



Mapping Parent-Child Relationship In Anita Desai's "Fasting, Feasting" Through The Lens Of Diana Baumrind's Parenting Theory

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Abstract:

The aim of my research article is to analyze the relationship between parent and their children in Anita Desai's novel *Fasting, Feasting*. This research article delves into the intricacies of parent-child relationships in Anita Desai's novel, "Fasting, Feasting," employing Diana Baumrind's parenting style as a lens for analysis. Diana Baumrind is a renowned developmental psychologist at the University of California at Berkeley in 1960s. Based on two dimensions viz. Demandingness and Responsiveness these four styles are authoritarian, authoritative, permissive and uninvolved. Through the lens of Baumrind's parenting styles - authoritative, authoritarian, and permissive - this study illuminates how the characters in the novel navigate the challenges of familial bonds and the consequences of different parenting approaches.

Keywords: Indian Literature, Anita Desai, childhood experience, Attachment theory, parenting styles, Indian family, gender bias

Anita Desai is a distinguished voice in post-independence Indian English fiction among the contemporary novelists writing in Indian English .She belongs to the generation of novelists on the Indian English scenario who rose to eminence since the seventies. She rose to prominence with the publication of her first novel *Cry, the Peacock*(1963).

Anita Desai, herself writes psychological novels, which she narrates as "purely subjective".She very aptly analyses her psychological feeling and says :

It has been my personal luck that my temperament and circumstances have combined to give me the shelter, privacy and solitude required for the writing of such novels, thereby avoiding problems a more objective writer has to deal with since he depends upon observation rather than a private vision.(Dhawan 255)

Desai's works are different from those of other Indian women writers in English-Nayantara *Sehgal*, Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Attia Hossain. These writers mainly concern themselves with politics, East-west encounter and social issues. Desai is concerned with the inner psyche of her characters. She aims at exploring their psychological crises and struggles. Her novels try to focus on the bafflement of the individual psyche confronted with the hostile socio-cultural environment and modern promise of self-gratification and self-fulfillment. In the face of this dual onslaught, her protagonists- Maya, Uma, Manisha, Nanda and Raka, Bim and Tara, Arun, Deven, Baumgartner are seen poised at different juncture of their life. In some of her novels she portrays the usual psyche of children and seems to assert that if a child is denied of love and affection because of the negligence and irresponsibility on the part of the parents, he or she may turn out to be a problematic, maladjusted child. This research article attempts to scrutinize Anita Desai's novel *Fasting Feasting* (1999) to explore the assumption that the traumatic childhood experiences of the characters have contributed largely to their inability to establish and maintain personal relationships in later life.

Childhood has for long been one of the central themes of English literature. The word 'childhood' refers to a distinct period of human life. However, Childhood is a complex term. It refers to a set of experiences and behaviours, characteristics for the earlier part of human lives, meant to prepare human beings for adulthood. Childhood is a formative period for his entire life. The child discovers the beauty and sweetness of human relationship through love and affection from their parents and other care givers. But parents, in many instances, have no time or inclination to fulfill their children's emotional need.

In most cases, parents' commitment to materialistic values has become more important than their responsibility to their children. Such negation of parenthood usually causes various mental disorders and adversely affects child's psychology. Children neglected by their parents frequently develop a sense of inferiority complex. Such indifference on the part of the parents either makes the child diffident and submissive or develops a protesting and repulsive attitude in the child. An unhappy home environment also creates fear, insecurity, distrust and anxiety in growing children. For healthy growth, a child needs an orderly and secure world.

Parenting styles

Based on the interconnection between the manner parents or caregivers express their affection and their child's response, it can be concluded that whether a child is prone to behave according to one pattern or the other depends on a particular parenting style. Diana Baumrind's groundbreaking study titled "Child Care Practices Antecedent Three Patterns of Preschool Behavior" explores the relationship between different parenting styles and their impact on children's behavior during their preschool years. This study, conducted in 1967, laid the foundation for understanding the various ways parents interact with their children and how these interactions can shape children's development. Based on the data she collected, Baumrind distinguished three types of parenting: **Authoritarian** parenting style, **Authoritative** parenting style and **Permissive** parenting style.

Authoritative Parenting: This style is often considered the most balanced and effective. Authoritative parents are responsive and warm, while also setting clear expectations and boundaries. They encourage independence and decision-making in their children, promoting a healthy sense of autonomy. Children raised by authoritative parents tend to be self-reliant, socially competent, and display higher levels of self-esteem.

Authoritarian Parenting: Authoritarian parents are highly demanding and directive, but lack warmth and responsiveness. They establish strict rules and expectations, and often use punitive measures to enforce them. Children raised under this style may develop a strong sense of obedience, but they may also exhibit lower self-esteem, poorer social skills, and a tendency to conform rather than think critically.

Permissive Parenting: Permissive Parenting style included not only parents who easily succumbed to their children's whims but also indifferent parents - they also discipline low amount of control over their children. However, the reason for giving their children freedom to do whatever they like is very different: over-indulgence on one hand and the lack of interest on the other. Furthermore, the outcomes of indifferent upbringing differ from those of permissive one. Therefore Eleanor Maccoby with John Martin introduced later a fourth parenting style, the **Uninvolved** parenting style. These four parenting patterns are closely discussed in several publications on developmental psychology

Fasting, Feasting

The novel, *Fasting, Feasting*, has been divided into two segments. Two diverse cultures – Indian and American are depicted here. The first part tells Uma's story in relation to her parents with the backdrop of her relationship with her sister, Aruna, and brother, Arun. This novel also "recounts human relationships in the language not only of fasting and feasting but of greed, craving, taboo, denial and disgust" (Dasgupta viii). Depicting the human hungers, as its title suggests, the novel is about the starving children and prospering parents who are no more concerned with their traditional duties. The parents here create their own individual space and entity. They remain far apart from the duties of a traditional father and mother. According to Rana Dasgupta,

“the novel gives an excruciating account of how society can seize control of individuals – especially women –through such practices as eating, and remove them from everything they intended to be”(Dasgupta viii).

The plot unveils through the perceptions of Uma, in India, and of Arun, in America. Both of them are entrapped, irrespective of the culture and enveloping milieu, by oppressive bonds exercised by their own parents, MamaPapa. The parents have merged into each other so intensely that now it appears quite difficult to conceive them as separate beings. “MamandPapa.MamaPapa. PapaMama. It was hard to believe they had ever had separate existences, that they had been separate entities addressed as MamaPapa in the same breath.”(Desai 5)

In his review of the novel, Andrew Robinson comments,

“In Papa and Mama, the Indian parents, she [Anita Desai] creates two monsters of almost Gothic proportions, locked into inseparable marital disharmony, determined to inflict on their two daughters and only son every ounce of the prejudices and disappointments of their own lives, as a respectable barrister and his wife in an undistinguished town” (Robinson 39).

They are the prototypical parents found everywhere in the middle-class families of India, who discuss, plan, plot, control, govern the activities of their children, be it marriage or going abroad for studies. And in their over-domineering concern, they tend to ignore the inadvertent possibility of entrapping their own offspring. Thus, they do not give contingency to the fact that perhaps their children too can have a life to call their own. May be even their own preoccupations, their own priorities, maybe an agenda for themselves that goes beyond what they actually want for their children.

"Fasting, Feasting" by Anita Desai explores the intricate dynamics of parenting and the parent-child relationship, particularly through the lens of two main characters: Uma and Arun, and their respective relationships with their parents.

Uma's Relationship with Her Parents:

Uma, the eldest daughter in the family, is expected to fulfill traditional gender roles and serve her parents. Her mother, MamaPapa, is overbearing and controlling, while her father, Papa, is distant and uninvolved. Uma's life revolves around her duty to her parents, and she is often confined to the domestic sphere.

The novel highlights the oppressive nature of Uma's relationship with her parents, as evidenced by this quote: "Her role was to serve, and that she did, and continued to do."(Desai 17)

Arun's Relationship with His Parents:

Arun, Uma's younger brother, is sent to the United States for higher education. His parents, especially his mother, have high expectations for his academic success. However, this creates a sense of pressure and isolation for Arun. He is emotionally distant from his parents and often yearns for more independence.

Arun's relationship with his parents is marked by emotional detachment. He reflects on his life in the U.S. and his family's expectations with the following words: "It had been long since Arun had been expected, or had expected himself, to explain himself to anyone."

Baumrind's Parenting Styles in "Fasting, Feasting"

Diana Baumrind's theory identifies four parenting styles: authoritarian, authoritative, permissive, and neglectful. These styles can be seen in the interactions between Uma, Arun, and their parents.

1. Uma- a daughter of authoritarian parents

Uma's parents, MamaPapa, epitomize authoritarian parenting. They impose strict rules and expect unwavering obedience. This authoritarian style stifles Uma's autonomy and independence, compelling her to conform to traditional gender roles. Baumrind defines this style as one that is high in control but low in warmth.

"Every morning Uma was required to rise at four, before dawn, and begin the housework... Her role was to serve, and that she did, and continued to do."(Desai 94)

2. Arun – a son of authoritarian parents

The day Arun was born was perhaps the happiest day in his father's life. However, the feeling of happiness was soon exchanged for worries about his son's progress, diet, education and future and as his father wanted to be sure that his only son get the best of everything, he watched over Arun's achievement and made a step-by-step plans for him. Arun's parents sometimes exhibit an authoritative parenting style. "Arun, my son, you have responsibilities now. You must study hard."(124) But later on they have high expectations for his academic success, they provide him with emotional support and guidance. They value education for their son-

“If one word could sum up Arun's childhood—or at least Uma's abiding impression of it—that word was education...then it was education for his son: the best, the most, the highest.”(Desai 121)

Everything was for Arun scheduled, even when and what he should eat, when and how and with whom he can play and this planning obsession, this constant need of control over Arun's life, got worse with Arun entering school years. Arun has learnt to accept his daily routine the way it was and yet there have been moments his father thought that Arun had done things so as to spite him. For instance, his son refused to eat eggs and meat, a privilege his father was so proud of. Furthermore, his only son has always been fragile, making his father never happy with Arun's progress, exclaiming once: " have you seen the Joshis' son: he is already playing cricket!" (Desai 32) Perhaps because of all those difficult times when the father had to study at night under a street lamp it is so important for him that Arun gets the best education possible with the goal of sending him abroad to foreign university so that he can get a foreign degree. Year after year Arun went to school only to return to more tutoring at home that ended shortly before the sun-set, leaving only little room or energy for playing or anything else. Finally, when the letter of acceptance from an American university arrives, Uma expects Arun to show some feeling of joy or fear, relief or sadness but Arun's face shows no such thing. He has just a blank face devoid any expression. Laughter, smiles and frowns have been taken from him by the strict regime and now he will go abroad just because his father wishes him to not because it is something that he wants .

Thus, it can be said that Arun has suffered and is suffering because he is his parents' only son and their way how to fulfil the dreams they once dreamt for themselves. His parents want only the best for him. Yet, it is what they think is the best for him and not what Arun might want or like, not even letting him to find out what that might be.

Thus, in "Fasting, Feasting," Anita Desai masterfully weaves a narrative that allows readers to witness the varied outcomes of different parenting styles. The application of Diana Baumrind's theory of parenting reveals how these styles shape the characters' experiences and destinies. The analysis shows Desai's inclination to portray such parenting styles that instil insecurity in children. The results prove that these approaches to raising a child affect the personality development negatively. It was interesting to find out that gender bias influences not only the life-path and self-concept of the protagonists but also the quality of their relationship with their parents.

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