



# The Perils in the Pursuit of Happiness in Anita Desai's "Fasting, Feasting"

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**Abstract:** The theme of women has always been and remains one of the most important topics in literature and has paved ways for authors to question dominant social institutions. This theme is rightly considered by researchers as the key to understanding the women's place in society, her role in social progress and of her rights and freedoms. Anita Desai is one of the noticeable writers in Indian English who has created a matchless stature in Indian English fiction by focusing on the mental torment and trauma faced by the women protagonists with the difference. "Fasting, Feasting" is one such venture of her that depicts a simple story of an Indian family which persists on the questions of the women's role within and outside the walls of patriarchal domesticity. This paper aims to evaluate how patriarchy functions through conquest of women who have been accorded a secondary status.

**Index Terms** - Patriarchal domesticity. Secondary status, matchless stature, privilege, deprivation, consciousness.

The theme of women has always been and remains one of the most important topics in literature.

Feminism is a literary movement and has proved ways for authors to question dominant social institutions as well as their representations in work of literature.

Indian English fiction has a long history to cherish in the realm of outlining the ambitions, sufferings and struggles faced by woman since Ages. To start with, there has been a long list of writers who have taken up the tribulations faced by women in this patriarchal society as the core of their novels.

Anita Desai, one of the most prominent writers of Indian English literature, has created matchless stature in Indian writing by concentrating in her fiction the mental agonies, the internal conflict and trauma faced by the women protagonists with a difference. Her literary ventures had always been different in their own way. She has given a new direction to Indian English fiction and has created a specific place for herself by researching deep into human psyche of her female characters. She presents cleverly the struggles faced by them in this world, where they have been accorded the secondary status. As has been rightly said by K.R.S. Iyengar, "Her forte is the exploration of sensibility- the particular kind of modern Indian Sensibility that is ill at ease among the barbarians and the Philistines, the anarchists and the amoralists. Since her obsession is with the inner world of sensibility rather than the outer world of action, she has tried to forge style supple and suggestive enough to convey the fever and the anxiety of the stream of consciousness of her principal characters."(p64) As said by Anita

Myles, “Anita Desai portrays Indian woman as fighter, a victim and as a heroine and ultimately a winner because of her indomitable spirit and attitude of compromise.”

Anita Desai doesn't refrain herself from acknowledging the fact that she is more concerned with the mental rather than physical being of her women protagonists. She plays with strong feminist themes in a simple manner which makes it more complex with gradual unfolding. Although her main characters are women in the novel but she also portrays their male counterparts basked in their own privileges of a male dominated structure.

Her novel “Fasting Feasting” is one such work of her that depicts a simple story of an Indian family and tangled fates of the children of the household. The basic thrust of the novel perseveres on the question of the woman's role within and outside the walls of patriarchal domesticity. The novel analyses in the same vein the internal anguish faced by Uma, the central character with great composure. Uma, the helpless, dull and ordinary looking young girl was the eldest daughter of the family, after being denied the desired love and affection, always feels isolated and insecure. She fulfills all the roles assigned to her- taking care of her brother, attending to each and every need of her parents, but despite that she fails to receive affection from them.

It is through Uma's bearable setup that the pseudo happiness of the family continues in the novel. Uma turns into a poor victim of patriarchal domain. From the very beginning, the parents depend on her and ironically, she never gets her share of importance. She gets outshined by her sister, Aruna because she is not only excellent in her studies but also smart in every other sphere. Uma has been brought up differently and always been treated as a nuisance. She has been exploited since her childhood and has never been treated with equality. She is made to feel unimportant and twitches losing confidence. She longs for the attention of her parents who always gives her a secondary treatment in comparison to her sister.

Her parents cherish the desire to have son and when Arun, her brother is born, they stop caring for the daughters. Overwhelmed by the birth of the son, they asked her to leave the school. This show of unrestricted happiness at the birth of a son in front of daughters is symptomatic of the negligible status of the daughters in the family. “A boy!” he screamed, “a bo-oy ! Arun, Arun at last!” (p-17) The exclusive concern and care allotted to the son, picks the mind of her to a great extent. Starting from the birth of her brother till his school, Uma has been assigned the responsibility of taking care of him. Though she is a weak student, she is never given the freedom to have tutors to teach her. On the other hand, her father arranges tuition for her brother in all subjects. All the love and care are showered on the son and the daughters are never even paid any consideration.

At the birth of her brother, she is not very old despite that she is forced to do all the work starting from changing his nappies to giving him food. Her consciousness is torn between her deepest desire to go out and play and over the captivity imposed on her by her parents. Her childhood just elapses in all these household chores, she is neither allowed to study nor allowed to enjoy with the children of her age. Whenever she expresses her desire to study, her mother silences it. “Leave all that , mamma snapped at her.” (p18) Her story is one of a prolonged repudiation that is marked by her early end of the school life. She is reduced to the status of a babysitter. Uma endures all the pain and internal helplessness without complaining to anyone, though there are instances where she really blurts out her desire strongly but is always silenced either by her authoritarian mother or father. There are moments when she wants to communicate her feelings of distress through her silence for instance when she locks herself in the room and didn't come out irrespective of repeated calls of her parents. The parents are not seriously interested in educating her, they always search for opportunities where she can be kept at home, to take care of their son. After Uma failed in her exams, her mother got the chance to keep her in the home for always. “You know you failed in your exams again. You're not being moved up. What's the use of going back to school? Stay at home and look after your baby brother.” (p22)

In all these situations Uma really finds herself imprisoned without any freedom to choose and decide on her own, for instance she just hates taking care of the child because she really finds herself incapable in managing these things. All her quest and her frustrations are restricted to her thoughts without any outlet. But there are instances where even she becomes impatient sometimes for small things and doesn't want to compromise. She asserts her desire to go out and enjoy by going with her cousin, Ramu against her parents' wishes. The desire to go out and study is so strong in her that one day she runs away secretly to meet Mother Agnes, her teacher to request her, to persuade her father to send her to school, as she says- “But I will work very hard mother!” she yelled, “I will pass next time. Please tell him, Mother- I will pass next time!” (p28)

The dissimilar and inappropriate treatment she suffers in the hands of her family is responsible for ruining of her future also. Uma's parents search for a match of her but they do not take much interest in finding out the exact information about the groom and his family. They just wanted to get rid of her and hence they were in hurry to marry her. The marriage did not follow the line of her expectations and consequently it leads to a failure. Her misfortune continues to pester her for it is not just her first marriage that ends in a disaster, but another likely engagement breaks off with another young boy after which she is forced into bearing the additional burden of gratitude towards her parents.

The fake engagement cost them a huge sum for which Uma is blamed ultimately. Even her sister starts speaking in a cynical way and everybody starts feeling sympathetic towards her.

Uma is not very pretty but doesn't want to put on make up to look attractive. She is very simple girl and moreover she has little sense of grooming in comparison to her sister, Aruna who is very skillful at dressing up and in talking to people. Uma also doesn't know how to lie, she is innocent as a child and when her mother tells her to lie to the groom's parents about the preparation of dishes, she doesn't agree to that. But even in this case, the family considers her a total fool as she doesn't know the ways of the world. Since her childhood she has not been a confident child and despite all her efforts she could not acquire it only because of the indifference and lack of importance meted out to her by her own family members. Their dispirited and rude behaviour has never allowed her to become a mature person. Uma has got the heart of a child, even after being a grown-up woman, she is not very skillful in managing the sensitive issues. For example, when she comes to know that her cousin Anamika has been sent to her house by her in-laws, she expresses her happiness by saying that now she will be able to meet Anamika. Hence, her parents never consider her fit to take part in such sensitive social issues and try to keep her away. The stage of repeated failure to marry her off proves to be very crucial and Uma's childlike personality is being taken over by maturity.

After a long search, Uma was married to a man who later turned out to be an already married man with children and a wife to support. She came to know a little about it when she was taken back to her house by her father. She was never informed about the legal proceedings being involved in terminating her marriage, which ultimately ended in a divorce. A victim of the hatred in the hands of everybody without committing a single mistake, she has no space to call her own in that house. "That was what Uma felt her own life to have been - full of barks, howls, messages and now silence." (p61)

She tries a lot to control her crushed life. There are moments in her life which gives her some consolation for instance whenever her Mira Masi, an old widow relative visit their house, she accompanies her on her religious pilgrimages that took her far from the disparaging and disturbing domestic pressures inflicted upon her by her own family. The company of Mira Masi helps her in her moments of distress and she acquires courage to compromise with her present situation.

As Anita Desai writes, "the tightly knit fabric of family that had seemed so stifling and confining now revealed holes and gaps that were frightening - perhaps the fabric would not hold, perhaps it would not protect after all."(p86)

Uma finds herself completely alone and feel choked in the confines of the household where everyone is just concerned about the son and his affairs. She feels that she has no identity in that home except as a caretaker of the house whom everyone can ask to work for them. She feels trapped under the pressure of her indifferent parents.

She doesn't wish to fit into any rule imposed upon by her parents or by society. She rather echoes the demand of an individual woman voiced by Virginia Woolf in "A Room of One's Own" (1929) who needs economic and social independence of her own. But she fails to live according to her own desires and is forced to give in to the pressures of the societal expectations. She has no freedom to even go out and meet someone without the permission of our parents. Initially, she has done according to her wishes but there were instances when she has also expressed and advocated her need to enjoy intensely. When her invitation to a coffee party by Mrs. O'Henry is quickly brushed aside by her parents, she openly expressed her anger on this constant oppression. "She is giving a party - a coffee party, not a tea party - and she has invited some ladies, and me." (p112) Her parents stop her from participating in a party hosted by her old teacher, Mrs. O'Henry because they feel afraid that Uma might be converted to Christianity after interacting with such people from different religious communities. Her slightest wishes are not granted and she is always repressed by her parents. One day she talks to Dr. Dutt secretly and request her for a job, at this Dr. Dutt agrees and comes to her house to seek permission of her parents. When she informs Uma's parents about the requirement, they have in the dispensary for nurses and suggests Uma's name, they are captivated. They don't like the idea at all and start making excuses. Dr. Dutt assures her father that she will deal with the authorities. "You will agree, sir? She turned to Papa, smiling, as if she knew how much he adored being called Sir." (p142-43) "But Papa didn't appear to have noticed the honour this time. He was locking his face up into a frown of great degree." (p142-43) Even her this wish is denied to her by her parents who totally believe that woman should not work outside. Her mother states: "Our daughter doesn't need to go out for work, Dr. Dutt there is no need." (p62)

She has undergone this discrimination in the hands of her parents since her childhood, where girls have been considered as a burdens on the family. But selfishness and discrimination are so much rooted in her parents that they don't even allow her to do a job. It was the politics of patriarchy that made women conform to certain rules in order to serve its own purposes.

To sum up, miserable, torn and estranged self of Uma never achieved a position where she can become an independent woman. A struggler

throughout her life, she toils with her own wishes and desires that have never been provided, an outlet neither by her nor by her own family members. Although there were occasions in her life where in she wants to assert her own likings but on being rejected by her family members, she learns maintain silence. Her psyche has become accustomed of the discrimination meted out to her, on a part of female race and consequently, she tries to adjust and seeks fulfilment in the household chores. The muteness becomes a habit that the woman fails to overcome and thus on a long run they feel suffocated, helpless and choked inside a rapidly devastating web of patriarchal norms. "Fasting, Feasting" very powerfully interrogates the existing norms of the society made to subjugate women in every possible way. Anita Desai successfully presents the story of a woman to show how patriarchy works in every society irrespective of time and space.

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