

The Psychic Odyssey of Uma in Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting*

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Abstract

Anita Desai, an eminent, prolific Indian novelist has become a dominant figure in the twentieth century Indian fiction. She has received a wide recognition for her multifaceted writings. She has proved her literary skill as a renowned novelist, short story writer, and screen writer. She is a writer who has influenced generations of writers. Desai's novels are obviously the presentation of social realities from a psychological perspective. Desai shows her perpetual interest in revealing the psychic life of her characters to unravel the mystery of their inner life. She exposes the fact that nobody is an exile from society and the individuals should find fulfillment in their lives through self-exploration. Desai's novel *Fasting Feasting* is entirely based on human bondage. Desai here makes an attempt to present Uma as a girl, who has to live in society accepting all the miseries, sufferings and humiliations. The methodology employed in this article is in accordance with the instructions given in MLA Hand book for Writers of Research Papers (Seventh Edition).

KEYWORDS : alienation, reconciliation, existential dilemmas, psychological realisms.

Anita Desai, the renowned Indian novelist holds a unique place among the contemporary women novelists of India. Desai's novels are an expression of the psychic condition of many Indian women. The existential predicament of loneliness, alienation and reconciliation dominates her characters' mind. Desai in her novels presents the image of the suffering women, her emotional, spiritual and psychic odyssey in the male dominated society. Her main forte is the exploration of the inner world, delving hard into the limitless depth of the mind and bringing out the hidden contours of the human psyche... Desai herself reveals in an interview with Yashodhra Dalmia:

One's preoccupation can only be a perpetual search for meaning for value, for-dare I say it-truth. I think of the world as an iceberg-the one-tenth visible above the surface of the water is what we call reality, but the nine-tenths that are submerged make up the truth, and that is what one is trying to explore. (13)

So, Anita Desai's novels lay stress on interior rather than on exterior characterization on motives and circumstances.

Like Shakespeare, Desai has no heroes. Only heroines dominate her novels from the beginning till the end. Desai, being a woman herself delves deeper into her women's mind. While exploring deeper into the recesses of women's mind, Desai has become familiar with the psychological theories. But she has denied any extensive study of psychology. Her deep interest in the submerged worlds of human psyche has brought her in tune with many contemporary theories. Freudian Psychoanalytic theories could serve as a basis for understanding the causes of women's repression and their impact on the female psyche. Peter Barry states:

All of Freud's work depends upon the notion of the 'Unconscious' which is the part of the mind beyond consciousness which nevertheless has a strong influence upon our actions., Freud was not the discoverer of the unconscious: his uniqueness lies in his attributing to it such a decisive role in our lives. (96)

Desai's real concern is the exploration of human psyche especially of feminine psyche. Her novels are an exploration of individuals, their passions and emotions. Desai's women protagonists find themselves forced into unsuitable environments, fighting against the odds. They meet failures and disappointments while waging war against the negative and cruel social forces. The defeat, failure and disappointment make them suffer, but they suffer with tragic dignity.

Fasting, Feasting centres around the life of Uma. The novel deals with the lives of Mama Papa with their three children Uma, Aruna and Arun. Uma is expected to be an obedient elder daughter, an affectionate and motherly sister and everything but an individual. Her father's ecstasy at the birth of a son makes the wounds even deeper in his daughter's mind. It makes obvious the truth of her accidental birth into the world as a 'girl'. If the parents had been given a choice, they would never have wanted to give birth to a female child, "Papa, in his elation, leaping over three chairs in the hall, one after the other, like a boy playing leap frog, his arms flung up in the air and his hair flying. 'A boy!' he screamed, 'a bo-oy! Arun, Arun at last!' (17).

As a young girl, Uma has her own dreams and desires. She is not a bright student but she wants to continue her convent education. But her brother Arun's birth totally changes her life style. There is nothing more painful for a girl than the pressure of doing the duties of grown ups and the pleasures of childhood denied. So, Uma is reduced to the status of a domestic help.

The novel very clearly presents the inner cry of Uma, her entrapment at home and her existential anguish. When she becomes a grown up woman, her parents try their level best to arrange for her marriage. Two times the marriage arrangements end in disaster. After being rejected in the marriage market, Uma feels disillusioned with life. She also has the symptoms of neurosis. In her growing neurosis, she loses self-control and shouts at the servant. Oliver the well-known critic of Anita Desai explains Uma's victimisation as, "Uma, the older daughter, is a dismal failure in whatever she puts her hands to. Though she loves school she fails in all her exams. She is quite unable to master the art of house keeping and keeps dropping and breaking things. She is plain, short-sighted, clumsy and terrible embarrassment to her family" (159).

Having failed to get her married, Uma's parents use her to make life more comfortable for themselves. It is the fate of women who remain single in this patriarchal setup. She is continually at the beck and call of her parents. She feels highly dejected and frustrated. All her decisions are controlled by her parents. In desperation, she thinks of writing a letter to a friend to explain her existential predicament but finally realises that she has none in this world:

She could write a letter to a friend a private message of despair, dissatisfaction, yearning; she has a packet of notepaper, pale violet with a pink rose embossed in the corner-but who is the friend? Mrs. Joshi? But since she lives next door, she would be surprised. Aruna? But Aruna would pay no attention, she is too busy. Cousin Ramu? Where was he? Had his farm swallowed him up? And Anamika had marriage devoured her. (137)

Uma's mother constantly goes to parties and club meetings but when Mr. O' Henry invites Uma to a coffee party, her parents create a havoc in the house. Bhatt presents Uma as a caged bird in her own house, "Uma knows best, she is a caged bird in her home, singing to the tunes of and at the order of her MamaPapa" (148). Both her parents are deaf and blind to the needs of their daughter. They do not understand her emotional needs. They are not willing to provide any kind of happiness to her. They forget that Uma is not a body she has a soul as well. They didn't allow her to go to a party with her cousin, Ramu. Asha choubey opines that, "Uma's existence, has been reduced into an unfed servant who has so many duties but no rights" (195).

The claustrophobic feminine existentialism is presented through the character of Uma. She has to brood and to consider herself as an 'outcaste' for she has not experienced the world of a married woman. Uma has to live in the society accepting all the humiliations, injustices, sufferings and miseries without raising her voice. Uma suffers quietly accepting the mute miseries with a stoic acceptance and a great sense of endurance. After her tragic withdrawal from husband Harish, it seems to be a most tragic situation in which a woman placed. Her inner cries are not heard by anyone not by her mother or by her sister.

Uma wants to run away from the fetters of her existence in her house by tirelessly serving her parents. Once she gets a chance to escape. Moyna Joshi who is pursuing a career in Delhi, invites in Uma, an aspiration to make a career to leave home and to soar high. But her wings have been so badly and prematurely clipped by her parents that only Uma can flutter her wings, but cannot fly. Poon is of the view that:

Uma, assured of a lifetime of confinement in her parental home, nevertheless manages to experience a liberation from her body when she is overtaken by periodic fits and fainting spells which on-verbally express her protest against the oppressiveness of her family and her victimization by patriarchal Indian Society. (36)

Uma, who is faced with failure after failure is a defeated dreamer. Uma in her existential search can be compared with Ammu of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. Her mental agony is accelerated as she is treated as a non-entity in her own house. She is not allowed to express herself. Uma has to live in the society without raising her voice against the humiliations, injustices and sufferings.

Uma tries to escape from the world of sufferings by making two attempts to drown in the river. But both the suicide attempts end in a failure. When she goes along with Mira Masi on a ritual dip. "She sank to her chin and the current carried her away. It had not occurred to her that she needed to know how to swim, she had been certain the river would sustain her" (44). But Uma is rescued by the boat men. If Uma is drowned in the river, her meaningless, existence in the world might have been over. Again she attempts suicide by making a watery grave for herself. She has an inner urge to escape from the dreary world of tortures. Uma's hopelessness, depression, anxiety and loss of pleasure in life lead her to end her life by drowning. Being an unmarried woman she has to live at the mercy of her parents, till the end of her life in her parent's house. Here she becomes the traditional archetype woman who is born to live and suffer. For her every need, she has to depend on her parents. So, suicide seems to be the only option for Uma.

... when she had plunged into the dark water and let it close quickly and tightly over her, the flow of the river, the current, drew her along, clasping her and dragging her with it. It was not fear she felt, or danger. Or, rather, these were only what edged something much

darker, wilder, more thrilling, a kind of exultation – it was exactly what she had always wanted, she realised. Then they had saved her. (114)

Through her protagonists like Uma, Desai reflects a picture of the middle class society in India. She delves deep into Uma's inner consciousness to express her craving for love and affection. Desai here presents the psychic dilemma of a heroine, who questions the very relevance of her existence in the world. Desai tries to imply that in the midst of the existential dilemmas, there is a glimmer of hope, that brings brightness to drive away the darkness in Uma's life.

Towards the end, Uma's mother's love and her perception of her daughter's lonely plight brings about an understanding between the two and saves Uma from destruction. When the whole family performs the religious rituals for the cousin Anamika's ashes who was burnt to death by her husband's family, a great thing happens there. Quite surprisingly, there comes a bond-a reunion of Uma with her mother. While they are travelling in the boat, Uma suddenly finds her mother clasping her with care:

Uma suddenly finds a hand clasping hers tightly. It is Mama's. When Uma turns to look she sees Mama's eyes are closed and there are tears on her cheeks. 'Mama', she whispers, and squeezes the hand back, thinking they are together still, they have the comfort of each other. Consolingly, she whispers, 'I told cook to make puri-alu for breakfast and have it ready?'. Mama gives a sob and tightens her hold on Uma's hand as though she too finds the puri-alu comforting; it is a bond. (158-59)

There comes an optimistic view that this motherly affection and comfort Uma longs all through the years will make her to lead a much better happy life afterwards. So Uma tries to reconcile herself with the environment, she accepts life with a new hope to live on.

While dealing with the predicament of women and their social and moral dilemmas, Desai has triumphantly emerged in breaking new grounds of presenting psychological realisms. She uses sharp expressions and vivid images to express the psychic odyssey of Uma.

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