

# Gender Discrimination and Deprivation in Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting*

Smt. Basavva C. Nidagundi

Assistant Professor of English, Shri K. M Mamani Government First Grade College,  
Saudatti, Dist: Belagavi, State: Karnataka

## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the complexities of family dynamics within a conservative, upper-middle-class Indian household. Anita Desai rejects a narrow feminist approach and portrays females' desire for liberty from social and traditional norms in patriarchy. Novelist presents various characters in the novel that women or men; every person feels deprivation and profusion in their life. This paper deals with themes of deprivation, abundance and being trapped in society's claims. This novel reveals the dynamics of an Indian family entrenched in traditional values. This novel also explores the different aspects of Indian and American culture.

**Keywords:** deprivation, frustration, social, traditional, society, marriage and patriarchy

## INTRODUCTION

The novel *Fasting Feasting* portrays the story of emigrant Indians. There are two protagonists in this novel and it is structured through a brother and sister, one an recluse and other outgoing. The brother goes to America and thereon the novel is about two families, one Indian and other American. Anita Desai has thus presented in her novels the dilemma of sensitive women characters, who find it very difficult to adjust in the present automatic and developed setup. The novelist's language and theme also reveal the meaningful correlations between the psychic conditions of the characters. Mrs. Desai is mainly concerned with the fate of the married woman in Indian society today. Her women become victims of the traditional modes of existence without a strong terra firma, which makes them intensely conscious of their lack of identity. Their protest mostly turns into frustration, for as an Indian girl a woman is brought up to be submissive, meek and respectful. With this kind of orthodox setting she tries to represent the harsh, oppressive and unfeeling marital bond. Hence Mrs. Desai represents the unhappy situations of women in Indian society. She has knobbed the issues of violence against women creatively and veraciously.

Literary critic Asha Choubey notes that for some Indian women, "Icon of dumb, docile existence renders women incapable to act. 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"(Choubey, Asha, 91) Choubey appears to be commenting on what patriarchy can do to women over long periods of time and generations of oppression, and clearly Mama. She sees that things are unfair for her daughters at times but feels she has no power to act in opposition to Papa. Her obedience renders her incapable of action and unable to change circumstances. Uma, the daughter of Mama, is another example of a non-mother figure, much like Bim, Ila Das and Mira-masi, who is compelled to take on caretaking and nurturing roles.

M. Q. Khan declares that the central meaning of the novel can only be understood through the complicated life of Uma "who becomes the prototype of Sita and Draupadi in their sufferings. Like the traditional Indian woman, Uma suffers quietly only to prove her great sense of endurance and stoic acceptance" (M Q Khan, 380) At the beginning of the novel, Uma is characterized as a seemingly normal Indian girl; she goes to school along with her sister Aruna and also helps out at home. Although Uma enjoys school and learning in general, she is not very successful at it and actually ends up failing multiple times. Mama consoles Uma and tells her that she will be happier at home, helping to take care of her new little brother and the rest of the family until she is married.

Uma is disappointed since school also afforded her time outside of the home with other girls her age, and Choubey actually sees her entrapment at home and removal from school as "the end of all her dreams, her aspirations and even her individuality. Before the girl could learn to assert herself, she is burdened with the responsibility of taking care of a baby brother" (Choubey, Asha, 99) At this point in the novel, Uma only has marriage to look forward to as an escape from the responsibilities she has incurred at home, and her family tries desperately to find her a husband. The two attempts the family makes to marry her off fail miserably and actually end up scamming the family and losing them money. Neighbors criticize Mama and Papa for not realizing that they were being lied to, but Mama laments "I was so happy to find someone

for my Uma after all, her cousin Anamika is already married. I didn't like to wait longer" (Anita Desai, 83) Up until this point in the novel, Mama and Papa had followed the usual procedure of marrying the older daughter first and then the younger daughter, but "having cost her parents two dowries, without a marriage to show in return, Uma was considered ill-fated by all and no more attempts were made to marry her" (Anita Desai, 96) Since Uma is unable to secure marriage, the family gives up on her, and Mama turns her focus to marrying off Aruna, while Uma is relegated to the position of the permanent caretaker of her parents and little brother, doomed to be at the mercy of her parent's wishes for the rest of her life.

The events for Uma and argues that daughters in this society are denied autonomy. Daughters are seen as possessions to be used in a manner which suits the parents. Having failed to get her married, Uma's parents use her to make life more comfortable for themselves. The novel hints at the fate of women who remain single in this society. His point does not remain true for every Indian daughter, but for Uma, it does. She is not powerful within this society since she is unmarried, childless, and not smart enough to finish out school and make a career for herself the way Dr. Dutt, the single female doctor in town does. Even when Dr. Dutt gives her the opportunity to work as the warden of a nursing facility that houses girls, her family will not allow her to give up her caretaking duties. Anita Myles argues that "broken, dejected, frustrated, isolated, alienated and lonely Uma stands nowhere, neither falling in the category of unmarried girls, nor in that of married women" (Anita Desai, 56) The characters of Uma and Mama are clearly reflected in the American landscape that Arun adventures to in order to fulfill his education obligations. The suburban family he lives with while on summer vacation from the University of Massachusetts, the Pattons, provide a unique comparison to his own family in India. The mother of the family, Mrs. Patton, is clearly linked to Mama by her inability to stand up to her husband and her timid and obedient behavior.

Unlike what most people would assume in the case of an American context, as scholar Choubey states, "In a country of supposedly strong and independent women Mrs. Patton has made compromises over every small matter. She is not free even in her choice of food. An ardent vegetarian, she has meekly taken to non-vegetarian food because Mr. Patton feels that that is the only kind of food. All her life Mrs. Patton yearned for vegetarian food but out of fear of disturbing the peace of her home, she did not do anything about it". (Choubey, Asha, 94) Obviously this comparison is being made to Mama, who acquiescently follows the decisions of Papa without question and often forgoes her own wishes and comforts in order to allow for his.

Arun notices this similarity as well: "That too, was something Arun knew and had experience of, even if a mirror reflection of it his father's very expression, walking off, denying any opposition, any challenge to his authority, his stony wait for it to grow disheartened, despair and disappear" (Anita Desai, 186) In another instance, "She [Mrs. Patton] smiles a bright plastic copy of a mother-smile that Arun remembers from another world and another time, the smile that is tight at the corners with pressure, the pressure to perform a role, to make him eat, make him grow, make him worth all the trouble and effort and expense" (Anita Desai, 194) These two observations made by Arun in reference to Mrs. Patton not only show that he rejects the male privilege that has been bestowed upon him but also that he realizes that although America and India are completely different contexts with different histories, ideologies and daily realities, motherhood and the pressure to perform a certain role can be equally and comparatively constraining within both contexts.

Melanie Patton, the daughter of the American family, also provides a means of comparison, in her case to the character of Uma. Uma and Melanie are completely different women who have varied priorities, goals and desires, but what does compare is their position within the family and greater society. Both characters feel unfulfilled by the social roles they are obligated to fill, undesirable since they do not receive the love and attention they deserve and angry since they do not have the power even to protest against their mistreatment. At the end of the novel, Arun finally realizes that Melanie is truly suffering in her wanderings to find purpose and love in life. He looks at her and notices 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. How strange to encounter it here, Arun thinks, where so much is given, where there is both license and plenty. By providing four characters in this novel that can be grouped into pairs and compared to each other.

Desai makes the argument that Indian and American contexts are not actually that different for women, and societal roles for women are equally constraining in both places. Despite the complete difference in circumstances, experiences, ideologies and histories, Uma and Melanie and Mrs. Patton and Mama provide the reader with an investigation of power structures and how certain women under patriarchy allow the actual propagation of patriarchy. Anita Myles states that specifically Uma and Melanie "present two women of different cultures each reacting to the claustrophobic unwanted social norms in their own way. However, both lack sufficient power and hence fail to emerge out successfully in the efforts to rebel against the existing social norms" (Anita Desai, 58) Through the characters of Mrs. Patton and Melanie, one can

gain greater insight into the characters of Mama and Uma, and see that although their situations differ, they are still part of the same mechanisms and ideologies that keep women subservient and acquiescent in their relegation to a submissive role within the family.

In *Fasting, Feasting* the characters Mira-Masi, Aruna and Anamika also provide material for the discussion of Indian motherhood although they are more minor characters than the characters mentioned above. Mira-Masi is Uma's widowed aunt, and she comes to visit the family periodically as she conducts pilgrimages. As a widow, there are certain expectations in Indian society, and she willingly fulfills these with a zealous religious devotion to the Hindu god Shiva. The narrator describes her "safe in her widow's white garments, visiting one place of pilgrimage after another like an obsessed tourist of the spirit, and only too often her hapless relatives by marriage found themselves in her way, at convenient stopping places" (Anita Desai, 38-39). Mira-Masi, not uncommonly, feels almost a lover's connection to Shiva, and it is obvious that for her religion exists as a means of validation, love, affection, communication and power. She even tries to get Uma involved and after a hysterical fit of Uma's, claims that she is Shiva's lover, never to be touched by a human man. Although Mama and Papa discredit this, for Uma it is the only time in her life she is ever desired by a man. Mira-Masi also feels that Shiva is the only man for her, so much so that when she loses her beloved idol towards the middle of the novel, she is in despair.

Uma describes the scene stating, "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" (Anita Desai, 138). Although religion is sometimes referred to as a way to control the masses and keep them complacent, religion is both important and empowering for Mira-Masi. Anita Myles agrees and declares that women "turn towards religion for the required succor to sustain not only themselves but also their families.

In portraying the religious sensibility in her women characters Anita Desai exhibits her strong inclination towards the Indian way of life in which religion and traditions have their own importance" (Anita Desai, 138) Although the widowed Mira-Masi in *Clear Light of Day* does not appear to have these same opportunities due to her lack of familial support and the fact that she was left with nothing after her husband died and was forced to earn her keep within the homes of others, for the Mira-Masi in *Fasting, Feasting*, religion becomes a way to remain independent and autonomous but also contained within a communal group where love and support can be given and received. Aruna, Uma's sister, lives a life much different from that of her sister and ends up fulfilling all the roles that her sister never could. She marries well, a wealthy man, has children, and appears, at least on the outside, to be a devoted mother and wife.

From what Uma perceives, though, marriage is not ultimately fulfilling for Aruna, even though she does everything she is supposed to do. Uma claims that "Aruna had a vision of a perfect world in which all of them – her own family as well as Arvind's – were flaws she was constantly uncovering and correcting in her quest for perfection" (Anita Desai, 54) Also Uma notices that motherhood "Certainly brought her no pleasure: there was always a crease of discontent between her eyebrows and an agitation that made her eyelids flutter" (Anita Desai, 109) For Aruna, the only option was education and then marriage and then motherhood, and the family put pressure on her to perform these sanctioned roles, especially since Uma had failed so terribly to complete them.

This pressure to be the perfect daughter, wife, and mother appears to have made her into a controlling person who is never satisfied with her life. She is not able to enjoy the fulfillment of her social duty because in the end it proved to be unrewarding for her. Lastly, Uma's cousin Anamika also provides material for the discussion of motherhood and how dangerous seeking it can actually be for some women. Anamika is described as a wonderful child who is sweet, excels at school, and is thoughtful towards everyone. Anamika actually does so well in school that she is offered a scholarship to Oxford, and although her family would never let her attend, it is used to secure even better marriage prospects for her. In actuality, Anamika's marriage proves to be unfulfilling, abusive, and dangerous. Anamika marries a man who ends up being both verbally and physically abusive, whose mother is also completely disrespectful and cruel as well.

This obviously does not characterize every marriage in India but remains a problem for many Indian and American women, who suffer at the hands of a malicious husband. What makes the life of Anamika particularly telling in regards to Indian motherhood specifically is both the role of the mother-in-law in Anamika's life and also what happens to her after she becomes unable to bear children. Anamika's mother-in-law becomes a tyrant in her life and an inescapable force to be reckoned with. Earlier, I discussed the importance of bearing a son for the character Mama; Anamika's mother-in-law has likewise gained power through her conception and birth of a male child. Becoming a mother-in-law not only means retaining power over the son and maintaining high status of oneself in one's husband's eyes, but also gaining power over another woman, the son's wife.

Shirwadkar discusses the role of the mother-in-law: “As a son’s mother an Indian woman enjoys a high position in the family. When the son’s wife comes the son is likely to follow the wishes of his wife. The mother is generally unwilling to allow the son to go under her daughter-in-law’s power. To that end, she devises various ways to keep him in power or else she harasses the daughter-in-law” ( Shirwadkar, Meena , 101) Although, the practices that Anamika has to endure on part of this mother-in-law and within the extended family setup are cruel, it is easy to understand why Indian mothers are so unwilling to give up the power they gained when they produced a male child. It is one of the few means available to Indian mothers that can actually increase one’s worth in the family and prove one’s status as a good, dutiful mother, and many mother-in-laws fight to keep that hard-won status bestowed upon them at the birth of their son. Sadly, this power struggle between Anamika, her husband, and her mother-in-law proves deadly for Anamika. After she finally gets pregnant, Anamika’s husband beats her so severely she suffers a miscarriage and in the process becomes barren. The narrator describes the episode by commenting, “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 wanted to hear” (Anita Desai, 71) Once Anamika has no possibility of ever becoming a biological mother, her worth within her marriage is completely devalued. She is seen as an investment not capable of a return.

The family and community’s embarrassment is relieved, however, by the sudden ‘suicide’ of Anamika, who apparently awoke early one morning to burn herself alive. Neighbors believed that it was actually Anamika’s husband and mother-in-law in collusion who committed the murder, but, regardless, her tragic death stands as a testament to the fate that awaits women who are for some reason or another cannot become mothers but are expected to by both their husbands and Indian society. This paper sought to explore the realm of Indian motherhood within the fiction of Anita Desai and Indian Literature in English in general, and present the complicated ideologies and histories that inform its position. It is clear that there is no simple, straight forwards solution to the dilemma of woman. It is the awakening of her consciousness which imparts the required strength to conquer the bastion of male dominance. It is agree that there is no conclusive way Indian motherhood can be explained or defined, due to its immense complexity. Furthermore, defining Indian motherhood as only an oppressive construct or, in contrast, only an empowering construct, is not helpful for doing nuanced research or for understanding the actual lived reality of Indian mothers.

Through the fiction of Anita Desai and specifically the three novels this project focused on, one is able to see how motherhood functions in Indian society and what informs its construction but also how difficult it is to speak of motherhood in generalities. Completing the research necessary to this project also reified the belief that there cannot be an overarching category of women or mother. Even in similar contexts or situations there are different histories, ideologies, mythical constructions and actual lived experiences.

## **CONCLUSION**

In order to understand Indian motherhood and have the ability to both critique its failings and celebrate its successes, one cannot merely ascribe characteristics to all Indian women or even all Indian mothers, and must explore the complex, often contradictory realm of Indian motherhood. This type of research is also necessary to avoid homogenization and essentialism, especially for those outside of the context of Indian society. In conclusion, this paper has operated as an exploration of Indian motherhood, which sought to dispel essentialist misrepresentations and truly understand the societal role of mother and it has successfully portrayed the both the intricacy and heterogeneity of the ideological construct of Indian motherhood.

## **WORKS CITED:**

- Anita Desai, *Fasting*,( 2000) *Feasting*. New York: Houghton Mifflin,  
 Choubey, Asha(2004) “*A Feminist Perspective on Anita Desai’s Fasting, Feasting.*” *Critical Responses to Anita Desai*. Ed. Shubha Tiwari. New Delhi: Atlantic, 2004,  
 Khan, M.Q.( 2004) “*A Critique of Fasting, Feasting.*” *Critical Responses to Anita Desai*. Ed. Shubha Tiwari. New Delhi: Atlantic,  
 Shubha Tiwari.(2014) “*Mothers and Daughters: A Comparative Critique of Fasting, Feasting and Difficult Daughters.*” *Critical Responses to Anita Desai*. New Delhi: Atlantic,  
 Shirwadkar, Meena ( 1979) , *Image of Woman in the Indo-Anglian Novel*, New Delhi: Sterling,