

Status of women in Anita Desai's novel: "Fasting, Feasting"

Mrs. Gayatri Kaman

H. No. 65, 2nd Floor, A, Behind L P School
Milan Chowk, Ganeshguri, Guwahati, Assam

ABSTRACT:

From the early age women have always been exploited in the society. Women writers have written about their status and role in the society. Problems of women are the central theme of the most of the women writers. It is quite natural to expose the problems of individual viewing universal point of view. But it quite ridiculous to think of how a women is being exploited in many ways even after seven decades of independent India. Anita Desai's novel "Fasting, Feasting" describes the condition of women in general, their role in a family and the status of unmarried women in particular. Uma , the protagonist of the novel is a spinster and her individual life is reduced to that of a maid in the family.

Keywords: *Women, Problems, Exploited, Love, Betrayal, status.*

Introduction:

Anita Desai is widely recognized as an Indian feminist writing in English. She is a remarkable painter of her characters. She always tries to project the misery and problems of woman in the Indian society. Anita Desai is one such writer, who through her most absorbing and appealing work Fasting, Feasting tries to change the mindset and outlook of society and particularly to elevate the position of women from the sufferings and hardships of society and

to give her a status equal to men. She deals with this theme seriously and always tried to highlight the problems of women in a male dominated society.

Today Indian female novelists occupy a distinct place in Indian English literature. They fearlessly state the loopholes of patriarchal society and describe in a vivid manner the plight of women in their writings. Anita Desai, one of India's foremost writers has authored numerous works of fiction and occupies a distinct place in Indian English literature. A Fellow of the Royal society of literature in London, the American Academy of Arts and Letters in New York, Girton College at the University of Cambridge and most recently the Sahitya Akademi in India. Anita Desai has also been a professor of writing at MIT and has frequently been honoured with awards and prizes for literature and the Padma Shri.

As a writer she has been shortlisted for the Booker Prize and her novel "Fasting, Feasting" describes the status and role of woman in the society. The novel is divided into parts- the first part is set in India and the second part is set in the USA. In the very beginning of the novel the readers are provided with a picture of a typical Indian household where all the love and care is bestowed to a boy child. In the family "papa" is the head of the family and "mama" is the helper who assists him in each and every walk of life. The family is ruled by customs and traditions and their sole aim is to marry off the girls and educate the boys.

The fact of weight age being given to the boys was present in the society from the past generations, that is why Mama says-

"In my day, girls in the family were not given sweets, nuts, good things to eat.

If something special had been bought in the market, like sweets or nuts,

It was given to the boys in the family" (Page -5).¹

In this novel she presents both female and male characters to present the actual face of a patriarchal society. Anita Desai presents various female characters in this novel, who are the victims of patriarchal society and mainly the character of a woman Uma, who suffers the most. Though at the end of the novel she realizes her condition and she tried different means and ways to break the patriarchal norms. But it was not enough to strike and cut down the age's long tradition of male domination to gain freedom and liberation. Whereas, Auurn, brother of Uma enjoys full freedom only because of being a male.

Eldest daughter Uma has stayed at home to look after her parents , after two failed marriage; middle child Aruna has a successful marriage and has almost forgotten her roots ;and the third child a son named Arun has gone to the US for further studies. The second part deals with the Patton family in the US where the women have the freedom to do as they like even though their real happiness is a matter of question. Mrs.Patton seems to find her happiness in the supermarket and Melanie, their daughter takes comfort in her bulimia which seems to give her a kind of relief from the strains of her life (Page.134). ²

The story revolves around the life of woman in general and the life of unmarried woman in particular. Uma, the main character in the story, is a spinster whose individual life is diminished to the life of a maid .The whole life she struggles to create an identity of her own and live an independent life. She spends her life in fulfilling the demands of her parents while preparation are made to expand the education of Arun-the sun of the family .After Arun's birth Papa's happiness knew no bounds—

“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!”

After his birth the atmosphere of the household changed, Mama is proud to have fulfilled her role of giving birth to a son, Papa is proud to have been able to produce, finally a male offspring. Now, that a son is born, Uma lost her right to education.

Another character whose identity is submerged in the family is Uma's cousin Anamika. Anamika is the graceful and everyone's favourite in the family. But, unfortunately even though she won a scholarship to Oxford, her parents didn't even consider allowing her to go just because she is a girl. And after her marriage to a rich, educated man she spent her entire time in the kitchen and had a miscarriage due to the beatings by her in-laws. The miscarriage made her infertile and her value was that of damaged goods with no perfection. When Uma hopes for Anamika's return to her home Mama says—

“How can she be happy if she is sent home? What will people say? What will they think?”
(pg-72)¹

And when Uma showed her indifference to the views of people in the society, once again Mama comes up with her view—

“Don't talk like that, 'Mama scolded them. 'I don't want to hear all these modern ideas. Is this what you learnt from the nuns at the convent?’” (pg-72)¹

So it is very clear from the sayings of Mama –what woman thinks about woman, what is their role in the society and their contribution towards the family. Ironically, Mama and other woman characters in the novel have no sympathy for Uma or Anamika even though they themselves belong to the same category.

Anita Desai has made a clear distinction between the male and female characters in the novel. The man — epitome of freedom while the woman — struggling for freedom and identity — discriminated only on gender biasness. To quote Simone de Beauvoir ---

“One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.”(The Second Sex)

Desai often noted for her sensitive portrayal of the inner life of her female characters successfully portrays the woman characters in the novel. The stark reality, along with the shocking and sad story of woman’s suffering is presented through the characters of Uma and Anamika.

The novel deeply explores in a very poignant manner the life of woman and particularly the life of an unmarried woman who has to bear all the injustice meted out to her. Even though she struggles to live an independent life she cannot liberate herself from the clutch of the age old customs and traditions of this patriarchal society.

References:

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