



## GENDER INEQUALITY AND PATRIARCHY: A STUDY OF ANITA DESAI'S *FASTING FEASTING*

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### ABSTRACT:

India is the country of diversity not only climatic, geographically, regionally but also socially where exists various living stratus in society like race, communities, castes, religion, class etc. Indian society has been patriarchal and prevailed so many disparities, misconception, traditional social system towards women whether it is violence, inequality underestimation, oppression, gender bias which is obstruction in the development of women. In the technological age, it can be seen that women are making progress greatly day by day in health, education, economic and even in forces. They are living the life of freedom, openness and boldness yet because of some conservatives, unawareness and lack of knowledge in Indian society, women are living the life of under pressure, psychological assault and social evil customs, rituals and traditions which are making oblige to take own decision to do something. So it can be said that even today there is bigger problem of gender inequality and patriarchy in Indian society that was exposed by many writers, thinkers, social reformers and filmmakers as south Indian novelist Anita Desai has depicted above mentioned social and familial issues in her novel *Fasting Feasting*. The paper will highlight domestic and social maltreatment and a strong longing for son in contrast to daughter. The study is an effort to raise a voice for the development and emancipation of women familial, social and psychological delineated by Anita Desai.

### KEYWORDS:

ANITA DESAI, GENDER DIFFERENCE, GENDER CONFLICTS, PATRIARCHY, DISCRIMINATION, VIOLENCE, INJUSTICE, HEGEMONY.

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### INTRODUCTION

Man and woman are the part and parcel, complementary and independent to each other in a society in every way whether it is matter of health, or education, or socio-economic condition, or politics etc. so they should be equal in position and rights. But because of not only biological existence as human being they are differ in gender but also socio-political status. Although the constitution of India grants men and women equal rights yet gender disparities remain which create the multifaceted issues and problems as gender inequality and patriarchy in Indian society. As far as gender is concerned, it is concept of self an identity and the manifestation of roles, responsibilities and activities which are given to men and women within a society or within a community. As far as gender inequality is concerned, it is the social phenomenon in which people are not treated equally biological, psychological, cultural and social. Gender inequality arises so many problems such as in health, education, business, politics etc. in the society. It is strictly

not only political phenomena but also it has several facets which manifest themselves in different forms in the context and situation of region or community. In her *Gender Inequality in India*, Mamta Mahrotra quotes, gender inequality is men, their rights, and nothing more; women, heir rights, and nothing less. (52).

In Indian English literature several authors and critics have made an attempt to expose the social issues, problems and traditional evils of the society to reform the social structure and stratus, of which Anita Desai is known as one of the greatest feministic south Indian novelist and short story writer. She focuses on the exploration of the psychological condition of her heroines. Her works are delineation of patriarchy, resistance, gender inequality, marginalized women, hegemony, mother daughter relationship, inner conflicts of women etc. Her remarkable masterpieces are *Cry, the Peacock* (1963), *Where Shall We Go This Summer* (1977), *Fire on the Mountain* (1977), *Clear Light of Day* (1980) and *Fasting and Feasting* (1999) etc

makes her female characters as the protagonists of her novels who suffer through the hands of males whether it is father, or a husband and brother. She has made a strong plea for rights of women and the banishment of gender inequality. The social problem can be worked out in her *Fasting Feasting*. *Fasting Feasting* is one of the finest and masterpiece through which she struggles to change the mental status and perception of society to emancipate and elevate the position of women from the sufferings and hardships of society and she wants to give women equal status to men. Anita Desai occupies a prominent place in the Indian English literature in gender bias regard.

Her novel *Fasting Feasting* presents the ideology regarding women activities, responsibilities and roles which divides people into a group of men and women and describes it as a hierarchical relation of domination and subordination. As far as patriarchy is concerned, it refers to a system of social relationships in women are excluded from the political, social, cultural, and economic institutions of a society but also in domestic relationships. In this regard it can be said that women are considered weaker and they are also underestimated and disadvantaged in the society. Though at present considering the present scenario, women succeeded in their struggles to make their position in equal to men in every ways in the society yet in the remote areas of India there exists the multifarious gender based problems such as gender inequality and patriarchy etc.. Since earlier, socially and familial the heads of households had been males as father, husband and brother who have been controlling over their wives and daughters. So it can be said that our Indian society had been patriarchal in which men are understood as superior to women.

In the novel *Fasting Feasting*, the entire story revolves round the central female characters, such as Uma, protagonist of the novel Mama (mother), Aruna, Anamika and Masi in contrast to the characters, Papa (father), Anamika's husband and Arun. In the family there are two daughters, but no son so the family is considered incomplete that is felt a intense need by everyone in the society. The concept is revealed gender inequality and patriarchy. There are some traditional practices which separate men to women and foregoing become a socio-cultural gender issue. In her an anecdote about her day Mama said, 'girls in the family were not given sweets, nuts, and good things to eat. It was given to the boys'. (5).

Papa who is the head of the family ready to endanger in the life of her wife to undergo for the child labour for the fourth time as the lines indicate: 'papa set his jaws. They had two daughters, yet quite grown-up- as anybody could see, but there was no son, would any man give up the chance of a son?' (16). similarly when Mama begot a son, Papa becomes out of joy at the birth of his son. Even there was a mirthful atmosphere in the family and their happiness knows no bounds. So the whole family celebrates the function only at the birth of the son, Arun. So it can be said that the above mentioned the entire activities depict patriarchy. This is depicted in these

words: 'arriving home however, he sprang out of the car, raced into the house and shouted the news to whoever was there to hear, servants, elderly relatives, all gathered at the door, and then saw the most astounding sight of their lives . . . A boy!' he screamed, a' b-oy!' (17).

In a patriarchal social context, it is also regarded that male is admitted as an authority of family and a source of safety for women especially for the mother. Their lives are secured only when they give birth to sons. The life of a woman is secured only when she has a son as in *Fasting and Feasting*, Mama's life is secured by giving birth to the son (Arun). This gender bias can be traced out in these lines: "He had not only made her his wife; he had made her the mother of his son. What honour, what status. Mama's chin lifted a little into the air, she looked around her to make sure everyone saw and noticed. She might have been wearing a medal" (1999, p. 31). Women are also marginalized by their own gender. Sometimes, it is noticed that a woman has to suffer at the hands of a woman. Thus, she is oppressed within and outside home through patriarchy and her own gender as in the case of Uma who suffers at the hands of her mother, Mama who is always ready to obey the orders of her husband.

In the case of education, it can be seen that females are mostly deprived of education They are only to take care of her brother as it is reflected in the novel when Uma wants to express her wish to get her education but her this desire shatters into pieces when Mama-papa clearly tells that her duty is to look after her baby brother, Arun. This concept is revealed in the lines: "stay at home and look after your baby brother you will be happy at home you are not being moved up. What is the use of going back to school?" (1999, p. 22). On other hand, her schooling is disturbed when she tells her mother, "I have to go and do my homework: she told her mother. I have got to get my sums done and then write the composition. Leave all that, Mama snapped at her" (1999, p. 18). In contrast to her, Papa head of the family wants to provide his son the best possible education. It can be traced out in these lines: "if there was one thing papa insisted on in the realm of home and family, then it was education for his son, the best, the most, the highest" (1999, p. 121). Papa has got the best possible education from his parents, but he is not ready to give his daughter the right of education. The issue of gender discrimination in decision-making process is also revealed in the novel. In patriarchy, women are not involved in decision-making process, nor are their opinion valued on account of false justification that they are not able to come up with any worthy opinion or idea. Likewise, there is no value and worth of Uma and her opinion as no response is given to her suggestion or idea in the eyes of Mama-papa, nor is she involved in the decision-making process: "Why Uma says, "that Rover is going to stop one day and never start again—it's so old, he remains impassive, as if he prefers not to hear her and has not heard her" (1999, p. 11). In patriarchy, voice of the opposite gender is suppressed and ignored like this. Her life is not a serious business for her parents. Every matter

related to her and her life is unimportant and not worthy to be given any attention by them due to which she is ruined twice by the hard clutches of life. The sole matter of interest for her parents is Arun (male child), that is clearly expressed in these lines by the novelist: "if parents will not take time to make proper enquiries, what terrible fates their daughters may have!" (1999, p. 84). He was married already, had a wife and four children in Meerut where he ran an ailing pharmaceutical factory to save money as he needed another dowry which had led him to marry again. Gender discrimination in the field of economy is also highlighted in the novel. Uma is not allowed to work in the clinic of Dr. Dut. Mama-papa are not ready to fulfil her needs. They are not willing to spend their resources in order to meet her tiny requirements. Papa even snubs her when it comes to spend money on her part as revealed in these lines: "cost money! Cost money! Never earned anything in her life, made me spend and spend, on her dowry and her wedding. Oh! Yes spend till I'm ruined, till I am a pauper" (1999, p. 146).

Anita Desai has explored the exploitation of women. Gender is such kind of issue which plays a significant role in middle class family. It is a matter of lot when a child is born whether it is boy or girl. In *Fasting, Feasting* Uma, is grown up for taking care of Arun and for marriage while her brother Arun, the son is grown up for higher studies and suggested for good health. On other hand,

As per Indian Hindu mythology, females are regarded as goddess 'Laxmi' of the family and sometimes in the sense Laxmi is considered as wealth but on the contrary, they are oppressed and tortured instead of worshiped and reverence. The birth of a girl is considered a curse for a family in the society as in *Fasting Feasting* Mama says harshly, "You, you disgrace to the family - nothing but disgrace, ever!" (53). and on other hand patriarchy can be worked out in these described lines: "He was their son, surely an object of pride" (31).

Throughout her whole life, Uma is oppressed and marginalized in a strong patriarchal family structure. She is never rewarded with love, freedom and privacy. Her parents don't care of Uma. She is always ignored, abused and even she has to receive typical attitudes from her Mama and Papa. She has always been a victim of "Papa's scowling, Mama's scolding" (10). Uma loves reading poetry and collecting cards in her room but she is interrupted by her mother. So it can be said that she is a prey of her father.

In Indian society, dowry system is a devil for society that creates so many problems. The condition of poor people is not good even they are unable to educate them. It is seen that those people who are unable to give a rich amount of dowry to bridegroom's family, it leads domestic violence like - bride burning, dowry death and physical, verbal &

sexual abuses. In the novel Uma and Anamika both are victims of dowry.

In the novel, Anamika is also a victim of patriarchal social system She is very polite, pretty and brilliant girl and she wins a scholarship to Oxford but doesn't get an opportunity to go abroad to study, "Anamika was not only pretty and good, but an outstanding student"(69).

In the social system where gender inequality and patriarchy prevailed, women have to sacrifice their desires which affect and disturb their whole lives. Finally they are discouraged at every step of life. In our Indian society, an ideal woman is representative of submissiveness, tolerance, silence, sacrifices and passiveness.

Today, In Patriarchal society, women's subjugation can be seen in both sectors: private and public. It is not only males who dominate women but also sometimes it has been seen that women also dominate women. As Uma is oppressed by her mother, Mama who herself has been a victim of her husband. So not only women but also men will have to work together to eradicate the concept of subordination and domination. It is necessary to educate them to be able so that they can resist such kind of social evils as soon as possible. Even the contemporary women are skilled, educated and intellectual. They have spread their steps to far distant in every area to understand pros and cons of any system, so they can abolish the ideologies of gender inequality and patriarchal system. Without going against it, They cannot attain equality, rights and freedom in the society.

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