



Feminine Sensibility: Anita Desai

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Introduction:

Anita Desai's more recent novel *Fasting. Feasting* (2000), however, marks a definite progression in her feminine sensibility. Through the claustrophobic existence of Uma in a tradition-bound society, she throws ample light on the plight of women in postcolonial India and, at the same time, through the portrayal of such character like Mira-masi, she portrays their inner strength and deep desire to rise up and find out proper solutions in a world that is made not for theirs. Moreover, in portraying the religious sensibility of Mira-masi, the novelist shows her strong inclination towards the Indian way of life in which religion and tradition have their own importance.

The novel is divided into two parts. Part-1 deals with family intrigue through socio-cultural and spiritual experiences in India, and Part-II describes familial existentialism in a small town in America. The main fabric of the plot is deftly woven around female characters giving the novelist ample scope of comparing the tradition bound life-style of India and the materialistic scenario of the West. In the present dissertation however, I shall confine myself only to the Part-1 of the novel because the focal point of this thesis is to delineate an Indian experience.

Hence, Part-II of the novel is unnecessary for my purpose. Its relevance, however, lies in the fact that the novelist, being a postcolonial one, tries to create a concept a global sisterhood here. Here she takes the role of a third-world feminist who criticises the Western notions of female emancipation. In Part-1 of the novel, we are introduced to an apparently close-knit family with Mama, Papa and their three children - Uma, Aruna and Arun. While the mother is a shy lady indulging in clandestine activities such as playing cards with the neighbours or chewing betel leaves in the absence of her husband, her prejudicial attitude to Uma is obnoxious and uncalled for. Uma, a girl child is forced to live a life of subjugation - first in her parents' home and later in her in-laws'. She was compelled to quit her academic pursuits after the birth of her brother, Arun. Mama thought it was essential for Uma to learn the art of baby-



sitting and household affairs because that is the ultimate future of an Indian girl. Soon a conflict arose between Uma and her parents and she began to feel suffocated in the confines of the family. Anita Desai writes:

The tightly knit fabric 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 (86).

Even in a joint family Uma was tightly absorbed by the pangs of segregation.

The moment Uma comes of age, frantic efforts are made to get her married. Her isolation deepens as she is segregated from other girls of her own age and she misses all the fun that other school-girls have. A suitor does come to see her, but demands the hands of Aruna, the younger sister rather than that of Uma. Meanwhile, another proposal for marriage comes in, though after extracting a lot of money, the boy decides not to marry her. Following this she is married off to an already married man. However, there also she gets overpowered by a complete sense of dejection resulting in greater emotional setback within her. She comes back to her parents' home and tries to reassemble her shattered life. But broken, dejected, frustrated, isolated, alienated and lonely, she stands nowhere, neither falling in the category of unmarried girls nor in that of married women. The novelist writes:

That she had not had their experiences, that hers was other: that of an outcaste from the world of marriage, the world which all the murmuring, and whispering and muttering implied, was all that mattered.

Retreating to her room, she sank down on the floor, against the wall, 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 (96-97).

Having cost her parents two dowries and no marriage to show in return, Uma is branded as ill-fated by all. And affected by an acute sense of failure she herself also starts to bear the humiliation inflicted upon her silently and stoically. The situation worsens when Uma's mother is not even ready to allow her any sort of diversion like visiting neighbours or talking to friends or even working. Hence, she has nothing to do but lie down in bed hearing the barking of dogs in the darkness of the night:



That was what Uma felt her own life to have been -- full of barks, howls, messages, and now silence (61).

Uma surrenders to the life of silence and loneliness. Mama would be angry even if she read books to divert herself. Ultimately she learns to compromise with her claustrophobic existence. She patiently suppresses her emotions, surrenders her finer impulses and accepts bravely the humiliation and desolation etched on her destiny.

Aruna, the younger sister of Uma, also suffers from isolation, though for different reasons. She exemplifies unsuccessful cultural hybridization because she surrenders a traditional life-style for a Western one. She consciously surrenders the conventional role of an Indian wife, mother and daughter-in-law, in favour of the Western ways so that she is called a 'modern' woman. But, very soon she realizes her folly and begins to suffer from claustrophobic schizophrenia. She begins to lead a life of isolation neglecting her two children. She, the marginal woman, is emotionally torn because she had ostracized her parents and sister as uncouth and now there is no one she could appeal to for succour in time of need (Myles, 2006). Consequently, she withdraws within her shell of isolation.

Conclusion:

Through the portrayal of Mira-Masi's character, Anita Desai brings out the practicality of the confluence of the social, the religious and the spiritual. Mira-masi is involved in religious pursuits no doubt, but when she travels from place to place and meets her relatives, she participates whole-heartedly in their lives, indulges in animated conversations, gives advices and even provides companionship and comfort to girls like Uma. Thus she emerges as a perfect link between the spiritual and the social sides of human existence.

Reference:

1. Feasting 2000
2. Myles, 2006