

ANITA DESAI'S FASTING FEASTING: AN ANALYSIS OF WOMEN'S SUBJUGATION IN A MALE DOMINATED SOCIETY

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Abstract

Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting* vividly portrays the lives of women caught in the web of patriarchal systems that perpetuate subjugation and limit agency. Through characters like Uma and Mrs. Patton, Desai examines how societal and familial structures in both India and the United States impose constraints on women. This paper explores the mechanisms of subjugation in these settings, drawing on feminist literary theory and concepts of gendered power dynamics. By comparing the "fasting" deprivation in India and the "feasting" excess in the United States, the novel demonstrates how gender-based oppression transcends cultural boundaries.

Introduction

Since, time immemorial subjugation of women is matter of great concern in Indian society. While many reformists have publicly called for women's liberation and empowerment, many women opt to stay stuck in it, whether consciously or unconsciously, while tacitly accepting it as a cultural norm. As literature is the mirror of society, the renowned Indian author Anita Desai is also not an exception. Desai's novels often depict the interior struggles of women navigating oppressive societal norms. *Fasting, Feasting* (1999) Desai's fourteenth novel, exemplifies this. The novel contrasts the lives of women in India and the United States, illustrating the pervasive reach of patriarchal systems. The novel revolves around two primary settings: an unnamed small town in India, where Uma's story unfolds, and suburban America, where Arun interacts with the Patton family. Both narratives reveal how women's subjugation manifests differently but retain a core commonality: the social boundaries set upon women.

This paper tries to analyse the portrayal of patriarchal control in both societies. It explores how the subjugation of women is perpetuated through cultural norms, familial expectations, and economic dependence. Through characters like Uma, Mama, and Mrs. Patton, Desai critiques the systemic forces that confine women, using feminist literary theory to uncover layers of meaning within the text.

DISCUSSION:

The novel *Fasting Feasting* is about cross-cultural experiences in India and America. It is a novel about the protagonist Uma and the mentality of the Indian middle class families who always give priority to the sons in comparison to their daughters. The first part of the novel represents almost the life of most of the Indian women through the characters of Uma, Aruna, Anamika, Mama and Mira Masi, while the second part is not an altogether different but select portrayal of the life of women at Massachusetts through the character of Mrs. Patton.

The first part of the novel revolves around the elderly and the unmarried spinster Uma and her family. In this part Uma's silent sacrifice to her subjugation is clearly noticed. Uma's life is emblematic of women's struggles in a traditional Indian household. Her parents, Mama and Papa, represent patriarchal authority, enforcing rigid gender roles that privilege male children. Uma's aspirations for education are thwarted when her brother Arun's needs take precedence. Her parents see no value in investing in her future, a reflection of societal norms that view women primarily as caretakers or burdens. When she is not even past her mid-teens, Uma is ordered around the house to change nappies, order the menu to the cook, help Mama with her chores or run errands to the neighbor. Uma is miserable because her education is prohibited by her parents at the time of the birth of her younger brother and their only son—Arun. She is imposed with the duty of caring her brother. "But ayah can do this—ayah can do this"—Uma tried to protest when the orders began to come thick and fast. This made Mama look stern again. 'You know we can't leave the baby to the servant', she said severely 'He needs proper attention'. When Uma pointed out that ayah had looked after her and Aruna as babies, Mama's expression made it clear it was a quite different matter now, and she repeated threateningly: 'Proper attention'. (*Fasting Feasting*, 52)

Judith Butler's notion that gender is a performance rather than a biological essence can be used to analyze how characters in the novel enact socially prescribed roles. Uma is expected to embody the "dutiful daughter" while Arun is granted freedoms Uma could never imagine.

Aruna, Uma's sister, is given considerable freedom to go around with her friends to the cinema or for shopping as she is comparatively good at studies and in socializing. "When Uma was still watching to see that Arun did not crawl off the veranda and break his neck and put knitting needles or naphthalene balls in his mouth, Aruna was already climbing into bicycle rickshaws and going off to the cinema-with girl friends from school, she said." (*Fasting Feasting*, 81) Their parents are convinced with the idea that Aruna is far better and capable than Uma, just because she can show better social skills and is prettier than Uma. Here, we can see parents' different behaviours to each child depending upon their performance and the so called "values" of society. Aruna is given more importance because in the market of marriage she is more acceptable than Uma.

Later, when their cousin Anamika is found with a suitable groom, who is much older than her, she is grandly married off with dowries. Her excellence in studies that led to the arrival of an admission letter from the Oxford, was only preserved to serve as a merit in her matrimonial search. There were rumors that said she was abused physically and verbally by her in-laws while her husband stood approvingly and that she was never allowed to attend any family event. "... Anamika had been beaten, Anamika was beaten regularly by her mother-in-law while her husband stood by and approved- or at least did not object. Anamika spent her entire time in the kitchen, cooking for his family which was so large so that meals were eaten in shifts- first the men, then the children, finally the women. She herself ate the remains in the pots before scouring them. ... When Anamika was not scrubbing or cooking, she was in her mother-in-law's room, either massaging the lady's feet or folding and tidying her clothes." (*Fasting, Feasting* 72). However, her parents maintain that her in-laws were very

loving that they didn't want to part with her for even a day, which indirectly maintains a claim that a women's abode is her husband's house irrespective of her treatment. The domestic violence comes to an end when finally Anamika was buurnt alive by her in laws after knowing the fact that she will never be able to give birth to a child, after twenty-five years of tormented married life.

This societal obsession with marriage traps Uma too. Her failed engagements and eventual unmarried status render her invisible and pitied, highlighting the limited pathways available for women outside marriage. Again, Desai has beautifully portrayed the mentality of the Indian families when Uma returned to her parents after getting divorce from her husband and who always find faults within a woman in case of divorces and thinks that a married girl is a burden on them.the same happens in case of Uma. After returning to her parents, she is again confined to the household works just because they think that now they have to bear the burden of their daughter as no one now will marry her because she is a divorcee so there must be something wrong with her. Uma becomes the caregiver for her aging parents, sacrificing her own desires to serve the family. Her life epitomizes the metaphor of "fasting," symbolizing emotional and personal deprivation.

Another character, Mama, though a figure of authority within the household, is also a victim of patriarchal systems. Her life is shaped by submission to her husband and devotion to her son, reinforcing gender norms for the next generation. Mama enforces the same constraints on Uma that were likely imposed on her, demonstrating how women, through internalized oppression, perpetuate patriarchal values. Mama's identity is subsumed by her roles as wife and mother. Her complicity in Uma's subjugation highlights the intergenerational nature of patriarchal control.

GENDER DYNAMICS IN THE WESTERN CONTEXT

The novel's second half shifts to Arun's experiences in America, introducing the Patton family. Here, Desai contrasts the apparent freedoms of Western women with the underlying emotional and psychological constraints they face.

Mrs. Patton embodies the "feasting" metaphor, enjoying material abundance but suffering from emotional deprivation within her family. Mrs. Patton's life revolves around cooking and caregiving, echoing Uma's constrained existence in a different cultural context. Her attempts to bond with Arun highlight her unfulfilled emotional needs, suggesting her lack of agency within the family. However, her actions often go unacknowledged, highlighting the undervaluation of women's domestic labor. For example, Mrs. Patton attempts to create a bond with Arun by buying vegetarian food, which she views as a meaningful way to connect with him. However, Arun remains disinterested, and her efforts feel futile. This illustrates her emotional labor as a woman, which goes unnoticed and unappreciated.

Food serves as a recurring motif to explore gender dynamics in the Patton household. In America, food consumption reflects excess and indulgence, which is often associated with masculinity, while restrictions around food, such as dieting, highlight the societal control of women's bodies. Melanie's eating disorder contrasts with the men's indulgence in grilling

and eating large quantities of food. Arun's discomfort with the Western diet further emphasizes how cultural norms around food intersect with gender role. Food plays a central role in Mrs. Patton's life too, symbolizing both abundance and emptiness. Her obsession with feeding her family contrasts with her inability to nourish her own emotional well-being.

In fact, Desai uses food and domestic spaces to explore women's roles within the family. In both households, food symbolizes control and caregiving. Uma's role in preparing meals for her family reflects her servitude, while Mrs. Patton's elaborate meals highlight her constrained identity as a homemaker. Again, the domestic sphere becomes a site of confinement for women. Uma is trapped within her parents' home, while Mrs. Patton's life revolves around her kitchen, illustrating how physical spaces mirror patriarchal control.

Melanie is another important female character in the novel from Western culture. She is Mrs. Patton's daughter who offers a counterpoint to her mother. Melanie's eating disorder reflects the oppressive beauty standards imposed on women in Western society. Her self-destructive behavior and isolation are a response to societal pressures to conform to idealized femininity, which contrasts with the celebration of Rod's physical vitality. For example, Melanie's refusal to eat and subsequent bingeing highlight the emotional toll of these expectations. Her struggles symbolize the silent suffering of women under societal pressure. It can be analysed that her struggles with body image and eating disorders reflect a rebellion against societal expectations, yet they also emphasize her vulnerability to patriarchal pressures. Melanie's obsession with thinness and her self-destructive behaviors reveal the pressures women face to conform to idealized beauty standards. Like Uma, Melanie's life is also shaped by constraints, though they manifest differently in the American context. Both characters represent the costs of patriarchal control on women's mental and physical health.

Simone De Beauvoir's idea that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" applies to the social construction of gender roles in the lives of Uma and her mother. Both characters are shaped and confined by patriarchal expectations of subservience and duty to family. Desai critiques patriarchal systems that deny women autonomy and enforce gendered power imbalances. Both Indian and American settings reveal how societal norms prioritize male needs and marginalize women's voices. The novel highlights how class, culture, and family dynamics intersect to shape women's experiences. Uma's economic dependence and Melanie's cultural pressures illustrate how oppression operates across different cultures.

The metaphors of "fasting" and "feasting" underscore the deprivation and excess that characterize women's lives in the two cultures. While Uma and Mama are starved of opportunities and autonomy, Mrs. Patton and Melanie are overwhelmed by societal expectations and consumerist pressures.

While the novel explores specific cultural contexts, it also reveals universal patterns of women's subjugation. The parallels between Uma's and Mrs. Patton's lives emphasize that patriarchal oppression transcends geographical boundaries. Desai shows how societal norms shape women's lives in culturally specific ways, yet the underlying mechanisms of control remain similar. Uma's quiet endurance contrasts with Melanie's rebellion,

illustrating different responses to subjugation. Both, however, are constrained by the systems of the society they inhabit.

CONCLUSION

Through the story of entanglements in *Fasting Feasting*, Desai aims to highlight the fact that patriarchal society always tries to subjugate women from all sides. If one says that Uma's lack of education brings her misfortune to her life, at the same time it can not be ignored that Anamika's scholarship does the same for her. So, Uma is the girl who fasts in the novel just in order to feed her brother Arun whose education is the priority of her parents. Unfortunately her feelings as well as her sufferings are suppressed by her parents. To conclude, Desai's *Fasting, Feasting* offers a profound critique of patriarchal systems that subjugate women across cultures. Through her nuanced portrayal of characters like Uma, Mama, and Mrs. Patton, Desai exposes the mechanisms of control that limit women's agency. The novel's dual settings in India and the United States highlight the universality of gender inequality while also emphasizing cultural variations in its manifestation. By weaving together themes of deprivation, abundance, and control, Desai invites readers to reflect on the pervasive nature of women's oppression and the possibilities for resistance and change.

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