



Gender as a Social Construct

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Abstract

Throughout history women have had to overcome beliefs that they are non-rational, passive, emotional, nurturing, inferior and so forth. It has been claimed by many that a woman is constructed by the society and it is a behavioural issue that women are oppressed in their own families and societies. Anita Desai, an Indian writer, gives language to the reality of the lives of Indian women. She suggests that women in the 'Third World', in particular, are oppressed by the male constructed ideologies of the society. The purpose of this paper is to explore one of Desai's fictions, *Fasting, Feasting*, to see what it suggests about how women are shaped to meet the needs of men and how they challenge their condition to find an identity for themselves. It will precisely focus on what the novel suggests about the impact of Hindutva Movement on women and that in the West, the oppression of women is related to an unreal ideal promoted by big business through the media. Together with this, it will argue that Desai suggests that these women challenge their condition to support Chandra Talpade Mohanty's theory that all 'Third World' women are not passive.

In recent years, measurement of work-related personality characteristics has increasingly become a vital function of human resources in the process of employee selection (Levy, 2011). The domain of personnel assessment from only emphasizes on job-related knowledge, skill, and abilities (KSA's) have expanded by including other personal characteristics, specifically personality traits (Levy, 2011). Assessment of personality characteristics may increase the probability of someone to succeed in their career, if their personality traits match with the career needs (Naemah, 2007). According to Julie (2012), personality is defined as enduring patterns of action or behavior. Personality traits are tendencies of individuals to behave in similar ways across settings and situations (Ones, Viswesvaran, & Dilchert, 2005). Furthermore, Ryckman (2004) suggested personality as a dynamic and organized set of characteristics possessed by an individual that uniquely influences his or her behavior, cognitions and motivations in various situations. For example, personality traits may have an effect on job outcomes such as job performance. The findings from one meta-analysis suggested that personality traits can be dispositional predictors of job performance (Judge & Bono, 2001). This situation might be true among teachers, where they have different capabilities and personality characteristics that later can influence their job performance directly (Siadat, Arbabisarjou, Azhdari, Amiri, & Abooeimehrizi, 2011). It is said that certain teachers who perform well in teaching and providing quality instructional are those who display certain traits of personality, such as outgoing, humour, enthusiasm, and emotional stability (Radmacher &

Martin, 2001). Thus, personality traits are one of the factors that is crucial in delivering effective teaching (Zuhaili, 2009).

In 1952, Simone de Beauvoir asserted that the “representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their point of view, which they confuse with absolute truth” (Bart, 2000). This continues to be the hypothesis for many feminist theories from the 1970s. Gender is a socially constructed attribute of being a male or female and gender despotism is the most serious form of oppression in the human societies which can be noticed in various social realities such as class, ethnic, national and religious, to name a few.

“Each person’s subjectivity is constructed and gendered within the social, economic and political discourses to which they are exposed” (Yieke, 2001, p. 337). Gender is implanted so methodically in our institutions, our proceedings, our thinking, and our desires, that it appears to us to be absolutely innate. When a girl child is born, we tend to buy her presents such as kitchen toy sets, dolls and pink clothes, whereas for a boy, we would look for toy guns, toy cars and other so called ‘masculine’ toys. The basic presumption here is that girls are to stay indoors and keep themselves busy around the home, while the boys are to be active and energetic.

For centuries women have been fighting against assumptions that they are non-rational, patient, sentimental, nurturing, secondary and so on. These personalities have barred females from exposing their talents in the political, social and economic circles. As Virginia Woolf writes in her essay ‘Professions for Women’, during the reign of Queen Victoria, every house had an angel, who was “intensely sympathetic”, “immensely charming” and “utterly unselfish” (Woolf: 1942). The ‘angel’ here refers to an ideal woman and this ‘angel’ constantly reminded women of their responsibilities. Contrary to this view, men are always expected to be tough, vigorous, impersonal, competitive and unemotional. Aristotle, illustrating with the doctrine of Biology, tried to argue that “the man is by nature superior and the female inferior; the one rules and the other is ruled” (Bart, 2000).

“When Beauvoir claims that ‘woman’ is a historical idea and not a natural fact, she clearly underscores the distinction between sex, as biological facticity, and gender, as the cultural interpretation or signification of that facticity” (Butler, 1988, p. 522). To be a woman is to conform to the prescribed behavior. Most of the societies and families even today see women with responsibilities of bearing and upbringing children, managing the home, and attending to the needs of the family.

This paper aims to explore one of Anita Desai’s fictions, *Fasting, Feasting*, to see what it suggests about how women are shaped to meet the needs of men and how they challenge their condition to find an identity for themselves. Desai suggests that women in the ‘Third World’, in particular, are oppressed by the male constructed ideologies of the society. The paper will precisely focus on what the novel suggests about the impact of Hindutva Movement on women and that in the West, the oppression of women is related to an unreal ideal promoted by big business through the media. Together with this, it will argue that Desai suggests that these women challenge their condition to support Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s theory that all ‘Third World’ women are not passive.

Anita Desai, an Indian novelist and short story writer among the other Indian writers in English is acclaimed for her delicate representation of the psychology and struggles of her female characters. She illustrates women in discomfort situations who are bemused with her household responsibilities, her grievances and her circumstances in a society which is usually male dominated. With these characters, Desai makes an appeal for an improved life for women in general.

Fasting, Feasting, a novel by Desai suggests that women are socially constructed by the society at large. It focuses on two societies, an Indian society and an American society, trying to show women as a social construct as the common issue in both. The Indian society shows how women were shaped by the Hindutva Movement, which was “a communal movement to strengthen the social and political power of Hindu elites” (Ram, 1999). Women’s development was a threat to Hindutva, thus they were “considered inferior, religiously polluted, socially ostracized, culturally stigmatized, legally side-lined, physically violated, and psychologically demoralized” (Mendonca, 2004, p. 51). The American society, on the other hand, as suggested by Desai focuses too much on material things, and men tend to neglect the existence of women in their lives. Desai portrays that both societies are somehow common in the treatment of women.

Patriarchy plays a vital role in the study of the novel. According to Abhrams (1999) in his book *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, patriarchy is “male-centered and controlled and is organized in such a way as to subordinate women to men in all cultural domains: familial, religious, political, economic, social, legal and artistic”. In the

case of this novel, the patriarchal dogma of Papa (the male in the family; father) in relation to Mama (mother) and Uma (their daughter) is clearly evident. His paternal thoughts seem to have conquered the expression, reaction and even the movement of the mother and daughter. He thinks he is always in charge: “What would become of his status, his standing, in this town or even in his family, if he gave up these vestiges of his authority and power” (Desai, 1999)? Mama sees Papa as God and so serves him in almost everything. She appears to be willing to fulfill Papa’s needs:

‘Uma, pass your father the fruit’... She picks out the largest orange in the bowl and hands it to Mama who peels it in strips, then divides it into separate segments. Each segment is then peeled and freed of pips and threads till only the perfect globules of juice are left, and then passed, one by one, to the edge of Papa’s plate. ... ‘Where is Papa’s finger bowl?’ She asks loudly... Mama sits back. The ceremony is over. She has performed it. Everyone is satisfied’ (23 – 24).

Using simple speech and uncomplicated structures, Desai has pointed out that there are some women who are ruled by their male partners and they seem to accept the ruling without questioning. Mama is an ideal wife for a patriarchal husband and a traditional selfless woman. Her time and decisions spin around her husband. When he returns from work, all things have to stop and she does her best to please him in carrying out her duties as a wife, “Uma! Uma! Tell cook to bring Papa his lemonade!” (Desai, 1999). Mama’s incompetence in executing her duties as a wife for her husband results in him becoming irritable with her.

Papa’s patriarchal dominance over his wife is quite rigid. This could be because Mama is fearful that she would violate the peace if she did not labour for her husband. Her culture, that is the Hindu Culture, is oppressive here as it defines women’s dharma (spiritual and ethical law governing behavior) as being respectful to their husband and seeing their husband as god. It requires women to be duty bound to their husband and this is what Mama is practising.

Mama’s oppression is also an example of societal oppression. An Indian society is mainly a patriarchal society, where the leader is usually a male. A family is judged by the strength and success of the men in that family and women are expected to support men in whatever endeavors and decisions men undertake. In the novel, Mama does everything in consultation with her husband because she thinks she would be failing in her duties and expectations if she does not do this. A woman is reminded through many ways that she is incapable of making decisions. The Manusmriti, translated in English as the ‘Laws of Manu’, an ancient authoritative text outlining the expectations of women, says: “In childhood a woman should be protected by her father, in youth by her husband, in old age by her son. She does not deserve freedom” (Hawley & Wulff, 1982).

The novel suggests that men are comfortable when women accept their minor role and support them. Papa seems quite comfortable when Mama is serving him because she never protests. His patriarchal nature is seen on many occasions. Mama enjoyed gambling, but “Papa had a high-minded disapproval of all forms of gambling” (Desai, 1999) and she also loved betel nuts, “another indulgence frowned upon by Papa” (Desai, 1999). Due to her husband’s dislike of these things, she had to forgo her desires and continues to be suffocated. When Papa is at work she goes to her neighbour’s and gambles and she makes sure she is back home before he returns from work. “When Papa, back from his office, asked what they had done with themselves all morning, she drooped, sighing, and fanned herself, saying, ‘it was so-o hot, what can one do? Nothing’” (Desai, 1999).

The Victorian norms of the nineteenth century did not permit women to even decide her reproductive health. Mama is not allowed to terminate her late pregnancy. “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? The pregnancy had to be accepted” (Desai, 1999). Papa is not at all concerned about what Mama wants or of her weak condition. All he wants is a son to continue his tradition. He portrays typical attributes of the Indian male who gives priority to sons. From a postcolonial perspective, he treats his wife just as a colonizer would treat a colonized.

In addition to Mama, Desai has used other female characters to further highlight how women are constructed. During the time the novel is set, daughters were expected to behave in a prescribed manner. Uma is a victim of psychological sense of exile and alienation. She is unattractive, not educated, dependent and suffocated by the overbearing parents. She is claustrophobic because she is never left alone and is always guided by her parents. She is not allowed to work, not allowed to meet people, not allowed to travel places, not allowed to have her own opinion and not allowed to have any ambition. Although Uma has a rebellious streak and occasionally asserts herself, the constant presence of MamaPapa makes her wit under pressure. Uma is not bright but she is neither dumb and her aspirations, which unfortunately are not allowed to flourish – are smothered.

Furthermore, the concept of marriage for females is highlighted in this novel. As Uma gets to the marriageable age, Papa takes the responsibility to find a fitting man for her, but Uma proves troublesome to pair off. "Mama worked hard at trying to dispose off Uma, sent her photograph around to everyone who advertised in the matrimonial columns of the Sunday papers, but it was always returned with the comment: we are looking for someone taller/fairer/more educated, for Sanju/ Pinku/ Dimpu" (Desai, 1999). Eventually when a suitor is found, the family is cheated in paying a large amount of dowry and the wedding is cancelled. A second marriage is arranged where Uma seemed to be just an object in her marriage. "Her husband was a merchant and looked as old to her as Papa, nearly, and was grossly overweight too, while his face was pockmarked" (Desai, 1999). The failed marriage infuriates her father who does not consider the sentiments of his daughter who is similarly wounded psychologically by the ordeal she undergoes.

Aside from this, Desai's *Fasting, Feasting* also shows the contrasting culture of the USA, while maintaining the perception that women are socially constructed there too. Melanie, daughter of the Pattons, is shaped by the concept of female perfection and has an inner dissatisfaction due to the societies over emphasis on appearance of women. "Researchers have investigated the link between adherence to traditional feminine ideals and disordered eating, hypothesizing that women with eating disorders may conform to a stereotype of femininity in which women are expected to be submissive, overly concerned with relationships, attractive, and thin" (Ropers-Huilman, 2003). To be the ideal or the beautiful, slim woman the society desires, she starves herself.

Mass media also plays a huge part in the shaping of women. Gender portrayal in the media can reflect "fundamental features of the social structure," (Goffman, 1979) like values, beliefs and norms. In other words, advertising reflects social behaviours. The cultivation theory also suggests that the media plays an essential role in constructing distorted views. "The theory suggests that exposure to media content creates a worldview, or a consistent image of social behavior, norms, values, and structures, based on the stable view of society provided by the media" (Kim & Lowry, 2005, p. 902).

"Researchers have argued that television programs and commercials reinforce conventional gender stereotypes" (Kim & Lowry, 2005, p. 902). "In the United States, most researchers around the world have found that men are likely to be shown in work settings, and women are shown in home settings in television commercials. Moreover, reporters stated that female characters are likely to represent body or household products, whereas male characters are likely to represent automobile or service products" (Kim & Lowry, 2005, p. 904). Thus, the big businesses, through the media, tend to construct gender.

Melanie's mother, Mrs. Patton is also an emotional wreck. She is taken with consumerism and does all the shopping and cooking to feed the unappreciative men and the daughter who cannot eat. She also tries hard to be an ideal, a good wife and a good mother. She is a vegetarian while her husband loves meat. However, her desire to be a vegetarian is ignored by the husband and Mrs. Patton continues to suffer silently.

Apart from showing the oppressive conditions of women, Desai's novel tries to incorporate Chandra Talpade Mohanty's theory that all Third World women are not passive. Some of her female characters do fight the constructed feminine ideologies. For example, in the first part of the novel, unlike their mother, the two daughters try to break free of their condition. Aruna chooses her marriage partner and does not allow her father to do this for her.

Uma also tries to break free of her condition. Occasionally, she is invited to coffee by her neighbours or by Mother Agnes to help in some chores. All these help Uma realize that she is at least of some worth. But the real chance for Uma to prove her worth is an employment opportunity brought by Dr. Dutt, a family friend. However, Papa once again dismisses her interest. "He was locking his face up into a frown of great degree. The frown was filled with everything he thought of working women, of women who dared presume to step into the world he occupied" (Desai, 1999).

Uma is denied the chance to embrace the opportunity that comes her way and she herself stands accused on many occasions. It is evident that Uma wishes to be freed of the enslaved situation she is put in by her colonial minded father, but fails in her venture. She only has her little indulgences like her Christmas cards collection, her collection of bangles and reading Ella Wheeler Wilcox's *Poems of Pleasure*.

In the second setting, Mrs. Patton too fights her situation silently. She gets excited when she finds out that Arun is a vegetarian because that means she now has someone like her. She sees Arun as her escape and tries to get rid of her loneliness and find some identity. She keeps getting some brochures as if in search for something, but her husband disapproves of this as well: "Here's another batch of catalogues come for you. What in God's name

is numerology? Or gemology? Karmic lessons! What's that? Hell, what's this you are getting into" (Desai, 1999)? It is evident that all female characters, but Mama, try and break the ideologies governing them, but they fail because the patriarchal power still proves to be stronger than the battle they put up.

In sum, *Fasting, Feasting* is a novel, which spells out female construction in a variety of ways. It is a tragic tale of females who are trying to survive in a male dominating society. In fact, it is a tragedy for all women because such things do happen in the society today.

All over the world, at one point or another, there has existed discomfort among women about their place and their status in society. Desai's fictions explore how a woman is isolated within her own family and the difficult times she goes through. Her novels are an eye-opener to all women and men as well and prove the point that women's oppression in families, at work place, in education, in the society can no longer be dismissed and treated as a personal matter.

Gender construction can only be avoided if people speak for themselves instead of being submissive. Women, in particular, have to realize the truth that as women are not biologically gentle and nurturing, men are not aggressive and assertive. Simone de Beauvoir (1952) very well captures the essentials of gender when she claims "one is not born, but rather becomes a woman".

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