma feels defeated and discontented, she is neither permitted to visit Mrs. Henry, the Baptist Missionary's wife nor Mother Agnes of the nearby convent nor even friends and neighbours as the parents were so conservative and apprehensive about the efforts Christians would make to 'convert' her. The depressed girl desperately longed to be somebody else's daughter. When Moyna, daughter of Mrs. Joshi, had gone to Delhi to pursue a career, Uma pleads with Mrs. Joshi:

Won't you adopt me, Aunty! won't you let me be your daughter, now Moyna has gone? and Mrs. Joshi would reply, laughing. 'Of course stay here, be my daughter' then give her a gentle nudge in the direction of her own home, with a basket of mangoes or a jar of pickles for Mama.(131)

Many times Uma too, thought of escape in the form of a career. A faint ray of hope appears in Dr. Dutta's offer for a job. Papa frowned at the very idea of a 'working woman'. This was the end of her dream at getting freedom from the claustrophobic existence she had for almost forty three years which accelerates her mental agony.

Desai has taken into her preview other women too in the novel but Uma suffers a little more because she is rejected in the marriage market. The story of Anamika is equally significant to study the feminine psyche in the indifferent, harsh and cold male-dominated social frame-work. She is not only good and pretty but an outstanding student as well. She performs so brilliantly in her final exams that she gets a scholarship to Oxford where only the

most favoured and privileged could ever hope to go. But unfortunately her parents are so backward and possessive that they decline her desire to go to Oxford. The letter of acceptance from Oxford gets locked by the parents in a cupboard which becomes a thing for exhibition with pride before everyone. It shows their conservatism, hypocrisy and ostentation. Unlike Uma, owing to Anamika's pleasant demeanour and smart and attractive personality, her parents succeed in getting her married. All the scholarship, distinction, beauty and good behaviour of Anamika fall flat once she reaches her husband's house, she gets tortured mentally as well as physically in front of her husband who remains indifferent and a mute spectator.

Moreover she never goes out of the house except the temple with other women. Constant beating led to miscarriage, thereby permanently disabling her from conceiving. Consequently One day news arrives that Anamika is dead. According to the details she had poured kerosene oil over her body in the early hours and set herself ablaze. All this happened after twenty five years of married life.

Her parents accepted her death without any protest, saying - "that is fate, God had willed it and it was Anamika's destiny" (151). Anamika's tragic death reminds us of Monisha in *Voice in the City* who also prefers death by pouring kerosene oil on herself, owing to the indifferent behaviour of her in-laws and husband. This is not only the predicament of Anamika or Monisha only but most of the women suffer from this dilemma which affect their mental equilibrium and force them to act violently.

The women in *Fasting, Feasting* depicted so far - Uma, and Anamika are in one way or the other, victims of the age-old traditions and customs of India's social set-up and their inevitable loneliness. In Part Two of the novel Desai has portrayed two other female characters and their psyche- Mrs. Pattons, the landlord of Arun and her daughter, Malanie, both feeling suffocated in the modernized but highly impersonal western life style. Mrs. Pattons, obsessed with the idea of food, makes frequent trips to the market only to ensure that her kitchen cabinets are well stocked with edible goods. Mrs. Pattons blumic daughter, Melanie is an introvert and disintegrated child, who shuns company. She is deprived of parental care and sympathy. She is so much neglected that she develops an aberrant and indifferent attitude to everyone in the house. In a fit of anger she bursts out:

I won't eat anything you cook. You can give it to the cook. Give it to him. She points dramatically to Arun. I am not going to eat any of that poison. Everything you cook is poison. She howls, and blunders out of the room, leaving her mother white with amazement. (207)

Melanie is averse to converse with anyone including people of her own age. In order to overcome her loneliness and desperation she overeats candy. Her description is a truthful and tragic commentary on the loneliness of the affluent:

. . . She sits in a gloom of the unlit staircase, munching the nuts with a mulish



obstinacy, regarding him (Arun) with eyes that are slits of pink-rimmed green. Has she been crying? She looks sullen rather than tearful. It is her habitual expression. (164)

Both Mrs. Pattons and Melanie find the western environment to be stifling and phlegmatic. Desai stipulates that just as women in the East fail to emancipate themselves from the shackles of traditional life style, similarly women in the West feel burdened by the excess of their own society.

Desai's entire fiction traces the changing images and psyche of women in the face of existential dilemmas. Most of Desai's women characters registered protest against the circumstances which oppressed them. Yet where Maya, Monisha, Nanda, Anamika and Uma failed to win their frustration and resentment, Bim, Sita and Sophie succeeded in doing so. Desai is not a surrealist yet her understanding of the female psyche is highly distinctive and remarkable. Desai stresses the isolation and loneliness of her female characters surrounded by their self-created problems. Harish Raizada observes:

Their attempt to seek their refuge in their loneliness worsens their situation still more, for their solitary musings and their mobility quickens the process of their disintegration. (193)

Thus it can be concluded that Desai is basically a socio-psychological novelist dealing with families in transition in the post -colonial Indian set-up with female characters as the central focus. The present novel's main thread is woven around socio-familial complications in post-independent India where neo-colonial consciousness particularly among the women, whether they are unmarried or married both, results in claustrophobic schizophrenia due to the existential dilemma of attempting to compromise between the traditional set-up which has not completely disappeared and the so called new-awakening of a sort of women liberation which has not yet completely set in.

Works Cited:

- Desai, Anita. *Fasting, Feasting*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1999. Print. (All references to the text have been indicated parenthetically in the chapter).
- _____. *Indian Women Writers: The Eyes of the Beholder*. Ed. Maggie Butcher. London, 1983. Print.
- Ghosh, Arya. "Baumgartner's Bombay and the Irony of Possession." *The Post-Modern Indian Novel in English*. Ed. Vinay Kripal. Bombay: Allied, 1996. Print.
- Gopal, N.R. *A Critical Study of the Novels of Anita Desai*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers, 1995. Print.
- Gupta, R.K. *The Novels of Anita Desai: A Feminist Perspective*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers, 2002. Print.
- _____. Hariprasanna. "An Expression of Feminine Sensibility: Anita Desai's Bye-Bye Blackbird." *The Indian Journal of English Studies*. Vol. Xxxii, 1994-95. Print.
- Raizada, Harish. *Indian English Novelists*. Delhi: K.K. Publication, 1996. Print. Srivastava

Gender Discrimination and Suppression of Identity: Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting*

R.K. "Anita Desai at Work: An Interview." *Perspective on Anita Desai*. Ghaziabad: Vimal Prakashan, 1984. Print.