

# Gender Discrimination: An Analysis of Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting*

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**Abstract:** Anita Desai is a distinguished Indian novelist and short story writer. Raised in a multilingual environment she was fluent in German, Hindi and English since an early age. Her literary journey began early. Her writings are famous for psychological depth and exploration of themes such as identity, Alienation and complexity of human relationships. Her notable works include *Cry, the peacock*, *Clear light of day*, *In custody*, *Fasting, Feasting* and *Rosarita*. Her Famous novel *Fasting, Feasting* offers a poignant critique of gender discrimination entrenched in Indian society. Through the experiences of characters like Uma, Anamika and Mrs. Patton, Desai criticises the patriarchal structures that limit women's autonomy and opportunities. Uma serves as the central figure representing the marginalized position of women in society. Her life is dictated by familial expectations where she is bound to domestic duties and denied educational opportunities reflecting the societal preference for male. Anamika, Uma's cousin embodies the tragic consequences of gender bias. Despite her Academic potential, she is forced into marriage leading to physical abuse. This novel of Anita Desai reveals the systematic nature of gender discrimination where societal norms and familial pressures converge to suppress women's voice and choice. The title of novel itself conveys the discrimination as Fasting means deprivation while Feasting means abundance. Uma and Arun being from the same family are raised with discriminations and priorities. Uma is supposed to sacrifice her dreams while Arun is free to chase his goals. Uma's education, health, feelings, desires are ignored by her parents while Arun is independent to take his decisions. He is sent to abroad for studies. The impact of patriarchy can be clearly seen in the novel.

**Keywords:** Patriarchy, Gender, Culture, Societal, Discrimination, Education.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Anita Desai's reputation as a feminist writer rests on most of her fiction dealing with psyche and life of women. Born on June 24, 1937 in Mussoorie, Desai is known for her sensitive portrayal of the human psyche particularly the inner lives of women and marginalized individuals. She often explores themes such as identity, isolation, family dynamics and gender discrimination. Her works include novels, short stories and essays. Her notable works are *Cry, the peacock* (1963), *voices in the city*, *Clear light of the day* (1980), *In custody* (1984) *Fasting, Feasting* (1999) and *Rosarita* (2024). Her genius has Garnered Critical acclaim and numerous awards. She has been

shortlisted for Booker prize for her novel *Fasting, Feasting*. Her writings often delve into the conflicts between tradition and modernity as well as the tensions faced by individuals trying to reconcile personal desires with cultural norms. Her rich literary style has earned her recognition as one of India's foremost writers in English. She currently lives in US and continues to write.

## II. MEANING OF GENDER DISCRIMINATION

Gender discrimination refers to the unequal treatment of individuals based on their gender. It involves treating someone unfairly or unequally just because of their gender which can result in limitations on their opportunities, rights and access to resources. This occurs in the various aspects of life such as Education, Employment, Healthcare and social roles where certain behaviours, responsibilities or privileges are assigned based upon gender. Gender discrimination often stems from deeply ingrained cultural, societal or historical beliefs that assign specific roles, behaviours, rights to individuals based on their gender. For example, in some societies women and third gender might be denied equal access to education, employment or decision-making roles. While men might be discouraged from showing vulnerability or expressing emotions. In some societies some roles and behaviours are culture specific. These assigned roles limit individual freedom and reinforce inequality. In such societies, certain genders may be overlooked for promotions, educational opportunities or leadership roles due to prejudiced attitudes. Gender based stereotypes can limit opportunities for individuals such as the belief that women are less capable in leadership roles or that men should not show their emotions. Such kind of discrimination also leads towards pay-gap where women and gender minorities are often paid less than men for the same work or for the work of equal value. The gender discrimination can be harmful on both individual and societal level.

### **Gender discrimination in *Fasting, Feasting*:**

*Fasting, Feasting* is a novel written by Anita Desai first published in 1999. The novel explores the themes of Family dynamics, cultural expectations, personal identity and the struggle between individual desires and societal norms. The two main characters Uma and Arun, siblings from an upper middle-class family in India are clearly depicted by the title *Fasting, Feasting*. Fasting and Feasting have been used as metaphors in the novel. The title itself reflects the central motifs of the book where Fasting represents deprivation-not just of food but of freedom, identity and agency. It symbolizes

the sacrifices, limitations and self-denial imposed on individuals like Uma and Anamika. While Feasting represents abundance not only of food but of freedom, choice and identity. It also represents indulgence and celebration of life's pleasures of individuals like Arun. The contrast between these two ideas parallels the lives of the characters. Uma, the young woman faces societal pressures to conform to traditional gender roles. She's always fasting to meet up the family needs. While Arun fulfilling each and every wish including study at US is always Feasting. Uma is caught in the traditional roles imposed by her family where her life revolves around family obligations and expectations placed on her as a woman. She faces discrimination while fulfilling her personal desires particularly when it comes to Education, marriage and self-fulfillment. Her life is shaped by a sense of repression and sacrifice symbolized in the novel through the themes of Fasting and denial. Arun, the son is sent to Abroad to study. All his demands have always been fulfilled by his parents symbolized in the novel through the themes of Feasting and acceptance. The novel deals with various themes like culture and Gender expectations, Alienation and displacement and Family dynamics. Gender discrimination is a prominent theme that reflects the societal and familial constraints placed on women. The novel explores the lives of its central female characters in context of Indian society where traditional gender roles are deeply entrenched.

#### **The Patriarchal Family Dynamics:**

Uma's family especially her father and mother impose rigid gender roles. Uma's father is a dominating figure who expects her to adhere to traditional ideals of femininity, sacrificing her own dreams for the family. Her mother on the other hand is the woman who internalizes the same patriarchal values and limits her daughter's existence by forcing her into a mould that restricts her independence. Uma has to play the role of a dutiful daughter. From an early age, she is conditioned to see her life as one of service, be it her family or society. Her aspirations, desires whether they are intellectual, romantic or personal-are continuously thwarted by her parents. Her early Education is interrupted not just by financial constraints but by the assumption that Education is less important for a girl. "We are not sending you back to school, Uma. You are staying at home to help with Arun" (Desai,18). She can't pursue her dreams since according to her family a woman's primary function is to manage the household, please her parents and eventually fulfil the roles of wife and mother. Uma's attempted marriage with a series of unsuitable men underlines how her desires are overlooked by her family. Even when she rejects one proposed marriage, she is made to feel guilty and punished suggesting the extent to which women's decisions are controlled by patriarchal authority. In her family, the power dynamics are clearly patriarchal. The father referred to only as 'papa' exercises total control over household. Even the mother, 'mama' is not truly autonomous-she reinforces the patriarchal values, particularly in the way she treats her daughters. Anita Desai has deliberately merged the parents into a single term-mamapapa- to reflect how they operate as a unified, unquestioned authority. This symbolizes how tradition

and patriarchy are interwoven. The family invests all its hopes and resources into Arun reinforcing the cultural belief that sons are assets while daughters are liabilities.

#### **Gender based oppression:**

1) Uma - A victim of patriarchy, Uma, the protagonist of Indian part of the novel is the clearest presentation of gender-based oppression.

- a) Denied Education: Uma is pulled out of school at an early age despite her interest in learning while her younger brother is sent to abroad for higher studies. She is denied of her basic right to education just because she is a girl. "A career. Leaving home. Living alone. These trembling, secret possibilities now entered Uma's mind-as Mama would have pointed out had she known-whenver Uma was idle.(...) But Uma could not visualize escape in the form of a career. What was a career? She had no idea". (Desai, 131)
- b) Marriage pressure: her parents are obsessed with marrying her off, leading to disastrous arranged marriages that only leave her more trapped.
- c) Domestic servitude: Uma is expected to serve her family especially her brother Arun and her parents without complaint or personal aspirations. She cannot say no to the orders of her parents and mere aim of her life is to fulfill the needs of the family
- d) No Autonomy: Uma's desires, ambitions, dreams and individuality are consistently dismissed in favour of family expectations and traditions. She's not considered as a human being having dreams and desires. Her only identity is her family.

2) Arun-A beneficiary of male privilege, Arun is in contrast to Uma. He is the youngest child of family and enjoys all the privileges that come with a Male in a traditional Indian household.

- a) Prioritised Education: Arun being the male child of the family enjoys all of the comforts of life. He is taken good care by his parents. He is sent to abroad for higher studies since his education is given priority by his parents. "If one word could sum up Arun's childhood or at least Uma's abiding impression of it-that word was education". (Desai, 118)
- b) Freedom of choice: Arun is not forced into marriage or traditional roles. He has freedom of choice. He can resist Family pressures.
- c) Proper Attention: Arun is given proper attention by his parents just because he is a male "You know we can't leave the baby to servant" she said severely. "He needs proper attention" (Desai, 30)
- d) Symbol of status: Arun's existence and Education serve as a status symbol for the family.

Arun experiences a different set of expectations since he's a male while Uma is always educated to sacrifice her aspirations and dreams Arun is free to fulfill all his desires while Uma is confined to the domestic duties. Arun's Journey reflects the opportunities granted to men in this patriarchal system where male children are often treated with more freedom especially in terms of education and career choices. This not only

demonstrates the privileges given to men in Uma's family but also the cultural and societal assumptions that men's education and success are vital while women are seen as secondary. In the US, Arun faces different forms of isolation but unlike Uma he has the freedom to define his future. His educational journey is not questioned by his family and he is not subjected to the same scrutiny or societal pressure that Uma faces. Arun's relative autonomy highlights the inequalities between the sexes especially in terms of how a young man's independence is often celebrated while a woman is supposed to depend upon the male to be happy or satisfied.

#### **Uma's struggle for Independence:**

Uma, the protagonist faces significant gender discrimination throughout her life. As the eldest daughter in a traditional Indian family, she is expected to confirm to the roles of a dutiful daughter, caretaker and eventual wife. However, her dreams and aspirations are completely shattered by the expectations of society and her family. Being a girl, her education and personal growth are limited. The patriarchal views are imposed by her father and brother. She is unable to make choices in her life. All the major decisions of her life are taken by her parents. She becomes a victim to the entrapment at home. Her journey of discrimination starts with the birth of her younger brother, Arun. She is being taken out of her school to look after him. "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". (Desai, 21). Instead of treating her like a sister she is treated like a babysitter. This oppression continues till Uma reaches the age of marriage which she looks forward to as a relief from dull and monotonous life. Unlikely the marriage results into a failure because Uma is mistreated by the groom and his family. She has to come back to her parents' home. She feels like a bird in a cage all the time taking care of household. "It was Uma who remained behind, to serve, to be sacrificed". This reflects a broader societal norm where unmarried or divorced women are considered burden, their lives absorbed entirely into the needs of family. She is not allowed to go anywhere. Nobody except her Mira Massi comes to visit her. Uma's ill luck and domestic exploitation follow her not only through her first marriage but also in her subsequent engagement and break off with another boy which increases her parents' 'proprietary rights' over her life. Her continuous complaints regarding her falling eyesight do not affect her parents. On being offered a job by Dr. Dutt, the Neighbourhood doctor, she is not permitted by her parents to join it. She's not even sent to a party hosted by the former teacher Mrs O. Henry.

### **III. WOMEN'S SUBJUGATION THROUGH MARRIAGE AND MOTHERHOOD**

Uma's repeated failures in marriage are Central to the theme of gender oppression in the novel. Each marriage proposal, each attempt to find a suitable match for her reveals how women's lives are often dictated by men's desires and family compulsions rather than by their own autonomy. Uma, throughout serves as a caregiver to her demanding mother. In

the novel, marriage serves as a central institution through which women are subjugated. For Uma, marriage becomes an oppressive force which reflects societal expectations and familial pressures. From the outset, her parents are intent on marrying her off, since marriage is a means of securing her future and fulfilling her duties as a daughter. However, the marriages arranged for her are often with men who are unsuitable, indifferent or even cruel revealing how little her personal desires are valued. The repeated attempts at marriage highlight the damaging nature of system that reduces a woman's worth to her ability to fulfill the role of a wife. Uma is not independent enough to choose her partner or raise a voice of dissatisfaction with the men chosen for her. The main purpose of marriage is not Uma's happiness or fulfillment; rather it is an institutionalized form of control over her body and future. Each failed marriage deepens her sense of emotional isolation. The insistence on marriage reflects the belief that a woman's primary goal is to become wife. The act of marrying Uma off is seen as a necessary step to fulfill her role in society. This aspect of novel critiques the view that women are incomplete without a husband. The novel also examines the cycle of subjugation passed down from one generation to the next. Uma's mother's insistence on marriage reflects her own internalization of patriarchal values and her treatment of Uma as a subjugated daughter mirrors how she herself was likely to be treated. The novel hints at the cycle of women being tied to caregiving roles, unable to break free from oppressive systems. It also hinted the nature of oppression which travels from generation to generation, reinforced by a mother upon a daughter.

#### **Women treated as other:**

As Simone De Beauvoir in her book *The Second Sex* emphasizes that women are treated as other in the society, Anita Desai also shows how women are systematically 'othered' -seen as outsiders even within their own homes. Uma, despite being the eldest is infantilized and denied independence. Her cousin, Anamika despite being brilliant and winning scholarship to Oxford is married off where she later dies (implied to be due to domestic violence). Anamika's death is symbolic of how women's potential is often destroyed by the institution of marriage. Even though she is Academically gifted, her achievements are discarded in favour of securing a good marriage. Mira -Masi, an older unmarried woman who travels between households offering religious counsel represents a rare example of female independence but only within the strict confines of religious life-further underlining how women must often renounce the material world to find some freedom.

#### **Silence and Suppression:**

Desai uses silence as a motif to show how women are conditioned not to speak out. Uma often cannot express herself; her protests are ignored or ridiculed. The novel reveals that communication within the household is limited and one-sided. Parents make the decisions which daughters comply with. Uma's silence shows powerlessness in her own home. Uma is silenced not just by words but by the very structure of her household. Her voice carries no weight-her thoughts and

desires are constantly overridden by Mama and Papa who prioritize her brother and freedom. Anita Desai also portrays silence as a subtle form of resistance. In a patriarchal society that demands conformity, silence becomes a space for introspection and self-preservation. Uma's silence is not just the submission but also a means to navigate the oppressive structures around her. Similarly, Mrs. Patton's silence though seemingly passive reflects her attempt to maintain control in an environment where over resistance is futile. Through Uma and Mrs. Patton, Desai illuminates how silence can be both a response to and a consequence of patriarchal oppression.

**Gendered Expectations across the Cultures:** Although India and the US differ culturally, Desai draws parallels in how gender expectations affect women. If Uma is suffering at her parents' home, Mrs. Patton in America tries to hold her family together with smiles and meals but she's disconnected from her children and has no real voice. She represents a different kind of female oppression-one that exists within the apparent freedom of western society. While she is not overly abused or restricted in the way Uma is, she suffers from emotional neglect, invisibility and the burden of performance as a wife and mother. Her relation with her husband is distant; he is an authoritative and emotionally unavailable. He dominates household decisions including those about food and lifestyle, to which Mrs. Patton mostly agrees. There is no sign of companionship or affection between husband and wife. "We don't sit down to meals like we used to. Everyone eats at different meals. We just don't get to eating together much now that they're grown. So, I just fill the freezer and let them take down what they like, when they like. Keeping the freezer full-that's my job, Ahroon". (Desai,137) Mrs. Patton's condition suggests that even in a Society that preaches freedom, women are trapped in performative roles. She's not only physically alone but emotionally and mentally as well. She tries hard to be a perfect American mother and wife-cheerful, accommodating and organized. She suppresses her own needs and desires to maintain the illusion of a happy family. Her entire identity is wrapped up in being a mother and wife. Outside of these roles, she appears to have no strong sense of self, hobbies or aspirations. Like Uma, Mrs. Patton's voice is drowned out. Conversations are shallow especially with her husband and children. There is no real emotional communication in the Patton family. Mrs. Patton and Uma are from vastly different cultures yet both are

1) Marginalized within their families

2) Expected to serve others

3) Deprived of emotional fulfilment

4) Silenced, either directly or subtly

Their suffering shows how patriarchal structures can exist in both traditional Indian and modern western families.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

In *Fasting, Feasting*, Anita Desai poignantly exposes the pervasive gender discrimination that shapes the lives of her characters particularly Uma, Anamika and Mrs. Patton. Through their experiences, Desai criticizes the patriarchal norms which dictate the gender roles. In the Indian context,

Uma's life is emblematic of the systematic suppression faced by women. Her education is curtailed upon the birth of her brother Arun reflecting the societal preferences for male children and the relegation of girls to domestic roles. Conversely, Mrs. Patton's life in America though seemingly liberated reveals that gender discrimination persists across cultures. Her emotional isolation and the expectations placed upon her reflect a different form of suppression where the absence of communication and connection leads to a profound sense of alienation. This novel conveys that gender discrimination is not confined to any single culture or society but it is a universal issue that transcends geographical boundaries. Through the struggles of her female characters, Desai draws the attention towards the need of dismantling of patriarchal structures that continue to oppress women. Through *Fasting, Feasting*, Anita Desai not only portrays the personal toll of gender discrimination but also invites readers to reflect on the broader societal changes necessary to achieve the gender equality. The novel serves as a poignant reminder of the enduring relevance of feminist discourse. It also emphasizes to challenge the practices that hinder the growth and advancement of women. Through the contrasting experiences of Uma and Arun, Desai illustrates how societal norms and expectations shape individual lives, often to be detriment of personal identity and autonomy. Through the parallel lives of Uma and Arun, Desai highlights how patriarchal norms operate differently in Indian and Western contexts but result in similar oppressive outcomes. Ultimately, *Fasting, Feasting* does not merely portray individual suffering-it critiques the structural inequalities that define womanhood and masculinity across cultures. Desai's Work reminds that true liberation must address both visible and invisible forms of Gender discrimination.

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