

Compromise and Submission in Uma in *Fasting Feasting* by Anita Desai**NAVITA**

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The protagonist of Anita Desai's novel *Fasting Feasting*, Uma is a submissive and passive girl who amidst her desire for better life and company yields to the circumstances she faces in her life. The novel depicts her pathetic journey from a schoolgirl to a middle aged woman spent in her parents' home in the service of its inmates. Her obedience, submission, compromise, inaction and passiveness puts her always at the receiving end and she sees her dreams of romance fade away in the mist. Deprived of freedom, love and romance Uma seems to be a victim of Indian patriarchy, her own goodness and unfavourable luck. The present paper attempts to explore the factors determining the compromising and submissive aspect of Uma's personality. Apart from the effects of patriarchal society, her subtle sensibilities, the traditional values she cherishes, obedience and sense of duty towards her parents and lack of courage do play their role in the making of her compromising nature. Goodness and timidity coexisted in her, worked in a subtle and complex way and guided the course of her life in which luck played a dominant role.

Key Words: compromise, submission, obedience, patriarchy, society, marriage

Anita Desai has been a prolific writer of Indian English fiction in the post- independence era. Study of feminine sensibilities has been her major concern among the multilayered themes in her novels. A woman's quest for self-identify in the complex scenario of Indian culture has been a distinct feature of her novels. Among the female protagonists in her novels there are many memorable characters. The protagonist Uma in her novel 'Fasting Feasting ' appears to be a typical Indian girl whose life is full of compromises and sacrifices. Unable to get a suitable match, she spent her life in her parents' home. Her hopes for an independent and interesting life fade with every passing day. She accepted life in a submissive way showing least sign of rebelliousness and finally see her dreams for better life and company vanish out of sight. Her environment and subtle sensibilities worked together in unfavourable circumstances to shape her life.

Right from her first appearance till the end of the novel, Uma is seen playing subservient to the whims and fancies of her parents. The opening of the novel presents Uma engaged in multiple tasks. Her parents depend on her for every single work. She instructs the cook to make the fritters and sweets that Papa is in mood to eat. She is to take the dictation of the letter and pack the parcel of shawl that are to be sent to the States to her younger brother Arun. Uma's father, Papa is the typical example of Indian Patriarchy in which the male member lives like an emperor and the females attend him like servants. Mama always remain besides Papa to see his needs and requirements and pass further orders to Uma.

Rousing herself, Mama called, ' Uma! Uma Tell cook to bring Papa his lemonade!' Uma ran. (Fasting 9)

Her parents have been stern and strict to her and feel that Uma's duty is to serve them till she is married off. Education and freedom are not meant for girls. Uma is brought up in this environment. Uma understands this thinking of her parents and compromises to the situation when a brother is born in the family and her education is brought to a halt. Although she wasn't a brilliant student in the school, she was attached to her school and teachers. She is definitely hurt when Mama doesn't allow her to do homework. She is finally coaxed to be at home in the service of her brother till she is married off. Compromise and submission seems to be inherent and inbuilt in her but in bringing her up her parents invited obligation from her more than her sister Aruna, who was good looking and behaved smartly.

So now Mama was able to say, 'You know you failed your exams again..... Stay at home and look after your baby brother.' Then seeing Uma's hands Shake as she tried to continue with folding the nappies, she seemed to feel a little pity. '.....You are a big girl now. We are trying to arrange a marriage for you. Not now, she added, seeing the panic on Uma's face. 'But soon. Till then, You can help me look after Arun. And learn to run the house.' (Fasting 22)

Pressures of society also made Uma's life full of challenges. Timely marriage of a girl is highly expected and demanded by the society. People take pride if they are successful in finding a suitable match for their daughters and are able to marry them off. For this reason the beautiful girls have an upper edge as there are brighter chances of their marriages and when it comes to plain and unattractive girls like Uma, parents become disturbed and pressurize their daughters to present themselves in the best way. Uma is taught by her mother to come up with her best when Mrs Syal visits their home with her brother. Mama powdered Uma's face to cover her pimples. She is also told to say that she has herself prepared the samosas and barfi.

'You did,' Mama threatened her with a fierce look. All this work and nothing to show for it- that was Mama's fate. How Mama had always envied Lila Aunty for having a daughter like Anamika, a model of perfection like Anamika. No that was not for her, she sighed.' (Fasting76-77)

Once the daughters are married, parents always pretend that their daughters are happy fearing the talks of the society. Uma's cousin Anamika was beautiful, intelligent and talented and got married at the appropriate time according to the standard set by the society. She was tortured and

mistreated by her in - laws, but her parents keep on pretending the happy life of Anamika. The fear of not being able to follow the standards set by the society is so deep rooted in Indian mindset that well educated people like Uma's father feel helpless.

Uma's feelings are like other females. Uma likes to enjoy privacy which she rarely finds. She likes to see her card and bangle collection. She never demanded anything from her parents. Only when she gets an opportunity, she gives time to herself. In the novel we see her indulging in self only when her parents aren't around. She has desires which remain suppressed and snubbed. Having desires and expectations like normal girl, her only fault was she was less demanding, less assertive. She always looks for company and finds tuning with Mira Masi and Ramu Bhayia and is excited to welcome them home whereas her parent's reaction is opposite to her as they don't like the intrusion of any unwelcomed guest to disturb the peace and tranquility of their life. Uma is more conversant to them and shares her feelings with them. Because of their strict and stern attitude Uma's parents could not be her friends. In spite of the rudeness of their behaviour, Uma remains extremely tolerant of their dictates.

Uma's excursion with her cousin Ramu is the lone episode in the whole novel in which we find Uma swimming in the sea exuberance and gaiety. It seems that she rarely gets a chance to enjoy herself. She is the kind of girl whose demands are simple, she takes pleasure in ordinary things but her feathers are clipped at the slightest flight. She feels excited to make a call to Mrs. O' Henry when her parents aren't around. In typical patriarchal way she is snubbed at the least attempt to find freedom.

'Quiet, you hussy! Not another word from you, you idiot child!' Mama's face glints like a knife in the dark, growing narrower and fiercer as it came closer. 'You, you disgrace to the family- nothing but disgrace, ever!' (Fasting 53)

Uma remains fearful, nervous, shy and diffident throughout the novel. Her obedience has a touch of timidity. Often feeling scared of her parents she doesn't do anything which might upset them. The most she can do is make a phone call when her parents aren't around. She wanted to have a haircut at Aruna's suggestion but lacks the courage to assert it. Living in constant fear and always trying to please people around, Uma's goodness and obedience is taken for granted by her family members. Living in such a dull and uninteresting environment suffocated her mind and affected her health. Under stress she has seizures which do not invite any sympathy from her family members, on the other hand it is seen as a handicap in the future of the girls of the family. When Uma had a fit of seizure at her sister Aruna's wedding, Aruna shouted at her.

'She listened to Aruna's voice lashing at her, flailing her with accusations. She had spoiled the party, the cocktail party.' (Fasting 104)

Uma's patience and tolerance were exceptional. She compromised in every situation and submitted to the events of her life in the most humble way. In the selection of a life partner she always obeyed her parents and depended on them. Her sister Aruna was selective and lived life on her own terms. Uma's parents could not suppress Aruna as they could snub Uma. When Uma got married to Harish who cheated them of the dowry and went to Meerut after the marriage, she

lived in Harish's parents' house waiting for him for a few weeks. She lived there patiently among Harish's unconcerned and indifferent family members perfecting household chores in anticipation of a happy married life. As Uma's father came to know about the treacherous act of Harish's and reached there to take Uma back, Uma's ruin and suffering is unspeakable. She went through the ordeal patiently and didn't complain anyone.

'She had gone into her room, shut the door and sat on the bed, wrapping her sari over her head, around her ears and mouth and eyes, till it was all over.' (Fasting 96)

It was unfortunate that Uma always find herself in unfavourable circumstances. The arrival of her younger brother in the family stopped her education and school life which she really missed. She had a communication gap with her parents. At times she tries to communicate to her parents and she is snubbed most of the times. She likes Ramu's company but very well understands the disliking of her overbearing parents for Ramu. It was unfortunate that she didn't get a loving and understanding husband. Had she been able to get a considerate fellow, life would have been altogether different. Her cousin Anamika had been the most unfortunate character in the novel who inspite of her intelligence and talent, her obedience and compromise, faced the worst consequences. Her husband and mother in law were cruel to her and finally set her ablaze. Anamika's death disturbed Uma a lot and could not come to terms with this reality. Her sensitive nature was troubled and realized that life could be worse than one can imagine. In the end of part one of the novel, Uma and her mother share a bond in which Uma seems to compromise to the role that life has assigned her.

Conclusion

The journey of Uma in the novel 'Fasting Feasting' reveals that submission and compromise in Uma's character is the effect of her patriarchal upbringing and social constraints of that time. Undoubtedly, this seems to be the chief reason of Uma's inaction and passiveness. However, there are certain other things which contribute to the making of Uma's character. Duty and obedience towards parents and loyalty for her fellows were the chief aspects of her being. From a school going girl to a middle aged woman, she remained in her parents' home and served her parents, guests, relatives and visitors. She took care of her brother Arun, leaving her school midway and even attended Aruna's child.

Her character and fate can't be attributed wholly to societal forces and pressure. Her sister, Aruna was a bold, confident and assertive girl. Born to same parents, brought up in same environment, she grew with a different temperament and personality. She had that element of rebelliousness in her. She didn't accept things as they came. Critical of the things around, she always wanted perfection in her world. Her nature and thinking was different from Uma. Uma had imbibed the traditional values taught in Indian homes. She believed in her parents and accepted their dictates feeling that they are the best judge of her life. She loved everyone she met and never disliked anyone. Her goodness, innocence, obedience and gullibility made her vulnerable and taken for granted. Her lack of courage and timidity had a share in shaping the things but her goodness

cannot be mistaken as her weakness. Such aspects of her personality worked together in a subtle way and put her in the given circumstances.

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