

FASTING, FEASTING : ENVISIONING A BOND OF MOTHER - DAUGHTER

Fasting, Feasting (1999), the eleventh novel of Anita Desai, explores the victimization of some women in the oppressive structure of Hindu patriarchal ideology. While producing the knowledge about their victimization through the construction of different discourses, the novelist is seen to take the Third-world feminist position in order to critique the different oppressive structures of Hindu patriarchal ideologies. But her critique does not take on a negative turn because with the feminist consciousness of the victimization of the women she also constructs a discourse of mother-daughter bond in which she empowers them to exercise their agency towards the development of their own subculture to resist the patriarchal repressive structure. In this sense, the women, in this fictional domain, are powerless and empowered, passive and active.

The text is represented through Third person narration and divided into almost two equal parts : Part one, consisting of thirteen chapters, focuses on the predicament of some Hindu women in Hindu patriarchal family structure and Part two, having fourteen chapters, deals with Arun's studies and his bewildering experience in the Patton family in America. Symbolically, Mrs. Patton's joyful sharing of vegetable food with Arun in her home and Arun's presentation of an Indian shawl to her seem to give an indication of the novelist's emphasis upon multiculturalism. Besides this, Part two provides a slightly little space for inclusion of the novelist's concern about the adolescent American girls' victimization by the cultural identity norms in Late Capitalist society. Part one opens with Papa Mama's shouting for sweets, fritters and tea and with Uma engaged in doing up the parcel of shawl and tea to be carried away by justice Dutta's son with him to America for Arun. Part two ends with the packet at Arun's hand. He finds that there is no extra space in his suitcase, so he presents them to Mrs Patton. In between these two incidents the other incidents have

unfolded themselves in depth. In what follows is a discussion of these other incidents concerned with women's life.

To begin with, the novelist gives a vignette of the relationship between Uma's parents. Uma's mother, named Mama in this novel, came of an enormous merchant family in Kanpur, which, she believed, was not an orthodox one. This was because 'in her day, girls in the family were not given sweets, nuts and good things to eat. If something special had been bought from the market like sweets or nuts, it was given to the boys in the family' (6). But no such gender discrimination she encountered in that family. But she did not know that without giving her proper education, at sixteen she was given in marriage to Papa (Uma's father), the son of Tax Inspector, who was provided with the best available education for a 'career'. Her mother perhaps internalised the patriarchal ideology that the goal of woman is marriage. So the story of her life was concerned with food – mostly sweets – and the family, and her father's with education, career, authority and power.

However, Papa Mama now seemed sufficient in themselves. At home, their existence was like that of the Siamese twin; but they had two different roles : Papa's scowling and Mama's scolding. The children did not question their choice, at least during their childhood because they hardly saw any difference between them.

But a difference came to crop up between them as Mama discovered her own pregnancy at a time when her two daughters were well grown-up. However frantic she was to have it terminated, she had to comply with her husband's decision that he could not now miss the chance of having a son. Through this incident the novelist seems to expose the predicament of the women like Mama in patriarchal family where they are treated solely as bodies, but not as subjects with desires, fears, special needs and so forth.

However, in patriarchy the mother of a son is granted extra status. With the birth of a son, Mama began to enjoy that extra status. She became her husband's helpmate, his consort, his wife and above all, the mother of his son. Patriarchy's preference of a son to a daughter was revealed by Papa's joy that knew no bounds with the news of the birth of a male child in the family. But he turned morose when the second daughter was born.

Patriarchy prefers a son to a daughter in order to perpetuate itself. With this awareness, the novelist, from this point onwards, sets to constitute the discourse of gender discrimination.

The feminist in Anita Desai takes note of the fact that in patriarchal family, with the advent of a male child, the daughters' positions are relegated. This is exposed through the positions of Uma and her sister Aruna which are relegated to that of an 'ayah'. They are not only neglected but also expected to give proper attention to the infant son. Through Uma, the novelist points out that they were brought up by ayah, whereas Mama now requires their special service towards her son. With this consciousness of gender discrimination, Uma ventilates her protest against her mother's unjust demand through a direct question :

That ayah had looked after her and Aruna as babies (30).

But her mother silences her voice with a threatening note that 'it was quite a different matter now' (Ibid). Uma and Aruna find no alternative to standing in for her at Arun's cot as she would accompany her husband to the club, or to the dinner parties and weddings. She matches her husband's achievement and they are 'now more equal than ever' (31). Yet it cannot evade Uma's notice that there is a dearth of something in their relationship. Consequently, Uma cannot but wonder :

Was this love? was this romance? (31)

Actually their relationship is based upon obligation, constraint, submission but not upon mutual love and romance.

Anyway, here it is pertinent to note Uma Narayan's observation on the middle class Indian mothers' relationships with their daughters. As Uma Narayan observes, 'the middle class Indian mothers give contradictory messages to their daughters, encouraging their daughters to be confident, impudent and self-assertive even as they attempt to instil conformity, decorum and silence, seemingly oblivious to these contradictions' (1997 : 8). But Uma's mother has no such contradiction. In delineating the middle class Indian mother like Uma's mother, Anita Desai has made us aware that there are still certain middle class

Indian mothers like Mama who are of traditional mentality. Now the middle class Indian mothers, as Uma Narayan observes, see education good for daughters, encourage them to do well at their studies so that the requisite qualifications would enable them to support themselves economically. But Uma's mother discourages her daughters, particularly Uma, to continue her studies. Of course, there is a cause behind it. Uma's performance is abject in school. Yet while Uma wants to continue her studies, feels attracted towards the rational, orderly and mindful atmosphere of school, and the nuns and the sisters want her to come back to school, her parents withdraw her from it and engage her in the crib so that she can assist her mother. Since her mother wants Uma to be like her, she gives her the lessons of how to fold nappies, prepare watered milk and rock the screaming infant to sleep. Uma is not oblivious to the fact that her mother was not so serious about her school work as now in respect of these lessons.

Again, like the middle class Indian mothers, Mama is critical of the effect of convent education upon her daughters. She wants her daughters to conform to the prescriptions and expectations around them. She has already internalised almost all patriarchal prescriptions and expectations around a woman. Naturally she would not approve of her daughters' behaviour otherwise toward Hindu patriarchal culture. So whenever she finds them do so, she tries to silence them by scolding. The novelist makes this point clear in the following piece :

Anamika had had a miscarriage, after a beating ... would she be sent back to her family? Everyone waited to hear. Uma said, 'I hope they will send her back'. 'Then she will be home with Lila Aunty again, and happy'. 'you are so silly, Uma', Mama snapped, ... 'How can she be happy if she is sent home? What will people say? What will they think?' While Uma gaped, trying to think of something to say that could strike down Mama's silly thoughts ... Aruna cried out for her instead, 'Who cares what they say? Who cares what they think?' 'Don't talk like that', Mama scolded them. 'I don't want to hear all these modern ideas. Is it what you learnt from the nuns at the convent? ... All this convent education - what good does it do? Better to marry you off than let you go to that place' (71).

The mother gets alarmed at her daughters' inclination to question the social convention that after marriage, the woman will stay at her in-laws' house, she cannot be brought back to her parents' house until the in-laws send her back. She perhaps considers her daughters' defiant behaviour against the social convention as a sort of cultural betrayal. So scolding them, she tries to discipline their behaviour.

Again, it is interesting to note that while Mama is critical of the effect of convent education upon her daughters and therefore wants to withdraw them from it, Papa is very much serious about his son's education. Against this sort of gender discrimination, the novelist cannot but ventilate her feminist rage through this discourse :

If one word could sum up Arun's childhood that word was education. Although this was not what loomed large in the lives of his sisters, who were, after all, being raised for marriage by Mama. And if there was one thing Papa insisted on the realm of home and family, then it was education for his son : the best, the most, the highest (115)

Here it may be argued that Papa's seriousness about his son's education is because of the fact that in patriarchal society the girls are considered to be the transitory members of the family in contrast to the boys, who are believed to be the transmitters of the family name to the future generations and are therefore more carefully and lovingly brought up and given more advantages. So while Arun is being raised for career, Uma and Aruna are raised for marriage. Even Anamika, the daughter of her uncle, who is not only pretty and good, but also an outstandingly brilliant student is raised for marriage. Anamika has won a scholarship to Oxford by doing brilliantly well in her final Exam, yet her parents, who are modern, urban and elegant in taste and outlook, think of giving her in marriage. They argue :

To Oxford, where only the most favoured and privileged sons could ever hope to go ! They would not countenance her actually going abroad to study – just when she was of an age to marry (68).

Rather they utilize her certificate as an extra qualification towards the search for a husband for her. On the other hand, Mrs Joshi who in her early-married life got illtreatment from her mother-in-law now encourages her youngest daughter to have a career. Here the novelist perhaps admits that there are a few Indian mothers like Mrs Joshi who encourage their daughters to have a career, but in most cases the mothers, like Mama, raise their daughters for marriage in perfect conformity to the claims of a patriarchal society.

In patriarchy marriage is observed to be the deepest as well as the most problematic of all human relations. From the standpoint of religion it confers a status of the union of two souls and bodies and invokes oneness. But in practice, as the feminists, particularly the radical feminists, observe, it turns into a trap, an institution of oppression and torment for women. But in this context Anita Desai tries to show through the construction of different discourses on marriage that marriage, in practice, takes on different characters in different patriarchal families. Though the novelist observes that barring a few, marriage in most cases takes on oppressive character, yet she is not in a position to encourage the heterosexual women to abrogate it totally. Rather she makes an attempt to show that there are a few heterosexual women like Aruna who can selectively appropriate it for negotiation of power and position in patriarchal capitalist society. From this it appears that Anita Desai wants the women to selectively appropriate or abrogate it whenever it is possible for them. Now it is our turn to see how the discourses on marriage have been constituted differently in different contexts.

That marriage is a trap is shown through the construction of the discourse of Anamika's marriage. Anamika has been attractive for the male gaze, yet her bridegroom remains unresponsive to her beauty, grace and distinction. After marriage, she comes to be treated as an 'interloper' to her husband and mother-in-law. In presence of her husband she would be regularly bitten by her mother-in-law, and forced to do scrubbing, cooking, massaging her mother-in-law's legs. Anamika cannot defy the social mores lest she should put her parents into social criticism, and her parents, on the other hand, cannot bring her back to their house for the same reason. As a result, Anamika has to bear all the inhuman tortures and afflictions for twenty five years after which fire finally consumes her body in

the kitchen. Anita Desai observes that this sort of wife-murder or daughter-in-law murder is construed from different individual points of view. It is considered as a case of murder, or a case of suicide or a case of an ill-fated woman. But none of these pays attention to the fact that the practice of this sort of wife-killing is still prevalent in our society as something rooted in the very structure of the society.

Again, Anita Desai constructs a different meaning of marriage in the discourse of Aruna's marriage. Here marriage is shown to be giving Aruna freedom from her parental bondage and the way to self-actualization. For being attractive in the marriage market, she, unlike her elder sister, Uma, does not find any difficulty in choosing the handsomest, the richest, the most exciting of the suitors who present themselves. Her parents feel perturbed. Prudently they wish for someone a little less handsome, a little less showy and suggest caution and patience to see who else may turn up. But Aruna marries the man of her choice. She raises her power, position and status through marriage, obliterates every trace of her provincial roots and overlays them with the bright shine of the metropolis. Her parents cannot keep up with her. However, the only thing that makes them tolerate her behaviour is the evidence that she directs it not only towards them but even at her husband, Arvind. Clearly Aruna has a vision of a perfect world in which all of them – her own family as well as Arvind's – are flawed. But Uma assumes from the symptoms of all-time agitation on her eyelids that Aruna's marriage experience is not a pleasing one. In one sense, Uma is perhaps right because Aruna, in her quest for perfection, has fallen a victim to 'fashion/beauty complex'. She has riveted her whole attention on how to walk, talk, style her hair, care for her skin, and on how to make other do so. Paying too much attention to all these feminine identity norms, her soul has imprisoned her body, though she has made her a skilled woman. And for being so, she now shares power with and exercises power over others. The exercise of power certainly gives her pleasure – the symptom of which is noticeable in her recent shopping trip with her husband in Singapore. Here it is pertinent to note what Nelson Mandela said only the other day :

Even if there is war on you must negotiate--negotiation is what politics is all about. (quoted in Diane Elam, 1994 : 81).

Aruna has actually played the politics of negotiation for power and position in a patriarchal family. In constructing Aruna, Anita Desai seems to suggest that the marriage can be selectively appropriated for negotiation of power and position in the patriarchal capitalist society.

But the unattractive woman like Uma gets victimized by the institution of marriage. For being unattractive, she has to pass through the institution of dowry in order to enter into the institution of marriage. But the irony is that she is also cheated by the institution of dowry. Firstly, she is cheated by a cloth merchant's family. As Uma's parents approach the father of the son, the latter explains that they cannot proceed until they come into some money. So a negotiation sum is made over as dowry and the engagement ceremony arranged simultaneously. It is thought that they are now engaged; they have met a few times – after all. So Mama invites 'the family over – once, twice, thrice – only to be refused each time' (81). However, when no more is heard from the merchant family, they go across to fix a date for the wedding, but the merchant, quite abruptly, informs them that his son has decided to go to Roorkee for higher education and feels he should not be hampered at this stage and has asked for the engagement to be indefinitely postponed. If this does not suit them, they are free to break it off. But as the question of dowry-back is raised, the merchant refuses to give back the dowry on the ground that the money has been spent on building the house : 'He had gone ahead with preparing a home for their daughter, but fate had willed it otherwise' (82). The general opinion is that the Goyals are able to do such things, because of the parents' being too much in a hurry.

In spite of being cheated by the Goyals, Uma's parents again work hard to dispose of Uma, because they know that in patriarchal society it is the parents' duty to give the daughters in marriage as they bloom in youth. So they start sending photographs around to everyone who advertises in the matrimonial columns of the Sunday papers, but the photographs are always returned with a negative comment. Finally, a pharmaceutical business man, allegedly a widower, communicates his willingness to marry Uma. Uma's parents apprehend that Uma is not going to receive any other offer; so they make negotiation with the man about payment of dowry which is, as the novelist ironically

comments, bonus to the man. However, after marriage the bridegroom is discovered to have a wife and four children. He has really taken to subterfuge to revive his sick business in Meerut with the dowry money. Uma is brought back with the retrieval of gold of her Jewellery that has been under her control. But the cash is forfeited. Uma is considered to be an ill-fated woman.

Dowry-cheat is generally construed by referring to the cruel disposition of particular in-laws, or by referring to the brutal nature of a particular man, or as an unfortunate accident rooted primarily in human propensities for evil. But this is not the whole story of dowry-cheat. In order to know the exact causes, a discussion of the institution of dowry is in order here.

In her book *Dislocating Cultures* (1997 : 105-111), developing a trajectory of the institution of dowry, Uma Narayan has shown how the traditional institution of dowry which was not murderous in nature has changed in recent times and taken on a murderous character. In her view, in the traditional institution of dowry, dowry had to be given in three forms : dowry as gift, dowry as compensation and dowry as premortem inheritance. The first form meant for conversion of material wealth into spiritual wealth. The second form economically would compensate the groom's family for taking on the economic burden of a wife whose contribution to the family income was negligible, or religiously would compensate a man and his family for marrying a creature to which Scriptures have assigned 'less intrinsic value'. The third form provided the daughter a share of parental property at the time of her marriage in the form of movable property consisting of gold jewellery and household items, while it would simultaneously foreclose her inheriting immovable property such as land.

But the traditional institution of dowry has undergone a number of changes as it has come to exist within an increasingly market-dominated modern economy. It has mainly become increasingly commercialised. In the traditional institution, dowry had to be decided by the woman's parents keeping in view their social status. But in the commercialised world, demands for gold jewellery, gifts and cash as dowry have escalated due to the emergence of dowry-bargaining. The daughters' traditional control over their dowry assets

have significantly eroded. If cash is given, it seldom remains in the daughters' hands. Moreover, where dowry traditionally used to be more or less 'a one-shoot deal', it seems to be changing into something more like 'dowry on the instalment plan'. Demands for goods and cash now-a-days seem to continue for several years after marriage takes place, the wife's harassment compelling her to put pressure on her parents to submit to further demands by her husband and in-laws. If a woman's parents are unwilling or unable to meet these on-going demands, the woman's utility is reduced, making it expeditious to murder.

Adapting Uma Narayan's observation about dowry-cheat, it may be said that the dowry-mishaps concerned with Uma's life have taken on a deceitful character, instead of murderous one. It might have taken on the murderous character if Uma has not been brought back to her parents' home in time. Besides this, the above trajectory helps us understand that dowry-cheat or dowry-mistreatment is not a personal problem. Uma's parents have been cheated by the Goyals not because of their being too much in a hurry, but because of the prevalence of the practice of dowry-system in society. This is what Anita Desai means to say. In constructing the discourse of Uma's dowry-cheat, Anita Desai seems to point out that the recent dowry mistreatments or cheats are significantly rooted in particular practices and institutional arrangements embedded in a material reality that includes culture and tradition as well as a variety of ongoing changes, and the powerlessness they inflict on many women.

Again, on the other hand, in inscribing three different meanings in three different discourses on marriage, Anita Desai seems to show marriage not as a sacred essence, but merely as an institution, a construct, produced in different families in different ways. In the family of Anamika's in-laws, it takes on an oppressive and annihilating character. In Uma's case, it is a humiliating one minus sexual experience. And in Aruna's case, it is appropriated as a site for negotiation of power and the way to self-actualization. In constructing three different meanings of marriage Anita Desai seems to betray her deep scepticism about it.

After being cast away from the institution of marriage, Uma has now become a spinster daughter in her parents' close-knit family. She now finds that she is under constant

surveillance of her parents, with the result that she feels repressed in mind and soul. She seeks for an unsupervised life plus a thrilling sensation. So Mira Masi's offer for a life of submission to Lord Shiva appears to be unacceptable to her. She rejects it with an argument with herself :

Lord Shiva may have been an acceptable husband to Mira Masi, but even He, at least in the form of the brass image that had been stolen from Masi, had proved Himself elusive (96).

Here it is worthwhile to note that Mira Masi, an old widow, exercises a power over her relatives through her observance of all rituals relating to widowhood. Whenever she appears in any family of her relatives, she demands a new set of cooking pots. She does not take what the cook makes. In making herself different from other members of the family, she exercises power over them. She does not feel oppressed in the role of a widow. Rather she is seen to observe the ritual, from the moment she wakes up in the morning. Pilgrimage has now become the part and parcel of her life. She has 'developed an unsettling habit of travelling all over the country, quite alone, safe in her widow's white garments' (38). She enjoys her life through her ritual bath and morning prayers and the preparation of her single vegetarian meal of the day and through incantation of Lord's name.

However, Uma does not like to be guided by Mira Masi. She is in search of something that would provide her with freedom and a sensation of life. Casually she has heard from Mrs Joshi about the pursuit of career, but has no idea as to how to go in for a career. Again, on the other hand, her vision of escape takes on an enormous form, even though she knows that her father will not allow her to accept any chance of escape because he is 'quite capable of putting on progressive westernised front when called upon to do so – in public, in society, but not within his family of course' (141). Her apprehension comes true as Dr. Dutta's offer of a job for Uma is squarely turned down by her father on the ground that the right place for woman is home. Uma who does not have the capacity to rebel against her father has to feel oppressed by the discursive pressure of the patriarchal ideology that enjoins women to stay at home.

In the meantime, Anamika's tragic death has acted as a warning-call to all women about the oppressive structure of Hindu patriarchal society. Uma's mother is perhaps warned of her husband's belittling attitude towards her intellectual capability. She took note of this as she protested against her husband's over-seriousness about sending his son abroad for higher education :

Where is the need? Mama protested. He can go to Seth Baba Ram college here – ... it is not bad here (120).

She then noted that her husband did not even bother to counter her argument; he did not expect her to understand the importance of sending Arun abroad to study, the value of a foreign degree. He merely brushed aside her protests and concentrated on his son. That humiliation perhaps now makes her realise how selfish and possessive the male world is. She feels repentant for the negligence she has so far shown towards her daughter. Out of this sense of repentance, she relates her feminine self to the self of her daughter for sharing their sorrows and sufferings, for caring for their aspirations and desires. This is why she clasps her daughter's hand to make her feel that she is not alone in this oppressive, violent male world. Uma appreciates her mother's realization, and therefore in a consoling tone she whispers :

I told cook to make Puri-alu for breakfast and have it ready (155-56).

This also makes her mother convinced of her daughter's empathy and sense of responsibility. Once convinced, the mother 'tightens her hold on Uma's hand' (156) and feels an intimate symbiotic bond with her daughter 'as though she too finds the Puri-alu comforting; it is a bond' (Ibid).

'Puri-alu' is suggestive of a bond, stressing the need of a mother-daughter bond to be evolved in the book as women's sub-culture of mutual empathy, responsibility and interdependence. Thus the novelist locating herself inside the national culture enables the Third-world women like Uma and Mama to take a position of resistance to the dominance

of the fathers like Papa who exploit the culture of separation, selfishness, and competition for a bond of father and son.

Though all-through Part two of the novel the multiculturalism is emphasised through the symbolic exchange of food and presentation between Arun and Mrs Patton, there is also a hint at the predicament of American adolescent girls who are implicitly referred to as victimized by the feminine identity norms prescribed by the patriarchal disciplinary technologies. Because of their victimization by the norms, they are seen to suffer from different sorts of neuroses such as bulimia, anorexia, depression, withdrawal, compulsive behaviour, hysteria. Melanie's suffering from anorexia bears testimony to the fact. However, her recuperation from anorexia because of her mother's care for her symbolically speaks of the need for a culture of interdependence and empathy to counter the commodified patriarchal culture in America. Thus the novel can be read as a commentary on the selfish, aggressive, competitive and separatist patriarchal culture in the Late capitalist world.