

Tradition and Gender in Anita Desai's Fasting, Feasting

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Abstract

The present paper is an attempt to focus on how tradition, society and patriarchy decides the future of the children in an Indian middle class family in Anita Desai's fiction, Fasting, Feasting. The story also focuses on the sufferings and discrimination faced by the main character of the play, Uma. It is found that tradition and customs plays an important role in deepening the sorrow of Uma.

KEYWORD : Suffering, tradition, gender, discrimination

Women writers in India have shown their distinct identity after independence. They have established a distinct identity by contributing largely to the Indian English literature. Women writers like Kamala Markandya, Shashi Deshpande, Arundhati Roy, Ruth Pawar Jhabvala, Anita Desai and many others have occupied a unique place in the history of Indian Writings in English. The women writers have their own style of writing. Many of their writings largely deal with the theme of sorrows and sufferings of the women, which reflected the society as it was and experienced by them. Anita Desai is one of India's foremost writers and has authored numerous writings. She has authored a number of fictions and some of them were shortlisted for the Booker Prize. Anita Desai's novel, Fasting, Feasting published in 1999, is a wonderful novel dealing with the story of an Indian middle class family living in a small town. The story has two settings. The first part is set in India and the second part is set in the United States. The story focuses on Uma, a spinster and the main character of the novel along with Arun, the boy and the baby of the family.

The objective of the paper is to throw light on the traditions, customs, suffering and discrimination faced by Uma. It is observed that patriarchy dominates the lives of the Indian women and this domination creates hurdles in progressing and limiting the happiness and opportunities of their self development in women.

As the story opens, we find husband and wife rather Mamapapa of Uma sitting in the varandah swing. Mama and Papa though physically two persons but have become so much like one person in course of time and so Uma refers to them as Mamapapa. Uma's father, a middle aged lawyer, and her mother, a housewife, who all the time is beside her husband when he is at home. Uma's father or papa is seen to dictate the family activities and projects himself to be the most important person in the family. Mama is proud of being the wife of an important person and always with him and cooperates with him on every issue. Uma is interested in attending convent school in spite of her repeated failures. She is not at all interested in household activities. Mama is of the opinion that she must be able to cook and do other household activities. It is of course the tradition and customs prevalent in the society that girls must know all these which will be helpful when they will be married off. Society wants girls to be expert in cooking, doing household things and rearing children. Education seems secondary for the girls. Uma is forced to take interest in the household activities. Mama says: In my days, girls in the family were not given sweets, nuts, good things to

eat. If something special is brought in the market, like sweets or nuts it was given to the boys in the family (5). It sometime seems that girls are not treated as human beings. They were even discriminated from having good food. Uma serves her parents and looks after every household works as directed by her Mamapapa. Uma studied in a convent school and made her parents unhappy by her repeated failures. She was forced to leave the school in spite of her begging and appeals for continuing her studies. She goes to Mother Agnes for help but has to return unhappy as Mother Agnes told that she is powerless to help her. It is Uma's ill luck that the demand for leaving the school became permanent when her younger brother, a baby boy was born in the family. She has to look after her younger brother as he cannot be left to the care of the servants. When Uma was trained by Mama how to take care of her baby brother, Uma tried to protest by saying: But ayah can do this...ayah can do that.. and pointed that ayah had looked after her and her sister, Aruna when they were babies, Mama's expression made it clear that the matter is different now, different in the sense that it is a baby boy and he needs proper attention. The baby boy was given so much attention by Mamapapa. They keep their eye fixed on what he eats, whether he had his fixed quantity of milk, whether he had the prescribed boiled egg and meat broth and so on. Traditionally it has been passed from generations to generations that the baby boy is always given much importance in every aspect whether be it his food or education, opportunities or other freedom. Had Uma been given such importance in her studies by her parents, she too would have perform well and never displease her parents. Mamapapa loves and cares so much for Arun, the boy of the family, and at the same time shows their discriminating behaviour towards their daughters. Uma and Aruna are never loved as Arun was by their parents. Uma suffers inwardly and behaved as a child. As Uma grew up, she hardly goes out and tries to find happiness and freedom in her isolation. She never showed her disobedience towards her parents. Obeying one's parents is a traditional social rule in India. Uma is happy when one day her cousin, Ramu arrives in their house. Mamapapa dislikes him. In spite of protest of Mamapapa, Ramu is successful in taking Uma to a restaurant for dinner. Uma enjoys the outing with Ramu and comes home drunk. She is scolded as an 'idiot' and 'hussy' and pushed to her room. Mira-Masi, a distant relative of Mama, sometimes used to visit them on her way to ashram. Mira-Masi, a widow, dedicated her life to lord Shiva. Uma loves the visit of Mira-Masi and when she used to visit them she used to sit curling up to her feet and listen to the epic myths and about the adventures of the Hindu gods. Uma loves Mira-Masi because she leads a free life without any interference of anybody. She also likes her because of her magical stories. Once Mira-Masi compelled Mama to send Uma with her to the ashram. Uma stayed with Mira-Masi in the ashram for about a month. She enjoyed life there by wandering freely all the day through the river paths of the ashram. After a month, Ramu and Arun come to the ashram to take Uma. Uma was sad to leave the ashram and Mira-Masi. But she must be at home as Mamapapa sent for her. Though Mira-Masi and Ramu are of different characters but both of them have provided some adventures and happiness in the life of Uma. Uma's cousin, Anamika was full with female virtues which Indian traditional society approves. She has beauty with brain. She is well accomplished, humble and obedient. She wins scholarship to Oxford which is the hope of many privileged sons.

In Anamika there was no such thing: she was simply lovely as a flower is lovely, soft, petal-skinned, bumblebee-eye, pink-lipped, always on the verge of bubbling dove-like laughter, loving smiles, and

with a good nature like a radiance about her. Whatever she was , there was peace, contentment, well-being.(67-68)

But her parents, Lila Aunty and Bokul Uncle won't allow her to go to Oxford as she is in her marriageable age and above all she is a girl and girls should be married off at the right time. Anamika's beauty and scholarship would fetch her wealthy and educated husband. It is observed that however good at studies, girls are to be married off soon. Her interest, her likings and disliking are never given importance. She could never bring herself to contradict her parents or cause them grief (70). Anamika was married off to a much older man only because he matches her in degrees and prestige. She lived in her husband's place like a servant and later on burnt to death by her in-laws. Once when Uma and Aruna talked about Anamika whether she will be send back to her parents by her in-laws as she will not be able to bear children anymore and if she is sent, her Lila Aunty will be happy. Mama says how can she be happy when her daughter is at home permanently. What will people say? What will people think? When Aruna cried out who cares what they say? Listening to this, Mama scolded them: Don't talk like that. 'I don't want to hear all these modern ideas. Is it what you learnt from the nuns at the convent?'(72) It is in Indian tradition that girls once married off are never to return to her parental home permanently in whatsoever the situation is. Anamika beared all the mental and physical torture silently in her in-laws place and finally gives her life. Anamika could have complained to her parents about her sufferings. It is clear that the value of women in the society is only submissiveness, having beauty, ability to do domestic work and to bear child. Anamika's parents could have saved Anamika but to save their own face from the society, they denied the reality of the situation and Anamika had to pay for it by sacrificing her life. After Anamika's marriage, Mama is communicating their relatives and sending pictures of Uma to find a marriage match for her. As Uma grew older, men showed less interest in her and preferred her younger sister, Aruna for marriage. When three marriage attempts failed, Uma's parents gave up the idea of trying to marry Uma off. They thought that Uma has wasted her youth and decided to marry off their younger daughter, Aruna.

While Mama searched energetically for a husband for Uma, families were already 'making enquiries' about Aruna. Yet nothing could be done about them; it was imperative that Uma marry first. That was the only decent, the only respectable line of behaviour (81).

So, Mamapapa made a last effort to marry Uma off. They hurriedly respond to an advertisement in a Sunday newspaper placed by a descent family in search of a bride for their only son. It seemed that when it comes to marriage and relationship, both Uma and Aruna were taken as burden by their parents and wanted to dispose them off soon. Though the engagement of Uma was fixed but it did not materialise into marriage as the merchant's son to whom Uma was engaged to decides to go for higher education. He did not want that his studies should be hampered by early marriage and wanted to postpone the engagement indefinitely. The marriage breaks off only because the parents of Uma are in haste to marry off their daughter and without inquiring they wanted to dispose off Uma, and fulfil the social and traditional expectations. "There were so many marriage proposals for Aruna that Uma's unmarried state was not only an embarrassment but an obstruction"(87). Mamapapa makes a last effort to marry off Uma. Mama tried hard to dispose Uma by sending her photograph around to everyone who advertises in the matrimonial columns. Finally

the man who approved her was a married man without any issue. The marriage took place, dowry was offered but it is observed that neither the husband of Uma nor her in-laws took any interest in her. Immediately after marriage Uma's husband leaves for Meerut and did not come back. One day, suddenly Papa in rage arrives at Uma's in-laws place takes Uma back telling her that husband has wife and children in Meerut. He married her only take dowry and save his business.

Having cost her parents two dowries, without a marriage to show in return, Uma was considered ill-fated by all and no more attempts were made to marry her off.(98)

Uma feels that she lost all her values to her parents. Moreover it is observed how decisions are made in a patriarchal society. The parents of Uma tried to marry her off anyhow and at the same time they brought her back home in no time. There is nothing to be heard from Uma. Decisions are made by Papa or the elder male members of the family and the decision is final. Daughters are to obey them silently. It is observed that though Mamapapa gave more importance to their son, Arun, but hardly they paid any attention to the emotional aspect of their children. During Arun's stay in the United States, Uma was asked by Mamapapa to write a letter to Arun to inquire if he had received the parcel sent to him by Mamapapa through Justice Dutta's son. Papa dictates Uma writes. Papa criticises Uma for her inability to write fast and properly. He scolds, "What did they teach you in the convent?" When Uma complains that her eyes are paining, Papa again reproaches her saying, 'Every one's eyesight grows weaker as they grow older'. Don't you know that? You think my eyes are not grown weaker?'(129). Uma is criticised for her inability to write properly but it seems that Mamapapa have forgotten that they themselves have denied Uma the opportunity of basic education. They forced her to leave school in spite of her repeated appeals and look after the baby boy of the family. Uma was not only denied the basic education but she was also deprived from medical care when she needed. When Mama answers to Papa's reproaches saying, 'Yes, but you went to see the doctor and he gave you new glasses'(130), Papa refuses to admit his mistakes being arrogant of his gender and the social status he posses.

Uma is fed up of fulfilling the demands of her parents. Sometimes she becomes irritated but she goes on. She tries to find consolation from the poems of the book which she got from the Christmas bazaar. She reads some of the poems, utters and speaks to her own situation. We feel sympathy for Uma whose life is lifeless. She suffered from her childhood and her suffering continued. she is deprived of many things in her life. The sufferings and the injustice which she received was because of gender bias tradition, patriarchal family and the norms of the society.

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