



MALE PERCEPTION IN ANITA DESAI'S *FASTING FEASTING*

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ABSTRACT

The novel Fasting Feasting explores the role of family on the individual. It is done through Uma's formative experience in India and Arun's post-adolescent experience in Massachusetts. The family is the central agent of individual socialization. Uma and Arun's upbringing is an example of rigid authority and parental control. In India parents are supposed as figurative dictators, controlling and managing every step of child's activities and his development. The novel understudy concentrates on the male perception. The male characters are deeply focused on in this paper.

Keywords: male, female, perception, understanding, husband, wife, domestic.

DISCUSSION:

The perception of the male in Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting* becomes obvious from the strict attitude of Papa towards the woman in the family. The women are not allowed for outings usually, but when Papa feels that the women laze around the house too much, then they would be taken to the park for a walk. At the park also, women do not feel a sense of freedom and relaxation. On one occasion, Uma gets easily distracted and fails to keep pace with her Papa. Though Papa is far away, and she is left in the company of Mama, she would not dare attempt to buy some eatables on her wish though it is highly tempting:

*Uma finds saliva gathering at the corners of her mouth at the smell of the spiced, roasted gram but decides to say nothing.*¹⁰²

Likewise, the children are not allowed to have any sense of privacy even when they have grown-up. They are not allowed to shut any doors in the household for this meant secrets, especially nasty secrets, which are impermissible:

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*It meant authority would come stalking in and make a search to seize upon the nastiness, the clean blot.*¹⁰³

MamaPapa also decide which of their children should have education and how much of it. After the birth of Arun, Uma's education has been stopped. She looks forward towards her marriage to give her the much-needed relief, yet, unfortunately, she returns home frustrated after the deceitful marriage and subsequent divorce. At home, she gets a rare, job offer through Dr. Dutt, but MamaPapa refuse to send her. In another case, when Uma receives an invitation for a coffee party from Mrs. O'Henry, MamaPapa refuse to send her to the party because of the apprehension that Mrs. O'Henry might ensure her and convert her into a Christian nun. Uma is thus reduced to a baby-sitter at her earlier days and an unpaid servant for her self-centered parents for the rest of her life. In a way, she has been entrapped by the male dominance.

Uma has been unattractive, clumsy and dull-minded but Anita Desai doesn't mean to say that these are the reasons for her suffering. At the very time, the writer has chosen Uma's counterpart in the character of Anamika, who excels in her final school exams and 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. The scholarship obtained 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 and grace and distinction."*¹⁰⁴

Anamika's husband is a typical 'Mama's boy' to the extent that he could be a silent witness to his mother's beating of his wife regularly. Anamika, who won scholarship to Oxford, spends her entire time in the kitchen cooking for a very large family that eats in shifts—*"first the men, then the children, finally the women."*¹⁰⁵ After a miscarriage, which followed a brutal beating, and the belief that she could not bear more children, finally, the family ties her up in a nylon sari, pours the kerosene over her, and burns her to death.

In case of Aruna, Uma's smart and pretty younger sister, the perception of male is changed. As per the standard of her husband, Aruna transforms herself. She has made a discreet choice and marries—

*...the wisest, most expedient choice—the handsomest, the richest, the most exciting of the suitors who presented themselves.*¹⁰⁶



Aruna's marriage to Arvind who has a job in Bombay and a flat in a housing block in Juhu, facing the beach is just like a dream-come-true. To live that dream-life fully she transforms herself and desperately seeks to introduce change in the lives of others. She cuts her hair, takes her make-up kit wherever she goes, and calls her sister and mother as 'villagers' once they refuse to accept her sophisticated and flashy style of life. For that reason, she avoids visiting her parents' home and the rare occasions of her short visits are spent in blaming the untidiness of the surrounding and the inhabitants. Even she goes to the extent of scolding her husband when he split tea in his saucer, or wears a shirt, which does not match with his trousers.

Mrs. Desai seems to project the perception of male more forcefully in respect to Arun, the only son. Arun has been a hope for MamaPapa that's it has been observed that MamaPapa have been engrossed in bringing about discipline and system in his life. They take every care of Arun's food and education. Right from his birth, Arun desists eating the food of his family which is symbolic of its values. Much to the dismay of his father, he shows his preference for vegetarian food. Simply because it revolutionized the life-style of his father, Arun cannot be forced to eat non-vegetarian food. This, of course, is a cause of disappointment for Papa:

*Papa was always scornful of those of their relatives who came to visit and insisted on clinging to their cereal and vegetable-eating ways, shying away from the meat dishes Papa insisted on having cooked for dinner. Now his own son, his one son, displayed this completely baffling desire to return to the ways of his forefathers, meek and punny men who had got nowhere in life. Papa was deeply vexed.*¹⁰⁷

Papa, in order to give "the best, the most, the highest"¹⁰⁸ education for his son, takes charge of Arun's life from his childhood. Although Arun's school examinations are over, Papa cannot allow him to go to his sister's house in Bombay during holidays, since he has planned that time for taking up entrance examinations and preparation for sending applications to go abroad for higher studies. However, in the eyes of Aruna, her father has turned manic to get a foreign scholarship for Arun. It has actually been on account of his unfulfilled dreams, which he tries to impose on his son. That is why, we see and Uma observes when the letter of acceptance from Massachusetts finally arrives, it stirs no emotions in Arun:

Uma watched Arun too, when he read the fateful letter. She watched and searched for an expression, of relief, of joy, doubt, fear, anything at all. But there was none...There was nothing else—not the hint of smile, frown, laugh or anything: these had been ground down till they had disappeared. This



*blank face now stared at the letter and faced another phase of his existence arranged for him by Papa.*¹⁰⁹

Sylvia Browning has rightly commented and also pointed out the male perception in regard with Arun and against Uma:

*With a deft touch, Desai shows us the MamaPapa's ambitions for Arun are as stifling as their lack of ambition for Uma...*¹¹⁰

From America, Arun's letters come just to indicate his endurance and survival. His messages are always diluted and are devoid of emotion and substance.

In a country like America where much attention and liberty has been given to individuality of a person, Arun fails to manifest his identity as an individual. He feels to be caught up in the trivial food habits of his own family. He can neither nourish the alien food nor develop a sense of belonging with Patton's family that shelters him during his vacation. Arun feels very loathsome at the smell of the raw meat being charred over the fire by Mr. Patton for steak or hamburger. Like Arun's father, Mr. Patton fails to understand why Arun refers to eat a good piece of meat. It is Mrs. Patton who sympathizes with Arun and gives him the vegetarian food to eat, particularly tomato slices and lettuce on bread. This food also seems to be detestable to Arun as he thinks that—

*...in his time in America he has developed a hearty abhorrence for the raw foods everyone here thinks the natural diet of vegetarian.*¹¹¹

Mrs. Patton seems quite satisfied being Arun's host. She watches him eat with pride and simplicity.

It is Mrs. Patton's daughter, Melanie, who raises the voice against the food which is offered to them but Arun helplessly eat the same. The writer has presented two sides of human personality wherein one finds Melanie suffering from bulimia—a disorder in which overeating alternates with self-induced vomiting, fasting, etc. The other is Rod who presents a contrast to Melanie. He proves to be a fitness fanatic. He spends all his time and energy in jogging, baffles Arun who wonders that

*"one can't tell what is more dangerous in this country, the pursuit of health or of sickness."*¹¹²



Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting* proves to be her attempt to establish her identity from altogether a different perspective. She has been known as one of the best Indian writers dealing with the lives of her characters, especially, the female characters. *Fasting, Feasting* proves to be a shift in her theme and approach. Desai speaks out in a recent interview that she has been deliberately shifting her focus from female characters to male characters. She rather feels she needs to address and voice out themes which concern males too:

*Specially in my earlier work I found myself addressing the same things over and over again: very much about the life of women, specially those women who are confined to home and family, also the solitude from which a person can suffer even if living within a big family or surround by crowds. But after several years and several books I began to feel suffocated myself by the confinement of these subjects. I felt I was limiting the territory to such an extent that it created a kind of suffocation even for me. So I deliberately opened the doors, to widen the canvas, and started writing more about male characters and their lives, because I felt they had a wider experience of the world, and I could address a great variety of experiences.*¹¹³

CONCLUSION:

Through the characters like Uma, Aruna and Arun, Desai has attempted to present the perception of male. How the male in the character of PapaMama control, guide, care, affect and plan the life of the other male as well as female characters where Mama is the passive representation of the malehood. Uma and Anamika have a very different and negative perception of male as they do not enjoy the boons of married life whereas Aruna experiences an altogether different side of male in her life. How and what Arun feels about the other male characters especially about his own father is very obvious from his behaviour. Papa's attitude towards Arun has been an imposition of his own unfulfilled desires.

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