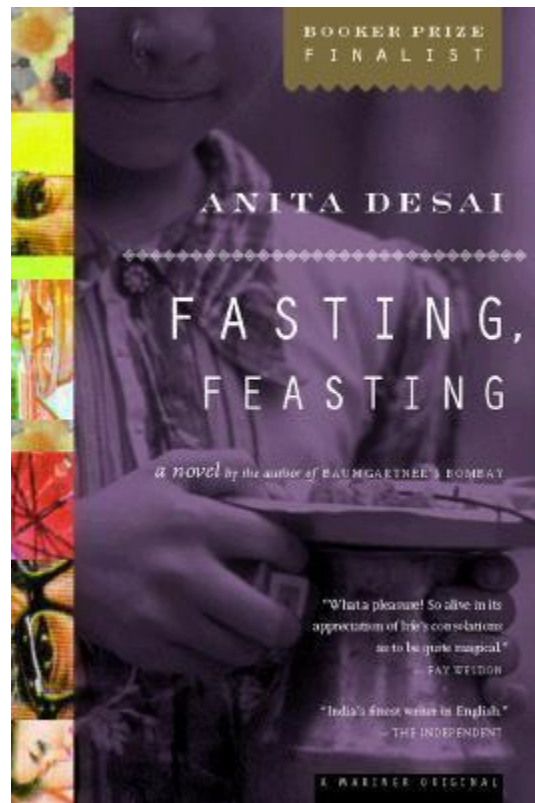


Silent Suffering in Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting*

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**Abstract**

The aim of this paper is to explore the concept of women's suffering, their untold ache and their irreparable loss. Anita Desai is a representative Indian woman novelist in English. Her contribution to fiction is more significant than the other Indian women novelists. Desai's novels all highlight the emotional turmoil, depression and agonies of her oppressed women characters. As a keen observer of life, she has portrayed the inner life of her female characters. Desai's novel *Fasting, Feasting* deals with the agony of the women characters and the clash of two different cultures.

The novel *Fasting, Feasting* depicts the miserable life of the protagonist, Uma. This paper critically examines how Uma suffers quietly and tolerates her neglected state in her family. She is made a victim of her circumstances and a victim of her fate. Like other women, she also has wishes and desires but she is not able to express everything in her life. This paper critically analyses the entrapped condition of Uma and her sister Aruna.

**Keywords:** Fasting, Feasting, Suffering, Agony, Emotional turmoil, Entrapment of women, patriarchal society

### **Introduction**

Anita Desai is one of the most significant contemporary Indian novelists in English. Her contribution to fiction writing has been quite praiseworthy and substantial. In her novels, Desai explores the mute miseries of married women and their existential problems. Most of her novels deal with the theme of unhappy married life, alienation, loneliness and the agony of existence. Swain in his study on *Note of Existentialism in the Novels of Anita Desai*, comments on Desai's depiction of this novel, "The terror of facing single – handed the ferocious assaults of existence". (Swain 167)

Desai's protagonists are independent, agonized and frustrated. Desai closely examines the emotional world of her woman characters. She examines the social and emotional bonds that shackle women. She is concerned with the inner climate of women characters. Prof. Srinivasa Iyengar rightly observes:

Since her pre-occupation is with the inner world of sensibility rather than the outer world of action, she has tried to forge a style supple and suggestive enough to convey the fever and fretfulness of the stream-of-consciousness of her principal characters. (Iyengar 16)

### ***Fasting, Feasting***

Desai's novel *Fasting, Feasting* (1999) deals with the intricate web of family conflict. The novel is divided into two parts. The first part deals with the family of Mama Papa and the second part covers Mr. Patton's family in America. The title of the novel is a highly symbolic one. The novel highlights the theme of rootlessness and alienation. Desai has portrayed the contradictions through the characters as well as the situations. Anita Desai remarks, "I am interested in characters who are not average but have retreated or been driven into some extremity of despair and so turned against, or made to stand against, the general current." (23) The title *Fasting, Feasting* signifies Uma's 'fasts' in India and Aruna's feasts in America. Here 'Fasting' refers to the miserable existence of Uma and 'feasting' refers to the unwanted life style of Aruna in the United States.

### **Mama Papa and Their Children**

*Fasting, Feasting* is about the traditional couple Mama Papa and their children, Uma, Aruna and Arun. In this novel, Desai portrays the oppression of woman characters and their miserable lives. She depicts Indian society and Indian socio-cultural milieu through man and his circumstances. R. S. Singh in his study on *Aloneness Alone: Anita Desai and Arun Joshi* rightly comments on Anita Desai, "Anita Desai is undoubtedly among the most gifted Indian Writers today who are expressing through their writings the psychic reverberations of a whole generation". (Singh 177)

### **Uma**

Uma who is the protagonist of the first part of the novel lives under the demanding rule of her parents. She is plain, short-sighted, clumsy and a terrible embarrassment to her family. She is trapped at home and she is smothered by her overbearing parents and their customs. She is a gray-haired spinster living under the control of Mama Papa. In her childhood days she loved to go to school. Uma's school-going was a pleasant attempt to escape from the claustrophobic conditions at home. Through the character of Uma, Desai exposes the common scenario of oppression of women in Indian society.

Uma's only joy in her childhood is to go to school. After every vacation she looks forward to its reopening. Mama's plan of dropping Uma's school education is shown when Mama says, "We are not sending you back to school, Uma. You are staying at home to help with Arun". (18)

Uma's desire for going to a convent school is stopped by her mother Mama. When Mama gives birth to the third baby, Arun, Uma's state is reduced to a baby-sitter in her early years. When Uma shows her disagreement, she is manipulated and threatened by her mother. Thus Uma's joy of going to school is crushed by her mother's traditional outlook. This unfavorable situation turns her life for the worse and she is treated as an unpaid servant by her parents. Being the eldest of the three children, Uma is expected to change the diapers of her baby brother and she is ordered to share in the household chores of her family. Her childhood is lost by these demands of her parents. Her wishes and desires are denied in her family. She finds no escape from the unfavorable situation. She feels as if she is put in prison. She is not allowed to express her wishes.

Uma looks forward to her marriage .She believes that her marriage would give her the much – needed relief. All the efforts of Mama Papa to see Uma happily married are turned to failure and all their hopes are shattered. Though Papa does not hesitate to arrange the dowry for his daughter, the suitable match for Uma is not easily fixed by her papa. She remains unwedded and finally her parents arrange her marriage with a man who is much older than her father. The second attempt of Papa too proves to be a failure, when she is brought back home from her husband's house. All Uma's expectations are shattered when immediately after marriage she discovers that her husband is already married and also having four children. So she returns home in permanent disgrace. After the failure of her married life, her existence is confined to the verandah, bedroom and kitchen of her parents' home. Here Desai highlights how the hypocrisy of the marriage system affects the life of an innocent woman in our society.

After she discovers the truth she becomes a victim of her cultural traditions and a victim of patriarchal society. As a divorcee Uma is treated as a mere burden in her parents'

House and Mama says, Uma was considered ill-fated by all, and no more attempts were made to marry her off". (98) Being a mother of Uma , Mama does not understand the pain of her daughter and she expresses Uma's desire to "dispose of Uma". (88) Uma's suffering increases when she is neglected by her family members. Jasbir Jain in his study on The Novels of Anita Desai comments, "Uma's life becomes a series of furtive flights, attempts to escape from the fate which seems to be enclosing upon her life". (Jain 188)

Unlike her younger sister Aruna and her younger brother Arun , Uma does not have the privileges. Instead, she is committed with all household chores. Mama too suffers before the birth of Arun. Since she has given birth to two daughters, she is neglected in her family. Though Papa has two grown up daughters, he desires to have a son. When a male baby is born to Mama Papa, Papa feels very happy and is proud to be a father of his son Arun. The unwanted state of daughters indicates clearly when Papa says, "A boy... A boy! Arun, Arun at last !" (17)

### **Papa and Mama**

Andrew Robinson comments on the character of Mama Papa :

In Papa and Mama, the Indian parents, she (Anita Desai) creates two monsters of almost Gothic proportions, locked into irreparable marital disharmony, determined to inflict on their two daughters and only son every ounce of the prejudice and disappointments of their own lives, as a respectable barrister and his wife in an undistinguished town .( Robinson 39)

Mama is not respected by her husband until she gives a birth to a male baby. After the birth of Arun, Mama gets the status of woman in her family and is proud to have been able to produce finally a male offspring. Her all sufferings are vanished after she gives a birth to a boy baby. Here Desai explores the conventional belief of society that is bound to the value of woman. Through Mama, Desai highlights the sufferings of mother in male dominated society and how she is treated in a family

Uma's attempt at going to a job is also denied by her parents. When Dr. Dutt provides a chance to go out and work as a nurse, Uma is denied by her parents. Uma feels friendless and lonely. Even when she is at home, she is surrounded by her Mama Papa and she is left with humiliation. Her frustration and isolation make her to think of writing a letter to a friend to share her heartache and she says:

She could write a letter to a friend – a private message of despair, dissatisfaction, yearning; she has a packet of notepaper, pale violet with a pink rose embossed in the corner – but who is the friend? Mrs. Joshi? But since she lives next door, she would be surprised. Aruna? But Aruna would pay no attention, she is too busy... (137)

### **Arun**

Arun is unable to free himself from the clutches of his father in terms of his education. After getting a foreign scholarship he goes to America to fulfill his Papa's unfulfilled dreams. He is sent to Massachusetts against his wishes. Arun's entrapment is revealed when Uma notices his state:

Uma watched Arun too, when he read the fateful letter. She watched and searched for an expression, of relief, of joy, doubt, fear, anything at all. But there was none.... There was nothing else...not the hint of smile, frown, laugh, or anything else ... This blank face now stared at the letter and faced another phase of his existence arranged for him by papa. (124)

Arun struggles to establish his individuality in America. His letters from America are devoid of any emotion. Arun is not able to adjust to the alien food and develops a sense of belonging with the Patton's family in Massachusetts. Though Arun is given more privilege than his sisters to go abroad, his dream of a better life is shattered. Arun's disappointment increases his sufferings when he faces the cultural conflicts. Asha Kanwar remarks, "The hall mark of Desai's fiction is to focus on the inner experience of life". (Kanwar 71)

## **Anamika**

Anamika is the first cousin of Uma. She gets a scholarship from Oxford University for her studies. But her scholarship is used only for her marriage. After she gets married she is tortured and beaten by her mother-in-law and her husband. Anamika's miserable life is revealed when one of her relatives says, "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." (71) Anamika tolerates this prison life for twenty five years. Her miserable life comes to an end when she is burned to death by her husband and mother-in-law. Here, Anamika is a victim of her cultural traditions as well as a victim of male dominated society.

## **Conclusion**

Anita Desai has portrayed the predicaments of Indian middle class women. She has an innate ability to delve into the inner psyche of her characters. Her women characters suffer privations and humiliations, neglect and silence, aloofness and alienation. The unhappy situations of women in Indian society are depicted in all her novels. The novel *Fasting, Feasting* depicts the plight of Uma who is a victim in her North Indian typical middle class family set up. Through this novel, Desai highlights the precarious situation of the married woman. Uma, Arun and Anamika are the defeated dreamers who experience failures, frustrations and rejections in the journey of their life. Uma and Anamika are compelled to sacrifice their lives. Uma survives not because she is weak, but because she knows that she is weak.

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