



**ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER**

**Literature**

**FASTING, FEASTING: FROM A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE**

**KEY WORDS:** socio-political realities, Existential malaise, Patriarchy, Gender oppression, Gender prejudice, Feminine Identity

**Etishree Sagarika Panda**

Bangalore, India

**ABSTRACT**

Western feminism is encapsulated in literature and corresponds in written form, which is contradictory to the East, especially in countries like India. Because of its oral tradition and greater illiteracy, the effect of this discourse was limited to the urban community. But the recent scenario is different as rural people are much better informed with the advent of the electronic media. Indian women writers in English have been raring to try their hands at writing over the past few decades and perpetually making efforts to accomplish their mission successfully. They no longer fall behind their male counterparts no matter what the genre is. Their artistic creations are axiomatic and have bagged a prominent place in the spectrum of world literature. Women novelists are now globally recognized for their contribution to the amplification of Indian Writings in English, especially in the genre of fiction which causes the acclivity of feminist literature. The most prominent among them are Shobha Dey, Arundhati Roy, Anita Desai, Kamala Markandeya, Ruth Pravar Jhabvala, Shakuntala Shrinagesh, Bharathi Mukherjee, and Kiran Desai, who defy the deep-seated patriarchy. Among these writers, Anita Desai denies a narrow feminist approach and portrays females' desire for liberty from social and traditional bondages in patriarchy. The present paper explores the despicable status of women in the Indian patriarchy and expounds on the depiction of the psychological plight of her female characters and gender oppression in her novel Fasting, Feasting. As a prominent Indian writer, Desai proposes her outlook and stance on the issues of femininity and elucidates that Indian feminism contradicts the Western one.

Women's writing records the reactions of half of humanity and demonstrates a consciousness fabricated by gender. It questions the existing patriarchal system, which demeans the female existence by valuing women's perspectives and applying a feministic approach to the novels. Exploration of feminine subjectivity and application of the theme that ranges from childhood to complete womanhood constitute a major segment of the Contemporary Indian Writings in English. Major Feminist writers have opened a new vista of human nature and the man-woman relationship in Indian English Novels. Anita Desai is not a devout feminist such as Ruth Pravar Jhabvala and Nayantara Sahagal, but her portrayal of tyrannies, torture, and violence faced by women in Indian society is correspondent to feminist ideology. She has emphasized the disturbed psychology of deprived women, which makes them appear neurotic, and they lack a positive attitude towards lives and consequently fail to overcome their existing traumas and apprehensions, yielding to ennui and despair. This pessimistic stance exaggerates the negative aspects of a situation which overshadow everything that is positive. (Kadu, 2018) The present study explicitly discusses gender ideologies concerned with explaining and analyzing intercultural similarities and differences in human persuasion on men and women and alternative gender identities. The study examines the roots of the feminist position that women are preconceived as inferior to men to justify and sustain social and cultural systems dominated by men and the culturally constructed notion of gender. (Philips, 2001) The present paper responds to the questions like- What is feminism, what is the Indian perspective on feminism, and how feminine sensibility and Gender oppression are exposed in Fasting, Feasting by Desai.

**Feminism**

Feminism is a cumulative effect of social theories, political movements, and ethical values, predominantly actuated by or with references to the experiences of women, on the whole, socially, politically, and economically. Feminism as a social movement focuses on limiting or annihilating gender inequality, promoting women 's rights, interests, and other related affairs of women in society. Feminism refers to a profound consciousness of female identity and interest in the issues related to women. Women's subordination is a historical fact that is responsible for bringing about all psychological disorders in society. Since 1969 there has been an explosion of feminist writings. But the current form of

feminism materialized after the 1960s led to the evolution of a socio-political movement. This theoretical framework strives to understand the power structure in the society, male domination, women's subjugation, other social norms, and social institutions serve as contributory factors in assigning a marginalized position to women. Feminist theory concocts strategies to reconstruct the social structure to favor liberation. (Patil, 2017) In the 1980s, feminism aspired to modify individual fields. In the 1990s, it played a crucial role in regulating academics with a focus on the notions like otherness, polarity, and marginality. In a nutshell, feminism is viewed as the struggle against all forms of patriarchy or resistance to the patriarchal hegemony.

**Feminism In India**

Theoretically, Indian feminism is at odds with the West as the socio-historical-cultural-religious context in the Indian state of affairs generally differs from the western one. Indian feminism entails a new definition because the idea of Western feminism cannot be applied to India. During the pre-colonial period, Indian feminists were influenced by the Western debates hammering out violence against women, but it disclaims the notion that feminism is new to this soil. The idea of defending women's liberation against the patriarchal structures had stood out in the country long before the West started off with the feminist movement. Diversity in the historical and social culture of India certainly rejects a few western ideas because the problems faced by the Indian feminists were not common in western society. Though the Indian feminists share the same goal as their western counterparts, their vision varies in many ways to handle the kind of issues and occurrences they face in the modern-day Indian patriarchy. As Uma Nayantara rightly said, "Third world feminism is not a mindless mimicking of Western Agenda in one clear and simple sense, Indian Feminism is clearly a response to the issues related to Indian women ." (Nayantara, 1996) Indian feminists venture to confront the patriarchal structure of their society in different ways as Indian women haggle over survival through an assemblage of oppressive patriarchal family structures: age, ordinal status, marriage, reproduction, and patriarchal attributes. It is apt to quote here Manju Kapur, who emphasized the same issues in her novels and said, "There is a man within every woman and a woman in every man when manhood is Questioned, and womanhood is fragile." (Kapur, 2002) Apparently, there exist multiple patriarchies contributing to the existence of multiple

feminism that elucidates feminism in India is not a singular theoretical orientation; it has kept on changing from time to time with regard to the historical and cultural actualities, level of consciousness, perceptions, and actions of women individually or as a group. Thus, feminism in the Indian context can be discerned as "An awareness of women's oppression and exploitation in society, at work and within the family, and conscious action by women and men to change this situation" (Bhasin, 1986).

#### **Anita Desai as a Feminist**

Anita Desai, originally known as Anita Majumdar, is one of the most celebrated English-language Indian novelists who sounds excellent at exploring the human psyche and the emotional triggers of her women protagonists. Her expertise in exploring the female psyche dealing with thoughts, emotions, and commotion at different levels of consciousness reminds us of the stream of consciousness technique used by D.H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, William Faulkner, and Henry James in terms of character portrayal. Being a keen observer of society, Anita understands the position of women in contemporary society, which compelled her to explore the family issues like agitation between the family members causing marital disharmony, which she thinks is perhaps the main reason behind the estrangement of the women from their families. Apart from the central theme of her novels is the existential malaise of women as an individual who is communicated through mismatched couples, essentially conscious and conscientious wives but insensitive and confusing husbands. Desai's innovative thematic concerns and depiction of feminine sensibility added a new facet to contemporary Indian English fiction. (Aarathilaxmi, 2018) In her novels like *Voices in the city* (1965), *Cry the Peacock* (1963), and *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975), and the latest novel *Fasting, Feasting* (1999) reconnoiters the gender-related concerns in the light of the Indian socio-historical standpoint. This latest novel, a finalist for the Booker Prize, explores the issues associated with marriage, dowry, women's education, and their desire to attain self-sustenance and meaningful existence. Notions like patriarchal oppression and objectification of women are considered central to feminist theory and are handled sensitively and thoughtfully in the novel.

#### **Decoding Feminine Sensibility and Gender Oppression in *Fasting, Feasting***

The title of Desai's novel *Fasting, Feasting* sounds ironic as it embodies a dual implication. Credulous Indians believe that the birth of a son is genuinely valued, cherished, and always feasted upon. Whereas daughters are always denounced, imagining that they cast misery because they are meant to get married off with a dowry and are educated just to qualify as a desirable bride for a prospective groom. The secureness of a major benefaction adds to the excessive spending in the family, which underlies misery, and that is suggestive of 'fasting'. Even we find Atharvaveda bearing instances of gender inequality, "The birth of a baby girl, grant it elsewhere here grant a boy" (Vaishnavi, 2015). This cannot be called an age-old prayer because this is still prevailing today, and even educated parents show their crudity while choosing a boy over a girl. A girl is not only unfavoured but also weighed down with responsibility right from her childhood and compelled to act as a mother to her siblings. We come across such a character, Uma, Desai's oppressed female protagonist, the never-married daughter who is brought up in a highly conservative, old-fashioned, and traditional family, shows no interest in domestic duties, and disappoints her parents by enthusiastically pursuing school despite her falling grades. To her, both of her parents 'PapaMama' appear to have merged into a single identity. "Having fused into one, they had gained so much in substance, in stature, in authority, that they loomed large enough it was; they did not need separate histories and backgrounds to make them even more immense." (Desai, pg.6) Domineering, Mama Papa keeps

ordering the cook through Uma being swung. Uma and her sister Aruna are both submissive and never dared to rebel against their unmannerly parents.

The gender issue is evident from this anecdotal quote – Mama said, "In my day, girls in the family were not given sweets, nuts, good things to eat. If something special had been bought in the market, like sweets or nuts, it was given to the boys in the family". (Desai, pg.5) It conveys that a son is always valued more than a daughter. The character of Uma symbolizes the grossly submissive role of women, especially in Indian society. Her earnest desire to learn despite her limitations just to escape from the claustrophobic condition at home remains unactualized. But Uma's world narrowed even more, when her baby brother was born, and she was removed from the convent school just to take care of the newly born, which completely ruined her spirit and opportunities for a fulfilling life. The author observes, "We are not sending you back to school, Uma. You are staying at home to help with Arun". (Desai, pg. 18) Parents' craving for a boy hurt both the daughters because that reminds them of the fact that their births were accidental. Arun's birth was celebrated, whereas this was not the matter with both the daughters.

Feminists imply that women are not mentally different from birth; the only difference is noticed biological, but it is patriarchy that conditions them into being women. It is apt to quote here Simone De Beauvoir's famous line – "One is not born rather becomes a woman," and continues, "no biological, psychological, economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in the society, it is civilization when that produces it his creature, intermediate believes male and eunuch, which is described as feminine" (Vaishnavi, 2015). Desai shows a humanitarian perspective blaming not only the patriarchy but also the women who oppress their own kind. The concept of male superiority prevails in her family, and Papa flaunts it at every opportunity. Feminists criticize not only male jingoism but also condemn female disinclination, submissiveness, and passivity for shaping women's existence in patriarchy, where the so-called Male-Gods act as immutable lawmakers and women assist them in the course intensify the matter. And here it is Uma's mother who uses Uma for her own selfish needs depriving her of her freedom and privacy in life. Uma endured several failed wedding attempts, which are enough to consider her 'doomed'. Mama always tries to make Papa feel content, and she demands the same from her daughters. When Uma put the fruit bowl in front of her Papa, he watched in silence instead of letting out what he needed, and Mama peeled the oranges for him, a bastion of male chauvinism is observed.

Her parents lost sight of her physical and emotional needs when she faced an eye problem after her failure in marriage and suggested visiting Bombay to meet an eye specialist but was turned down rudely by Papa, mentioning that a family optician is enough for an eye check-up and decided to spend more money on Arun's education, health, and food, etc. She suffers silently and is never consoled by her mother, whom she always expected to be by her side; rather, she holds her as an object of laughter which excruciates pain in her. She is reduced to a domestic help who has many services to render but no rights to claim.

In India, Mama's submission to the male authority figure, Papa, who was of a capricious turn of mind, and in Massachusetts, Mrs. Patton, a brown-noser, always striving hard to please her husband, appears to be the same as they both manifest similar servile attitude. It seems unbelievable that in a country of presumably strong and independent women, Mrs. Patton compromises over every single issue. In the second part of the novel, the feasting theme is presented through Mrs. Patton in America, who feels content in stuffing the freezer with eatables, and in the first part, the contrast is demonstrated between the feasting parents dealing with all pleasures of life,

and fasting from all happiness on the part of Uma in the Indian scene. Mrs. Patton is not free to choose her food as she is an ardent vegetarian and meekly takes non-vegetarian food because Mr. Patton doesn't approve of it. All her life, Mrs. Patton craved vegetarian food but dared not to disturb the peace of her home by admitting to the fact that she actually despises meat just to maintain equilibrium in the strained atmosphere in her home. Mrs. Patton pretends as if she enjoys eating meat prepared by her husband. She admits to her deception to Arun. "I've always hated eating meat – oh, that red, raw stuff, the smell of it! I've always, always disliked it – but never could – never knew how – you know, my family wouldn't have liked it (Desai, pg. 183)."

Malanie Patton is no better than Uma because she too falls victim to parental indifference. As a hedonist, she concentrates every sense on her hedonic moment but longs for little love and affection but all in vain, which sounds intense as that of her Indian counterpart. On the Indian scene, the healthy Uma suffers epileptic fits, and on the western side, Malanie's unquenchable thirst for parental attention makes her a victim of bulimia and anorexia. Arun observes the resemblance between the two:

"a resemblance to the contorted face of an enraged sister who, falling 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. How strange to encounter it here, Arun thinks, where so much is given, where there is license and plenty." (Desai, pg.217)

There are other female characters in the novel, such as Mira Masi, Aruna, and Anamika, other than Uma, Mrs. Patton, and Malanie complete the feminist study by bringing up various facets of feminism. Mira Masi's widowhood condemns her to a lonely old age. Her dual role: on one side, she describes and spreads the news of births, marriages, deaths, and illnesses about relatives who are completely social, and on the other side, she is ardently religious, considering religion as her vocation. Uma's visit to the ashram along with Mira Masi is censured by Mama Papa. But to Uma, religion serves as a tranquilizer to ease her soul, neutralizing the effect of the damage done to her. So, Uma is summoned to respond to the calling, and the people around her who 'crave' for her provide a solution to her 'loneliness.' (Uddin, 2014)

With regard to gender discrimination, Anamika's story is equally important to unveil the dominant ideology of patriarchy. The newspaper clipping about a wife 'burnt to death' compels the reader to note the reaction of Anamika's parents, who are proud of her educational achievements, unlike Uma, an abject scholar who falls prey to the dowry system. She owns a scholarship to Oxford, but her parents are reluctant to send her to Oxford and sheltered the letter of acceptance carefully in a still cupboard. The letter is shown only to the prospective grooms as one of the marriage's essential requisites. She was married off to a man much older than her, and her story ends there as her in-laws never allowed her to visit her people. Desai sums up Anamika's marriage, her groveling existence, and gruesome death in four paragraphs (Desai, pg. 70-71). "Anamika is simply an interloper, someone brought in because it was the custom and because she would, by marrying him, enhance his superiority to other men. So, they had to tolerate her." (Desai, pg. 71) This reveals the true condition of women in patriarchy; no matter how educated the woman is, she falls inferior to men. Whenever she is beaten by her mother-in-law, her husband performs as a silent observer of her humiliation. She is treated like a slave who has to cook for the whole family and is compelled to eat "the remains in the pots before scouring them." Furthermore, when Anamika survived a miscarriage and lost her childbearing capacity, she is considered 'flawed' and 'damaged good.'

"She filled a can with kerosene oil. She unlocked the kitchen door and went out on the veranda. Then she removed her cotton clothing. She wrapped a nylon sari about her. She knotted it at the neck and knees. Then she poured the kerosene over herself. Then she struck a match. She set herself alight. (Desai, pg. 153) This horrifying incident evokes pathos.

The title Fasting, Feasting seems to be an oxymoron because some of the characters are found feasting and enjoying, while a few characters whose existences denote fasting with both physical and spiritual implications. Such characters are Uma and Aruna, who longs for their parents' affection and attention, but their thirst is never quenched. On the contrary, Mama and Papa are feasting and enjoying, and along with them, it is Arun who feasts on Mama, Papa, and on Uma. Similarly, Malanie is a little child bereft of parental care and sympathy. And due to this negligence, she is rude and inconsiderate to others in the family while bursting angrily: "I won't eat anything you cook. You can give it to the cat. Give it to him! She points dramatically at Arun. I'm not going to eat any of that poison. Everything you cook is – poison! She howls and blunders out of the room, leaving her mother white with amazement." (Desai, pg. 210) She is bad-tempered, which is evident in her expressions: "Go away!", "Give it to him!" "I call that s\*\*\*." As Malanie gorges herself before regurgitation indicates feasting, but technically, she is not eating due to regurgitation, and on an emotional scale, she doesn't make an effort to connect with others, which symbolizes fasting.

## CONCLUSION

It is duly noted that Anita Desai approves of gender identity by defining the power, privilege, and possibilities that some people have, and some people do not have in a given society which affects progress toward equality and freedom from discrimination. She participates in the quest of the 'free' woman, specifically in the Asian Diaspora. Desai intended Fasting, Feasting to be an indictment of the men who practice gripping their women as well as an indictment of the men who consider marriage as essentially a trade to make more money. The woman is made to believe that marriage and motherhood are her professions. The book condemns the women who sabotage their less unfortunate counterparts, like 'fish, devour their own frail sisters'. Apart from these, Desai takes on board: Male-chauvinism, female passivity, and hesitancy by vocalizing freedom and emancipation. Anita Desai's notion of feminism is different as one can see that her female protagonists are normally amenable and tolerant. They struggle to endure the grim reality of life but learn by suffering, resembling the Shakespearean tragic heroes.

Lastly, in my opinion, women, instead of backing a man to get the job done, must appreciate their own worth and each other's worth. A frail woman must seek out a strong lady to befriend, align herself with, learn from, be inspired by, collaborate with, and support so that the doubters or everyone who cast her hell will recede. Their existence will make her stronger and will provide grounds for cautious optimism.

## REFERENCES

1. Aarathilaxmi, A. Thirumani (2018). Anita Desai As A Feminist: With Reference To Cry, The Peacock. Veda's Journal of English Language and Literature (JOELL), Issue 1, Vol.5.
2. Bhasin, Kamala and Khan, Nighat Said (1986). Some Questions on Feminism and Its Relevance in South Asia. Kali for Women, New Delhi.
3. Desai, Anita (2020). Fasting, Feasting. Penguin Random House India.
4. Kadu, Umesh Vithalrao (2018). Feminism as A Literary Movement in India (English Literature). Aayushi International Interdisciplinary Research Journal (AIIRJ).
5. Kapur Manju (2002). A Married Woman. Penguin Publication, New Delhi.
6. Nayantara, Uma (1996). Indian Women Writers at the Cross Roads. Pen Crafts, New Delhi.
7. Patil, Sonal (2017). Feminine Sensibility. Scholarly Research Journal for Interdisciplinary Studies, Vol. 4, No. 29.
8. Philips, S.U. (2001). Gender Ideology: cross-cultural Aspects. International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioural Sciences.
9. Uddin, Md. Eftekar (2014). Gender and Feminist Consciousness in Anita

Desai's Novels. Research On Humanities and Social Sciences, Vol. 4, No. 21.

10. Vaishnavi (2015). Feminist Perspective in Anita Desai's Fasting, Feasting and Clear Light of Day, Academia.edu.