

The Dravidian Aesthetics in Anita Desai: A Feminist Perspective

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Introduction

Literature is the finest and the most resourceful approach of manifestation, illuminating or sustaining or resuscitating the various social movements. Srinivasa Iyengar quotes Gandhiji as regards the use of English by the Indian writers to convey their message to the readers: “The purpose of writing is to communicate, isn’t it? If so, say your say in any language that comes to hand”. (Iyengar, iv) But the Indian literature comprises many literatures—Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, Malayalam, Hindi, and Bengali and so on. But ideologically, it is Indian in thought and feeling and emotion and experience. The portrayal of society in Indian literature is anything but candid and forthright. Indian novel, in particular, is an end product of the Indian renaissance; it came into vogue as an upshot of the bearing of the west on Indian life and literature. It records the constant commotion and the ensuing fruition and reconstruction in society. The transition may take different forms—status of life, ethnicity, bearings and ethics of men as well as the behavioural paradigm. “Basically social change implies first, internal differentiation or multiplication of forms of roles and relationships within a social structure and secondly, replacement of older structures by new structures”. (Bisaria, 28) “The Indian English novel to-day has bloomed and blossomed into variegated tapestries, tastes and sensibilities offering a variety fair to the reader in India and abroad”. (Dasan, 10)

The mien of the contemporary Indian novelists also expounds an unambiguous and conspicuous divergence from the post modernist ‘nihilism’ thanks to the Indian roots, Indian aesthetics, creative imagination and compassionate posture. “Indic art imitates life as all arts do. Imitation is a two-dimensional process—gathering of knowledge of life that is fragmentary and distilling and discerning the knowledge that is poignant with eternal verities.... Indian literary aesthetics has a tradition of celebrating compassionate humanism without any precondition and superimposing agenda”. (Dasan 15)

Thus the novel as a social act presages that there are positive alternatives to the smothering negatives in life. The same is the watchword of the Dravidian culture that attempts radical adaptations at the familial and societal strata to increment and supplement the excellence and elegance of living towards the emancipation of women.

Anita Desai and Her Feminist Stance

The state of women in Indian society is subjected to considerable change. Earlier women were stripped of social status and veracity. Now their clout in social and cultural set up is seen in these arrays—"the constitutional right to equality of opportunity and status before law, right against discrimination, right to property, reservation of seats in legislative bodies at different levels, right of choice in marriage and numerous other rights and privileges". (Sorot, 77) Vimala Patil has this to affirm on this premise: "Women in India have changed at a faster rate than women anywhere else in the world and their 'attitude' has changed the very face of our society". (Patil, III)

But in spite of all these vociferous avocations broadcasted through various literary genres, the post colonial Indian society depicts a dissimilar impression. In fact, the Indian women writers in English were branded 'sub-altern' by the male dominated Indian literature, thus prevailing upon their sustaining and indisputable roles. But shunning the protests and braving the challenges, this select band of writers unveil the status and context of modern women in all their facets—the fall, the rise, the fall-rise and the rise-fall. In the guise of tradition, man humiliates woman, keeping her under permanent crunching shackles, physically and mentally.

Anita Desai's strong suit is chiefly human relationship—reminiscent of the Dravidian thoughts. "Her women characters herald a new morality which is not confined to physical chastity. It demands accommodation of individual longing for self-fulfillment." (Desai, 3.1 1978: 2) Desai's role in sensitizing readers about the Indian views of feminine sense and sensibility against cultural imperialism and tradition-bound outlook, sacraments and institutions that means subjugation of women has been breathtaking indeed. Her fiction stands as a collective metaphor for her ways of celebrating womanhood in the midst of conflicting ideologies, human bondages and phallo-centric notions of womanhood. (Dasan, 2006: 58)

Most of her fictional female characters are existential characters jittery in asserting against suppression and voicelessness. Her aesthetic rootedness in Indian culture in no way contradicts her value stances against the ill-treatment of women.

The Emblematic Prototype

"...*Fasting, Feasting* is a most beautiful novel, very moving, very funny, terribly illustrative of what happens to women in different parts of the world." (Kaufmann, ii) In general many modern critics are susceptible to flout stylistic and structural excellences of innovative works, riveted more on thematic explications. But this novel is all in one—gripping, sparkling and neurotic—a scrutiny of the conundrum of feminine existentialism not only in the post independent India but in the more progressive socio cultural landscape also.

Fasting, Feasting has two clear cut apportionments—the comparative investigation between Indian family machinations, socio-cultural and spiritual, and the familial existentialism in America. The former is tradition-bound and the latter is altruistic and acquisitive, the unifying facet being the female characters.

The Indian state of affairs is populated by Uma, Aruna, Arun, Anamika and Mira-Masi. The seemingly close-knit structure of the family is pictured in Anita Desai's words: "It was hard to believe they had ever had separate existences, that they had been separate entities and not Mama Papa in one breath." (Desai, 1999: 9) But, but for Uma, others effortlessly and clandestinely indulge in surreptitious activities. Docility is Uma. A succession of happenings sounds the death-knell leading to Uma's regression. The birth of Arun, the long-awaited heir of the family, strikes down her academic career. Uma needs to be educated in domestic chores of house work or baby sitting. Her show of reluctance is doused with bullying galore: "Uma tried to protest when the order began to come thick and fast. This made Mama look stern again. 'You know we can't leave the baby to the servant.'" (Desai, 97) As soon as she attains puberty, Uma's parents make vigorous and frenzied efforts, as if panic-stricken, to 'celebrate' her marriage. The first proposer is enamoured of her coquettish younger sister, Aruna, just thirteen years old. The second proposal also does not mature into a success, failing at the betrothal stage and not before the swindling of a sizable sum as dowry. Such catastrophes leading to melancholy is made more poignant with the remarks of Aruna: "... a certain mockery was creeping into her behaviour, a kind of goading, like that a sprightly little dog will subject a large dull ox to when it wants a little action." (Desai, 97) Anita Desai's seeming scepticism and irresolution of the familial environment are reiterated in the following articulation: "The tightly knit fabric of family that had seemed so stifling and confining now revealed holes and gaps that were frightening—perhaps the fabric would not hold, perhaps it would not protect after all." (Desai, 142) Mira-Masi, the good old widow and aunt of Uma, perhaps, is the only reserve of reassurance and succor after the mortifying calamities of the arranged marriages of the 'ill-fated' Uma. Mira-Masi pacifies: "She is blessed by the Lord. The Lord has rejected the men you chose for her because He has chosen her for Himself." (Desai, 61) Anita Desai frames Uma's state of mind: "that of an outcaste from the world of marriageretreating to her room, she sank down on the floor, against the wall and put her arms around her knees and wondered what it would have been like to have the Lord Shiva for a husband, have Him put His arms around her." (Desai, 101) The desolate and estranged Uma was permitted to visit neither her neighbours nor the convent nearby as her parents had the inherent mistrust that she would embrace Christianity. Her contemplation of getaway from this murky survival in the shape of a career, endorsed in the words of Dr. Dutt, "... a young woman with no employment, who has been running the house for her parents for long. I feel sure you would be right for the job", (Desai, 101) is frowned upon by Papa. Her dream remains unconsummated and she is holed up in her mind-numbing subsistence.

Anita Desai has a representative style of making her internally chaotic central characters find communication by affiliation with exterior ambiance: "At night, she lay quietly on her mat, listening to the ashram dogs bark...then other dogs...barked back...gradually the barks drowned. Then it was silence. That was what Uma felt her own life to have been—full of barks, howls, messages and now silence." (Desai, 131)

Aruna, the tenacious younger sister of Uma, goes against everything traditional. The wedding is unlike: "This was to be an event so chic and untraditional—as had never been witnessed before in the town, at least by their relatives." (Desai, 86)

Aruna herself becomes a changed personality: "...every trace of her provincial roots...obliterated and overlaid by the bright sheen of metropolis." (Desai, 86) Ultimately, Aruna becomes a quarry of her own preferences with her westernized lifestyle, leading her to a point of no return. By flaking her own conformist role of a typical Indian wife, mother and daughter-in-law and faking an eccentric, contrived and unfeasible neo-colonial lifestyle, she remains 'aloof' in the socio-cultural milieu, not only losing the benefaction but also earning the scorn and the censure of the parents and relatives. Her phobic consciousness and the ensuing claustrophobic schizoid alter her into an android.

Anamika, Uma's cousin, is another demonstration of the tragic fiasco in marriage. Her parents' wish insinuates a deep-seated rampant evil prevalent in the traditional Indian society. Disregarding Anamika's pleasant demeanour and short entity, her parents 'drown' her in a 'good' family. The groom is "much older than Anamika, so grim-faced and conscious of his own superiority ...insufferably proud and kept everyone at a distance...he barely seemed to notice Anamika...impervious to Anamika's beauty, grace and superiority." (Desai, 69) Anamika's wrapping up is that she "...was simply an interloper, someone brought in because she would, by marrying him, enhance his superiority to other men. So they had to tolerate her." (Desai, 10) At home, her dismal predicament is implausible—receiving regular blows from her mother-in-law with her husband standing as a mute witness, endless cooking schedules to satisfy the insatiable hunger of all and sundry in the family, massaging the feet of her mother-in-law or tidying the heap of clothes, no outings except the occasional brief ones to the temple, that too, in the company of other women and unfortunate enough in not having sanctioned private company of her husband. In spite of all these, she managed to conceive but the unvarying beatings of her mother-in-law leads to miscarriage and irreversible disability. Even her self-immolation and the subsequent death do not perturb her parents who could just dismiss the episode by throwing the blame on fate—"that it was fate, God had willed it and it was Anamika's destiny." (151) Thus Anamika was relinquished at the altar of marriage.

Mira-Masi is the only woman in the novel who feels emancipated. Her sparse needs—a bland diet of uncooked food, austere lifestyle, compromise with family rituals—make her a courageous individual capable of coping with the unnatural and crooked world outside. She could blend judiciously the inner and outer worlds without relegating either to the background. She does not detach herself from the outside world: she, in fact, relishes gossiping and carries tales from one family to another. She could renounce her material comforts and ignore its snares. As such, she could achieve inner freedom and comfort and remain a source of retreat for comfort for others.

In Part II of the novel, two more female characters materialize, Mrs. Pattons and Melaine, asphyxiated individuals by the modern impersonal and appealingly free western life style. Mrs. Pattons, an obsessive compulsive eater, stocks edibles in large measures. Her bulimic daughter, Melaine, is a 'loner' and she exhibits the gloomy lonely feeling of the affluent: "...dressed in denim shorts and a faded pink T-shirt, holding a party-sized bag of salted peanuts...she sits in the gloom of the unlit staircase, munching the nuts with mulish obstinacy...she looks sullen rather than tearful. It is her habitual expression."

(Desai, 164) The overdose of freedom and the resultant repulsion transform the environment into a stifling and phlegmatic one.

Thus whereas the women of the East could not detach themselves free from the crunching shackles of the burdensome tradition, the western women feel humiliated by the excesses of their own society. As a matter of fact, both Uma and Melaine represent two women belonging to two entirely dissimilar cultures reacting to the superfluous social customs in their own styles. But they are meek victims bereft of will power to fight against the vicious might of the existing benchmarks.

Conclusion

History does not tell us that the discrimination of sexes subsisted in the days of Adam and Eve. "From being the very incarnation of power (Shakthi) and knowledge (Gnyan), women came to be held only as child-bearing machines and their horizons have been supposed to be confined only to their familial role." (Choubey, 195) Girls are not only less preferred but also more laden with more odd jobs. The disgrace suffered by Uma through failed marriages invalidates Simone De Beauvoir's account: "Feminists say that marriage is the destiny traditionally offered to women by society." (Beauvoir, 445) Jana Matson Everett underscores the point that "in India, a woman is considered to be an embodiment of sacrifice, silent suffering, humility, faith and knowledge." (Everett, 76) Even the parents forget that Uma is not just a body but a soul as well. Mira-masi is the prototype of an Indian widow: "...quite alone, safe in her widow's white garments, visiting one place of pilgrimage after another like an obsessed tourist of the spirit." (Desai, 165)

In India, Mama parades taciturn submission to Papa and follows all his whims and idiosyncrasy meekly and in Massachusetts, Mrs. Patton is identically servile while Melaine Patton is a victim of parental indifference.

Thus, *Fasting, Feasting* is an arraignment against men who believe in holding their women in their vice like clutch, it is an avowal against women who are conceited of their servility and an impeachment against men who trade in marriages as means of mounting money and power. Thus the novel is multicultural in outlook with tirades against male-bigotry, lackadaisical attitude of females and also their disinclination.

Any society in a whirlpool of change breeds many negative feelings in the oppressed women—alienation, anxiety, insecurity, fear etc. These women pine for adjustment and readjustment. But, while tussling with problems and refusing to accept the life of repression, the positive compromising attitude, they settle on living life in their own way. This awakening of the consciousness and not making any attempt to arrive at a straight forward solution are their potency in their ceaseless battle to trounce the stronghold of male ascendancy. This faculty to endure the domestic injustice and the institutionalized tyranny unseat the myths of femininity, motherhood and marriage. This is also what the Dravidian culture is all about. It is highly pertinent to recall the ire of Periyar E.V. Ramasamy at this juncture: "We recommend that women should stop delivering children altogether because conception stands in the way of women enjoying personal freedom." (Ramasamy, 45)

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