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THE CONDITION OF WOMEN : PATRIARCHY AND RESISTANCE IN ANITA DESAI'S
FASTING FEASTING

HANIFA RAHMAN

Lecturer, Moran College (Ad-Hoc)
Barbaruah, Dibrugarh, ASSAM



HANIFA RAHMAN

ABSTRACT

In literature the image of women in fiction has undergone a change during the last four decades. Women writers have considerably moved away from traditional portrayals of enduring self-sacrificing women, towards conflicts, female characters searching for identity, no longer characterized simply in terms of their victimized status.

One such prominent Indian author, whose writing addresses issues focusing on the condition of women in India, is Anita Desai. Desai's novels chiefly center around the representations of women and their struggle against patriarchal and colonial oppression.

This paper critically examines Anita Desai's outlook and standpoint on the socio-cultural issues of patriarchal oppression, ideological conditioning, female freedom and empowerment with special reference to her novel *Fasting Feasting*. It brings into focus the interaction of women's traumatic experiences, the psychological plight of the female characters, and the state of their oppression in a male dominated patriarchal framework. At the same time the paper also attempts to bring to the fore the resistance exerted by these female characters against such oppressive bondage, although not expressly but through certain other modes. The novel underscores the dialectical relationship between 'fasting' and 'feasting' and the entangled politics of gender and cultural inequality. In the process, it raises questions about the possible locations of female individual agency.

The paper thus, while examining the position of Indian women in an all-encompassing patriarchal society, also throws light on the means to overcome this vicious circle of existence.

Key words – Patriarchy, oppression, oppressed psyche, repression, 'hysterical women', resistance.

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INTRODUCTION

In literature the image of women in fiction has undergone a change during the last four decades. Women writers have considerably moved away from traditional portrayals of enduring self-sacrificing women,

towards conflicts, female characters searching for identity, no longer characterized simply in terms of their victimized status.

One such prominent Indian author, whose writing addresses issues focusing on the condition of women in India, is Anita Desai. Desai's novels chiefly center around the representations of women and their struggles against patriarchal and colonial oppression. Her celebrated novel *Fasting Feasting* (2000) delineates the psychic entrapment of women in a oppressive male dominated environment. Though India attained independence from colonial rule it failed to unburden women from the ideal visions of womanhood. Advancement of learning and modernization have made little impact on the internal psyche and attitude of the society towards women specially in context of India.

This paper attempts to critically examine Anita Desai's outlook and standpoint on the socio-cultural issues of patriarchal oppression, ideological conditioning, female freedom and empowerment with special reference to her novel *Fasting Feasting*. The paper brings into focus the interaction of women's traumatic experiences, the psychological plight of the female characters, and the state of their oppression in a male dominated patriarchal framework. At the same time the paper also attempts to bring to the fore the resistance exerted by these female characters against such oppressive bondage, although not expressly but through certain other modes. The novel underscores the dialectical relationship between 'fasting' and 'feasting' and the entangled politics of gender and cultural inequality. In the process, it raises questions about the possible locations of female individual agency.

Discussion

The first part of the novel centers around the plight of the 'not-so intelligent' and 'unattractive' female protagonist, Uma and gives us a first-hand account of her life under the demanding rule of her parents. In a series of flashback the readers are told how Uma becomes a reluctant victim to the entrapment at home. Uma's story is one of perennial deprivation beginning with her being taken out of her school after the birth of her baby brother Arun. Her attempts to protest and assert her choice proves futile when the mother superior at school to whom she makes a desperate appeal also complies with her parent's wish that Uma need not study any further. Early in life thus she is reduced to a baby-sitter because her brother, according to her parents needs 'proper attention'. The oppression continues till Uma reaches the age where she can be married off, an event which Uma looks forward to as a sort of respite to her dull and monotonous way of life. Unfortunately, the marriage turns out to be a sham as the groom and his family are deceitful and treats Uma like an unpaid servant. She is brought back home by her father and a divorce is arranged. Once again she finds herself in the grip of her insensitive parents who are reluctant to let her go out or have any life of her own. The only form of outing made available to her is a hurried walk in the park on occasions when her father feels that the women are becoming lazy by sitting at home and doing nothing. These outings too are so hurriedly done that Uma is left wondering why they had to come out at all only to rush back home whenever her father wanted to. Uma finds a little respite when she accompanies her aunt Mira Masi on a pilgrimage and for once is out of the exploitative and monotonous atmosphere at home. Another source of relief and some fun is provided to her by the irregular visits of her favourite cousin, Ramu. But these too get more and more rare and finally stops altogether as he fades out of the narrative.

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 after which she has to bear the additional burden of the two lost dowries which increases the 'proprietary rights' of her parents over her. Even Uma's constant complains regarding her failing eyesight falls on deaf ears.

Despite her lack of education and professional skill, Uma is fortunate enough to be offered a job by Dr. Dutt, the neighbourhood doctor. Appreciated and useful, "a member" of a community which works for someone's benefit, free from the patriarchal supervising of her parents, Uma finds this experience comparable to that of heavenly bliss. However as usual her parents do not permit her to join inspite of her eagerness. They even refuse to send Uma to a party hosted by her former teacher Mrs. O Henry, because they are afraid that the lady may try to convert Uma to Christianity.

However, it would be wrong to presuppose that Anita Desai shows Uma's unattractiveness, clumsiness and dullness of mind as causes for her entrapment. Uma's polar opposite, her graceful, beautiful and brilliant cousin, Anamika's fate is far worse. While Uma's failure in her school exams pressurizes her to stay at home, Anamika does so excellently in her final school exams, that she wins a scholarship to Oxford. Yet Anamika lives in a patriarchal society that considers higher education to be the prerogative of males, and marriage as the major preoccupation of females. Thus the scholarship obtained by her is used only as a means to win her a husband who is considered an equal to the family's prestige. Anamika's parents are unperturbed by the fact that he is "so much older than her, so grim-faced and conscious of his own superiority", and is "totally impervious to Anamika's beauty grace and distinction" (pg.70) Anamika ultimately meets a tragic death at the hands of her in-laws.

Apart from addressing certain prominent issues of Indian socio-cultural scenario like marriage, dowry and gender, Desai makes the issue of women's education and their aspiration to obtain self-sufficiency and a meaningful existence her prime focus in the novel. She depicts values and beliefs prevailing in the Indian society in order to interrogate them. The title *Fasting, Feasting* is ironical with its binary implications: the birth of a son always is to be feasted upon whereas the birth of a daughter is believed to spell misery. She is to be married off with a dowry and she is to be educated to qualify as a desirable bride to a prospective groom, Thus a daughter instead of bringing good fortune only adds to the compulsive expenditure in a family. Such are the implications of 'fasting'. The predicament of the female characters in the novel, especially Anamika's, reveals the striking fact that educational qualification and degrees did not until recently impel women to create their space in the outer world and acquire self-sufficiency. The Victorian ideal of the 'angel of the house' continued to dominate the social consciousness even in the 1980's and early 90's. The repression had taken a psychic dimension and women were forced to restrict themselves to the "interior space" since that was more acceptable to the respectability of the middle-class household. Thus in the novel when Uma is offered a job by Dr. Dutt, Papa scornfully rejects it and it is Mama who echoes Papa's words, "Our daughter does not need to go out to work, Dr.Dutt. There is no need."(pg.62)

Thus the "mad" or the "hysterical" women in Desai's novels belong to this generation of women: as daughters and wives in the Indian society of late 80's and early 90's of the twentieth century. The drudgery of daily chores, of catering to the needs of husbands and children often led women to feel depressed, isolated and bored. Repression of desires and a breakdown of communication within the family often made them suffer from neurotic disorders from time to time and even drove some of them to commit suicide. There are many points in the novel when Uma feels utterly friendless and alone, without anyone to turn to or even write a letter to. In desperation, she thinks of writing a letter to a friend to share her grief but it only ends up with the realization that she has none to confide with: "She could write a letter to a friend -- a private message of despair, dissatisfaction, yearning; she has a packet of notepaper....but who is the friend? Mrs. Joshi? But since she lives next door, she would be surprised. Aruna ? But Aruna would pay no attention, she is too busy."(pg68)

Thus Uma, assured of a lifetime of confinement in her parental home, nevertheless manages to experience a liberation through her body when she is overtaken by periodic fits and fainting spells. These seizures that Uma is given to, where she falls to the ground, thrashes around, and turns purple, non-verbally express her protest against the oppressiveness of her family and her victimization by patriarchal Indian society. Another act of Uma's plunging herself into the river shows her rebellion against the oppressive bonds and her desperation for liberation. This is the only time, when she's under water, unable to swim but somehow sprung loose in the black depths, that she feels truly liberated: " It was not fear she felt, or danger... it was exactly what she had always wanted, she realized. Then they saved her. The saving was what made her shudder and cry..."(pg92)

A significant point that Desai touches upon in this novel is in presenting the stories of oppression of women not only in the Indian context but also in the West signifying how patriarchy is all encompassing irrespective of culture or place. Thus we are introduced to two other suffering females of the American Patton family—Mrs. Patton and her daughter Melanie. The second part of the novel is presented as viewed by Arun

where he sees how the Patton family lives in a consumerist land of plenty that is so remote from the concerns of his family in India. However Desai very poignantly depicts how Arun soon becomes witness to the hollowness of their 'feasting' when he sees a similar kind of oppression exerted by the male members of the American household as that in his own family. This is revealed through Mr Patton's obsession with non-vegetarian food and his imposing of his food habits on his family members. We get to know how Mrs. Patton is deprived of her freedom even in her choice of food. Though she despises non-vegetarian food and has ardent likings for vegetarian food she had to meekly submit to her husband's wishes. Arun also becomes witness to the suffering of Melanie—daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Patton who like Uma suffers from parental indifference. Due to negligence of family care as a female child, in spite of the liberal set up, Melanie falls prey to bulimia—a disorder in which overeating alternates with self-induced vomiting and anorexia. Thus in spite of the telling contrast between the two cultures as well as families, Arun ironically finds resemblance to something he knows well: a resemblance to the contorted face of an enraged sister who, failing to express her out-rage against neglect, against misunderstanding, against inattention to her unique and singular being and its hungers, merely spits and froths in ineffectual protest. "She smiles a bright plastic copy of a mother smile that Arun remembers from another world and another time..." "How strange to encounter it here, Arun thinks, where so much is given, where there is both licence and plenty—but what is plenty? What is not? Can anyone tell the difference?" (pg.120)

Conclusion

The reference to the condition of Mrs. Patton as well as Melanie highlights that despite locations, cultures, or social and cultural values being different, the patriarchal attitude is same everywhere. Even an advanced country like America is not free from its grips and the condition of women is no different there. However despite the oppression the female characters in the novel are seen putting up resistance against the overpowering clutches of patriarchy. Since they are deprived of any other agency their resistance finds expression in their own idiosyncratic ways; Uma's fainting spells as well as her act of plunging herself into the river; Mrs. Patton's frenzy for buying food items to fill the freezer, Melanie's bulimia, Mira Masi's empty spiritual leanings as well as Aruna's mad pursuit towards a vision of perfection all mark a sense of resistance which is the result of age-long suppression and consequent frustration.

Finally then taking into account Arun's experiences in America together with the outcome of the first part of the novel the observation can be made that the possibilities of woman to escape the suffering in the bonds of patriarchy depend essentially both on recognition and action. Actual liberation could be possible only with the consciousness (recognition of her inner strength) of the younger generation of women. Such an effort can be seen in Uma in the novel, who in spite of her dullness craves for education and wishes to be economically free of her parents. Thus the means of liberation from such vicious circle of existence has to be two-fold. Effort needs to be put in from both sides i.e. blaming patriarchy alone would serve no good until women themselves stop propagating it which is evident in characters like Mama and Anamika's mother-in-law who steeped in the ideology of patriarchy becomes tormentor for other women. To conclude with the words of R.S. Pathak, "Marginal has no other option but to speak, it has to speak, voice, not hide its tears, fears and angst and wrath, to attain identity of their own."

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