

Marginalization of Women in Indian Society and its Representation in Anita Desai's *Fasting Feasting*

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Abstract: In the dominant patriarchal society women are often treated as subservient other. On the one hand development of science and technology has, to a great extent, facilitated woman's emancipation; on the other hand growth of consumerism has facilitated woman's objectification. In the traditional Patriarchal society a male child enjoys a privileged position while the girl child is often neglected. Woman body is also, as is shown in Anita Desai's *Fasting Feasting*, seems to be controlled by the male. Politics of marginalization of woman works at different levels. Presenting a phallogocentric universe, the Lacanian scheme places woman at the marginal space. Lacan's symbolic order is completely male-centric. Society's rules, customs are made in language which is essentially male-centric. At another level, the structure of patriarchy, as found in *Fasting Feasting*, may not be sustained by male only, the female may be an equal partner in sustaining the dominant patriarchal structure.

For a better man-woman relationship, reorientation of male gaze may be a necessary requirement. Presentation of woman body as a commodity before the male eye without spiritualizing the gaze may help to create undue desire for possession. As Foucault asserts, our gaze is also ideologically constructed. So, for this reorientation of gaze, ideological change may be a necessary requirement. Change of power equation may help to change male gaze towards woman. Exploration of a third space where both male and female can have a respectful position may help to achieve a better man-woman relationship.

Giving reference to Anita Desai's *Fasting Feasting*, this paper thus aims to expose the politics of marginalization of woman in patriarchal Indian society. It would also make an attempt to explore ways for a better man-woman relationship.

Keywords: marginalization, fasting, feasting

In the Vedic age women played a significant role in almost all spheres of society. There are examples of women taking part in battle along with their husbands. In the absence of the wife, the yagna (the ceremony of oblation) was not complete. Many hymns of the Vedas were composed by women sages. In the Rig Veda, names of many women poets like Biswabara, Apala, Romasa, Lopamudra, Zarita, Juhu are mentioned. But after the Vedic age women's position in the society declined. Patriarchy took hold over society.

Many feminist critics point towards Rama's ill treatment towards Sita in the great Hindu epic Ramayana. Pregnant Sita was left to destiny in the deep jungle. Rama sends Sita into exile because some citizens of his kingdom started gossiping about Sita's chastity after she is rescued from Ravana; Laxman is given the task to leave her alone in the jungle. In the dense jungle she is left to destiny. Valmiki happens to see her alone in the jungle and takes her to his ashram. In the ashram Lava and Kusha are born. These two sons stop Rama's ashwamedh horse. This incident leads to Sita's return to Rama's palace only at the behest of Valmiki. Adding salt to her wound, she is subjected to the test of fire. Ram, in a sense, robs/humiliates her honour by suspecting and subjecting her to inhuman test. In Mahabharata, another great epic, the panchali of the Pandava is subject to inhuman treatment by Dushasan in Dhritarastra's crowded palace. The mighty Pandava appears helpless spectator. Another important book in Indian philosophy, Manusanghita, prescribes that day and night woman must be kept in dependence by the males (of) their (families).

Manu says that women are not capable of protecting themselves, they must be protected by males, or else, they will bring sorrow on two families'. The husband has been prescribed by Manu to employ his wife, in the collection and expenditure of his wealth, in keeping (everything) clean, in (the fulfillment of) religious duties, in the preparation of his food, and in looking after the household utensils'. Drinking, association with wicked people, separation from husband, rambling abroad, sleeping (at unseasonable hours), and dwelling in other men's houses are the vices identified in women by Manu. "(While creating them) Manu allotted to women (a love of their) bed, (of their) seat and (of) ornament, impure desires, wrath, dishonesty, malice, and bad conduct."¹

In the traditional patriarchal society, women are taught to accept their husbands as "parameswara" and abide by the male constructed customs. The awareness of women's marginalized position in the society's patriarchal discourse, has led to the rise of feminist movement. The voice of the subaltern, however remains unheard or any attempt to express and assert her identity is often seen as an aberration. Because of lack of power she often fails to assert her feminine identity and her utterance does not get legitimate space in the patriarchal society. Presenting the position of women in the traditional Indian society, Anita Desai's *Fasting Feasting* shows how women are denied their legitimate right and kept in a subservient position in the traditional patriarchal society.

Through the character of Uma, Anita Desai presents the position of a girl child in

the society. Uma is engaged in the service of her parents. She is all the time expected to be in service of her parents. Any sign of disobedience is suppressed. Her father's wishes are the rules of the house. For a male child, he almost forces his wife to go through hell like torment: "Mama was frantic to have it terminated. She had never been more ill, and would go through hell fire she wept just to stop the nausea that tormented her. But Papa set his jaws. They had two daughters, yes, quite grown-up as anyone could see, but there was no son. Would any man give up the chance of a son?"²

After Arun's birth Uma is asked to leave school. She is needed at home to look after Arun. Arun gets extraordinary care while Uma is treated as a subservient employee in her own house. She cannot even use her freedom to use the telephone. It may however be pointed out here that it is not only Papa who commands Uma, Mama equally restricts Uma's life to the four walls of the house. Mama asks Uma to leave school because she needs Uma to look after Arun. Later Uma's marriage also proved to be a deception. Harish to whom she was married was already married, had a wife and four children. He married Uma for the second time only for dowry. "Having cost her parents two dowries, without a marriage to show in return, Uma was considered ill-fated by all and no more attempts were made to marry her off".

According to Lacan masculinity and femininity are not biological essences but are instead symbolic positions. His symbolic order denied woman central position. For him language is masculine, grounded in the phallus as universal signifier. "Law, religion, science and civilization are structured by the

masculine symbolic. The feminine is figured as an absence within the, real as well as the 'imaginary' and 'symbolic' orders. Thus women have been excluded from the symbolic order. Becoming a subject involves entry into the symbolic. But /Then the language and the whole symbolic order are masculine, one can only enter into it as male." "The masculine symbolic system thus denies women's subjectivities and shut women up, so women were considered unspeakable, even though women have spoken, yelled and cried out for a long time."

In such a position how can a woman assert her female identity? It becomes an existential question for woman. She has to fight to make her way into the world of her own. Her attempt to make her way into the world or to make her voice heard may appear to be an aberration; she may be treated as an outcast, or may be objectified with derogatory adjectives/attributes. In such a situation, many may conform to the norms laid down by the Father and live in a state of subservience.

Uma's cousin sister Anamika "has been beaten, Anamika was beaten regularly by her mother-in-law while her husband stood by and approved-or, at least did not object. Anamika spent her entire time in the kitchen, cooking for his family which was large so that meals were eaten in shifts-first the men, then the children, finally the women". Though highly educated, she is bound to conform to the patriarchy assigned role. "When Anamika was not scrubbing or cooking, she was in her mother-in-laws's room, either massaging that lady's feet or folding and tidying her clothes. She never

went out of the house except to the temple with other women”. “She had had miscarriage at home, it was said, after a beating”. After her miscarriage, she could not bear children. Then she was treated as a “damaged goods.”³

Endnotes

1. Manusanghita, Ch.9 line.17
2. Desai, Anita. *Fasting Feasting*. Page 16
3. *Fasting Feasting*, Page 71

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