

The Muffled Voice in Anita Desai's *Fasting Feasting*

Dr. Riazul Hoque, Associate Professor, Deptt. Of English, Rupahi College, P.O. Rupahi, District. Nagaon, Assam- 782125

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Abstract:

Anita Desai is one of the most frequently mentioned faces among contemporary Indo-Anglian authors in India and abroad. Her concern for the feminist cause is also unchallenging. Reading *Fasting Feasting* (1999) as a feminist text will further establish this concern.; however, it must be remembered that her fame as a feminist writer has already been established through the publication of her novels like *Cry, the Peacock, and Where Shall We Go This Summer? Fire on the Mountain* etc. Which are some fine examples in her credit that foregrounds the gender question. *Fasting Feasting* has projected women as the symbol of victims, sacrifice, endurance, subdued suffering, and faithfulness through the characters of Uma, Aruna, and Anamika. Patriarchal values are so much imbibed, fossilized, and internalized in these women that they do not hesitate to rule their female wards from the vantage point of patriarchal values. This novel embodies the suffering and coerced voice of women who cannot take aggressive steps to improve their lives due to patriarchal dominance. Here women are doubly marginalized as they are pushed to the margins in their own houses and society. Women characters seem isolated and marginalized as they cannot handle their lives. Their marginalization and aloofness are, in fact, the outcome of their oppressed desires and subdued dreams. This paper is a humble attempt to understand and realize the muffled voice of the women projected in the novel who are victimized in the name of caste, creed, race, religion, and community.

Keywords: feminism, endurance, equality, gender, patriarchal

Feminism is a social movement that seeks equal rights for women, giving them equal status with men and freedom to decide their careers and life patterns. It comprises several movements, theories, and philosophies that are concerned with issues of gender, and that campaign for women's rights and interests, besides advocating equality for women. Though the term feminism is relatively modern, the inequities against which the feminists protest- legal, economic, and social restrictions on the fundamental rights of women have existed throughout history and in all civilizations. Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* challenges the idea that women exist only to please men and proposes that women receive the

same opportunities as men in educational work and politics. A milestone in the rise of feminism was Simon de Beauvoir's book *The Second Sex* which raised feminist consciousness by appealing to the idea that liberation for women was liberation for men. Virginia Woolf's *A Room of one's Own* is also considered a precursor to feminist thinking.

For ages, women have been discriminated against in all ways. In Indian patriarchal society, the man enjoys the central role. Man is the nucleus of the family, and woman is the other. A woman's destiny is shaped by gender discrimination. That is why it is a common question 'boy or girl when a child is born. The family becomes euphoric at the birth of a baby boy; on the other hand, family members turn gloomy at the advent of the baby girl. This is the reality of Indian patriarchy. Desai's *Fasting Feasting* is a novel that captures the lives of three female characters- Uma, Anamika, and Aruna and depicts what life brings them as rewards for being what they are, that is, women. Their reward is deprivation. In the novel, every sphere of life and thing is controlled by the family head, Papa, whereas the papa-mama relationship is mismatched, wherein everyone blames each other:

"Of course, there were arguments between them and debate. These occurred every day at the same hour when ordering meals for the day. They could never be done without heated discussions that would have gone against custom. It was wonderful to see what fertile ground the dining table was for discussion and debate" (6).

So far as Uma's life is concerned, she has been trapped in the stifling life that her parents decided for her. For her childhood, 'home' for Uma means a prison, from where she seeks refuge in school. However, her parents do not permit her dream to attend convent school, whereas her brother Arun is encouraged to go to America for higher studies. Uma's every move and action seems to be dominated by Papa. Uma becomes unable to do anything or to move forward due to Papa's dominant role:

"Uma finds saliva gathering at the corners of her mouth at the smell of the spiced, roasted gram but decides to say nothing" (15)

Arun's birth terminates Uma's aspiration for school education. Uma is summoned to babysit her newborn brother, the only 'son' in the family. When Uma protests and says that Ayah can look after the baby, her mother sternly says, "You know we cannot leave the baby to the servant" (89), for he needs "proper attention ."Uma again points out that Ayah brought up her and Aruna, her sister, and her mother emphatically repeats the unalterable "proper attention."Indian patriarchal society considers a male child a fortune of the family but another hand, a girl child a beast of burden. Uma becomes the victim of a patriarchal society. As regards marginalization R.S. Pathak believes that marginals have no other option: "It has to speak, voice, not to hide tears.....it has to disidentify itself and open itself to intervening positive influence for larger identity" (Pathak 15).

As Uma grows up to be a young lady, she fails to fulfill the criteria of an eligible bride; once, she is duped after the engagement, and another time she has to return home after a deceitful marriage. Since then, all the doors of escaping from home are shut, and Uma becomes a burden, an eyesore, for her parents. After all these happenings, Uma is regarded as an ill-fated, uneligible bride: "Uma was considered ill-fated by all, and no more attempts were made to marry her off (96)". Thus from her early life, Uma remains a babysitter, while in her later life, she remains an unpaid servant to her parents. If Uma is unattractive, dull, and gawky, her cousin Anamika is the epitome of perfection. She is not only beautiful but also brilliant, graceful, obedient, and accomplished, yet her life, too, ends in the inescapable trap set by misogynic prejudice. Though Anamika obtains a scholarship to Oxford, her parents hastily marry her off to a snob who is even much older than her. Patriarchal mindset pushes feminine existence to the margin even after having a grim face and the illusion of being superior:

"Impervious to Anamika's beauty..... grace and distinction, he was too occupied with maintaining his superiority. He raised his chin and nose- as long and as sharp as a needle- and seemed to look over the top of her head as they exchanged heavy garland of rose and jasmine when sat before the ceremonial fire" (70).

After marriage Anamika's life becomes a traumatic experience as she has to bear the unspeakable atrocities of her husband and mother-in-law. Moreover, finally, they set her ablaze and burn her to death.

Thus both Uma and Anamika's lives bear proof of what Simon de Beauvoir utters as a feminist maxim "one is not born but rather becomes a woman" (Beauvoir 56). In contrast to Uma and Anamika, Uma's younger sister Aruna is 'fortunate' enough to secure a married life with "the wisestThe most handsome, the richest, the most exciting of the suitors who presented themselves" (97). Aruna's marriage to Arvind, her flat in Juhu, facing the beach, is like a dream come true; ironically, she is too entrapped in that insulting dream life to ignore life outside and the reality beyond it. Thus through the story of Uma, Anamika, and Aruna, Anita Desai portrays the life of women, which is self-negating and uncompromising. No doubt, there are some moments in Uma's life when she gathers the courage to revolt, but the iron hands of her parents make her conform to what they choose for her life.

So far as the minor female characters in the novel are concerned, for example, Mira Masi, Mamma, Mrs. Verma, and Anamika's mother, they seem to be happy and contented living within the framework of patriarchy. Patriarchal values are so much imbibed, fossilized, and internalized in these women that they do not hesitate to rule their female wards from the vantage point of patriarchal values. If Uma is stopped from going to school, Anamika is stopped from going to Oxford. On the other hand, Uma's only brother Arun is given the 'best education and is sent to the U.S.A for further education almost forcefully. This novel embodies the suffering and coerced voice of women who cannot take aggressive steps to improve their

lives due to patriarchal dominance. Here women are doubly marginalized as they are pushed to the margins in their own houses and society. Women characters seem isolated and marginalized as they cannot handle their lives. Their marginalization and aloofness are, in fact, the outcome of their oppressed desires and subdued dreams. They fail to understand the meaning of their existence. That is why they feel isolated and incapable of fitting into the patriarchal social framework. Reflecting upon the positive and negative aspects of the feminine psyche, a few solutions may be worked out to end their suffering and isolation:

1. Women should be aware of their rights and liability.
2. They should maintain equilibrium between their emotions and reasons.
3. Self-identity, boldness, and creating space are paramount for their empowerment.

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