

## **Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting* : A Heart-touching Feministic Saga of the Sacrifice of Women at the Altar of Marriage**

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**Abstract.** Marriage is assumed to be the primary business of a woman's life through which the patriarchal values perpetuate. The themes of Anita Desai's compositions are chiefly love, matrimony and divorce which ultimately annihilate a woman's life. In Indian society, still in the twenty first century marriage is seen as the only course for majority of women. A woman is defined by her relatedness to man. Married or unmarried, women are the victims of discrimination, humiliation, and violence on various levels. Woman's emergence in society from the house and her deliverance from ignorance are favoured by only a few broad-minded personalities and people influenced by the great post-colonial movement 'feminism' that aims at eliminating sexist oppression in the male-dominant societal set-up in order to make a possible ground for the empowerment of women by providing them control over their own lives and liberty of materializing their dreams. Seen from this perspective Desai's *Fasting, Feasting* (1997) can be declared a highly feminist novel. In the present paper an endeavour has been made to trace and analyse all those double standards of codes of conduct in society regarding men and women due to which innocent women characters, such as "Uma" and "Anamika", are subjugated and tortured at each corner of their lives, not by the outsiders, but to utter surprise, by their own family members. Desai's novel *Fasting, Feasting* realistically illustrates the passive docile role of a woman in a man-woman relationship, and the malicious role of a lady in perpetuating the humiliation of another lady by a male. In it the problems of gender discrimination, pathetic conditions of women at their maternal and in-laws' homes, bride-torturing, unmatched marriage, dowry system, wife-beating, betrayals in marital relationships, humiliation of women when they are girls of marriageable ages, denial of education and equal career opportunities to girls, all have been masterly interwoven along with the plot.

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Feminism has emerged as a revolutionary movement now-a-days, and it is essentially concerned with the representation of women in the orthodox patriarchal society. Feminism aims at providing independence of mind, soul and body, as well as equal status to the womankind by putting full-stop to their incessant exploitation. Its chief goal is to eliminate sexist oppression in the male-dominant societal set-up. The demand of feminists is women's control over their own lives and liberty of materializing their dreams. In the days of Adam and Eve inequality of sexes was not known, but down the ages women have been relegated to an inferior position in the social set up. Now-a-days, merely clay-statues of goddesses are considered and

worshipped as incarnations of Power (Shakti) and Knowledge (Gyan), however, women of flesh and blood are deemed merely as child-bearing machines in general, and their horizons have been supposed to be confined only to their familial roles. In Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1986), women become mere "two-legged wombs", that's all; "sacred vessels", "ambulatory chalices", preserved and fattened for the purpose of copulation, fertilization, and breeding children :

We are two legged wombs, that is all; sacred vessels,  
ambulatory chalices (At wood 146)

To increase the population, fertile women are taken to camps and trained to be handmaids i.e. women with viable ovaries. These unfortunate handmaids are forced to bear child for the childless commanders. In place of word 'sterile', fruitful or fruitless word is used there for women. The handmaid's role is the most dehumanized. They don't have their own names; their names indicate that male to whom they are currently rendering service. In this regime, women's identity is repressed by men; they are diminished to being men's possession, mere objects or machines. The reproductive capacity of females has been exploited to tie her down to sexual, child-bearing and socializing roles within the confines of the home. They don't pay attention to this reality that this oppression of women may result into the severe ecological imbalance. The patriarchal society has always remained prejudiced with the notion that men are born to command, and women to follow them. Men are to rule over and women are to be ruled over as Lord Tennyson has depicted in his celebrated poem "The Princess" :

Man for the field and woman for the hearth,  
Man for the sword and for the needle she,  
Man to command and woman to obey,  
All else confusion. (Tennyson 43)

However, it is not merely male-domination or male-chauvinism which is responsible for the deplorable state of womankind. As a matter of fact, female-reluctance to face the challenges, and even female-apathy are responsible for this disparity. This ironical situation has been portrayed by many women novelists. Anita Desai's name is also quite prominent among such fictionists. The themes of love, matrimony, divorce, and then, the problem of rehabilitation after it, have chiefly been dealt with by Desai. She possesses a special knack for depicting social taboos and inhibitions in her fictions. Projecting out the crisis of conscience and values in the androcentric society, she wants to highlight the pains and agonies of womankind in such a hostile atmosphere. She lays the cruelty and ferocity towards the female sex quite bare before the society, and demands thereby, liberty, equality and apt recognition to the whole woman community.

*Fasting, Feasting* (1997) is one of Desai's highly feminist novels wherein women exploit another woman more in comparison to men. The problems of gender discrimination, pathetic conditions of women at their maternal and in-laws' homes, bride-torturing, unmatched marriage, dowry system, wife-beating, betrayals in marital relationships, humiliation of women when they are girls of marriageable ages, denial of education and equal career opportunities to girls, all have been realistically illustrated by Desai in it. Innocent women characters such as Uma and Anamika are subjugated and tortured at each corner of their lives, not by the outsiders, but to utter surprise, by their own family members. Either Uma, a mentally retarded girl, or Anamika, a highly gifted girl, both suffer at the hands of their own family members, so called their own mother or mother-in-law, just for being born as women. This novel has two parts, and it sketches a family in India comprising of Mama and papa and their children- the eldest daughter *Uma*, an intellectually retarded child who remains at home forever to look after her callous parents, after two failed dowries and a failed marriage, the younger daughter Aruna and the son Arun. Aruna was lucky to be married to a very handsome person, though, she is equally sad. 'Feasting' by *Aruna* never gives happiness and 'fasting' by *Uma* never gives satisfaction. The first part of the novel stands for fasting i.e. Indian society, and the second, for feasting i.e. American society. This novel relates the saga of the ironical situations wherein a girl or a woman suffers mentally, physically, ethically, socially at all levels, everywhere, even at her own parents' home, even by her own mother. Chiefly, it is the story of *Uma* who is expected to be an obedient daughter, an affectionate and caring sister and everything but an individual. When she was a young girl, she had her dreams, her desires, but when her dreams and aspirations came in conflict with the comforts of her parents she had to sacrifice, and she did. How parents crave for a boy child, and how much they get annoyed when a second daughter is born after already born first daughter, all harsh realities have been well portrayed in the novel. *Uma*'s father gets elated knowing the third child is a boy:

‘A boy!’ he screamed, ‘a bo-oy! Arun’, ‘Arun at last!’  
(*Fasting, Feasting* 17)

Anita Desai comments about his statements by writing :

It turned out that when a second daughter had been born, the name Arun had already been chosen in anticipation of a son. It had had to be changed, in disappointment, to Aruna. (*Ibid.*)

This shows how a girl child is unwanted and unwelcomed in an Indian patriarchal family. According to feminists, women are not mentally different since birth. Though a female child is biologically different, but, in no way she is inferior to male child

and incapable in any field. The most renowned feminist *Simone de Beauvoir* says in this regard :

One is not born but rather becomes a woman...No biological, psychological, economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in the society, it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine. (Beauvoir 44)

Since the birth of her baby brother Arun, Uma was forced to sacrifice her personal desires and pleasures at the altar of familial duties. She is forced to nurse her kid brother even when she is herself a child. How heartlessly Uma's mother says to Uma:

We are not sending you back to school, Uma. You are staying at home to help with Arun (*Fasting, Feasting* 18)

Uma, as a student, has been producing depressing results at school so her Mama orders her:

'You will be happier at home. You won't need to do any lessons. 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. 'Till then, you can help me look after Arun. And learn to run the house. (22)

The traditional Mama and papa of *Uma* tried to bring up their daughters as just to get them married at the right age and their son for a career. Her mother gets relaxed at the withdrawal of Uma from school because now the boy could be left to the care of his elder sister for bridge parties:

You know we can't leave the boy to the servant, she said severely. 'He needs proper attention. (30)

This statement of Uma's mother for Uma alludes at the feminist issue that a woman herself feels sadistic joy in exploiting another woman, even her daughter. Even a mother can be cruel and unsympathetic towards her own daughter getting prejudiced by the patriarchal notions. Desai brings into focus parental indifference, which wounds the daughters permanently. Desai, as a true humanist, provides a picture of

women suffering not only at the hand of male-superiority, but, also at the hand of women's apathy. A woman's heartlessness towards a woman does more harm to the happy existence of a woman. Uma, though was own blood of Mama and Papa, yet, in her own home, she was treated as no more than an ayah or a domestic help. She is denied the pleasure of ordinary living. Uma remains a plain uneducated, spinster, unmarried daughter throughout her life. She is trapped at home, smothered by the overbearing parents and their traditions. Uma's parents never think of giving her a career. Instead of sending her to dance, painting, tailoring classes, they keep her back at home just to do the job of an attendant. Many restrictions are put on Uma. Once she goes out to enjoy a cheerful evening with Ramu Bhai, her cousin, she is badly humiliated by her mother. Both Uma and Ramu receive the typical reaction of an orthodox Indian family. Papa thunders towards them with a face as black as the night and Mama's face glints like a knife in the dark, growing narrower, fiercer as it comes closer. The mother curses Uma, blaming her for spoiling the image of her family by going out to enjoy out with her cousin. Mama says in a great rage:

Quiet, you hussy! Not another word from you, you idiot child!"....You ,you disgrace to the family- nothing but disgrace, ever! (52 - 53)

Marriage is assumed to be the primary business of a woman's life. It provides her the right to procreate and become a mother. A lady can get her own identity only after accepting marital obligations. A daughter in the patriarchal society must separate from her mother in order to acquire her own individuality and personality as per social norms, essentially, as a mother. The values attached to motherhood in human society, undoubtedly, establish the indomitable hold of patriarchy over woman's biological existence. A woman is defined by her relatedness to man. An unmarried girl is considered as a burden in the Indian society. Uma proves to be unlucky in the matters of wedding as well. Her family was cheated by the Goel family, as they took the dowry, but, after refusing to marry Uma, they refused to return the dowry also. Uma's life is filled to saturation with *Mama*'s taunts. Aruna's yelps of laughter mock at her. Mama tries hard to "dispose-off" Uma; her photograph was sent to everyone who advertised in the matrimonial columns. Uma is never consulted regarding all this. A marriage is fixed with an old man, as old as 'Uma's own father'. That man too, turns out to be a cheater and leaves Uma before the espousement was consummated. Somehow the wedlock is cancelled. On this account, Uma costs her parents two dowries and still remains unmarried. Uma's depression gets doubled as her younger sister Aruna is married off and starts a 'fantastic' life in Bombay, and wins laurels of praise from her parents and in-laws. Uma is regarded ill-fated by all without any fault of her own, and, no more attempts are made to find out a match for her. Her status is reduced to that of a maid servant in the family. She is not allowed even to make any phone call and is

kept confined to the house, sans friends, enjoyment or entertainment. Her Papa often rebukes and taunts her for costing him two dowries, yet, pestering him by staying at home unwedded :

‘Costs money! Costs money!’ he kept shouting long after. ‘Never earned anything in her life, made me spend and spend, on her dowry and her wedding. Oh, yes, spend till I’m ruined, till I am a pauper’  
(146)

Clearly enough, Uma’s own parents leave no stone unturned to cow down their already frustrated daughter. As she couldn’t be married successfully despite her parents’ several irritated efforts, they always torture her mercilessly. In Arundhati Roy’s Booker Prize winning novel ‘The God of Small Things’ the case of *Ammu* is quite similar to that of *Uma*. In both the novels how women are exploited by their own family members, most surprisingly, by their own mothers, the deprivation of a girl child of her schooling, the evil of dowry system, and maltreatment towards girls, have been sarcastically focused to evoke readers’ sympathy for the tortured and hatred towards the torturers. As *Ammu*’s father cannot afford a suitable dowry, marriage proposals do not come and she marries according to her choice to quit an unworthy person that proves later fatal and tragic for her life.

In *Fasting, Feasting* there is another pathetic story of Anamika, a talented girl who couldn’t be sent abroad despite scholarship to Oxford, just because, she was of an age to marry. Her wedding to a man, so much older than herself, with higher degree suffering from Oedipus complex, mars her life. Joint family system becomes a curse for her. She is beaten regularly by her mother-in-law while her husband standing by approves, does not object. Anamika spends her entire time in the kitchen, cooking for everyone and she eats the remains in the pots. She has a miscarriage after being beaten and is treated like ‘damaged goods’ to be sent back to her family:

She had had a miscarriage at home; it was said, after a beating. It was said she could not bear more children. Now Anamika was flawed, she was damaged goods. She was no longer perfect. Would she be sent back to her family? Everyone waited to hear. (71)

Her own parents do not protect her; none of the relatives even wants to see her. People wonder to think:

'How can she be happy if she is sent home? What will people say? What will they think?' (*Ibid.*)

Anamika dies under mysterious circumstances. Whether it is a murder or suicide, she is tortured for twenty-five years in the name of marriage. Violence against women still prevails and even has condoned throughout history. Many feminists claim that brutality against women is the result of a deeply enhanced patriarchal culture that encourages and rewards male supremacy. They opine that in a patriarchal culture, men are more likely to use strength to keep their domineering position. While society claims to abhor violence, people often make heroes of men who are aggressive. It is quite obvious that whenever and wherever there is partiality, injustice, tyranny and fierceness, woman is the worst sufferer. Violence includes both personal injury and property damage. It is to assent one's will over another in order to prove or feel a sense of power. In behavioural terms, violence against women ranges from simple suppression to abuse, aggressive exploitation and severe humiliation. It also includes rape, wife-beating and denial of education to girls, physical, as well as mental harassment. On account of this, all such kinds make the term more terrible.

In Indian society, still in this twenty first century women are made victims of savagery on different levels such as familial, social, political etc. Still marriage is seen as the only course for majority of women. *Fasting, Feasting* throws light on the misery that can follow a marriage, too hastily arranged, and the lots of women in a typical joint family where the new bride is a prisoner and a slave to the mother-in-law. The story is a direct attack on the joint family system in Indian society, cruelty of the in-laws, and apathy of the parents towards a married daughter. This novel also throws light on many ugly practices in Indian society with regard to coercion of the womankind. The fate of Anamika is similar to Monisha of Desai's *Voices in the City*. Monisha also has to suffer uncountable taunts and insults at her in-laws' house, most particularly, due to her infertility. In *The God of Small Things* too, an identical attitude of family and society is observed towards womankind. Mammachi, Baby Kochamma, Ammu and Rahel all suffer due to patriarchal set-up of society. They all are the victims of gender discrimination, sexual repression and domestic violence in some or other ways. They suffer mentally, physically and sexually. There also Mammachi and Baby Kochamma fit into tyrannical family system, and blatantly victimize *Ammu*, daughter of their own family. Mammachi, who had once justified Chacko's flirting with women workers of Pickle factory declaring it as "Men's Need," denounces her daughter's Ammu's real love and emotional attachment for the paravan Velutha:

A cold contempt for her daughter and what she had done. (Roy 257)

No doubt, the greatest pain of women's lives is when they are inflicted by their own family members and known people. Through the agonies of Uma and Anamika, Desai has, brilliantly, exposed the grinding suppression of women in India. Marriage, pleasant or unpleasant, is a woman's mainstay, her destiny, the ultimate objective of her life. But, as a feminist, Anita Desai wants women to be accepted as responsible human beings. She highlights the Indian female's predicament of maintaining self-identity as an individual woman. Most of Anita Desai's female protagonists are "bored housewives" and suffer as Nanda Kaul in *Fire on the Mountain* and Monisha in *Voices in the City*. In all her novels, the women protagonists do not easily give up the strife. Her female characters, after being subjected to suppression and male domination, pass through the process of self-awareness. They start aspiring for the liberty and their individual existence, but, the realization of their limitations makes them emotionally frustrated and psychologically disturbed. In Desai's *Clear Light of Day*, marriage and profession are two well juxtaposed and well-defined choices to Bim and work is powerful substitute for marriage for it provides identity, fulfilment, involvement and purpose. Bim rejects the obligatory custom of nuptial load upon the womankind. She, like a true rebellious radical feminist, gives a snort of disgust over the institution of marriage which is considered as the only resort for women, and utters:

I don't know why they're in such a hurry to get married' .... Why don't they go to college instead? (*Clear Light of Day* 220)

Simone de Beauvoir observes in *The Second Sex* :

Today the woman who works is less neglectful of her femininity than formerly, and she does lose her sexual attractiveness. This success, though already indicating progress towards equilibrium, is not yet complete. (Beauvoir 695)

Indeed, from the radical feminist point of view women should choose their own paths of purpose and fulfilment. Their identity is not simply as sex-toys rather they can obtain their identity outside the four walls of their domestic arena. Desai's all novels are female-oriented in which she probes into women's emotional and mental problems. Her female protagonists appear as victims in patriarchal, patrilineal and father-led Indian family. The institution of matrimony becomes an instrument of exploitation in feminism which regards it as a subtle expression of patriarchal control and the most powerful weapon for female subjugation. Simone de Beauvoir writes about marriage:

It has been said that marriage diminishes man, which is often true; but almost it annihilates woman.(71)

According to Engels also marriage is not :

‘A reconciliation of man and woman’ but ‘the subjugation of the female in the interest of perpetuation of slavery and private property.

(Arora 57)

In the light of above statements *Fasting, Feasting* can be declared as a heart-touching saga of the sacrifice of women at the altar of marriage.

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