

Entrapment of the Psyche of Women in Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting*

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Abstract

The existence of duality across the universe has led to the dominance of one over the other. Man and woman are no exceptions and the advancements made in various arenas by mankind at an exponential pace is only peripheral and not holistic. The external progress in terms of physical, social, economic and political setup has made little or no impact on the internal psyche and attitude of the society towards women. Even the so-called liberated modern womanhood is often understood be another form of entrapment. Anita Desai portrays the complexities involved in the female psyche and a search for identity in a patriarchal society in *Fasting, Feasting*. The writer examines multiple woman characters caught between hegemonic gender ideology and their suppressed desire to realize their selfhood. Women are portrayed not just as victims of a male-dominant society but also as combatants who are actively vying to attain autonomy.

Keywords: dominance, internal psyche, liberated modern womanhood, entrapment, hegemonic gender ideology, autonomy

1. Introduction

The existence of duality in terms of day and night, white and black, sun and moon, God and man, has led to the dominance of one over the other. Man and woman are no exceptions and as an alternate, creation of a non-dualistic world could be a possibility only in science fictions. The advancements made in various arenas by mankind at an exponential pace is only peripheral not holistic. The external progress in terms of physical, social, economic and political setup has made little or no impact on the internal psyche and attitude of the society towards women. Even the so-called liberated modern womanhood is often understood be another form of entrapment. Anita Desai portrays the complexities involved in the female psyche and a search for identity in a patriarchal society in *Fasting, Feasting*. The writer examines multiple woman characters caught between hegemonic gender ideology and their suppressed desire to realize their selfhood. (Ashley)Women are portrayed not just as victims of a male-dominant society but also as combatants who are actively vying to attain autonomy.

1.1 Mother & Daughter – *The Unequal Power-sharers*

Fasting, Feasting written in two parts, with the first section narrated as perceived by Uma, the female protagonist nailed to a domestic environment and the second part of the novel set in a broader masculine environment of the West through the eyes of her brother Arun. Uma lives with her parents in India while her younger brother is pursuing his higher education in the United States. She refers to her parents as Papamama as they seem to be a single entity. But this relationship does not observe equal power between the two which is evident from the ritual of finger bowl practiced at home on a regular basis. “He is the only one in the family who is given a napkin and a finger bowl; they are emblems of his status” (24). Mama does gain prominence and power only after the conception of a male child. “What honour, what status. Mama’s chin was lifted a little higher in the air, she looked around her to make sure everyone saw and noticed. She might have been wearing a medal” (31). Asha Choubey addressing the attitude of women like Mama writes, “They are trained to simply show obedience to the orders of their rules. They sulk, they struggle but they are never freed of their meaningless existence as secondary to their masters” (91).

The injustice that Uma, the protagonist suffers in the hands of the patriarchal society is partly due to the silence and indifference of Mama when unfair decisions are made by Papa. Uma, though not a mother plays a nurturing role whose life-long duty is to serve her parents. She enjoys going to school which is “streaked with golden promise” (20) but her miserable failure in academics entraps her at home. She is given the responsibility of tending her new born brother because he needed “Proper attention” (31).

Uma looks forward towards her marriage as a safe refuge but the family fails miserably in two attempts in securing a husband for her. She returns home after a conniving marriage and causing a huge economic liability. From the level of baby-sitter, after her return, she is relegated to the position of an unpaid servant for her self-centered parents for the rest of her life. Uma holds a vulnerable position in the society since she is divorced, childless and a school dropout. Even when she is offered a decent job of a warden by Dr.Dutt who is also single but living with dignity because of her profession, even before Papa comments, Mama complains of a false illness which needs Uma to look after her. Also Mama refuses permission to send Uma for a coffee party hosted by Mrs.O.Henry. Above all, she even goes to the extent of preventing her from consulting an ophthalmologist. Hence more than her Papa, Mama is vigilant in not letting Uma to breathe free air.

1.2 The Alter-egos of Entrapped Women

Mira-masi, the widowed aunt of Uma is a periodic visitor who sojourns her pilgrimage for a brief period at Uma's home. She is an unwelcomed guest tolerated for bringing gossips from all corners and making excellent ladoos. An ardent devotee of Lord Siva Mira-masi is seen to maintain a lover's connection to Lord Siva which is candid when she loses her Shiva idol. Uma witnesses her fervent prayer, "Mira-masi let out a sigh so deep it seemed to tear the heart out of her chest. Folding her hands together, she began to pray for the return of her stolen idol, her Lord, her god, in tones of such anguish that Uma crawled away in order not to hear. She was afraid Mira-masi might become hysterical"(138). Women folk are often found to succumb to deep religious faith as a means to escape from the clutches of the patriarchal society. Mira-masi gains independence and autonomy under the aegis of religion which is briefly enjoyed by Uma when she accompanies her on a pilgrimage. Mira-masi is the representative of one of the most oppressed section of woman, the widows, who has liberated herself and as Anita Desai states, she "eventually, conveniently - ... quite alone, safe in her widow's white garments..." (38).

Aruna, Uma's younger sister is prudent enough to marry "the wisest, ... the handsomest, the richest, the most exciting of the suitors who presented themselves" (101). Yet this dream-come-true life is rather an entrapment for Aruna. She alters her external self by chopping her hair off, carrying a make-up kit and ridiculing her parents and sister as villagers. She envisages perfection in everything and is entrapped in the same.

Uma pities Aruna who seems to be eternally dissatisfied with the state affairs around her. "Seeing Aruna vexed to the point of tears because the cook's pudding had sunk and spread instead of remaining upright and solid, or because Arvind had come to dinner in his bathroom slippers, or Papa was wearing a T-Shirt with a hole under one arm, Uma felt pity for her" (109). Aruna is pressurized to perform the role of perfect daughter, wife and mother since Uma has failed on an epic scale, and this made Aruna entangle herself in a mad pursuit towards perfection.

1.3 Universal Subjugation Across Boundaries

Not only do clumsy, unattractive dull women deserve entrapment but even beautiful and brilliant women suffer the same plight. In fact Anamica is depicted as a double for Uma and as critic Anita Myles rightly points out, "... each heroine is seen as searching for, finding and absorbing or annihilating the double who represents the socially impermissible aspects of her femininity" (P. 36). The gorgeous Anamika, Uma's cousin shows academic brilliance by procuring a scholarship from Oxford which serves as a trump card to secure an opulent marriage proposal. Married to an elderly, grim-faced, apron-stringed husband, she leads an entrapped life at her in-law's place. "Anamica, who won scholarship to Oxford, spends her entire time in the kitchen cooking for a very large family that eats in shifts - ..." (70). Marriage is often looked upon as a means to showcase the prowess of men in securing an intelligent good-looking wife. Anamika becomes an "... an instrument for her husband 'to enhance his superiority to other men'" (Choubey, 97). She endures brutal sufferings in the hands of her mother-in-law leading to a miscarriage and marring her from bearing children any more only to get tied in a nylon saree and burnt to death.

Anamika's mother-in-law portrays the prominent role played by the mothers of the male children in the Indian society. Similar to Mama, the position of women in the society is elevated through the conception of a male child. After the wedding, the sons are likely to fulfill the wish of their wives which is usually disliked by the mothers and they look at their daughters-in-law as a potential threat to their powerful position in the familial and societal set up. Anamica's mother-in-law could not stomach the beauty and intelligence of her daughter-in-law since the day of the wedding and Anamica's husband, a typical Mama's boy remained a silent witness to his mother's beating of his wife regularly. When Anamica becomes barren she is seen as a liability and her position in the institution of marriage is nullified and therefore meets a tragic death in the hands of her husband and mother-in-law.

Mrs. Patton and her daughter are the mirror images of Mama and Uma in the American landscape. In an American free society Mrs. Patton meekly compromises to take non-vegetarian food as per the desires of her husband though she longs for a vegetarian meal. She is accomplished in carrying out the routine domestic duties without wounding her husband's desires and preferences and therefore draws comparison with Mama. "She smiles a bright plastic copy of a mother-smile that Arun remembers from another world and another time ..." (194).

Melanie Patton, the daughter is paralleled with Uma as she suffers from parental indifference like the latter. In spite of the liberal societal setup in which Melanie grows up, she longs for parental love and affection. Due to the total negligence of the family, Melanie falls an easy prey to bulimia and anorexia while Uma becomes a hysterical patient. They draw attention through their anger and eccentric behavior. Arun not only envisions his mother in Mrs. Patton but also his sister Uma in Melanie. "A resemblance to the contorted face of an enraged sister who, failing to express her outrage against neglect, against misunderstanding, against inattention to her unique and singular being and its hungers, merely spits and froths in ineffectual protest" (214). Despite the difference in culture, heritage and environment, the position and treatment of women in the society remains the

same across the globe.

1.4 Conclusion

The liberation of women folk from the entrapped patriarchal society cannot materialize unless they become aware of their enmeshed psyche and show an inclination to take action against the same. The affliction and torment which women undergo should be understood by those who are willing to act on their behalf. In case of Melanie, Arun comes to her rescue. On the other hand, Uma acquires a self-recognition and when she assists the nunnery during a charity show. Free from her parental supervision, she is content and attains a sense of fulfillment. This realization of being a productive member to the community propels her to think about securing a job. Finally when a job offer is made, overflowing with exuberance, even before Uma gives a nod, Papa bluntly refuses the offer. Arun who seems to have understood the predicament of women from the other side is expected to act when he comes back to India because, “the power and the potential to change being considered a male prerogative” (Nabar, 61). To conclude this paper has offered an insight into the entrapment of women by the patriarchal society which in turn has ensnared the psyche of women in Anita Desai’s Fasting, Feasting and the only means to liberate women from this lattice is self-realization

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