

A Feminist Re-Reading of Anita Dasai's *Fasting, Feasting*

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Abstract

Anita Dasai's novel, *Fasting, Feasting*, is basically a story of two families located in India and America. The Indian family is led by Papa, a magistrate with the government and Mr. Patton a full-time employee of a company is at the center of the American family. Though both the families live thousands of miles away from each other and represent tradition and modernity respectively, it is observed that they follow the gender roles assigned to them by their respective societies. Papa, the head of the traditional Indian society, plays a dominant role of a 'man' and forces all around him particularly the women to unconditionally submit themselves to his dictates. Though Mr. Patton does not seem to be as authoritative as his Indian counterpart, plays almost the similar 'male's role' and controls the lives of the members of his family. It is in this context that the present paper attempts to read Anita Dasai's *Fasting, Feasting* and show how the characters with certain exceptions faithfully play the gender roles assigned to them by the society.

Key Words: Anita Dasai, Fasting, Feasting, patriarchy, gender, etc.

Anita Dasai's *Fasting, Feasting* is a novel that deals with the lives of characters coming from two different social set-ups – India and America. However, most of them are seen following the set socio-cultural patterns of behavior and fulfilling the gender-specific roles assigned to them by their respective societies. According to these patriarchal social conventions in which men and women are required to act as per certain set standards. In such a society man is considered to be superior to woman and is expected to engage in active external activities whereas woman is passive and required to work inside the four walls of the house. It is expected that man should work hard, earn the livelihood, and be independent and successful. Woman is expected to be submissive, dependent and engage in household chores including child birth and child rearing. And she is required to follow these social dictates without

uttering a single word against them as Hardy says, "It is difficult for a woman to define her feelings in language which is chiefly made by men to express theirs.

Accordingly, most of the characters both men and women in *Fasting, Feasting* are found to be following these set social standards of behavior and playing their gender roles.

It is observed that Papa is the breadwinner of the family and controls every household activity including the education of the children, their marriages and their careers. He dominates the lives of all women - Mama, Uma and Aruna - and also the only son of the family, Arun. When his relationship with Mama is concerned, it is observed that Mama had almost no independent existence. She speaks the same language and expresses the same feelings as that of her husband. Mama, in fact, follows

Simone de Beauvoir's words when she writes: "Man is defined as a human being and a woman as a female - whenever she behaves as a human being she is said to imitate the male."

She is not allowed to indulge in her hobbies. She unconditionally follows all the wishes, opinions and commands of her husband. She, in fact, has almost whole-heartedly accepted her subservient role and supports her husband in all his decisions. She has nothing else to say when Papa decides to discontinue Uma's schooling and make her take care of the baby boy. Even in a way she consolidates Papa's patriarchal views. It can be seen from her words, when she says, "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".

It was actually unfortunate for Uma as both of her parents think that the only option for Uma as a girl child of the family was to get married with a suitable man and lead a settled married life. But when Uma fails in her married life, they have the next role for her, i.e. to take care of her old parents. And that is what she is forced to do throughout her life.

The only thing that Mama dared to say in her life was expressing her desire to terminate her late pregnancy as she felt that it would be painful and also dangerous to her life. But her husband did not pay any attention to her and forced her to go through the ordeal. Without the knowledge of her husband, Mama was also seen visiting Mrs. Joshi's house in the afternoon and playing cards, laughing loudly and showing the coy side of her personality. It doesn't mean that Mama did not like to be independent and

follow the desires of her own mind and heart. But she prefers to follow the set social conventions of her society which wanted her to forget her individuality, be subservient to her husband and follow his dictates without any complaint.

Mama's similar attitude is again seen in her attempts to keep her husband happy and satisfied when he played tennis. Actually playing tennis was a kind of ceremony for Papa in which he wanted his family and servants to play an audience. Mama is seen exhibiting a lot of pride in his games and getting angry if his tennis suit hadn't been washed perfectly or if his lemonade wasn't ready as soon as the game was over.

Papa is also seen dominating the life of Uma. Though Uma wanted to attend the school and choose a career of her own, Papa discontinued her education and forced her to take care of Arun. He is seen worried about getting Uma married as he thinks that marriage was the only destination of a woman's life. But when Uma failed to receive suitable marriage proposals, Mama Papa blamed it to her being untidy and negligent. He became so desperate to get Uma married that he even did not enquire properly, when Uma received a proposal from the Goyals and paid the dowry in advance and got deceived by them. In his next attempt, he actually succeeded in getting Uma married but at the time of marriage it was found that the groom was an old man. After the marriage, it was learnt that Uma's husband was already married and had a family in Meerut. He married Uma only because he was in need of money to save his business. So the marriage was broken and Papa brought Uma back home. Here Papa is seen following the set patriarchal social standards according to which 'marriage' is

a must for a woman. Hence he forces Uma marry an old man and fulfill his duty as a father.

Actually, Uma's character is little rebellious. It is seen that Uma does not like to follow the societal norms laid down for a woman. As a girl child, Uma is often seen trying to resist to be bound by those norms. She likes her school more than her home. After the birth of Arun, when her parents decide to remove her from the school, she meets Mother Agnes and requests her to convince her Papa to allow her to continue her educational career. Even after she is removed from the school, we see Uma trying to remain outside the house as much as possible. She was not much worried about all the minute instructions she receives from her parents regarding various household chores. However, in her rebelliousness, she does not receive any support either from her mother or sister. In Gloria Steinem's words, Uma seems to have forgotten that "Any woman who chooses to behave like a full human being should be warned that the armies of the status quo will treat her as something of a dirty joke. She will need her sisterhood."

Aruna, the younger daughter of the family is seen playing the role assigned to her by the society. She takes care of her beauty and other womanly qualities and gets qualified in the social structure that considers beauty as an important quality for a woman. And so she receives many marriage proposals and selects the handsomest and wealthiest groom for her. After marriage she is shifted to Bombay and gets mixed up with the mannerisms of city life. Whenever she visits her parents, she is seen displaying those qualities. Even her children – Aisha and Dinesh – also follow their mother faithfully in this respect.

The decisions regarding Arun and his education are also taken by Papa. And since his early childhood, Arun is seen playing the role that his family wanted him to play as faithfully as possible. Being the only son of a magistrate, society expects Arun to excel in his studies and so all the facilities for the same like appointing tutors for all his educational needs are made available for him. Papa takes every care that he studies properly and applies to various scholarships. Accordingly, Arun wins a scholarship and gets admitted to the University of Massachusetts. Even when he was in America, he follows the instructions of his parents in staying with the Patton family, though he did not want to live in a family unit. As a child, the only expectation of his Papa that Arun could not fulfill is that he fails to exercise and remains a weak child.

In case of Anamika, she is observed following the family and social expectations by getting married with a man chosen by her parents. She completely submits herself to the demands of her parents and also of her husband and in-laws. But unfortunately she is abused by her husband and mother-in-law who often beat her. When Uma comes to know about the suffering in Anamika's married life, she says that it would be better for Anamika to return to her parents' home to which her mother objects by saying that "How can she be happy if she is sent home? What will people say? What will they think?"

From Mama's words it becomes clear that society wanted Anamika to suffer silently at her in-laws' and should not think of coming back. This societal pressure ultimately leads Anamika to her death. Anamika's case can be considered as a female role model in Indian social context as most of

the women in India are forced to lose their individual freedom and unconditionally submit to the familial and social expectations.

It is not only his own wife and children that Papa is seen dominating but he also tries to dominate the lives of Mira-Masi and Dr. Dutt, who actually represent the women independent of family and men. Whenever Mira-Masi visits the family, it is observed that Papa doesn't like her for being independent, indifferent towards the societal norms meant for a woman and following her own ways of living her life. Mira-Masi has her own views and principles and she never compromises them even though the society does not like them. Similarly, Papa doesn't like Dr. Dutt as she leads an independent life free of any social constraints.

Mr. and Mrs. Patton are also seen trying to fulfill their social roles. Particularly, Mrs. Patton attempts to play multiple roles of a wife, a mother, a host and also a woman belonging to a free American society. When Arun comes to stay with the Patton family during his summer break, Mrs. Patton is seen faithfully playing the role of a good host. As Arun belongs to an Indian vegetarian family, she provides him

vegetarian food during his stay. Even she herself wanted to eat vegetarian food but Mr. Patton who does not believe in vegetarianism, makes her eat steak that he has prepared for all. Mrs. Patton takes Arun with her whenever she goes for shopping so that he can buy whatever he wanted. When the girl at the Cashier's counter comments about the looks of Mrs. Patton, she immediately becomes conscious of her body and starts to take its proper care. That is why, she is now often seen sunbathing. Mr. Patton and his son, Rod are also conscious of their bodies and hence they are busy in maintaining their physique by jogging and playing football.

Thus, almost all the characters in *Fasting, Feasting* are seen playing the gender roles assigned to them by their respective societies. Anita Desai has herself experienced these social norms from close quarters, hence she has succeeded in exemplifying how the men and women characters in her novel follow these social norms. At the same time she has also shown that there are also some people who nurture their own individual identities and try to defy the roles their society wants them to play.

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