



# Gender Disparity In Anita Desai's Fasting Feasting

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**Abstract:** Gender takes a leading role in Indian society. When a child is begotten, it is important whether it is male child or female child. A boy's birth is celebrated as a victory and a girl's birth becomes the cause of suffering to the family. Despite the constitution that guarantees equal rights for men and women and decades of legislation, some deep-rooted gender disparity in India takes a brutal role on women's lives. The aim of this paper is to analyze issues of gender disparity which is spotlighted in the novel *Fasting Feasting* by Anita Desai, specially through the character of Uma and Arun. How the patriarchal family of Uma raised her for marriage and raised her younger brother Arun for higher education. Anita Desai's celebrated novel *Fasting Feasting* depicts Gender disparity between male and female through the situation of Uma's forceful stay at home instead of going to school for take care of his younger brother Arun and Arun's stay in the USA for higher studies.

**Keywords:** Gender, disparity, education, male chauvinism, submissive, Indian society, discriminate, conservative family, dominance, patriarchy.

Anita Desai, a well-known Indian novelist can be considered as the genius of picturing the conditions of women in Indian society. Writings of Anita Desai is applicable to all time because she writes about the difficulties of modern man. Literature for her is not a means of escaping from reality but an exploration and an inquiry. Her real concern is the exploration of the human psyche, inner climate and she unravels the mystery of the inner life of her characters. In *Fasting Feasting* Anita Desai excels in portraying the gender inequality and conditions of women. Uma, the daughter of the family is grown up for marriage and Arun, the son for higher studies. Uma is entrusted to be passive, obedient, submissive and to take care of Arun, while Arun is suggested for good health and higher studies. The novel inspects the helplessness of women and how they try to resist male ideology but fail. As the Mama papa (parents) of Uma aim to promote education to their son whereas the girls Uma, Aruna are being raised for marriage. Arun is allowed to go to United States for higher education whereas Uma's going to convent School is not permitted.

Papa is the very epitome of male chauvinism. He believes the concept of male superiority and exercises his authority over women at every little opportunity. Papa's desires and demands must be fulfilled by mama. Mama does everything to suit Papa's interest and pleasure. Mama is over scrupulous in taking care of the food of Papa, as he is the male head of the family. When papa desires to have a son from mama to

satisfy his ego raising his status to a proud father of a son, mama must yield it. Gender inequality is evident from this anecdotal quote by Uma's mother.

“In my day, girls in the family were not given sweets, nuts, or good things to eat. If something special had been bought in the market, like sweets or nuts, it was given to the boys in the family.” (F.F. p.6)

It conveys that a son is always valued more than a daughter. The character of Uma symbolizes the grossly submissive role of women especially in Indian society. Her earnest desire to learn despite her limitations just to escape from the claustrophobic condition at home remains unactualized. Uma's world narrowed even more, when her baby brother Arun was born and she was removed from convent school just to take care of the newly born Arun, which completely ruined her spirit and opportunities for fulfilling her life.

“We are not sending you back to school, Uma. You are staying at home to help with Arun” (F.F.p.18)

Mama papa's craving for a boy hurt both the daughters because that reminds them of the fact that their births were accidental, and Arun's birth is celebrated. When the novel opens it suggests the ensuring events and the discriminating attitude of the parents to their daughter:

“On the veranda overlooking the garden, the drive and the gate, they sit together on the cracking sofa - swing, suspended from its iron frame, dangling their legs so that the slippers on their feet hang loose. Before them, a low round table is covered with a faded cloth, embroidered in the center with flowers. Behind them, a pedestal fan blows warm air at the backs of their heads and necks”. (F.F.p.3)

Sitting on the sofa and dangling their legs back and forth, the parents are imagined as selfish and luxuriant characters, doing nothing but giving only orders to Uma. The cacophonous sound prevails over the whole passage and clearly suggests the intention of sitting parents whose hearts seem to mutter and grumble without any reason. The reason for their frustration and step motherly treatment can be sought in the psychology of the parents who are more interested in a boy child than in a girl child. Both of their daughters Uma and Aruna are very submissive and obey their parents despite their ill treatment. The birth of a son as against daughter in conservative family in India is generally a matter of great enthusiasm and enjoyment. Returning from hospital with newborn baby boy Arun, papa shouted the news to whoever was there to hear.

The chapter three of the novel *Fasting Feasting* begins with busy domestic scenes; it was dinnertime where female at home must do simple task for male. Mama orders Uma to bring orange and “she picks out the largest orange in the bowl and hands it to Mama who peels it in strips, then divides into separate segments. Each segment is then peeled and freed of pips and threads till only the perfect globules of juice are left, and then passed, one by one edge of Papa's plate” (F.F.p.23). This shows that how females are made to work at home and how males enjoy their hard work and pain. Even for peeling the orange, the simplest work, Uma and mother must do for the father. This clearly tells us the gender disparity and male supremacy.

After Arun's birth Uma is entrusted with childcare and housekeeping, feeding, baby bathing, baby sitting by her mother who says that until her marriage Uma can help and look after her baby brother Arun and learn how to run a house. Papa considered educating Uma a waste of money and time and feels that Uma could take the position of Arun's ayah as money could be saved. When Uma pointed out that ayah had looked after her and Aruna, her younger sister as babies but mama's expression made it clear that it was quite different matter now, they can't leave the baby to the ayah and threateningly repeated “ He needs proper attention”(F.F.p.30).Mama feels that Arun being a male child in the family needs a good attention, care and guidance, so she insists Uma to look after him.

Mama papa likes Aruna's physical outlook, they believe that Aruna will get married easily than Uma because Uma's Physical outlook was not so good. Mama papa assumes that girls are for marriage only and boys are for higher education because boys will take care of parents during their last stage of life. Mama papa gave more emphasis on Arun rather than their daughters. Papa always thought if a son was educated and got more success in their life, the more pride and more benefits can be gained by their parents. So, papa mama is unable to see the utmost importance of education for their daughters. In this novel mama is a portrayal of traditional Indian women. She has been a submissive, obedient, passive daughter, wife and as a mother she was too involved in raising her daughters to face the same fire like situations. Mama also received very little attention at her parental home. Even Mama as a female never supported their daughters and harshly told Uma that she is disgrace to the family and her brother Arun is matter of pride.

Uma never gets the chance to enjoy good food, good education and freedom and go outside like her brother Arun who is sent to the USA for studies. If one word could sum up Arun's childhood that was education. Uma is not so good at her studies and fails in the exam, but she is interested in learning and going to school. Her mama papa doesn't support her and suggests that she should stay at home and take care of Arun. Mama papa makes her ready only for marriage. Mama teaches her role of a traditional wife and mother. Mama tells her "You are a big girl now we are trying to arrange marriage for you" (F.F.p.22). Uma loves to socialize with people, but she lacks these opportunities. Her parents restrict her from having contact with people by going outside, by telephone and by other means, they want to create a prison-like situation for her where she is too tired of the family's attitude towards her. Uma tries to spend her time with her cousin Miramasi and other people of society. She is prohibited from using the telephone and it is locked up by her parents. When she uses the telephone to talk to Druitt about a job without the knowledge of her parents and forgets to lock up the telephone again, when her father finds evidence that she uses telephone and blames Uma "cost money, cost money. Never earned anything in life, made me spend and spend on her dowry and her wedding, oh yes spent till I'm ruined till I am a pauper" (F.F.p.146). Uma's physical outlook is not so good, so she is rejected by many parties in marriage. Her sister, who is beautiful, got married to a wealthy boy from Bombay, her parents are very happy and often bless her to be happy. Uma's parents always offer a fair dowry to aspirant for Uma's hand in marriage. Uma's parents forced her to marry an old man of her father's age. It was unhappy marriage; papa becomes furious after being connected by Uma's husband's family not because of his daughter's life has been ruined but because once again he has wasted a large sum of money in her dowry. Once Uma faced an eye problem after her failure in marriage and suggested visiting Bombay to meet an eye specialist but was turned down rudely by papa, mentioning that a family optician is enough for an eye checkup and decided to spend more money on Arun's Education, health and good.

Anamika, Uma's cousin is also another example of Gender disparity. Anamika was very sober, not only was very pretty but also an outstanding student to be privileged to win a scholarship to Oxford but doesn't get an opportunity to go abroad to study. Because her parents chose a suitor for her who had equal qualification to her. The Indian system of arranged marriages fails, Anamika was regularly beaten by her mother-in-law which was approved by her husband resulting in her miscarriage. Her parents carried away by their own pretentiousness, turn callous and responsible for the marriage which ends in Anamika's death.

Gender disparity and dominance of patriarchy can be seen across the world. Women of other countries are also suffering the same as Uma. Mrs. Patton of America can't enjoy the foods of her own choice. She is an ardent vegetarian and meekly takes non-vegetarian food because Mr. Patton doesn't approve of it. All her life, Mrs. Patton craved vegetarian food but dared not to disturb the peace of her home by admitting to the fact that she despises meat just to maintain equilibrium in the strained atmosphere in her home. Mrs. Patton's daughter Melanie also suffers from gender inequality. She suffers from bulimia and anorexia, but her parents have no concern for disease like Uma's parents. The novel briefly encloses gender disparity in patriarchal domination in which the women folk must stay in that way what a man wants. Mama admits Papa's

domination over the family. He takes decisions for his children. Mama only ensures that all his decisions will be acceptable.

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