



Men's Biased and Dictatorial Attitude towards Women in the Novels of Anita Desai

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ABSTRACT

The goal of this essay is to draw attention to the male characters in Anita Desai's novels who oppress and torment the female characters and their attitudes towards them. Both men and women play important roles and are associated with the entire mankind where they play their parts as human beings. The mentioned issues have been highlighted in two of the novels of Anita Desai that are *Cry, the Peacock* and *Fasting, Feasting*. The characters of Maya, Uma and Aruna face gender discrimination in the hands of male-oriented Indian society. The study aims to make a strong case for the emancipation of women who experience gender discrimination in various spheres of life.

INTRODUCTION

Anita Majumdar, better known by her first name Anita Desai, was born in Mussoorie, India, on June 24, 1937. She is an accomplished English-language Indian novelist and children's book author who specialised in using visualised pictures ranging from the meteorological to the botanical to evoke the protagonist and their emotions. Indian women's repression and tyranny are the main themes in her novels *Cry, the Peacock* (1963) and *Fasting, Feasting* (1999). Her characters reveal not only through imagery but also through dialogues, gestures and reflection of Desai's essentially tragic view of life. She is among the most well-known and respected female writers in the world. She discusses the victimised,

victimised, and timid girls and women in the male-biased culture in her writings. Her immense contribution to the world of literature made her a renowned Indian English author. She portrayed the hardships, prejudice, pains, and desires of women but did not always return to the projection of men. Males have traditionally been viewed as the dominant force in the family and society, while females have not been given as much weight in these contexts. They always have to be in the clutches of the men in the form of father, husband, son, lover or father-in-law. Women are not permitted to make independent decisions about their lives. Both the male and female protagonists of Desai's novels have received extensive attention.

Gender Inequality: An Overview

The UN Rights Publication (2014) defines gender as the roles, characteristics, and identities created or prescribed by society for men and women. The term "gender," according to Alam (2011), is also described as the difference between the social roles and status of men and women, which are managed and established by various social organisations, such as cultural, social, and economic organisations, as well as by moral, religious, and legal principles. (p.331).

The manifestation of the duties, responsibilities, and activities that are given to men and women within a culture or community is gender, in Tebeje's words (2004, p. 8). Wikipedia (2017) notes that the opposite is the mistreatment or detrimental treatment of a specific person or group of individuals. Because women are more dependent on males than they are on themselves, gender bias makes them the least valuable persons in the world.

In many countries, people are divided based on numerous sorts of discrimination, including race, gender, age, sexual harassment, religion, and disability, claims Viper (2013). The customary discrimination against women is beautifully illustrated in Anita Desai's *Fasting, Fasting* as the parents of the protagonist Uma's son Arun, the only male child of the family, are encouraged to pursue education while both of their daughters, Uma and Aruna, are raised exclusively for marriage. The actual expression of Desai's perspective on how to portray women's freedom and their struggle in an androcentric culture, however, can be found in the book "*Fasting, Feasting*."

Gender bias is a result of ongoing imbalance between men and women in all spheres of life, claims K.M. Rehman (2013). The prevalence and severity of prejudice against women varied according to cultures, racial groups, nations, religions, and economic systems. Additionally, gender bias is seen as an enormous barrier to progress and is a covert cause of violence against women.(p.20).

At its root, feminism is the idea that women should have complete social, economic, and political equality. Feminist thinking has global applications and variations, although it primarily developed in

response to Western traditions that limited women's rights. There are various movements and campaigns that continue to fight for women's rights which are women's liberation, domestic violence, right to vote, equal earnings for equal work, own property, equal education opportunities for women and in other social integrations. A variety of feminist movements were active that refer to many political campaigns and social movements for revolutionary and enlightened reforms on various women's issues aroused by social inequality between men and women. A famous sociologist Allan Johnson who studied masculinity, exclaims about patriarchy:

“Patriarchy encourages men to seek security, status and other rewards through control: to fear other men's ability to control and harm them: and to identify being in control as both their best defence against loss and humiliation and the surest route to what they need and desire” (Johnson 26).

Anita Desai is regarded as the master of depicting the conditions of women in Indian society. Her writings are undoubtedly evocative that brings the real situation of patriarchal Indian society. *'Fasting, Feasting'* is one of her renowned novels in which she depicts a gender gap between male and female. The novel comprises two parts and discloses various obstacles of females to exist in the society as a whole. Desai's *'Fasting, Feasting'* shows the contrast between two siblings in the same house by their parents. Uma, the elder daughter is not attractive and intelligent and has passed the normal age of marriage. She is even deprived of attaining education and kept spare to take care of the family and obey their orders. Still she seems to be a headache for the family because they were not getting a match for her marriage. On the other hand, Arun, the son is kept over pampered and was provided with all the luxuries and facilities of life. Being a son is always prioritised in Indian society over a daughter. Uma, a suppressed girl, always dreams of existence and expects a better lifestyle, an independent and happy atmosphere like other girls of her age. Anita Desai through her characters eventually emphasises on how the patriarchal system of India limits the opportunities for growth and happiness, trapping them in marriage which is sometimes a lifelong slavery. Anita Desai has remarked on her literary work: “My novels are no reflection of Indian society, Politics or character. They are my private attempt to seize upon the raw material of life” (Vinson 155).

'Fasting, Feasting' is Anita Desai's twelfth novel based on the story of a neglected and dejected girl Uma. She is the eldest child of her parents. She is kept as a slave in her own house. She has to bear the patriarchal system of an Indian society of having a son and disregarding girls by the parents. Her mother says:

“In my days, girls in the family were not given sweets, nuts, good things to eat. If something special had been bought in the market, it was given to the boys in the family” (Desai 54).

The statement above was given by Uma's mother when she was narrating Uma and Aruna about her childhood experiences of not offering good food to girls and eatables brought from the market were fed to boys only. This shows the gender inequality that exists in Indian society.

Uma and Aruna are two sisters and later had a brother Arun. As Uma is the eldest among other siblings, she has to manage the household work along with her mother. Her parents are always biased towards their son and daughters. She is deprived of going to school and studying as her mother thinks that educating a girl child is unnecessary. Uma learns how to suck up her frustrations. She is always kept busy in hearing her parent's demands and orders. Arun is sent to America for higher studies getting all the perks of life. Uma is not attractive and educated so she is not getting a match. After an offer of a good dowry, a man triple her age agrees to get married to Uma. Soon he left Uma as he was already married. She comes back to her parent's home and his father keeps on taunting her that he has given a huge dowry for her marriage. She is the victim of her own family. She is neither liked nor respected by society. The novel examines gender- discrimination and racial inequalities for women who never come out of this web even after trying hard for it. Anita Desai's novels are mostly based on female issues and release the despairing happenings of women folks who have to follow and obey the male folks whole heartedly. The great twentieth century critic and writer, Virginia Woolf comments, '**As a woman I have no country. As a woman, my country is the whole world**'. In these lines Woolf wants to state that she does not need any special country of her own which is being ruled by males, her country is the whole world where she is free to walk and think about her own life. Anita Desai surpasses in portraying the mournful situations of women. The subordination of women is shown both in India and in America as well. Uma, the novel's main protagonist, is the focus of the first section. She is forced to stay under the guardianship of her parents where she is mentally and emotionally tortured by them. Their behaviour towards their female children was obdurate. They love only their male child, Arun. When Arun was born, they insisted Uma leave her school and take care of her younger brother Arun and should manage the home. Against her dreams and wishes, Uma has to obey her parents. She sacrifices her learning career because of her parents. They assume that girls in the family are created for marriage only and boys are to be educated as they have to take care of their parents in adulthood. Mama and Papa give more stress on Arun rather than their daughters. They emphatically give Uma's hands to an old man, but she doesn't like him. Uma always surpasses her wishes and fails to show her emotions to her parents. She is unable to express her entity in society. She lost all her domains of life. She was not good looking but her parents were always in search of a husband for her that made them disappointed and bear hatred for Uma. If Uma would have been nurtured by her parents, she would have definitely achieved success

in her upcoming years. But they always exploited her in one way or the other.

The novel briefly discloses the patriarchal domination of men over women who have to stay under the feet of men in the name of cultural and social protocols. There are various themes probed in the novel. The first is the description of the characters of Mama, Uma & Aruna and their positions in the family. The second one is the patriarchal values that are reflected through Mama's character and her treatment towards Uma & Aruna. The third which has been highlighted in the novel related to the factors responsible for mama's involvement in defending the patriarchal system.

At the end of the novel, Mama admits to herself Papa's domination over the family who takes all the decisions for his children. In Indian families, daughters are kept degraded as compared to sons and are well privileged in their upbringing, education, clothes and food too. They fail to see the utmost importance for education for their daughters. The novel basically presents the social trauma of the emerging self, liberating itself from the feminine role played to achieve creative identity. In some cases, women are embarrassed by death if the males force them to die because of their dictatorial attitude. Uma loses all hopes in life and joins Ashrama with Mira Masi but she is not set free from the obstacles of life. Her psyche is imprisoned by her parents and the patriarchal norms.

A woman has to become the victim of the patriarchal society. She is so oppressed that she even refuses to present compassion and solidarity to her daughters. The whole life they have to struggle for their freedom and to get equal rights for them. The struggle does not even stop after their marriage, rather it rises to its peak as they have to satisfy the needs of their husbands and children along with their in-laws also. It pertinently stated:

In certain parts of Indian society, women are conditioned from birth to be subservient not only to their future husbands, but also to the females in their husband's family, especially, their mother-in-law. Accordingly, the surrounding society mandates a woman's obedience to her husband and her in-laws. Any disobedience would bring disgrace to both, the wife herself and her originating family, and might lead to the woman being ostracised and neglected by her very own family and in her own home (Sultana 1-18).

Anita Desai is an astute observer of moral principles. She depicts numerous aspects of Indian patriarchal society in the book, aspects that place less emphasis on women and favour men as the dominant figures. Because of her subordinate level, a woman has to suffer from the fears of exploitation, subjugation and discrimination. She becomes the victim of various social evils like child marriage, purdah system, sati, female infanticide, polygamy, rape and forced pregnancy which are directly attacks on the 'self' of a woman.

The second novel taken for study in this paper is 'Cry, the Peacock'. The protagonist of the book, Maya, is a motherless child who is influenced by her father, who fills the void left by her mother's absence by subtly imposing his ideas, knowledge, and establishing a pattern for Maya's existence. This father figure further fails in establishing an emotional and mature satisfying relationship with Gautam in her married life. There is a huge age gap between her and Gautam, her husband, so there is poor emotional understanding between Maya and Gautam which brings distances between both of them. She screams in her falling mental state:

"Am I gone insane? Father! Brother! Husband! Who is my saviour? I am in need of one. I am dying, and I am in love with living. I am in love and I am dying. God let me sleep, forget rest. But no, I'll never sleep again. There is no rest anymore-only death and waiting."

Maya, the main character of Desai's novel, 'Cry, the Peacock' herself admits the fact that her world at her father's house was totally different from that of her husband's house:

Yes, now that I go over it in my mind, my childhood was one in which much was excluded, which grew steadily more restricted, unnatural even, and in which I lived as a toy princess in a toy world. But it was a pretty one (Desai 43).

Maya's childhood days were the most cheerful days of her life. She was treated like a princess by her father at her home. She recollects her past days in the following lines:

When with my father, even breakfast in the garden- for, on bright winter mornings, we have the servants bring it out into the flower-beds-- become a party, as good as a revel of elves and fairies who feast on melons and syrups by moonlight. As a child, I enjoyed, princess-like, sumptuous fare of the fantasies of the Arabian Nights, the glories and bravado of Indian mythology, long and astounding tales of princess and regal queens, jackals and tigers, and being my father's daughter of the lovely English Irish fairy tales as well that were read out to me by him, that inveterate reader-aloud, so that a doll dressed in pink I named rose rather than Gulab, and guards of Buckingham Palace were nearly as real to me as the uniformed cavalry officers who practised, in a magnificent vertigo of yellow dust, on the maiden in the army cantonment where I was sometimes taken for a drive, in the evenings (Desai 41).

A sensual and sensitive girl Maya was leading a hilarious life as she is not happy with her marriage. She needs a love partner with a highly responsive, sensitive and sympathetic temperament which were inadequate in her husband, Gautam. He is a pragmatic and practical man having commonsense of logic and reasoning. Their opposite sensibilities gave rise to an unknown disaster between them.

The most salient reason for Maya's stressful life is her childhood event when she meets the albino priest whose words keep on haunting Maya's mind. In the fourth year of Maya's marriage, he

foresees one of them passing away. There are secluded fears in her mind constantly which she declares through the following lines:

And I knew I should never again sleep in peace. For, God, now I was caught in the net of the inescapable, and where lay the possibility of mercy, of release? This net was no hallucination, no more. But, in the night, under the stars gaze of the moon, in that waiting silence, my memories came to life, were so vivid, so detailed, I knew them to be real, too real. Or is it madness? Am I gone insane? Father! Brother! Husband! Who is my saviour? I am in need of one. I am dying, and I am in love with living. I am in love, and I am dying. God, let me sleep, forget, rest. But no, I'll never sleep again. There is no rest any more—only death and waiting (Desai 48).

Maya's father gives her a world of fantasies which is far away from the realities of life so she has never thought about her married life to be so miserable. Gautam criticises her father for her ingenuous and childish behaviour. He proclaims:

I will certainly speak of him. He is the one responsible for this—for making you believe that all that is important in the world is to possess, possess-rich, comforts, posies, dollies, loyal retainers— all the luxuries of the fairy tales you were brought up on. Life is a fairy tale to you still. What have you learnt of realities of common human existence not love and romance but living and dying and working, all that constitutes life for the ordinary man (Desai 56).

This is true that Maya feels jilted, ignored and undesired in Gautam's house but Maya's loneliness made her more insecure and doubtful in her own house. Slowly but unknowingly Maya made a hell for herself by losing faith in everyone. Maya's father is a fatalist so he always encouraged Maya to grasp the situation as it is. But nothing helps Maya to get out of the wretched situation. Maya is both motherless and childless and these desires can be fulfilled in Gautam's house but his mother is involved in social work and same is with Gautam. A proper channel of communication is missing in their relationship that finally engulfed Maya into the state of neurotic moulds.

Maya felt herself being crushed between the two male powers and became neurotic. Her uneasy mood is disturbed by her emotions of inadequacy, which ultimately cause Gautam's murder and her suicide. The patriarchal dictatorial attitude ends up in a murder in 'Cry, the Peacock' which is highly heartshaken for the readers of the novel.

According to Desai, most of the marriages evinced to be unions of incompatibility. Men are felicitous to be rational and matter of fact while women are emotional and sentimental. Their attitudes and interests are different. Men and women look at different things in different manners and so they react to the same

situation differently. Males are not only different themselves but as often in the society of changing values, his family ways, his surroundings to which she is expected to adjust herself is totally different.

Conclusion

Finally, it can be claimed that practically all of Anita Desai's female characters depend on men when they find themselves in difficult circumstances. The female protagonist struggles to find new patterns and orders of life. By having strong creative urges, they try to rediscover a creative possibility within them. They strive for self-assertion. Without a doubt, males have victimised women, but they also provide necessary protection for women. The social set up is clearly men biased and dictatorial towards women which is well depicted through the novels of Anita Desai.

The patriarchal hegemony imposed on women gives rise to feminist sensibility. In Anita Desai's novels Maya, Sita, Nanda, Monisha and Uma are examples of such feminist sensibility. They represent themselves as those of very few women among others who break the shackles of social internment and succeed as self-determining independent individuals. In the novels of Anita Desai, the quest for their identity is illuminated through different characters. To attain this self-identity women have to undergo social dilemmas, mental tortures, social-condemnation, alienation, agonising self-transitions, disillusionment and occasionally neurosis also. It is admitted that once they have contended with their true self, they will acquire their own goals of their life with their own decisions. As compared to their earlier selves submissive, fearful, docile, dependent and hardships in silence but now they are liberal in their deeds and thoughts. They are determined to reside in equality with men. Through their characters of the novels, the authors set examples of courageous women who break the social conditions to emerge as autonomous self-reliant, apprehending complete responsibilities of lives lining on their terms.

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