

A STUDY OF GENDER INEQUALITY IN THE NOVEL "FASTING FEASTING" BY ANITA DESAI

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ABSTRACT

The paper focuses on the analysis and assessment of gender inequality, as portrayed in Anita Desai's novel, "Fasting, Feasting." This present issue is vividly illustrated through the experiences of the main characters, notably Uma, the central protagonist, her mother, Anamika, Meera Masi, and Aruna. These pivotal figures grapple with gender discrimination within their familial environments and the male-dominated social framework.

The novel portrays an androcentric societal setup that takes many forms, such as social and domestic abuse. Notable instances include the persistent belief in dowries, the false appreciation of light complexion, and the deeply ingrained inclination to have sons rather than daughters.

The idea of a "rich dowry" is a reflection of a long held social mindset that unfairly burdens the bride's family with debt. This practice upholds the idea that a woman's value is derived from her material belongings rather than from her intrinsic worth as a unique person.

The emphasis on having fair skin highlights the widespread colorism which marginalizes those with darker skin tones and reinforces negative preconceptions. In addition, the strong desire for a male heir over a daughter is a prime example of the profoundly ingrained patriarchal traditions that are still prevalent in many societies. This bias promotes gender inequalities.

The study aims to act as a call to liberate women who face gender biasness. Through the lives of the protagonists, Desai's novel seeks to highlight the systemic basis of these problems and promote significant change. Essentially, the goal of this paper is to give voice to people who are impacted by gender prejudice and to confront and demolish these detrimental standards. By raising awareness, educating people, and advocating for change, it hopes to make the future more inclusive and equal for everyone, regardless of gender.

Key Words: Gender Inequality, Feminist Criticism, Gender Discrimination

INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to analyze gender inequality in Anita Desai's 1999 book *Fasting, Feasting*. According to Rahman (2013), gender discrimination is the outcome of societal imbalance between men and women, which manifests itself in varying degrees across cultures, political ideologies, racial groups, geographical locations, and nations in the social, economic, political, and educational spheres of human civilization. "Her [Anita Desai's] double heritage and Indian background give her work a psychological depth and fascination," in the words of Abraham

(2006). Her writings have been greatly influenced by her heritage of mixed races and cultures. "I can 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," she added in her interview. I believe I think about India as an Indian, but I feel about it as an Indian. (Robinson 2)

In Anita Desai's works, women suffer at the hands of men who take the form of brothers, fathers, husbands, lovers, or other family members. Furthermore, these men constantly posed a threat to their honesty and well-being. According to S. M. Attar (2016), one of Desai's main goals in writing her novels is to make a compelling case for women's rights and equal status as well as the elimination of gender discrimination in society. Lamanna (2009) asserts that one of the primary causes of the appalling situations for women in her novels, particularly in *Fasting, Feasting*, is gender discrimination. According to Kaman (2017), Desai, an Indian novelist, is renowned for her exceptional talent at character painting, which she consistently utilizes to highlight concerns about women in Indian society. One such effort she makes to change people's thoughts and perspectives of society is *fasting, or fasting and feasting*, which aims to enhance women's status and free them from the ills and pains of society to parity with men.

She has a clear understanding of the problems facing Indian society as a whole because she is an Indian. As a result, she has been a pioneer in the Indian English literary canon when it comes to portraying typical gender themes on her large canvas.

RESEARCH QUESTION

How does Anita Desai represent Gender Inequality as a result of Gender Discrimination in *Fasting, feasting* at various levels in Indian society?

GENDER DISCRIMINATION: AN OVERVIEW

Discrimination is defined by moral philosophers and Wikipedia (2017) as the mistreatment or unfavorable treatment of an individual or a group of individuals. H. Rahman (2016) claims that Anita Desai's position on the portrayal of women's liberation and struggle in an androcentric society is embodied in the practice of *Fasting Feasting*. According to Ramachandran (2015), women in Indian society are considered inferiors from birth. Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting* serves as a perfect example of the customary (gender) discrimination against women, as the parents of the heroin, Uma, want to further their son Arun's education while raising their daughters solely for marriage. According to the UN Human Rights Publication (2014), gender is defined as attributes, roles, and identities, which are formed or designed for men and women, by society. According to K. M. Rehman (2013), gender discrimination is the result of ongoing disparities between men and women in all areas of life. The extent and kind of prejudice against women vary between civilizations, political systems, racial groups, geographical areas, nations, and economic systems. However, gender discrimination is seen as a major barrier to progress and is discovered to be a

casual component of violence against women (p. 20). Religion, race, sexual harassment, gender, age, and disability are among the many forms of prejudice that cause division among members of different cultures, according to Viper (2013). Alam (2011) has explained the term "Gender" as it refers to the differences in social roles and status between men and women, which are influenced by a range of social structures, such as cultural, religious, and legal norms as well as social and economic organizations. (p. 331). Alam (2011) has also brought attention to the same notion regarding the financial standing of women in extreme cases of gender discrimination. This view is further supported by Lamanna (2009), who cites gender discrimination as one of the main causes of women's economic backwardness worldwide. Education poverty results from the impoverished being unable to pay for their education, depriving them of the opportunity to attend colleges and universities. It is also seen in works of writing where feminist literature is not always readily acknowledged. Tebeje (2004) asserts that gender is the expression of the duties, responsibilities, and activities assigned to men and women in a community or culture (p. 8). Tebeje (2004) further says that women are the poorest people in the world because gender discrimination also leads to poverty.

M. M. LAZAR'S CONCEPT OF FEMINISM: AN ANALYTICAL AND THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

According to Fairclough (2005), discourse analysis aims to identify and evaluate different types of injustices and inequalities. Thus, the study of gender discrimination can also benefit from the application of Lazar's (2005) brand of feminism. The definition of "feminist" has been defined over the years by feminist scholars like Mills (1995), Christie (2000), and Kittzinger (2000), according to Lazar (2005). The objective of this study is to examine the problem of gender inequality in Anita Desai's novel, *Fasting, Feasting*. M. M. Lazar's (2005, 2007) interpretation of feminism has served as the theoretical and analytical foundation for the issue's investigation. Lazar's interpretation of feminism seeks to explore the nuanced, multifaceted, and subtle ways that gender, power, and ideology are worked out in discourses within a particular social context. Power is the capacity an individual possesses to shape the actions of others (Lazar, 2005, p. 32). Man views power as his domain, which he is unwilling to share with the other sex. He (ab)uses power in decision-making and domestic abuse (Lazar, 2005, p. 243). Since ideology is a collection of specific practices that only serve to further divide people in society along sex lines, the concept of ideology is likewise detrimental to the fight against gender discrimination (Lazar, 2007, p. 148). Similar to ideology, gender is an ideological construct that categorizes individuals into groups of men and women and characterizes their relationship as a hierarchy of dominance and submission.

RESEARCH METHOD FOR DATA ANALYSIS: TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

The research approach of textual analysis has been employed to examine gender discrimination in the novel under examination. The issue has been assessed using its analytical methods. Grammar, vocabulary, and textual structure are only a few of the textual features that are analyzed in textual analysis. These characteristics are crucial for a text's analytical analysis. This approach treats a text

as the object of analysis. Its meanings are not established and are multiple. A text has an idea or concept, and we can infer multiple meanings, thoughts, or ideas from it because of its pluralistic meaning. This approach entails a thorough reading of the text to identify its many meanings and interpretations.

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The primary female characters in the book *Fasting, feasting*—Uma, Mama, Aruna, Anamika, and Masi—as opposed to Papa, Arun, and Anamika's spouse, are the focus of the entire analysis of discourses on gender inequality in the book. When a family is perceived as incomplete because it has two daughters but no son, and everyone feels a great need, discrimination is evident. As the leader of the household, Papa is willing to put Mama's life in jeopardy to force her to perform child labor for the fourth time, as the lines "Papa set his jaws." Would any man give up the possibility of having a boy if they had two girls who were both quite adult? 1999, page 16. His son's birth has left him out of joy. The family as a whole is jubilant and their joy has no limits. The only time this family celebrates is when their kid (Arun) is born. When Papa learns of the birth of a son once more, he is overwhelmed with joy—a striking illustration of the problem of gender discrimination. The following describes this: "But on getting home, he leaped out of the car, ran into the house, and shouted the news to anyone who was listening, including servants and elderly relatives, who were all gathered at the door, and then saw the most unbelievable sight of their lives."

A boy! he screamed, a boy! (1999, p. 17). Patriarchy enjoys holding on to its power and safety. Because only moms of daughters are ever at risk in such social settings, men are the guardians of the stability of the family in general and the source of pride and safety for the mother in particular. Their heads are always threatened by the blade of another marriage. Only when they bear boys will their lives be safe. A woman's life is only safe when she has a son. For example, as stated in these lines: "He had not only made her his wife; he had made her the mother of his son." Mama's life is secured by giving birth to their son (Arun). What prestige, what standing? Mama's chin raised slightly as she turned to face everyone, making sure they were all paying attention. It's possible that she had a medal (1999, p. 31).

Women are marginalized in the society not only by the patriarchy but also by the other women. It is noticed, most of the time, that a woman suffers at the hands of a woman. As evidenced by Uma's suffering at the hands of her mother, she is victimized both within and outside of her family by patriarchy and by her gender. With Papa, she (Mama) is always the yes-boss (patriarchy). The phrase "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 backgrounds to make even more immense" describes how she is always subject to the strict rules that Mama-papa devises as they become one. (1999, p. 6). When Uma expresses her sincere desire to further her education, gender discrimination in the context of education is also evident. However, this ambition is dashed when Mama-Papa stands in her way and makes it apparent that her only

responsibility is to care for her infant brother (Arun). It is a clear example of how, in patriarchal societies, women are typically denied access to education due to flimsy justifications. As implied by these words: "Stay at home and look after your baby brother, you will be happy at home you are not being moved up," she does not have the right to finish her education because her only obligation is to care for her brother Arun. What purpose does return to school serve? (1999, p. 22), and once more, Mama refuses to help her with her schoolwork, which causes disruptions in her education and leads her to abandon her studies as stated in these lines: "I have to go and do my homework: she told her mother." I have to finish my homework before writing the composition. Mama yelled at her, "Leave all that." (1999, p. 18). Arun, on the other hand, receives the best education available. For the whole family, this is the most important issue. Even Papa considers it so important that he is unwilling to make any compromise on it. He's willing to endure any pain or hardship in exchange. His sincere goal is to give his son the highest quality of education possible, which demonstrates inequality in the educational system. Mama has been deprived of education similar to Uma, even though father himself has the best education. As these lines reveal, "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).

Although his parents gave him the best education possible, Papa is not yet ready to grant his daughter the same privilege. The novel also addresses the problem of gender discrimination in the decision-making process. Because of the fallacious argument that they are incapable of coming up with any worthwhile ideas or opinions, women in patriarchal societies are neither included in the decision-making process nor have their opinions respected. Similarly, Uma's opinion is worthless because Mama-papa doesn't consider her ideas or suggestions, and she doesn't participate in the decision-making process: Uma claims that Rover will eventually stop and never start again because he is so old and acts indifferently, as though he doesn't want to hear her or hasn't heard her (1999, p. 11). The voice of the other gender is suppressed and disregarded in patriarchy in this way.

For her parents, her life is not a significant matter. She is twice destroyed by the harsh grasp of life because they believe that nothing about her or her life is significant or deserving of their attention. The author makes it apparent in these lines: "If parents will not take time to make proper inquiries, what terrible fates their daughters may have!" (1999, p. 84). The novel also stresses the prejudice against women in the economics sector. Uma is not permitted to work in Dr. Dut's clinic. Her needs are not being met by Mama and Papa yet. They refuse to expend money to satisfy her insignificant demands. As evidenced by these lines, Papa even rejects her attempts to spend money on herself: "Cost money! Cost cash! She never earned anything in her life, which forced me to spend a lot of money on her wedding and dowry. Oh! Yes, I will spend money till I am impoverished (1999, p. 146). In the statements quoted above, Papa holds Uma accountable for the financial loss, even if his haste and negligence are to blame. It is also a reality that women are typically blamed for atrocities and losses in patriarchal societies.

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