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Research Article



Patriarchy and Resistance in Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting*


Ruchi Panday

(Research Scholar)

The Department of English and MEL

University of Allahabad, Prayagraj, Uttar Pradesh, India

Email Id: ruchipanday9621@gmail.com

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3798-2242>

Prof. Gunjan Sushil


(Supervisor)

Professor,

The Department of English and MEL

University of Allahabad, Prayagraj, Uttar Pradesh, India

Email Id: gunjan.sushil@gmail.com

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Abstract

Patriarchy is systematically a set of rules in which a male dominates over a female in every aspect of life. Even children also suffer in this patriarchal system. The literal meaning of

'Patriarchy' is "the rule of the father." The word 'Patriarchy' originated from a Greek word which is a combination of two words; 'patria' means 'lineage, descent, family, fatherland' and the other is 'arkhe' means 'domination, authority, sovereignty'. It is a system which subordinates women in both private and public life. For the ages, men relish the supreme position and women have been subservient to them. Society assumes men as superior to women. They are considered as inferior and less intellectual and are made to follow male authorities and ideologies. The patriarchal ideologies consider women only as a housewife and men as a leader of social, political and economic authorities. They experience domination, discrimination, oppression, control, insult and violence within family as well as in society. Although in contemporary society, a number of women try to resist and revolt against dominating authorities to get equal rights yet many of them relinquish their lives silently at the hand of heinous offenses of patriarchy. This system is very common in India and across the world. Females encounter physical or verbal abuses in their family and sometimes at public place too.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Gender Discrimination, Oppression, Submissive, Resistance, Culture, Social norms, Sovereignty, Hegemony, Marginalization, Domination

Introduction

Anita Desai is one of the eminent authors of India. Desai's recognition as an author is to focus on women's psyche. Unlike Nayantara Sahgal and Kamala Markandeya, for example, who respond primarily to the external social and political circumstances of their female characters, Desai concentrates on the exploration of the psychological condition of the oppressed heroines (Narayan and Mee 227). Desai's works are delineation of patriarchy, resistance, gender inequality, marginalized women, male hegemony, mother daughter relationship, oppressive patriarchal ideology, submissive nature and inner conflicts of women. Desai's mastery of these perception is remarkable in her works, for example- *Cry, the Peacock* (1963), *Where Shall We Go This Summer* (1977), *Fire on the Mountain* (1977), *Clear Light of Day* (1980), and *Fasting, Feasting* (1999) etc. Nevertheless, the 1980s see Desai's shift of interest from the female towards the male protagonist which carry with the themes classified rather as male related such as trade, raw deals, and mercenary motives of *In Custody* (1984) or a big city, the clash of culture and the social bias as in *Baumgartners Bombay* (1988). (Lal 279-83).

Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting* is the exploration of exploitation of women. Gender plays a significant role in our society. Its role is very vital in a middle-class family. When a child is born, it matters a lot whether it is a boy or a girl. A boy's birthday is celebrated and a girl's birth becomes the cause of distress in a family. This gender discrimination is well explained in *Fasting, Feasting*. Uma, the daughter of the family, is grown up for marriage and Arun, the son for studies. She is entrusted to be passive, obedient, submissive, and to take care of Arun, while Arun is suggested for good health and higher studies. The typical presentation of marginalized women is explained in the novel. The novel inspects the helplessness of women and how they try to resist male ideology but fail. The women characters of the novel are

portrayals of Indian women and in general. The story of the novel is about women's conditions of two countries; India as well as America.

In our Indian society, women take their sufferings as their fate. They feel pride to follow the rules assigned to them by male authorities. They think that it would be very shameful for them to resist male ideologies. In the novel, Mama is a portrayal of traditional Indian women. She has been a submissive, obedient and passive daughter and wife and as a mother, she too is involved in raising her daughters to face the same fire-like situations. Mama received very little attention at her parent's home. She recalls, "In my days, girls were not given sweets, nuts, good things to eat, but it was given to the boys in the family" (5). She was married at the age of sixteen. Now as a wife, she suppresses her desires like playing cards and others only for her husband. But whenever her husband is outside, she plays with her friends. This refers that somewhere she also seeks for freedom but fails and this creates her inner conflicts. When she begets male child, it raises her social status, "more than ever now, she was Papa's helpmeet, his consort. He had not only made her wife; he had made her the mother of his son"(31). She performs all her duties and responsibilities for Papa. She rears Arun very well because she has to answer Papa who has much concern for his son only. Mama is very careful about her looks so that her husband might feel pride in having her as a wife, "Mama continued to deck herself in silks and jewelry and accompany papa to the club, to dinner parties and weddings" (31). Mama doesn't like independent women like Mira Masi and Mrs O' Henry. As a traditional woman, she never tries to resist but enjoys living with the idea of subordination and the same things she hopes from her daughter also. This idea of Virginia Woolf, like "somewhere a woman herself is responsible for her own conditions"(Woolf), can be seen in the character of Mama. Sometimes, it seems that the patriarchal attitudes of Mama towards her daughters, is caused by the influence of the patriarchal system through which she has gone.

In our Indian Hindu mythology, females are considered as Laxmi of the family but it is very contradictory here that they are oppressed instead of worshiped. The birth of a girl is considered a curse for the family. Mama's eldest daughter, Uma, is a more victimized character than anyone else. She has been a matter of shame for her family. Mama says harshly, "You, you disgrace to the family - nothing but disgrace, ever!" (53). And her brother, Arun is a matter of pride, "He was their son, surely an object of pride" (31). Uma is presented as a victim of patriarchy, inferiority complex, evil practice of dowry and her own ill-fate also. Unlike her sister Aruna, she doesn't have physical beauty, power and strength to tackle familial issues. Uma never gets the chance to enjoy good food, good education, freedom and go outside for work like her brother, Arun, who is sent to the USA for studies, "If one word could sum up Arun's childhood- that word was 'education'"(121). She is not so good at her studies and fails in the exam but she is interested to learn and go to the school. Her parents, Mama Papa, don't support her but suggest that she should stay at home and take care of the baby. Her mother says, "you know you failed your exams again. You are not being moved up. What's the use of going back to school? stay at home and look after your baby brother" (22). Mama Papa makes her ready only for marriage. Mama teaches her role of a traditional wife and mother. Mama tells her, "You are a big girl now, we are trying to arrange a marriage for you" (22).

It is tragic for a girl in our society that she is not for good food, good education and freedom to enjoy her life in her own way like a boy. When Uma is tired of household responsibilities, she escapes to Mother Agnes for admission again. She attends to all the needs of her parents without taking rest while her parents relax. Because of her unattractive personality, Uma is rejected by many parties for marriage. This rejection worries her parents and finally they arrange a marriage for her with old age person Harish, "The man looked as old to her as Papa, nearly, and was grossly overweight too"(90). The man was deceitful and was already married. He marries Uma only for the sake of dowry. It is very pathetic that at the age of forty-three, she is married and divorced also and now living without a man at her parents' home. After this she becomes a burden for her family and her parents have stopped to think of her marriage, "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 off" (98).

The protagonist is not only a victim because of being a girl but for her looks and color also. Aruna, with a charming personality, is never treated like her. Uma is mistreated by her family and her sister also. When she suffers a bout of epilepsy at Aruna's wedding party, it annoys Aruna, "She should be put away, locked up, Aruna sobbed. I should be locked up,' Uma moaned, along with her. Lock me up, Mama, lock me up!"(104). Aruna is very lucky in case of marriage also. She marries a person who does a good job in Bombay. Now she is living happily with her husband in her in-law's house. Uma is so unlucky that she never gets genuine remedies and proper treatment. She suffers from myopic eye disease, but is not cured properly. When the Doctor recommends Uma an eye test to cure her disease, her parents don't allow her to go to Bombay, to her sister Aruna.

Uma loves freedom to socialize with people but she lacks these opportunities. Her parents restrict her from having contact with people by going outside, by telephone and by other means. They want to create a prison-like situation for her. When she is too tired of family's attitudes towards her, Uma tries to spend her time with her cousin, Mira Masi and other people of society. She is denied to attend the tea party invited by Mrs O' Henry. She wants to do a job with Dr Dutt but her parents reject the job offer. She is prohibited from using the telephone and it is locked up by her parents. When she uses the telephone to talk to Dr Dutt for the job without the knowledge of her parents and forget to lock up the telephone again. Her father finds the evidence after coming back from the club and blames Uma, "Costs money! Costs money! He kept shouting long after. '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" (149).

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 betray her. She always receives inattention, ignorance, abuses and typical attitudes from her Mama Papa. Even her mother has no affection and sympathy for her. 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. What A pathetic life she has! She can't do even a single thing of her own choice. She is a sufferer of male chauvinism. Every aspect, regarding to her

and her life, is determined by male ideologies. She has no privacy, no room and no economic Independence. Although she has an interest in poetry, she can't proceed in this field. "A woman must have money and a room of her own..." (Woolf). It seems that if Uma would have got the chance like her brother Arun, she could have developed her poetic readings and skill. Uma tries to cross the limitations and to free herself from the panopticon like family and society but shields the patriarchal system. Resistance can be observed in her behavior but she can't go against this patriarchal society. Once she tries to surrender her life by drowning but saved by people. It is very common in Desai's novels, when a female protagonist is unable to endure the male subjugation anymore, she pushes herself to commit suicide.

In the Indian marriage system, the role of dowry is very significant. It is an evil practice of society that flourishes like a disease. If parents fail 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. It not only happens in India but across the globe also. This dowry demand is rooted in our cultural practices. According to the latest National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) reports, '6753 cases were registered in the country in 2021.' Although our contemporary society has developed much in the field of education, it can't switch the ideologies related to dowry. In the novel Uma and Anamika both are victims of dowry.

In the novel, Anamika also encounters male domination, patriarchal ideologies and surrenders her life in the hands of heinous system if dowry. She is very polite, pretty, sober, intelligent and brilliant girl. 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). She is such an obedient girl that she never contradicts her parents' opinion. She is very cool and sensible, "She was cool, poised, mannerly and graceful. Wherever Anamika was there, moderation, good sense, and calm" (69). She remains passive in all her decisions regarding education, freedom and marriage. Her parents chose a suitor for her who had equal qualifications to her but he was a mismatched partner for her, "He was so much older than Anamika" (70). He didn't value the external and internal beauty of Anamika, "She was marrying the one person who was totally impervious to Anamika's beauty and grace and distinction. He was too occupied to maintaining his superiority" (70). She is betrayed by her parents. After her marriage, she is trapped in the dark realities of domestic violence. She is oppressed in her in-law's house and because of this oppression, she has a stillborn child, "Anamika was beaten regularly by her mother-in-law while her husband stood by and approved - or at least, did not object" (71). She has no existence of herself. She was a devoted daughter and now a devoted wife and daughter-in-law. She does only for the family throughout the whole day. But Anamika's parents have no concern for her. It is believed in the Indian community that once a girl is married, she can't return to her parents' home. She has to tackle the situations considering it as her own destiny. Uma's mother says for Anamika, "How can she be happy if she is sent home? What will people say? What will they think? " (72). Initially, she tries to sustain herself to all domination, oppression, harassment and abuses but finally when she finds no use of life, she ends her life by committing suicide like other characters of Anita Desai.

The patriarchal dominance can be seen in India as well as across the world also. Women of other countries are also sufferers of patriarchal set up like Indian women. In India, if Mama has submissive attitudes, Mrs Patton has the same attitudes in America, a well-developed country. Mrs Patton has a passive role. She can't even enjoy the foods of her own taste. She is a lover of vegetarian foods but she has to yield to the wishes of her husband who is an ardent lover of non-vegetarian foods. Melanie is also a victim of patriarchy like Uma in India. She suffers from bulimia and anorexia but her parents have no concern for her diseases like Uma's parents. So, it is noticed that in spite of cultural, social, political and economic differences in both countries, the patriarchal attitudes are the same in India as well as in America. Kate Millet's theory of 'subordination' refers that women are a dependent sex class under patriarchal domination" (Millet, 1977).

In Desai's novels, women willingly submit themselves to patriarchal subordination and domination. They consider it as their destiny. Women's passive attitudes make them willing agencies of domestic violence abiding by the rules and structure made by male authorities. They are trapped in male hegemony where they depend upon males socially, politically and economically. A woman has no right upon her body also. She has to please her husband's sexual whim ignoring her own desires. She can't decide even the number of children to beget. Mama has to suffer intolerable pain at the time of birth of Arun but she bears it to make Papa delightful and to raise his social status.

In this patriarchal set up, women have to sacrifice their dreams and desires which affects their psyche and their whole lives. They are discouraged at every step of life and their dreams are shattered like the petals of flowers. Throughout the characters of Mama, Uma, Anamika, Mrs Patton and Melanie, Anita Desai has portrayed the women's devastation caused by patriarchal ideologies. Their conditions are somewhere like an electric machine which is operated by male authorities. They are limited to only domestic needs. In India, women consider this subjugation as their destiny and accept it willingly and this reluctance creates havoc in their lives. They don't try to show courage to cross the lines drawn by male authorities for them. If they want to resist it, they find only one option that ends their lives in death. In our Indian society, an ideal woman is representative of submissiveness, tolerance, silence, sacrifices and passiveness.

In Patriarchal set up, women's subordination can be seen in both spheres- private and public. Today, it is more generally used "to refer to male domination, to the power relationship by which men dominate women, and to characterize a system whereby women are kept subordinate in a number of ways" (Bhasin, 2006:3). It is not only males who dominate women, sometimes women also dominate women. Uma is oppressed by her mother, Mama, who herself has been a victim of male domination. Women should resist the system, structure and rules assigned to them by patriarchal ideologies. They can never win this fight with their passive and submissive attitudes. If they want to eradicate gender discrimination, subjugation, oppression, domination and patriarchal set up, they have to evolve the abilities to resist. The contemporary women are skilled, educated and have the understanding of pros and cons of any system, so by understanding the strategies of male domination, they can abolish this system. Without going

against it, they are not going to be rewarded of equality, rights and freedom. They have to raise their voice against these women's oppression, marginalization, subjugation and heinous patriarchal ideologies. R. S. Pathak suggests that "women have no option but to speak" (Pathak, 15). It is system of our society when we are escaped of our rights, we have to fight for that and if we are not getting it smoothly, we have to snatch it.

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