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### AN ANALYTICAL STUDY OF GENDER DISCRIMINATION IN ANITA DESAI'S FASTING, FEASTING

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#### **ABSTRACT**

This paper aims at addressing and analyzing gender discrimination as depicted in Anita Desai's novel, *Fasting, Feasting*. The mentioned issue has been highlighted in this novel through some of the main and key characters, such as Uma, the heroin of the novel, her mom, Anamika, Masi and Aruna. These leading figures in the novel face gender discrimination within and outside home in the androcentric social set-up in the shape of domestic and social maltreatment, such as false concept of rich dowry, the misconception of white color and a strong longing for son in contrast to a daughter. This study is an attempt raise a strong voice for the emancipation of women who suffer from gender discrimination in various walks of life.

#### **INTRODUCTION**

The aim of this paper is to analyze gender discrimination in Anita Desai's novel, *Fasting, Feasting* (1999). Gender discrimination, according to Rahman (2013), is the result of inequality between male and female in the society which can be seen in various degrees in different cultures, politics, race, region and countries in the social, economic, educational and political fabric of human society. In the words of Abraham (2006), "her [Anita Desai] double heritage and Indian background give her work a psychological depth and fascination. Heritage of double cultures and races assert a strong influence on her writings." She has further said in her interview that "I am able to look at a country I know so intimately with a certain detachment, and that certainly comes from my mother

because I'm aware of how she would have reacted to people and situations. I feel about India as an Indian, but I suppose I think about it as an Indian" (Robinson 2)

Anita Desai makes her female characters as the protagonists of her novels who suffer through the hands of male in the shape of a father, a husband, a brother or a lover. Moreover, these males presented constant threats to their integrity and happiness too. In the words of S. M. Attar (2016), one of the chief aims of Desai in her novels is a strong plea for the due status and rights of women and the banishment of gender discrimination in the society. According to Lamanna (2009), gender discrimination is one of the main reasons of women's deplorable conditions in her novels, especially in *Fasting, Feasting*. Kaman (2017) also reveals that Desai, the Indian novelist, is widely known for her remarkable art of painting characters as she always tries to project the issues of women in the Indian society. *Fasting, Feasting* is one such work through which she struggles to alter the mindset and perception of society in order to elevate the position of women from the sufferings and hardships of society and to give them a status equal to men.

Being an Indian, she has a vivid picture of the common Indian society and its related issues. She has, thus, played a pioneering role in depicting the common gender issues on her vast canvas and occupies a prominent place in the Indian English Literature in this regard.

### **RESEARCH QUESTION**

How does Anita Desai represent gender discrimination in *Fasting, Feasting* at various levels in the Indian society?

#### ***Gender Discrimination: An Overview***

Gender, according to UN Human Rights Publication (2014), is defined as identities, roles and attributes formed or designed by the society for men and women. Alam (2011) has also defined the term "Gender" as the distinction of social role and status between men and women and which are governed and determined by various social organizations, including cultural, social and economic organizations along with moral, religious and legal principles (p. 331).

According to Tebeje (2004), gender is the manifestation of roles, responsibilities and activities which are given to men and women within a society or within a community (p. 8). On the other hand, discrimination, according to Wikipedia (2017) and the moral philosophers, is the maltreatment or harmful consideration of an individual or some class of people. According to Viper (2013), religion, race, sexual harassment, gender, age and disability are the various forms of discrimination as a result of which various societies divide its members. According to K. M. Rehman (2013), gender discrimination is the consequence of constant inequality between men and women in all spheres of life. The dimension and degree of discrimination against women manifests itself in different cultures, politics, race, region, countries and economies differently. However, gender discrimination is considered as a tremendous

constraint towards the development process, and it is found as a casual factor of violence against women (p. 20) as it is even present in literature where the feminist literature is not easily considered as worthy to be noted. According to Tebeje (2004), gender discrimination also leads to poverty due to which women are the poorest people in the world. This perception is also described by Lamanna (2009) who considers gender discrimination as one of the chief reasons of the economic backwardness of women in the world which also leads to education poverty as the poor cannot afford their education expenses due to which they are deprived of getting education in colleges and universities. The same idea has also been highlighted by Alam (2011) about the economic status of women in the dire situations of gender discrimination. Ramachandran (2015) reveals that women in the Indian society hold a subordinate status even from her birth. The traditional (gender) discrimination against them (women) is well exemplified in *Fasting, feasting* by Anita Desai as the parents of the heroin (Uma) aim to promote education of their son (Arun), a male child, whereas the daughters are being raised only for marriage. According to H. Rahman (2016), *Fasting, Feasting* is the representation of Anita Desai's stand point on the representation of women's freedom and their struggle in androcentric society.

### *Theoretical and Analytical Perspective: M. M. Lazar's Version of Feminism*

According to Fairclough (2005), the aim of discourse is to analyze various forms of inequalities and injustices. Therefore, Lazar's (2005) version of feminism can also be used for the study of gender discrimination. The word "feminist," according to Lazar (2005), has been defined through decades by the feminist scholars, such as Mills (1995), Christie (2000) and Kittzinger (2000). The present paper aims to analyze the issue of gender discrimination in the novel *Fasting, Feasting* by Anita Desai. For the study of the issue, M. M. Lazar's (2005, 2007) version of feminism has been used as theoretical and analytical framework. Lazar's version of feminism aims to discuss the intricate, complex and subtle working of power, gender and ideology in discourses in a given social setting. Power is the ability of a person through which he influences the behavior of others (Lazar, 2005, p. 32). Man takes power as his domain in which he is not ready to share with the opposite sex, and it is (ab)used by him in the shape of domestic violence and decision-making process (Lazar, 2005, p. 243). The notion of ideology is also harmful in respect of gender discrimination as ideology is the combination of certain manifestations of various practices that only divide people in a society as men and women (Lazar, 2007, p. 148). Likewise, ideology, gender is also an ideological setup, and it also divides people into a group of men and women, and describes it as a hierarchical relation of domination and subordination (Lazar, 2007, p. 148).

### **RESEARCH METHOD FOR DATA ANALYSIS: TEXTUAL ANALYSIS**

Textual analysis has been used as a research method for the analysis of gender discrimination in the novel under study. Its analytical tools have been used for the evaluation of the issue. Textual analysis, in general, involves the analysis of textual features of a text, including grammar, vocabulary and textual structure. These features are important for the analytical study of a text. According to this method, a text is a subject of analysis. Its meanings are plural and unfixed A text contains a thought or idea, and that its meaning is plural, i-e. we can elicit

more than one meaning, thought or idea from it. For this purpose, this method involves an extensive analysis of the text for the multiplicity of meaning and interpretations.

### **DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION**

The entire analysis of discourses on gender discrimination in the novel *Fasting, Feasting* revolves round the central female characters, such as the heroin, Uma, Mama, Aruna, Anamika and Masi in contrast to the characters, Papa, Anamika's husband and Arun. The issue of discrimination is revealed when the family has two daughters, but no son due to whom it is considered as incomplete, and an intense need is felt by everyone. Papa as the head of the family is ready to endanger even the life of Mama (wife) to undergo for the child labor for the fourth time as the lines indicate: "papa set his jaws. They had two daughters, yet quite grown-up- as anybody could see, but there was no son, would any man give up the chance of a son?" (1999, p. 16). He is out of joy at the birth of his son. Even the whole family is jubilant, and their happiness knows no bounds. This family's jubilation is celebrated only at the birth of the son (Arun). Papa is out of joy when he comes to know about the birth of a son again that is a vivid depiction of the issue of gender discrimination. This is depicted in these words: "arriving home however, he sprang out of the car, raced into the house and shouted the news to whoever was there to hear, servants, elderly relatives, all gathered at the door, and then saw the most astounding sight of their lives . . .

A boy!' he screamed, a' b-oy!" (1999, p. 17). Patriarchy likes to maintain its dominance and security. In such a social context, male is the guarantor of the security of family in general and a source of safety and pride for the mother in particular because in such social settings, only mothers of daughters are always at stake. The sword of another marriage always hovers upon their heads. Their lives are secured only when they give birth to sons. The life of a woman is secured only when she has a son. For instance, Mama's life is secured by giving birth to the son (Arun), and thus is a source of pride for her as described in these lines: "He had not only made her his wife; he had made her the mother of his son. What honour, what status. Mama's chin lifted a little into the air, she looked around her to make sure everyone saw and noticed. She might have been wearing a medal" (1999, p. 31).

Women are marginalized not only by patriarchy, but also by their own gender. It is, sometimes, noticed that a woman suffers at the hands of a woman. Thus, she is victimized within and outside home through patriarchy and also through her own gender as it has been observed in the case of Uma who suffers at the hands of her mother. She (Mama) is always a yes-boss in front of Papa (patriarchy). She is always under the strict rules devised by Mama-papa as they become one when it comes to her as depicted in these words: "Having fused into one, they had gained so much in substance, in stature in authenticity, that they loomed large enough it was; they did not need separate histories and background to make even more immense" (1999, p. 6). Gender discrimination in the case of education is also reflected when Uma expresses her earnest desire to get her education, but her this desire shatters into pieces when Mama-papa come in her way, and tell her clearly that her sole duty is just to look after her baby brother (Arun). It is a vivid indication that in patriarchy women are mostly

deprived of education on the basis of lame excuses. She does not have the right to continue her education as the sole responsibility of hers is only to take care of her brother, Arun as revealed in these lines: “stay at home and look after your baby brother, you will be happy at home you are not being moved up. What is the use of going back to school?” (1999, p. 22), and again she is declined to do her school work by Mama due to which her schooling is disturbed, and she leaves her studies incomplete as described in these lines: “I have to go and do my homework: she told her mother. I have got to get my sums done and then write the composition. Leave all that, Mama snapped at her” (1999, p. 18). In contrast to her, Arun is provided the best possible education. It is the most serious matter for the whole family. Even Papa takes it so crucial that he is not ready to make any compromise on it. He is ready to take any kind of pain and stress for it. His earnest desire is to provide his son the best possible education that is evidence of discrimination in the field of education. Papa himself has got the best education, but Mama has been deprived of it like Uma which is revealed in these lines: “if there was one thing papa insisted on in the realm of home and family, then it was education for his son, the best, the most, the highest” (1999, p. 121).

Papa has got the best possible education from his parents, but he is not ready to give his daughter the right of education. The issue of gender discrimination in decision-making process is also revealed in the novel. In patriarchy, women are not involved in decision-making process, nor are their opinion valued on account of false justification that they are not able to come up with any worthy opinion or idea. Likewise, there is no value and worth of Uma and her opinion as no response is given to her suggestion or idea in the eyes of Mama-papa, nor is she involved in the decision-making process: “Why Uma says, “that Rover is going to stop one day and never start again—it’s so old, he remains impassive, as if he prefers not to hear her and has not heard her” (1999, p. 11). In patriarchy, voice of the opposite gender is suppressed and ignored like this.

Her life is not a serious business for her parents. Every matter related to her and her life is unimportant and not worthy to be given any attention by them due to which she is ruined twice by the hard clutches of life. The sole matter of interest for her parents is Arun (male child), that is clearly expressed in these lines by the novelist: “if parents will not take time to make proper enquiries, what terrible fates their daughters may have!” (1999, p. 84). He was married already, had a wife and four children in Meerut where he ran an ailing pharmaceutical factory to save money as he needed another dowry which had led him to marry again. Gender discrimination in the field of economy is also highlighted in the novel. Uma is not allowed to work in the clinic of Dr. Dut. Mama-papa are not ready to fulfill her needs. They are not willing to spend their resources in order to meet her tiny requirements. Papa even snubs her when it comes to spend money on her part as revealed in these lines: “cost money! Cost money! Never earned anything in her life, made me spend and spend, on her dowry and her wedding. Oh! Yes spend till I’m ruined, till I am a pauper” (1999, p. 146). In the aforementioned lines, Uma is held responsible for the economic loss by Papa whereas the fact is that it is the result of his negligence and hastiness. It is also a fact that in patriarchy women are mostly considered as the root cause of evils and loss.

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