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FASTING, FEASTING AS A CHANNEL ON WOMEN AS THE SUFFERERS AND PRESERVERS OF CULTURE

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ABSTRACT

In one of her most famous TED Talks in India, Kavita Ramdas, a leading philanthropist said, "Why is that women are on the one hand viciously oppressed by cultural practices, and yet, at the same time are the preservers of culture in most of the societies?" In an attempt at intertwining the ideology of Kavita Ramdas with literature, the novel *Fasting, Feasting* by Anita Desai has been analysed as a representation and shout-out of all the silent oppressed women preservers of culture, especially in the Indian scenario of the first part of the novel.

Keywords: Fasting Feasting, Anita Desai, feminism.

Suppression of women and their empowerment is an alarmingly existing practice in India, the land that also saw women leaders. Many reformists have cried out aloud for women freedom and empowerment while many women choose to remain trapped into it knowingly or unknowingly, but silently agreeing it as a custom and culture. Years have passed by, but the struggle and entrapment continues. Circumstances still exists where a woman puts herself as a hindrance in the enlightenment of another women, and where culture and customs are claimed to be the reason.

Anita Desai is a praised Indian author of several award winning works such as *Fire on the Mountain*, *Clear Light of the Day*, *In Custody*, to quote a few. She was born to a German mother and an Indian father on 24 June 1937 in Mussoorie, India. She is currently the Emerita John E. Burchard Professor of Humanities at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. She has received a Sahitya Academy Award in 1978, honoured with the Padma Bhushan Award by the Government of India, and been shortlisted thrice for the Booker Prize.

Fasting, Feasting is Desai's fourteenth novel. Written in the year 1999, it is in two parts

with the first in a typical temple town in India and the second in the suburbs of Massachusetts in the US. Born in the colonial era of India, bought up in the independent and the developing India and settled in Massachusetts, Desai can be trusted for her moving and translucent portrayal of the two societies with its riches and flaws.

The first part of the novel represents almost the life of most the Indian women through the characters of Uma, Aruna, Anamika, Mama and Mira Masi, while the second part is not an altogether different but select portrayal of the life of women at Massachusetts through the character of Mrs. Patton.

The first part of the novel revolves around the elderly and the unmarried spinster Uma and her family. Born as the first child to the ever-separable MamaPapa, Uma is not able to show improvement in her studies, nor is able to maintain class with her successful younger sister Aruna, or her cousin, Anamika. She keeps failing her exams and is detained in the same grade. She is not given any remedial or tuition, unlike Arun- her younger brother. As Arun is born, when Uma is in her teens, she is asked to withdraw from studies to look after

the boy because the boy as Mamma says, needs "Proper attention". All her attempts to re-join school go in vain

When she is not even past her mid-teens, Uma is ordered around the house to change nappies, order the menu to the cook, help Mama with her chores or run errands to the neighbour, Mrs. Joshi.. However, her sister Aruna, is given considerable freedom to go around with her friends to the cinema or for shopping as she is comparatively good at studies and in socializing.

"When Uma was still watching to see that Arun did not crawl off the veranda and break his neck and put knitting needles or naphthalene balls in his mouth, Aruna was already climbing into bicycle rickshaws and going off to the cinema-with girl friends from school, she said." (Page-81)

Their parents are convinced with the idea that Aruna is far better and capable than Uma, just because she can show better social skills and is prettier than Uma.

Later, when their cousin Anamika is found with a suitable groom, who is much older than her, she is grandly married off with dowries. Her excellence in studies that led to the arrival of an admission letter from the Oxford, was only preserved to serve as a merit in her matrimonial search. There were rumours that said she was abused physically and verbally by her in-laws while her husband stood approvingly and that she was never allowed to attend any family event.

"... Anamika had been beaten, Anamika was beaten regularly by her mother-in law while her husband stood by and approved- or at least did not object. Anamika spent her entire time in the kitchen, cooking for his family which was so large so that meals were eaten in shifts- first the men, then the children, finally the women. She herself ate the remains in the pots before scouring them. ... When Anamika was not scrubbing or cooking, she was in her mother-in law's room, either massing the lady's feet or folding and tidying her clothes." (Page-72)

However, her parents maintain that her in-laws were very loving that they didn't want to part with

her for even a day, which indirectly maintains a claim that a women's abode is her husband's house irrespective of her treatment. The domestic violence comes to an end when finally Anamika sets herself on fire after twenty-five years of tormented married life.

Anamika's marriage meant that Uma was next to be married and sent off. When it turned out that the suitors were more interested in Aruna than over Uma, her parents try to get her married soon. Their haste to not miss a good match for Aruna made them to not carefully investigate into the matches sought for Uma. Uma also doesn't get to choose between the grooms, as there aren't much prospects due to her dusky and plain complexion and poor education.

"Uma was shown them (a sign of the family's progressiveness)" (Page-75)

Many attempts were made to get her married and they go futile, but one final attempt that also leads to an annulled marriage. The groom turns out to be a married man who faked as a bachelor to marry Uma for her dowry. Though Uma is saved from that family, her father shows only his materialistic mindset by lamenting that the dowry has gone waste. Uma is pricked by Aruna constantly and she also gets questioned if she ever got touched over the period of her annulled marriage, which is very unkind of a woman to another woman under the given circumstances. Eventually Uma's parents decide to keep her with themselves and to look towards Aruna's marriage. Their preference to Aruna over Uma is very evident right from the beginning of the novel. Mama being a woman herself is not very much concerned about Uma's esteem.

As expected when an array of suitors lines up for Aruna, she makes a fuss about choosing a groom. Unlike Uma, she also gets to choose her groom. She shows her picky nature over all the arrangements of her luxurious marriage. She orders Uma to ground herself, as she might throw into fits, only to embarrass her more, to which their parents never object. Uma is constantly seen as a pain and embarrassment by Aruna, while Uma thinks of Aruna otherwise.

Anita Desai very effectively brings a flaw in the character of Aruna. Aruna's marriage resulted to be a successful affair and she is a happily settled proud housewife of Arvind and the mother of Aisha and Dinesh. During each of her visits to her parents, Uma, as expected, is entrusted with the duty of overlooking the children as their maiden aunt, while she busies herself by visiting her girlfriends to show off her Bombay acquisitions. All her education and courage has fared her to only do nothing with her life than to boast off her life's luxury.

"... Uma felt pity for her: was this the realm of ease and comfort for which Aruna always pined and that some might say she had attained?" (Page-112)

When she brings her in-laws to visit and bathe in the holy waters, she orders around the house demanding perfection in everything. Though her parents are excited by her demands they clearly do not comment on her attitude. They feel content that Arvind too is being reprimanded along with them. While the parents decided to silently oblige to Aruna throughout, they always remain conservative when it came to Uma. Mama, the mother, even tactically turns down a job offer for Uma, which could have been a great support for Uma to look after herself.

The still existent discrimination on education based on gender is calmly explored in the novel. Papa, the father, was always ready to do anything to settle Arun: tuitions were arranged, sports classes were scheduled, and high-quality education was provided. But unlike Uma, all that Arun ever wanted was to go invisible. Anita Desai says that Uma was

"... seized with a longing to stir up that vicious greyness, to bring to life some evidence of colour, if not in her life then in another's." (Page-125)

Papa made sure that Arun applied to excellent colleges abroad and also got him a letter of acceptance from one at Massachusetts. With Arun's departure the parents retired to rest. They got their chances to visit clubs which Uma avoided so as to get some time for herself and also allow her parents get some time alone. Uma was also finally allowed to visit neighbours, only with proper permission prior.

Anita Desai also touches the section of women who are old-school in the concept of orthodox religion over the comfort of women. There are episodes of Mira Masi, a widowed relative of the family, who visits occasionally to stay with them on her pilgrimage tours. She has restrained herself from whims and fancies towards piety and religion only after her husband's death, which is a great irony. She demands her own cubicle of kitchen and vessels during her visits to the family. She even goes to the extent of declaring Uma to be the "Lord's child" when she throws herself into fits. Mama only entertains her because she is a hub of all gossips and rumours that connect her to the lives of her distant relatives. Though Mira Masi is fond of the girls, especially Uma, she is conservative over the concept of menstruation and considers it a pollution to God. She believes in the concepts of out-casts and untouchables which is understood through her demands.

In second part of the novel Desai moves on to Massachusetts, and portrays the American household through summer vacation of Arun at Mrs. Patton's. There is not much difference that Arun could note in the Patton family except for the freedom that their womenfolk get and menfolk who did occasional cooking for the family.

"Dad got home early. He's on the patio, cooking dinner." (Page-166)

says Mrs. Patton to Arun.

While the children at the Indian set-up of the novel have a seemingly better parental bond, Rod and Melanie Patton are clearly reluctant to interact or listen to Mr. & Mrs. Patton. It goes to the extent that the eating disorder of Melanie comes to light only when Arun breaks it down to the Pattons.

Mrs. Patton has got considerable freedom over her body and lifestyle. She would shop and sun-bath as she feels and invite Arun to join her for both, which was not very indecent or revolting to their culture.

"She is wearing clothes so minimal that they only cover a few inches of her chest and hips. The rest of her flesh is bared to his glaze. ... He would like to disappear. He does not want to glance in her direction.

It's like confronting his mother naked."

(Page 215-216)

Mrs. Patton is expected to watch over the household, fill in the grocery and keep it always stocked and cook food. Unlike the Indian setup, women at Massachusetts are allowed to drive and socialize and visit places without asking for permission constantly to the male superior of the family. However, the women are made by inner-force to give up their wishes to keep a family intact, in both the settings: Mrs. Patton always wanted to be a vegetarian, but her family did not quite allow her to be one.

No matter that there are two completely different settings in the novel, the liberation of womenfolk is constrained. Though the novel was written in 1999, it still is a reflection of most of the contemporary women. The concept of culture of many Indian households is portrayed through the family of MamaPapa. It is to lead a decent life with servants for work, to educate female children to elevate them to the status of marriage with dowries, to keep up their dignity by not allowing their female children to go for work, to cherish the male children who are their heirs, maintain a sociable relationship with the neighbours and relatives and to have extravagant celebrations.

Though the parents of Uma are educated, they restrict Uma from schooling and force her to care her brother, while her sister gets to enjoy the fruits of freedom. The disparity in terms of education between the genders and unfair treatment between one's own children are quite sharply spoken out by Desai. Mama, being a woman, herself silently approves of discontinuing Uma from school; blames her for her complexion; calls her an "unpromising material," "an outcast from the world of marriage," "disposed" and "madcap"; talks her low comparing with Aruna and ordering her around the house; and even rejects job offers that are put to Uma. Whatever she has preserved of culture through her restrictions is her submission to the patriarchy and she too has suffered by the same patriarchy by her husband's ignorance of her. Mrs. Patton on the other doesn't seem too much of a sufferer or preserver of culture.

Aruna, though revolting, is but a representation of a failed new woman. She has failed her duties as a sister, though she is a pride as a daughter. She achieved nothing through all her capabilities:

"Certainly it bought her no pleasure: there was always a crease of discontent between her eyebrows and eyes..." (Page-112)

Mira Masi is yet another example of a preserver of culture in the novel. Culture according to her is to reach God through sacrifice and pain. She bald shaved her head and refused herself of any fancy and tried to reach God. But all this, never meant anything to her until her husband's death.

The typical sufferers of culture and silently accepted patriarchy are represented through the characters of Uma and Anamika. If Uma shall be excused for her inability to learn and dusky unattractive looks, Anamika was a brilliantly learnt woman with warm and attractive looks and skills. While Uma remained to suffer as a spinster throughout her life just to preserve the custom of obedience to parents, Anamika remained to silently suffer under her in-laws to preserve the culture that would taunt a married woman who left her in-laws' house and for the respect of her family.

Altogether, throughout the novel, Mama, Mrs. Patton, Aruna, Mira Masi, Uma and Anamika are all both the sufferers and preservers of culture, except that they remain to be silent. Anita Desai's novel is a shout-out of all the women who in some point of their life or throughout their life has underwent any of those that the novel spoke about. Through this novel, light is thrown upon these domestic sufferings of women in a light yet loud way.

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