



A Study of Male Dominance in Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting*

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Anita Desai was born in India in 1937. Her mother was of German origin and her father a Bengali businessman – this mixed parentage developed her knowledge of both Indian and Western culture from early on (Tandon 8). Desai's first novel, *Cry, the Peacock*, was published in 1963, and since then, she has published numerous novels as well as short story collections and children's books. She lived and worked in India until the early 1990s when she started to share her time between her home country and the United States (Ho 1). Despite her German Indian parentage, she finds her identity "totally Indian", although she also has made a distinction between her feelings and her thoughts regarding India: "I feel about India as an Indian, but I suppose I think of it as an outsider" (quoted in Ho 1).

Desai is often regarded as a feminist writer. She herself, however, does not like being labelled as such, at least if we define feminism as a collective movement, passing off the experiences of women as individuals: in an interview in 1979 she stated, "I find it impossible to whip up any interest in a mass of women marching forward under the banner of feminism. Only the individual, the solitary being, is of true interest" (quoted in Mann 173). However, as Ho (99–101) argues, even though Desai's characters hardly suffer from poor conditions from a purely material point of view, they do face predicaments of other kinds: the social injustice hidden behind the bourgeois façade. One might also question whether it is realistic to expect a single writer to be able to represent India in a way that would be

"representative" of all the more than one billion people living in India (and whether this kind of representation is necessary).

Whether or not it was Desai's intention, *Fasting, Feasting* undeniably highlights the social evils that have affected and still continue to affect the lives of many Indian women. But what kinds of conclusions could we draw from the representation of *men* in the novel? As far as the male characters in *Fasting, Feasting* have been analysed, most critics have concentrated on the question of power, arriving at divergent interpretations. Many critics (such as Prasad 71–80) emphasize the women's inner life, their experience and silent suffering in the suffocating, male-dominated environment, but they do not analyse the actions or the personalities of the male characters in detail; male dominance simply "is there" – as if the male characters in the novel did not really represent this dominance. On the other hand, some critics, such as Devika, argue that male chauvinism is not merely an underlying factor in the novel – the male characters actively oppress the women:

The male characters act as a block in the women's process of finding their self and reaching at some sort of realization. In Anita's fictional world it is the males who rule over these women; they hold the reins of all the females in their family and this spoils the efforts on the part of women to find out on



their own the core of life
(256).

In other words, the role of men is often interpreted as the oppressor (either as active or a faceless group in the background) and the role of women as the oppressed. However, it is also possible to find another dimension in Desai's representation of the gender relations. As Choubey (89) argues, "Desai as a true humanist puts the blame not only on men who are suffering with the complex of male-superiority [sic] but also on women who oppress their kind". Thus, the division of gender roles may be more complex than a simple oppressor/oppressed relationship. I will mostly concentrate on Papa, especially analysing him in his roles as a husband, a father and a "personification" of the patriarchal values of Indian society.

The parents of the Indian family are often referred to as *MamaPapa*, as if they were not separate persons. In their current "Siamese twin existence", the parents hardly even speak about the time before their marriage. As a united team, they have more authority over the children; there is something impressive (if not even threatening) in their appearance:

Having fused into one, they had gained so much in substance, in stature, in authority, that they loomed large enough as it was; they did not need separate histories and backgrounds to make it even more immense (*FF* 6).

The representation of the parents as having 'fused into one' also reflects how complete oneness between a married couple has been idealized in India.

Mama and Papa usually agree with each other on everyday matters. The only thing they debate about is what to have for dinner; however, it is always Mama who has the final word. But when it comes to more significant questions, Papa makes the decisions alone. When Mama falls pregnant at a mature age, Papa turns a deaf ear to her wishes to have an abortion, even though she suffers from severe

nausea. Or, when Uma's eyesight is worsening and the local optician recommends she should consult a specialist in Bombay, it is Papa who firmly rejects this idea. Neither does Papa listen to Mama's protests when he wants to send Arun abroad to study; he does not expect her to understand the opportunities offered by a foreign degree.

Thus, despite their "oneness", Mama and Papa are by no means equal companions. However, by giving birth to a son, Mama is able to elevate her status considerably. After Arun's birth, the parents are "more equal than ever" (*FF* 31). Ironically, Mama herself seems to think of their son merely as Papa's achievement; as the narrator describes, "[m]ore than ever now, she was Papa's helpmeet, his consort. He had not only made her his wife, he had made her the mother of his son. What honour, what status" (*FF* 31). All in all, Papa and Mama follow the traditional roles: they seemingly act as one entity, "MamaPapa", but ultimately, Papa is the head of the family, and Mama subservient to him.

Men often control not only others but also *themselves* in order to assert their masculinity; so does Papa. He hardly shows any kinds of feelings – except for the negative ones. He is characterized by taciturnity, even bad temper; he always finds something to criticize. Papa finds it necessary to keep himself under control; only a few times the family members witness an emotional outburst by Papa. The most peculiar one takes place when Arun is born:

Arriving home, however, he sprang out of the car, raced into the house and shouted the news to whoever was there to hear. Servants, elderly relatives, all gathered at the door, and then saw the most astounding sight of their lives – Papa, in his elation, leaping over three chairs in the hall, one after the other, like a boy playing leap-frog, his arms flung up in the air and his hair flying. 'A



boy!’ he screamed, ‘a boy! Arun, Arun at last!’ (FF, 17)

As Papa tries to affirm his own masculinity, he simultaneously represses any signs of feminine qualities in his personality. Furthermore, such qualities in general seem to irritate him. Papa cannot, for instance, stand any kind of weakness – neither in himself or in the others. As Uma’s eyes start to hurt after writing a letter for Arun (dictated by Papa), Papa despises her – even though he himself has been unwilling to let Uma go to an eye specialist. Papa also tends to show a practical, unemotional point of view on most things, and he dislikes sentimentality. For example, when Arun gets the chance to stay with the Pattons during the summer break from the university, Mama is concerned whether the Pattons will “look after Arun properly” (FF 126); Papa, instead, “glares at her and tells her how fortunate Arun is to have a home offered to him free of charge”.

According to Johnson (190), repressing the feminine qualities in oneself can have tragic consequences for a man’s welfare: ... the more men reject ... the qualities that patriarchal culture associates with women, the more limited their inner and outer lives become. It precludes them from knowing true intimacy with other people, estranges them from their own feelings and the bodies through which feelings are felt, and denies them powerful inner resources for coping with stress, fear, and loss. Needless to say, there certainly is no ‘true intimacy’ between Papa and his family members. A whole other question is, whether Papa is happy with his situation or not. His unhappiness is thus a consequence from his inclination to emphasize his manliness and to suppress those qualities that he associates with femininity. But another factor behind his (supposed) unhappiness is his constant effort to preserve his powerful position, power often entails the fear of losing it. Within the family, Papa’s authority is usually unchallenged, but outside the sphere of the family, Papa feels

insecure. He needs to prove his authority, especially for his colleagues, by showing his skills and physical condition in tennis or by cracking jokes that no one else finds amusing. In reality, Papa is “rattled, shaken by what he saw as a possible challenge to his status” (FF 9).

The depiction of Indian society in *Fasting, Feasting* suggests that life is tough for those who do not meet the standards of a patriarchal society. Uma, who has no success in the marriage marketplace, becomes an outcast, because marriage would have been the only opportunity in her life, considering the fact that she would neither have had the talent or her parents’ support to continue studies and create a career. An outcast from the masculine world, in turn, is portrayed through Ramu, Papa’s nephew. Papa’s brother Bakul has two children: the beautiful and intelligent daughter Anamika, and the son Ramu, who has rejected the conventional way of living and who therefore is considered the black sheep of the family. He is unmarried, and spends his time travelling around; there are even rumours of an alcohol or drug problem. Once he pays an unexpected visit to Uma’s family. Whereas for Uma, the rare visit of her favourite cousin adds variety to the greyness of her everyday life, Mama and Papa cannot share her delight; they are highly disapproving of what they regard as bad manners and impudence. As Ramu takes Uma out for a dinner, the parents are outraged.

Finally, by the time of Aruna’s wedding, Ramu is excluded from the family and society: “No one mentioned Ramu; he was not considered fit for society anymore and had not been sent an invitation” (FF 102). This kind of exclusion from society might result from men’s effort to secure their privilege. As Johnson states, men “are often made invisible when their behavior is socially undesirable and might raise questions about the appropriateness of male privilege(155).” Papa is a paragon of the traditional Indian man, the head of the family. But even though he has power within



the family and a relatively high status in society as well, he shows a constant need to bolster his self-confidence and authority. Mama, although subservient to Papa, is a powerful figure compared to the daughters. The parents clearly ignore their children's emotional needs, but they are not, however, presented as totally inhuman. Rather, using devices of irony and humour, Desai creates an image of the parents as products of their society; they cannot see anything problematic in their actions, as they simply continue the very same traditions they themselves have been accustomed to throughout their lives.

Being a man in India does not automatically mean being privileged; one also has to meet the standards of patriarchal masculinity and support patriarchy, otherwise one ends up in the same situation as Arun, who has to balance between his real opinions and the surrounding values. On the other hand, the characters of Papa and Mr Patton show that a powerful position is not a guarantee of happiness; in their endless effort to affirm their masculinity, they lose their ability to feel true intimacy in their closest personal relationships. Also, the idea of women as innocent victims of patriarchy is proved wrong by Mama and the other female characters (some of whom are even violent against other women). Neither does Mrs Patton correspond to the common conception of an emancipated Western woman: in her marriage, she is not even able to choose the kind of food she likes. The idea presented by Frantz & Rennhak (2010, 2) of female writers constructing "alternative masculinities that are desirable from a woman's perspective", is not very accurate for *Fasting, Feasting*. Desai is not proposing an 'ideal' type of masculinity; instead, all the characters in the novel (both male and female) seem to be, in one way or another, victims of the circumstances.

Works Cited

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