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FEMINISM IN INDIAN ENGLISH LITERATURE AND THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN *FASTING, FEASTING* BY ANITA DESAI

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ABSTRACT

Feminism in Indian English literature is focused so many years back. Feminism refers to the support of women's right. This right is to remove gender discrimination and gives equal status to female in society. From the early period to modern period women writers presents the theme to highlight women issues in society. It goes on developing its content time to time. It starts with suppression of women and slowly comes to revolt of women. It becomes the major theme in Indian English novels. There is the dominance of patriarchal system in India and women have to suffer. This social and familial reality reflects in literature. Indian English Literature has depicted variety of themes. There are lots of writers who have written and still writing on epics, mythologies, social issues, gender problems, young adults, environmental awareness etc. Writers from different regions in India contributed for this.

The present research highlights on the role of women in *Fasting, Feasting* by Anita Desai. Desai's writing focused on the issues related to women. Here in this novel, she depicted the picture of suffering women. It is an attempt to put forward this issue by referring the novel *Fasting, Feasting*.

Key Words: Feminism, culture, loneliness, sufferings, patriarchal system etc.

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Indian English Literature has depicted variety of themes. There are lots of writers who have written on epics, mythologies, social issues, gender problems, young adults, environmental awareness etc. Writers from different regions in India contributed for this. It can be divided into two categories. Pre-Independence period and Post-Independence Period.

In Pre-Independence period, the writers like Rabindranath Tagore, Raja Rao, Sir Aurobindo, Swami Vivekanand, M.K. Gandhi, and Jawaharlal Nehru proved their writing notable. Autobiographies, informative articles, novels, prose, poetry are remarkable in Indian English Literature.

In Post-Independence period, the notable

writings of Ruskin Bond, Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, and R.K.Narayan give prestigious image to Indian writings in English. Because the works of these authors won the reputed awards and some of them won the prizes like- Booker Prize, Pulitzer Prize etc. Writers from this period recognized for their mastery in English Literary style. Due to Britishers ruled over country, and strong impact of English Language on society, writing and style is more developed than earlier period. Other blooming writer starts writing in English. They start writing their creative thoughts. They start writing the different issues in society. Various genres are being used to represent the theme. The real development

of the novel is in the 19th century. Female writers existed with different themes in society.

Feminism in Indian English literature is focused so many years back. Feminism refers to the support of women's right. This right is to remove gender discrimination and gives equal status to female in society. From the early period to modern period women writers presents the theme to highlight women issues in society. It goes on developing its content time to time. It starts with suppression of women and slowly comes to revolt of women. It becomes the major theme in Indian English novels. There is the dominance of patriarchal system in India and women have to suffer. This social and familial reality reflects in literature. As everyone is aware that women depend on father after her birth, after marriage, she depends on her husband and in her old age, after the death of her husband, she depends on her son. Anyhow she has no freedom to live individually after her maturity. She needs the help of male supporter from her family. India is traditional from the very early period. Freedom of women is blocked. She should be gentle, polite, hard working, endurance, caring and follower of her husband. She should not be in picture. She should be always at the back side of curtains make her busy in household works and taking care for her husband, family and children.

The term feminist literature means literature written by a woman on woman. Themes based on feminism got much strike on readers. Major feminist writers in Indian English literature is Rama Mehta, Shashi Deshpande, Chitra Bannerji Divakaruni, Kashmiri Seth, Kiran Desai, Veena Deo Rao, Shobha Dey, Anita Desai, Namita Gokhale etc. The list is very big. It's difficult to mention everyone's name. These all female writers write on varieties of theme. Majority female writers focused on female characters and their livelihood, their status in society. Social reality in Indian English literature is presented by these authors. Gender plays important role in their novels and this theme of social realism is penned out in their modern literary works. They give different voices to their characters. It also has the cultural dominance and impact on their writings. Indian society is bind up with culture, religious laws and other familial

restrictions. Anita Desai portrays the picture of women sufferer in her novels---It shows the dark picture of women reality. While Shashi Deshpande portrays the women characters in the same way but her style is different. Kashmiri Sheth presented the life of early widowhood in her novel *Keeping Corner*. This writing continues with Arundhati Roy, Zumpa Lahiri, Samina Ali, Swati Kaushal etc.

Society is that all-encompassing term which perhaps cannot just be restricted to one single domain of life in general. Indeed a generalized version of the contemporary society man lives in one's own community, one's religion, one's process of consuming food, behavior towards other member in community, education style, career one choose to pursue, or the friends and family one likes to maintain or just stray instances of communal disharmony in the area. Man's social order and cultural growth and amalgamation, all are profoundly interlinked in an ecological chain. And there can be no other powerful tool in man's hand than to portray and document down his own society that writing about it that is intended for the public.

Modern Indian English Novel consists the theme of individual identity of men and women. It depicts the inner life of men and women, their own problems of surviving in society. It is a combination of inner problems and social problems. Modern novel is conspicuous for use of realism. The writers focus on varieties of social life throughout India. They put forward the all issues of Indians living in urban society as well as rural society. The discrimination in gender plays important role in the modern novels. They present issues related to woman in society.

The present research paper is based on the existence of women in Fasting, Feasting by Anita Desai. Anita Desai is well-known personality in Indian English Literature. Anita Desai has been touted by British Writers' Michael Matin as "one of the preeminent contemporary Indian novelist," Even referred by many as Mother of the Indian psychology novel genre. She won lots of awards for her works in Indian English Literature. She was born in 1937 in India to a Bengali father and a German mother. She got her education in English so English became her writing literary language. At the very

small age of seven she wrote story and published. Then the writing continues. *Cry, The Peacock*, her first novel published in the year 1963. Her works includes- *Fire on the mountain, Clear Light of Day, In Custody, Baumgartner's Bombay, Journey to Ithaca, Fasting, Feasting, The Zigzag Way, Diamond Dust and other stories, The Village by the Sea*, etc.

The novel *Fasting, Feasting* is published in the year 1999. The novel describes the theme of love and justice in an Indian family mainly focused on the lives of two daughters and a son of a Hindu traditional family. The story revolves round the destiny of these two girls named Uma and Aruna. They bring and brought up, educated with the typical Indian traditional thinking of marriage. Uma is the elder daughter of her family, second to her is Aruna and a son named Arun. Even at the age of forty, Uma still is a spinster and under the demanding control of her parents.

The novel divides in two parts. One sets in India and second part sets in America. It is a combination of two cultures- traditional Indian culture and modern Western culture. Uma is the female protagonist of this novel. The novel sets in a complete domestic environment. As traditional Indian family desires for a son, this family also want a son. After the birth of a son (named Arun), elder daughter Uma suddenly removed from school to look after his small brother. She is treated as dull and clumsy whereas her younger sister always gets appreciation as smart and active. She is forced to remain at home and ready for her arranged marriage. Uma's parent tries many times to arrange her marriage but they fail. She is not so beautiful like her younger sister Aruna, so visitors prefer Aruna. Next time, she got engaged with a boy but unfortunately it breaks. And the third time, unwillingly she got married with her relative. But they humiliate Uma and behave like a maid servant. On the other hand Aruna is clever and beautiful and find her own husband. This time family supports her. There is difference in behavior with both the daughters of same family. Anita Desai while sketching of these characters points out the sufferings of Uma and freedom of Aruna.

Uma's family expects a lot from their children. They make difference in gender. Son is

treated differently and daughters are treated differently. There is difference in performing duties of male and female. Male supposed to perform the outside role as taking good education, working hard and become successful otherwise female depends on male in society. Her status and position depends on her beauty, domestic work, caring for family and children. Her position depends on her humble and polite nature. If she tries to seek something in her favour, she is rejected by her family. She should be always secondary to man. Here, Uma wants to get her freedom from family. She wants to live her life. This desire is noticed by her parents but they don't care. They only care for their beautiful daughter Aruna and their son Arun, who is in America. Uma opens her thought of freedom in front of Mira Masi and Dr. Dutt. The article published in Litchart mentioned:

Within Indian society, individuals experience mental isolation within tight-knit families. The obligation to maintain a pretense of family harmony is isolating because individuals have no recourse for expressing their true desires without rebelling against the family. Uma is constantly in the company of her parents or other family members- yet she is lonely and isolated within those relationships, because true friendship is lacking: Uma, social and curious in nature, hungrily seeks any opportunity to make new friends and interact with people outside her nuclear family home. (Web)

Desai portrayed Uma's character as suffering from loneliness and have no rights to survive as her aspiration. This is the situation of female in Indian orthodox families which is perfectly shown through Uma. Neither Uma have guts like her younger sister Aruna nor is she physically beautiful like Aruna. Due to this, she is rejected many times for the proposal of marriage. Anyhow once the marriage is fixed but it breaks due to the demand of dowry. Uma represent the fatality of male dominated society, the victim of dowry and woman without a man. She is under the roof of her parents taking care for her family and to tolerate the taunts of her parents for not being married. That's why she is always

searching for freedom. She is marginalized by her family. R.S. Pathak rightly suggests that the marginal has no other option but to speak:

It has to speak, voice, not hide its tears, fears and angst and wrath in as many forms as possible. Tongue, if unused, is a fleshy burden, tentamounting to its own detonguing. Moreover, marginal's cannot for long persist with their monologue of identity or difference. It has to misidentify itself and opens itself to intervening positive influences for larger identity. (15)

Meanwhile the story shift to another part to Arun. He shifts to America. It is completely different and new world for him- the masculine world. He gets confuse there. The major difference in two cultures is noticed by him. First is Indian, which is traditional and religious while second is American, the opposite is of Indian culture. The title *Fasting, Feasting* doesn't refer to its exact meaning. It is related to fasting culture of India as well as poor people in India who doesn't get food to eat due to poverty. Here Uma represent "fasting" symbolizing deprived from getting education and remains as an unmarried woman under the control of her parents without developing her personality. It is only Arun; the protagonist of the second part comes to know about the sufferings of Uma. He reminds his childhood memories and understood that only because of him, Uma is deprived of education, simply because he is a boy and received the best thing in every manner. Anita Desai here points out the gender discrimination.

There is difference in two cultures-America and India. The difference is between freedom to women and her thinking. Also there is difference in gender wise classification and their social status expectations in these two countries. MamaPapa and Patton family compared with American families. As MamaPapa is economically weak, they desire to have more money by marrying their daughters in wealthy families and giving good education to their son to earn more money by doing job in abroad. In India, Uma and Aruna are pressurized for their marriage but Melanie is not forced to marry by her parents. She is under burden for the showiness of American beauty. As well as she is suffering from

health problem for eating unhealthy and excess of food. There are differences in thinking of Indian and American families. Indian family prefers to be vegetarian while American family prefer non-vegetarian. The title represents the two opposite culture fasting in Indian culture and feasting in American culture.

Anita Desai is undoubtedly one of the major Indian writers of her generation. She portrays the disharmony of Indian traditional families and exploration of women in male dominated society. She also wants to show the condition of women in Indian society, her struggle to get freedom and social status. The novel portrays the Indian educated family and orthodox Indian family. The value given to woman is secondary. Through Uma's anguish, Desai presented the patriarchal system in India.

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