

## Feminist theory in fasting feasting

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### Abstract

This paper critically focuses on Anita Desai a foremost writer, who through her remarkable and captivating work *Fasting, Feasting* tries to change the mindset of society. Anita Desai's main emphasis is to elevate the position of women and to give her an equal status to men. Desai presents various female characters in the novel, who are the victims of patriarchal society. Besides, this paper shows how authentically the writer represents the deplorable status of women in Indian Society.

**Keywords:** feminism, motherhood, feasting, women, marriage, inclination, impotence, feminine

### Introduction

In *Fasting, Feasting*, the characters Mira-Masi, Aruna and Anamika also provide material for the discussion of Indian motherhood although they are more minor characters than the other characters in the novel. Mira-Masi is Uma's widowed aunt, and she comes to visit the family periodically as she conducts pilgrimages. As a widow, there are certain expectations in Indian society, and she willingly fulfills these with a zealous religious devotion to the Hindu god Shiva. The narrator describes her "safe in her window's white garments, visiting one place of pilgrimage after another like an obsessed tourist of the spirit, and only too often her helpless relatives by marriage found themselves in her way, at convenient stopping places" (38, 9). Mira-Masi, not uncommonly, feels almost a lover's connection to Shiva, and it is obvious that for her religion exists as a means of validation, love, affection, communication and power. She even tries to get Uma involved and after a hysterical fit of Uma, she claims that she is Shiva's lover, never to be touched by a human man. Although Mama and Papa discredit this, for Uma it is the only time in her life she is ever desired by a man. Mira-Masi also feels that Shiva is the only man for her, so that when she loses her beloved idol towards the middle of the novel she is in despair. Uma describes the scene stating, "Mira-Masi let out a sigh so deep it seemed to tear the heart out of her chest. Folding her hands together, she began to pray for the return of her stolen idol, her lord, her god, in tons of such anguish that Uma crawled away in order not to hear. She was afraid Mira-Masi might become hysterical" (138). Although religion is sometimes referred to as a way to control the masses and keep them complacent, religion is both important and empowering for Mira-Masi. Anita Myles agrees and declares that women;

"Turn towards religion for the required sustain not only themselves but also their families. In portraying the religious sensibility in her women characters Anita Desai exhibits her strong inclination towards the Indian way of life in which religion and traditions have their own importance" (54).

### Emphasis of characters in *Fasting Feasting*

Although the widowed Mira-Masi does not appear to have

these same opportunities due to her lack of familial support (especially on her husband's side) and the fact that she was left with nothing after her husband died and was forced to earn her keep within the homes of others, for the Mira-Masi in *Fasting, Feasting*, religion becomes a way to remain independent and autonomous but also contained within a communal group where love and support can be given and received.

Aruna, Uma's sister, lives a life much different from that of her sister and ends up fulfilling all the roles that her sister never could. She marries a wealthy man, has children, and appears, at least on the outside, to be a devoted mother and wife. From what Uma perceives, though, marriage is not ultimately for Aruna, even though she does everything she is supposed to do. Uma claims that "Aruna had a vision of a perfect world in which all of them – her own family as well as Arvind's - were flaws she was constantly uncovering and correcting in her quest for perfection" (109). For Aruna, the only option was education and then marriage and then motherhood, and the family put pressure on her to perform these sanctioned roles, especially since Uma had failed so terribly to complete them. This pressure to be the perfect daughter, wife and mother appears to have made her into a controlling person who is never satisfied with her life. She is not able to enjoy the fulfillment of her social duty because in the end it proved to be unrewarding for her.

### Exploration of Indian Motherhood

Lastly, Uma's cousin Anamika also provides material for discussion of motherhood and how dangerous seeking it can actually be for some women. Anamika is described as a wonderful child who is sweet, excels at school, and is thoughtful towards everyone. Anamika actually does so well in school that she is offered a scholarship to Oxford, and although her family would never let her attend, it is used to secure even better marriage prospects for her. In actuality, Anamika's marriage proves to be unfulfilling, abusive, and dangerous. Anamika marries a man who ends up being both verbally and physically abusive, whose mother is also completely disrespectful and cruel as well. AshaChoubey examines Anamika's marriage in her essay "A Feminist perspective on Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting*". Thus politics

enters into marriages. Anamika is also an instrument for her husband “to enhance his superiority to other men”<sup>(97)</sup>. This obviously does not characterize every marriage in India but remains a problem for many Indian and American women, who suffer at the hands of a malicious husband.

What makes the life of Anamika particularly telling in regards to Indian motherhood specifically is both the role of the mother-in-law in Anamika’s life and also what happens to her after she becomes unable to bear children. Anamika’s mother-in-law becomes a tyrant in her life and an inescapable force to be reckoned with. Earlier, I discussed the importance of bearing a son for the character Mama; Anamika’s mother-in-law has likewise gained power through her conception and birth of a male child. Becoming a mother-in-law not only means retaining power over the son and maintaining high status of oneself in one’s husband’s eyes, but also gaining power over another woman, the son’s wife. In *Image of Woman in the Indo-Anglian Novel*, Shirwadkar discusses the role of the mother-in-law:

As a son’s mother an Indian woman enjoys a high position in the family. When the son’s wife comes the son is likely to follow the wishes of his wife. The mother is generally unwilling to allow the son to go under her daughter-in-law’s power. To that end, she devises various ways to keep him in power or else she harasses the daughter-in-law.<sup>(101)</sup>

#### **Impotence as a Flaw in Women’s life**

Although the practices that Anamika has to endure on part of her mother-in-law and within the extended family set up are cruel, it is easy to understand why Indian mothers are so unwilling to give up the power they gained when they produced a male child. It is one of the few means available to Indian mothers that can actually increase one’s worth in the family and prove one’s status as a good, dutiful mother, and many mother-in-laws fight to keep that hard-won status bestowed upon them at the birth of their son. Sadly, this power struggle between Anamika, her husband, and her mother-in-law proves deadly for Anamika. After she finally gets pregnant, Anamika’s husband beats her so severely she suffers a miscarriage and in the process becomes barren.

#### **Conclusion**

The narrator describes the episode by commenting, “she could not bear more children. Now Anamika was flawed, she was damaged goods. She was no longer perfect. Would she be sent back to her family? Everyone wanted to hear”<sup>(71)</sup>. Once Anamika has no possibility of ever becoming a biological mother, her worth within her marriage is completely devalued. She is seen as an investment not capable of a return. Scholar Elizabeth Jackson also notes that the community’s reaction is telling: “they wonder if she will be sent back to her family-not choose to return because she has to say in the matter, but sent back because she is ‘damaged goods’ now and unable to bear children”<sup>(35)</sup>. The family and community’s embarrassment is relieved, however, by the sudden “suicide” of Anamika, who apparently awoke early one morning to burn herself alive. Neighbors believed that it was actually Anamika’s husband and mother-in-law in collusion who committed the murder but, regardless her tragic death stands as a testament to the fate that awaits women who are for some reason or another cannot

become mothers but are expected to be both their husband and Indian society.

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