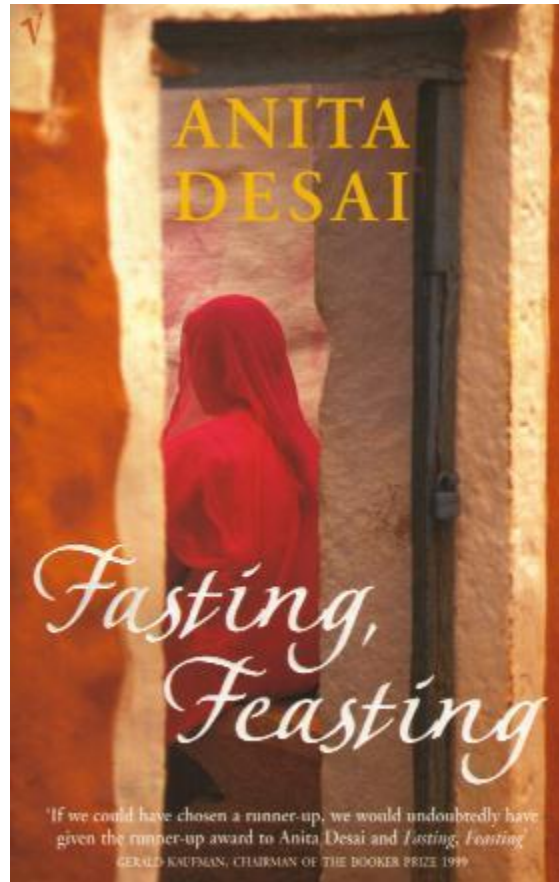


**Woman and Her Social Roles: A Study of Anita Desai's
*Fasting, Feasting***

Dr. Jitender Singh

=====



Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting*

Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting* is not merely a novel about woman and her diversified roles as mother, daughter and wife; but it also "recounts human relationships in the language not only of fasting and feasting but of greed, craving, taboo, denial and disgust" (Dasgupta viii). Delineating the human hungers, as its title suggests, the novel is about the starving women who

are no more concerned with their social roles especially as ‘mother’ or ‘daughter’. Though remaining within the threshold of male dominated society, the woman here may retain something of her own, a niche for her individual being, divorced from the duties of a traditional mother or daughter. In addition to this, “this novel gives an excruciating account of how society can seize control of individuals – especially women – through such practices as eating, and remove them from everything they intend to be” (Dasgupta viii). On the basis of these observations if deconstruction is applied, the novel also presents possibilities for destabilizing the position of woman in the patriarchal society. She can transcend herself from the state of ‘fasting’ to the one termed ‘feasting’ by overlooking her social roles like ‘mother’ or ‘daughter’ in pursuit of her selfhood. Deconstruction in the present context does not blame woman for her participation in power struggle rather it proves the patriarchal basis to be the reason for her starving self. And finally it is left on the part of woman whether she believes in her own aptitude and wishes to change her position or wants to remain stuck to her traditional roles.

Deconstruction - How It Works

Before arriving at the actual analysis of the text, a brief note would be useful on deconstruction and how it works. Deconstruction basically refers to a series of techniques for reading texts developed by Jacques Derrida, Paul de Man, and others. These techniques in turn are connected to a set of philosophical claims about language and meaning. However as a result of the popularity of these techniques and theories, the verb “deconstruct” is now often used more broadly as a synonym for criticizing or demonstrating the incoherence of a position. In relation to text, thus, to deconstruct is to analyze the latent conflicting aspects of a work which may have remained unnoticed due to a certain kind of ideology at work. According to M.A.R. Habib:

While Derrida himself has insisted that deconstruction is not a theory unified by any set of consistent rules or procedures, it has been variously regarded as a way of reading, a mode of writing, and, above all, a way of challenging interpretations of texts based upon conventional notions of the stability of the human self, the external world, and of language and meaning. (240)

Thus, deconstruction, in the strict sense of the word, is a critical strategy to decipher the established concepts and to introduce new truths and facts that have hitherto been ignored, simultaneously critically viewing the existing notions about the world and human experience.

Fasting to Feasting

Woman's transcendence from 'fasting' state to the 'feasting' one is the embedded vision in the novel. What this 'fasting' state may stand for is craving for selfhood, individuality and a respectable niche where womanhood can be celebrated beyond the criterion of woman's social roles. As Aparna Goswami and Bhaskar Jyoti Goswami point out, "This all-pervading mother-consciousness in the Indian mind has imposed upon women the attributes of self love, sacrifice and negation of self to such an extent that it has crushed their individuality and smothered their existence" (191). If a woman looks at herself not from the lens of social consciousness but from the sight of her feminine creativity, it can lead her to a state of 'feasting' where her dependence on others can be transferred to her inner-strength and self-reliance. This self-faith may result even in the creation of favourable circumstances out of unfavorable ones.

Uma and Her Selfhood

To show woman what she can do with herself, Desai has created the character of Uma's mother with such an artistic finish that she does not lack selfhood even in the wake of her troubled girlhood. With time, she improves her position in the family and creates an equal space with that of her husband. Radha Chakravarty observes, "The figure of the mother emerges in her novels as a symbol of multiple possibilities, a trope with both repressive and emancipatory potential" (83). She stands with her spouse so firmly that it becomes difficult for others to distinguish them "MamandPapa. MamaPapa. PapaMama. It was hard to believe they had ever had separate existences, that they had been separate entities and not MamaPapa in one breath" (Desai 5). She is an example of such women who shake off somehow the consciousness of their social roles and give space to their own individuality. "Desai's female characters can often be seen as liberated even from the emotional responsibility of motherhood. They are conceived of as primal creatures, busy in pursuing their own motivations, desires and thriving for the fulfillment of their selves" (Goswami 192).

For catering to her needs, Mama does not choose the way of argument but of agreement. Very adroitly, she immerses into her husband's personality and gains an equal status for herself. "Having fused into one, they had gained so much in substance, in stature, in authority, that they loomed large enough as it was; they did not need separate histories and backgrounds to make them even more immense" (Desai 6).

But this transcendence has not been easy. She belongs to a family where gender-biasness was the order of the family. Discrimination even in matters of food items could be seen occupying the mindset of the family members. 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" (Desai 5). Having grown up in such humiliating circumstances, she learns to maintain her selfhood. She does not believe in pretensions but in living her original self. She does not feel shy of her coquettish behavior. It is for her an assertion of her free will. She goes to kitty parties, plays the games of rummy and keeps her life full of activities, "her eyes gleamed with mischief as she tossed back her head and laughed apparently without any thought of propriety. She clasped the cards to her chest and fluttered her lashes coquettishly" (Desai 7). Moreover, despite being a traditional wife and mother, Mama occupies an important place in the family. In all family matters her role and participation is not less than the patriarch of the house. "The gesture of denying motherhood or showing negligence towards motherly duties is merely a gesture to assert one's individuality and one's need for one's own space" (Goswami 203). Her decisions, her choices are valued by all in the family. Her words are not considered merely an expression of her concerns and worries but also an assertion of her intelligibility. Talking about her coordination with her husband Desai writes, "Their opinion differed so rarely that if Mama refused to let Aruna wear a pearl necklace to the matinee at the Regal cinema or Papa decided Uma could not take music lessons after school, there was no point in appealing to the other parent for a different verdict: none was expected, or given" (Desai 14).

Arun's Upbringing

After giving birth to a son, Arun, finally Mama becomes free from her motherly duties. Now the responsibility of Arun's upbringing is solely transferred to Uma and Ayah. She herself becomes more conscious of her womanhood and devotes much of her time in celebrating it:

=====

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 **18:1 January 2018**

Dr. Jitender Singh

Woman and Her Social Roles: A Study of Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting*

“Mama continued to deck herself in silks and jewellery and accompany Papa to the club, to dinner parties and weddings. After all, Uma and Aruna and the ayah were there to stand in for her at Arun’s cot. It seemed to them that Mama sailed out with an added air of achievement. She had matched Papa’s achievement, you could say, and they were now more equal than ever” (Desai 31). Thus, she is able to leave the secondary position and establishes herself at the prime one with her husband, not necessarily relegating him to the secondary position. Aparna Goswami and Bhaskar Jyoti Goswami comment, “This rejection of children can also be seen as a way of asserting, by women, the fact that they do have their own world apart from their roles as mothers” (198).

Patriarchy - Marriage Instead of Education

In patriarchy, marriage instead of education is offered to girls as a career. Since their childhood, girls are conditioned to consider marriage as their ultimate destiny. And it is through marriage that women like Mama and Aruna can discover their mode of salvation. Mama’s relationship with Aruna is quite different from her relationship with Uma. Unlike Uma, a victim of her parents’ gender-based attitude Aruna adopts the idea of ‘femininity’ whole heartedly as a survival device. She considers Mama a model for herself and tends to follow on her footprints. Nancy Chodorow points out, “A girl tends to retain elements of her preoedipal primary love and primary identification. This has been compounded through the years by reinforcement from a more conscious gender-role identification with her mother” (136). Feeling neglected in the male dominated society, Aruna escapes into the feminine universe. She learns very early the coquettish behavior of Mama. “There was already something about the way she tossed her head when she saw a man looking at her, with a sidelong look of both scorn and laughter, and the way her foot tapped and her legs changed position, that might have alerted the family to what it could expect” (Desai 80-81). Aruna adopts quickly all the feminine traits required to become a good housewife. This is just a way for Aruna to assert her individuality. She is not submissive like her sister, Uma. Instead, Aruna has a rebellious nature and she can also question Mama. “By the time Aruna was fourteen she was rebelling against the blue cotton tunic and the white hair ribbons” (Desai 81). There are a few advantages that Aruna can enjoy. First she is more pretty and cute than Uma; and second, she does not have to look after Arun. That responsibility is left only for Uma to bear. “When Uma was still watching to see that Arun did not crawl off the veranda and break his neck

or 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” (Desai 81). Despite her mother’s careless attitude towards her children, Aruna becomes a fully grown up woman with all the attributes that a girl must possess to survive in patriarchy. She has, in a way, carved out a space for herself by her feminine qualities in the complex family web. “Here was Aruna visibly ripening on the branch, asking to be plucked: no one had to teach her how to make samosas or help her to dress for an occasion. Instinctively, she knew” (Desai 87).

Aruna Presents a Contrast to Uma

Moreover, since childhood Aruna presents a contrast to Uma both in matters of looks and education. Though conditioned by the same mother, Uma and Aruna have formed different personalities. One becomes the victim of that conditioning and can never prosper; and the other takes that conditioning as a challenge and carves out a space for herself. Alladi Uma points out, “Even while a daughter may seem to be neglected by the mother, even while she questions the relationship, she cannot totally negate her mother or her influence” (74). If Uma has learnt her mother’s docility and submission and becomes more conscious of her daughterly subservient self, Aruna has opted for freedom and zest for life from her mother and becomes more conscious of her individuality. Aruna uses her attractiveness as a survival device. While Mama searches energetically for a husband for Uma, families are already making enquiries about Aruna. Moreover, when after marriage Aruna comes back to her mother’s home with her children, she exactly imitates her mother’s behavior in matters of flaunting selfhood. Nancy Friday observes:

It is fine to be just like her, if it is a conscious choice. There is nothing wrong with imitating your mother’s life. But if it is not a conscious choice, you will end up in the same kind of symbiotic, dependent relationship with your husband and your children that you have with her. That is the danger. (xix).

“Living the Essence of Womanhood”

Most of the time Aruna remains out of the home busy in visiting her old friends and their families as her mother remained in kitty parties and card game. She is as careless and indifferent as her mother to her motherly duties. Thus, she neither acts like a traditional ‘daughter’ nor a

‘mother’ but tries to live the essence of womanhood. Aparna Goswami and Bhaskar Jyoti Goswami point out, “Anita Desai, for the first time, brings it to the notice of readers that there are many more dimensions to a woman’s personality than just being someone’s mother, or for that matter, someone’s wife, or mistress. She challenges the received cultural stereotypes” (199). However, Uma’s relationship with her sister, Aruna, does no good but intensifies the tensions between Uma and her mother. Uma usually notices her mother favouring Aruna’s smartness over her own submissiveness. This further makes their social roles problematic.

Performing the Role of a Mother Substitute

As far as the protagonist Uma is concerned, she initially appears to be a disillusioned and disheartened daughter who could not make up her mind to settle down and be a mother. But like Virmati in Manju Kapur’s debut novel, *Difficult Daughters*, she works as a mother-substitute for her kid brother Arun. Though she does not become a mother in the real sense yet metaphorically she mothers her brother, sister and even her parents:

When Mama comes back to home, it is Uma who is taught to fold nappies, prepare watered milk and rock the screaming infant to sleep. Stupefied and exhausted being engaged to this extra caring and rearing task, Uma has a meagre amount of time to study, to do her school homework and get her sums done. (Desai 18)

Through Uma, the narrative seems to project that to be a mother it is not obligatory to remain caught up in the socio-cultural patriarchal construct; one can mother a whole family without being a real mother. Though she remains a daughter throughout the story, through her devotion, submissiveness and docility, Uma earns a central place in the family. Without being a mother, she runs the entire household.

Living Their True Selves within Their Confined Existence

The purpose of the narrative behind Uma’s character is not to show her as a fulfilled woman in the traditional sense but to project a new class of women who live their true selves even within their confined existence. The real strength of Uma’s character comes to surface when she is compared with her cousin Anamika. Desai has conceived the character of Anamika in direct

contrast to Uma in that she is prettier and more educated than her. Uma's mother thinks that it was her daughter's bad looks and uneducated status that never enabled her to find a suitable husband. Uma recollects, "How Mama had always envied Lila Aunty for having a daughter like Anamika, a model of perfection like Anamika" (Desai 77).

This is not all; where Uma has to leave her studies, Anamika wins a scholarship to Oxford competing with the most favoured and privileged sons. But in the patriarchal society all this does not bring a radical change where every girl, educated or uneducated, is given off in marriage like a bundle of responsibilities. She is married to a man much older than her and who is much conscious of his superiority. She has a miscarriage as a result of regular thrashing. And one day news comes that Anamika has committed suicide. Uma, no doubt, remains devoid of the marital bliss. If what happens to Anamika is the marital bliss, it is good for girls like Uma to remain a spinster. Here the entire concept of marriage has been exposed as a trap for daughters to make them feel wretched even if they are more meritorious than sons.

Uma's parents try to marry her off three times but every attempt proves to be a failure for one reason or the other, invariably an error of judgment in the choice of groom by her parents. But Uma never complains. When she ultimately gets married in the third attempt and is ditched by the husband, she has not been shown to be complaining through words or thoughts. She maintains a considerable detachment from her mother and bears every pain stoically. She, in fact, cherishes a selfhood of its own kind which emerges from her sacrificing nature. Uma asserts herself in a different way. Though meek and docile, she is a stubborn daughter who is ready to accept loneliness and drudgery but does not like to sound weak in front of her mother. Her weapon against patriarchy is silence, her non-combatant attitude, and she does not surrender to the traditional cultural mores. Through politics of silence she counters the politics of power.

In Secluded Existence Experiencing Psychological Independence

Leading a secluded existence, Uma experiences a psychological independence of a rare kind. Devoid of 'feasting' of the material self, Uma caters to the needs of her psycho-spiritual self through 'fasting'. Without ever disclosing her heart to her mother who is too much involved in her

own life, Uma derives contentment in the company of Mira-Masi. It seems as if Uma becomes a mirror image of her Mira-Masi.

Mira-Masi is a widow who has fascination for pilgrimages and keeps visiting shrines, temples and distant Ashrams throughout the year. “Ever since her widowhood, she had taken up religion as her vocation. Her day was ruled by rituals, from the moment she woke up to make her salutations to the sun, through her ritual bath and morning prayers, to the preparation of her widow’s single and vegetarian meal of the day, and through the evening ceremonies at the temples she visited” (Desai 39).

Uma’s relationship with Mira-Masi is somewhat of spiritual nature. She listens from her ancient myths of Hinduism and tales of various gods and goddesses. Such knowledge of religion and spirituality proves a kind of moral support for Uma. And she too takes to the route of a similar spiritual journey but within the four walls of the home. Like her Mira-Masi, Uma’s every day is ruled by preparing watered milk for her kid brother, assisting the cook in preparing the meal and in carrying out orders of her parents. Thus, Uma’s journey to self-fulfillment is not a materialistic one. The narrative focuses on her psycho-spiritual voyage in the turbulent ocean of patriarchy. Unlike Aruna, Uma does not chase the life of a traditional wife and mother. She instead opts for a complete renunciation of her social roles. Like a Sadhvi, she leads a life of chastity serving her parents with care and devotion. Her fulfillment is of spiritual kind. Accepting the loneliness that she finds herself in, she bears everything without complaint and takes care of her parents like a son in their old age.

Break the Social Myth

Through Uma’s character the narrative seems to break the social myth that only the son looks after the parents in their old age. Arun has to go to the United States to pursue his higher studies. In his absence, Uma sacrifices her own life for the sake of her parents. To serve them in their old age, she accepts her spinsterhood stoically. Even when her parents chide her for not being a perfect house keeper, she does not shake off the responsibility she bears to them.

Thus, the narrative of the novel, *Fasting, Feasting*, attempts to capture the states of changing woman’s awakening of her basic right to exist for her own upliftment, the process of her

individuation and the changing power relations among mothers and daughters with time. Thus, patriarchal social roles become fragile in the narrative when the so called patriarchal mother lives a life with daughterly self and daughter takes the responsibility of child-care and family. This reversal of roles marks a radical modern note in the awakening of woman's self-consciousness.

Works Cited

- Chakravarty, Radha. "Figuring the Maternal: "Freedom" and "Responsibility" in Anita Desai's Novels." *Critical Responses to Anita Desai*. Ed. Shubha Tiwari. New Delhi: Atlantic, 2004. 83-99. Print.
- Chodorow, Nancy. *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1978. Print.
- Dasgupta, Rana. Introduction. *Fasting, Feasting*. By Anita Desai. Noida: Random House, 2008. vii-xi. Print.
- Desai, Anita. *Fasting, Feasting*. 1999. Noida: Random House, 2008. Print.
- Friday, Nancy. *My Mother/My Self: The Daughter's Search for Identity*. New York: Delta Book, 1977. Print.
- Goswami, Aparna, and Bhaskar Jyoti Goswami. "Motherhood: Not the only star in the Horizon! . . . Delineation of Mothers in Anita Desai's *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* And *Fasting, Feasting*." *The Woman Question in the Contemporary Indian Women Writings in English*. Ed. Indu Swami. New Delhi: Sarup, 2010. 191-204. Print.
- Habib, M.A.R. *Literary Criticism from Plato to the Present: An Introduction*. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011. Print.
- Uma, Alladi. *Woman and Her Family: Indian and Afro-American – A Literary Perspective*. New York: Envoy P, 1989. Print.



Dr. Jitender Singh
Assistant Professor
Department of English
Hindu College, Sonipat
Haryana
India
jitenderwriter@gmail.com