

Gynocritical Approach to Anita Desai's *Fasting Feasting*

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Abstract

In the name of patriarchy, women are exposed to as many hardships and challenges as possible. Numerous ideologies and literary trends have grown significantly throughout the twentieth century. Particularly in the field of gender studies, female authors speak much about societal injustice and the psychological afflictions faced by women throughout the world. Female authors who speak out much on sexual harassment and domestic abuse include Shashi Deshpande, Kamala Markandaya, Kamala Das, and many more. Anita Desai is one of them and identifies as a feminist who has been considered a renowned novelist in contemporary Indian literature and explores much through her powerful writing. This paper aims to focus on the Gynocritical Approach to her novel, *Fasting Feasting*.

Keywords: Domestic abuses, Psychological afflictions, sexual harassment and societal injustice.

India has many religions, castes, languages, a variety of festivals, trades, hospitality, traditional heritage, and a healthy food system. It is admired and respected by the people of other countries for its unity in diversity. However, India lacks women's empowerment, especially in the field of education for women. The Dowry System is an evil practice that makes Indian women completely dependent on men. In the end, these

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women become the victims of domestic violence. For the past few decades, educated women in various fields have started opposing the injustices against women, which are laid in the form of female infanticide and child marriage, denying the right to education and choice of marriage. Contemporary women writers have registered their concern for those women who depend on society for a living. Anita Desai is a pioneer in the field who gives a clarion call for women's education and empowerment in her works. "A significant point that Desai touches upon in this novel is in presenting the stories of oppression of women not only in the Indian context but also in the West, signifying how patriarchy is all-encompassing irrespective of culture or place"(Rahman 82).

Anita Desai is a prominent writer in Indian English literature. She has written many acclaimed novels. *Cry the Peacock* (1963), *Clear Light of Day* (1980), *In Custody* (1984), *Journey to Ithaca* (1995), and *The Zigzag Way* (2004). These are her most popular works in the twentieth century. Her writing style is always simple and clear. *Fasting, Feasting* (1999) is one of her famous novels. She portrays the suppression of women in Indian society through the protagonist, Uma. As Elanie Ye Lin Ho describes in her book *Anita Desai*, "*Fasting, Feasting* is a novel unsparing in its detail of parental abuse, and the children's self-abuse which is the tragic consequence" (Lin Ho 84).

The novel has two books divided into twenty-seven chapters. The first part contains thirteen chapters. The first part illustrates Uma's childhood, her isolation, disappointment, and longings. The second part starts with chapter fourteen and ends with chapter twenty-seven. The second part portrays Arun's life, which is in contrast with the sufferings of Uma. Volná points out in her book *Anita Desai's Fasting Feasting and the Condition of Women*. She says:

. . . the first part is told as perceived by Uma, a female protagonist, and, characteristically, its prevalent setting is a domestic environment . . . On the contrary, the main hero of the second part, Uma's brother Arun, is put into a "larger world," an emblematically masculine environment. (Volna 02)

The literary theory called "Gynocriticism" was coined by Elaine Showalter. It describes the study of women as writers. A feminist literary theory called gynocriticism first appeared in the middle of the twentieth century. "One easy way to think of gynocriticism is women writing about women writing" (Gracias 01). It explores the

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distinct viewpoints, experiences, and voices of women in literature, with a concentration on the analysis and interpretation of women's literature. The goal of gynocriticism is to examine and comprehend the manner in which women writers subvert and reflect gender roles, power structures, and societal standards through their writing. Gynocriticism has a few key aspects that help immensely to shape this term. The key aspects are female-centred analysis, exploration of female identity, recognition of women's voices, the interconnectedness of women's literature, and challenging and patriarchal narratives.

Desai reveals the lives of women from different backgrounds, which are realistically presented in the novel through female characters such as Uma, Aruna, Mira Masi, Anamika, Melanie, Mrs Patton, Dr Dutt, and Mama. "The novels of Anita Desai are basically female-oriented. She probes into their problems, be it of a daughter, sister, mother, grandmother, or wife. Her female figure appears as a victim in a patriarchal, patrilineal, and father-dominated Indian family" (Ousephachan 02).

The title *Fasting, Feasting* is highly representative. While "Fasting" represents the sufferings of Uma, "Feasting" denotes the privileges enjoyed by her brother Arun. This novel symbolically embodies the attitude of the parents towards Uma by calling the mother "scowling" and the father "scolding". Even though Uma desires to lead a happy and empowered life, her parents reject her wishes and dreams. However, Arun was hailed as the heir of the family and got a chance to go abroad for higher education. "Decade after decade, year after year, and day after day is passing, but the change in the society is very passive. It is crystal clear that people are not altering culturally. People here especially mean the father and the mother in a family" (Kannan and Vadivelan 1036).

In many places in India, parents play this kind of role in every child's life. They sturdily believe that their male child will bring reputation and fame to the entire family. Even as a small child, Uma does not express her desire to eat the spiced gram and ice cream sold in the park. She is made to believe that they are only for male children. The scene effectively displays the injustice laid on a female child, even in an educated Indian family circle. Desai states, "Uma finds saliva getting at the corners of her mouth at the smell of the spiced, roasted gram but decides to say nothing" (Desai 12). The privileges

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are given only to male children, not to female children. In most of her novels, Desai covers the mentality of the female characters in a good manner. She incorporates, "The disillusionment, the frustration, the despair, the dilemma, the longing, and the hopelessness of the female world can best be seen from such women writers. Being a woman, the writers have also given justification to the female world by writing about them" (Begam 1464).

Uma looks very plain. She is black in complexion. This is one of the reasons her parents hate her. Unlike Uma, her brother Arun and her sister Aruna look pretty. Hence, her parents deliberately avoid Uma's passion for being empowered in her career. Afterwards, Uma was compelled by her parents to discontinue her studies. Uma failed in many subjects, and this reduced her only opportunity to improve her level of ability. "Men often control not only others but also themselves in order to assert their masculinity; so does Papa. He hardly shows any kinds of feelings - except for the negative ones" (Siukonen²⁵). Though Uma's father struggled hard to get a higher education during his childhood days, he does not give his daughter an opportunity for her bright future for the sake of patriarchy.

Uma's father fails to take care of her despite his being a lawyer and embraces a good position in society. "Uma is criticised for her inability to write properly, but it seems that Mamapapa has forgotten that they have denied Uma the opportunity of basic education" (Begum 261). Her parents are the real convicts who had a stupid ideology towards the gender difference. Her parents force her to stay at home and look after her baby brother, Arun. As she opposes the plan, she happens to see the severe wrath of her mother many times. "When Uma pointed out that Ayah had looked after her and Aruna as babies, Mama's expression made it clear it was quite a different matter now, and she repeated threateningly 'Proper attention' " (Desai 30).

After some years, when Uma's parents try to find a match for her, she encounters several insults. She is being rejected by many due to her appearance and her black complexion. While suitors are interested in Aruna, her beautiful sister, Uma, has been treated like a servant by her parents and her siblings. At last, she is married to Harrish, who is already married and has four children. He marries her for the dowry, which would help him recover his company from the loss. Several humiliations are faced by

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Uma and her parents silently. However, her parents never comprehend that they are the main root of their daughter's ruined life and misery. "Uma's mother's role is dually presented. One is submissive to Papa, and second, being the woman, she is pushing her daughter Uma into the same fire" (Kharbe 77).

Like Uma, Anamika is another woman who exemplifies the oppression that has been faced by women in the name of domestic violence. Anamika is the cousin of Uma. She is a beautiful and intelligent girl but quite reserved. She gets a scholarship from Oxford University. However, her parents decide to get her married to a ruthless person who is too old for her. Though Anamika's husband is educated and well settled, he too possesses such stereotypical ideas and terrific beliefs. After getting married, Anamika is constantly ill-treated and beaten by her mother-in-law and her husband. She was treated like a slave, and she remained silent and subdued everything. Desai points out, "Anamika spent her entire time in the kitchen cooking for his [her husband's] family, which was large so that meals were eaten on shifts—first the men, then the children, finally the women." (Desai 71).

Although Anamika cooks for the entire family, she eats after everyone has eaten. The problem is that she is not at all ready to raise her voice in front of her husband and her mother-in-law. The character Anamika incarnates the typical women in India who lose their lives and dreams due to domestic cruelties. "Anamika lives in a patriarchal society that considers higher education to be the prerogative of males and marriage as the major preoccupation of females" (Baig 02).

In India, marriage is considered the ultimate goal for every woman, rather than getting an education. Furthermore, Desai exposes the prominent role of mothers in society who give birth to male children. The mother's status would be higher only after giving birth to a male child than a female child. "Anamika's mother-in-law portrays the projecting role played by the mothers of the male children in Indian society. Similar to Mama, the position of women in the society is elevated through the conception of a male child" (Abirami 18).

In *Fasting Feasting*, Desai also depicts the psychological ill of a female child in America. Uma's brother Arun went to America for his higher education. "Crucially, the privileges lavished upon Arun stifle and overburden him" (Wiegandt 124). Arun prefers

to continue his higher studies in something other than an alien land. Being a privileged child in his family, he has been continuously forced by his father to select his future goals. He resides with Mrs. Patton, sister of Mrs. O'Henry, for the summer vacation. Mrs. Patton's daughter, Melanie, has bulimia, a kind of eating disorder. Mrs. Patton is interested only in shopping and does not take care of her daughter. "Patriarchal discourse involves having hegemonic control over the body, especially its functions and appearance, and becomes the primary locus of oppression, dominance and social control" (Karki 121). Due to a lack of care, Melanie becomes obese and isolates herself from others. She angers everyone and starts destroying her by eating a lot. Though she knows that the overconsumption of junk foods and other things will infect her body, she makes a kind of revelation towards the rigid society by doing this. In her sufferings, she resembles the alienation of Uma.

Mira Masi is the aunt of Uma, who is a widow at a very young age. She married very young, and after her husband died, she made her life as she wanted to liberate herself from all the conventional expectations of society. Her aunt's unique nature inspires Uma. However, Uma's mother never wants Uma to join Mira Masi's journey. "Desai extends the image of the tree to represent what the experience of mothering felt like to Aunt Mira. Given her desperate situation as an unwanted widow, a life emptied of love and meaning, this new vocation can only be fulfilled" (Juneja 82).

Anita Desai also denotes the changing scenario in India, where educated women break the chains around them. Few such women have rejected the patriarchy and proved their strength. Dr.Dutt is an emblematic, free-thinking woman. In contrast to the characters Uma and Anamika, Dr.Dutt stands as a strong woman. She is a doctor and remains unmarried. She also inspires Uma to dream of freedom and self-respect. She offers the job vacancy in her clinic to Uma. This has made Uma dream of a new life. However, Uma is not able to make a strong decision due to the lack of courage and fear of society. Her father disapproves of the possibility of her progression in life. The option was not given to her by her parents. "Uma is prevented from uttering her wish, and her enclosure within the domestic domain is even reinforced" (Baldellou 112).

The character Mama plays an important role in this novel. Being a mother of three children, she fails to accept the needs of Uma. Whenever Uma wants to be free from her

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family, her mother never allows her to go out. According to her mother, Uma is happy in her parents' house, but in reality, that is not the case. Even when Uma wishes to go to the ashram with her aunt Mira Masi, her mother is the first one who disapproves. Karam states, "Women are marginalised not only by patriarchy but also by their gender. It is, sometimes, noticed that a woman suffers at the hands of a woman" (Karam 04).

Uma's sister, Aruna, is also a modern woman who is greatly influenced by freedom and the entertainment of city life. Aruna married Arvind, a handsome man, and went to Mumbai. After marriage, she becomes ultra-modern and changes herself according to the fashion of the city. After having two children, she cuts her hair like an actress and is interested in enhancing her beauty. She dominates her husband and her parents in the name of perfection, but the truth is, her attitude irritates them a lot.

Aruna cuts her hair, takes her make-up kit wherever she goes, and calls her sister and

mother 'villagers' once they refuse to accept her sophisticated and flashy style of life. For that reason, she avoids visiting her parent's home and the rare occasions of her short visits are spent in blaming the untidiness of the surroundings and the inhabitants. (Ravichandran 05)

In general, Indian society respects the wishes and dreams of a man, while the wishes of a woman remain unheard of on most occasions. While the birth of a male child is celebrated, the birth of a female child becomes a burden to the family. Such injustice should be put to an end, and Desai clarifies this through her fascinating novel *Fasting, Feasting*. Desai voices out the need for women's emancipation through these female characters. She depicts the injustice met by young women like Uma and Anamika very effectively in the novel. Uma suffers not only due to a lack of beauty and education but also due to a lack of confidence. She does not fight against injustice and makes her voice heard. "In the present scenario, the younger generation undermines the importance of values but claims a lot for its rights. The need of the time is to create a balance between values and rights because blind adherence to values and unawareness of rights also leads to fatal end" (Sanny 1238).

Characters such as Uma and Anamika are unable to recognise their rights and values in society. Similarly, other people needed more confidence to steady their voices.

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"Further, if we think again that it is Uma's lack of education that has led to her entrapped situation, Desai presents us the subversion of Anamika, where foreign scholarship fetches her equal match but fails to provide her the required escape, it suffocates and kills her literally" (Geetha and Latha 07). Though Anamika gets a great opportunity for her higher education, she resists utilising it. Desai, through the novel, seems to suggest that women must be courageous to fight against suppression and must be ready to accept the opportunities to break the chains around them by getting an education. Hence, she skillfully highlights the gynocritical approach while exploring each of the female characters.

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