

Article

## Society Defined Woman: Patriarchy and Gender Role as Depicted in Anita Desai's *Fasting Feasting*

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**Abstract:** Gender issues were profoundly ingrained as patriarchal standards in English literature from the ancient period, when women were confined to domestic roles as spouses, mothers, and caregivers for the family, and males were typically portrayed as warriors, rulers, and breadwinners of the family. Anita Desai's works portray gender issues where women are considered the second sex and they suffer at the hands of men in the form of brothers, fathers, husbands, lovers, or other family members. Anita Desai's *Fasting Feasting* deals with the roles of male and female in two different cultures, the culture of India and that of America. The novel outlines how women are psychologically trapped in a world where men rule and oppress women. She groans that despite gaining independence from colonial authority, India is unable to free its women from the restrictive ideals associated with women. In the novel, men dedicate themselves to education, but women are expected to take up the family responsibilities. Arun's parents willfully satisfy Arun's desire to study in the USA, but Uma is forced to drop her schooling to care for her brother. In Indian society, a girl cannot leave her house without hurdles. The novel *Fasting Feasting* reveals gender issues, focusing on Uma and Arun. The novel illustrates women's lives through the character of Uma, whose personal aspirations are unsatisfied. It also pictures a male-dominated society.

**Keywords:** Gender issues; patriarchal society; hurdles; aspirations

## Introduction

Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting* (1999) looks at the impact of gender roles and expectations on individuals, especially women, in a patriarchal society. The novel follows two siblings, Uma and Arun, whose lives are shaped by family traditions, cultural norms, and gender expectations. While the story is set in India, it also compares these experiences to those in Western cultures, making it applicable to readers worldwide. Through the experiences of Uma and Arun, Anita Desai shows how men and women are treated differently in society. Men enjoy more freedom, while women are expected to sacrifice their desires for the sake of their families. The novel particularly focuses on these roles' emotional and mental effects, primarily on Uma, who struggles with the pressures placed on her. Although the story takes place in India, the message is universal, addressing the challenges women face due to social expectations. Uma's life highlights the domination of women, while Arun's experience in the United States shows that men also deal with emotional and psychological pressures, though in different ways. This paper will explore how Anita Desai analyses gender roles and family structures, accenting their emotional and psychological effects on Uma and Arun.

## Literature Review

Anita Desai is well-known for exploring the inner emotional lives of her characters, especially women who are worried by social and family expectations. Scholars like Ayesha Kidwai (2004) and Rajeswari Sunder Rajan (2015) have written widely about how Anita Desai's characters, particularly women, often feel surrounded by traditional roles. Kidwai (2004) discusses how Uma in *Fasting, Feasting* is portrayed as an "unfulfilled and repressed" woman, symbolising the many women who live within rigid family structures. These roles limit their personal growth and happiness. On the other hand, Sunder Rajan (2015) highlights how Anita Desai critiques Western ideas of freedom, showing that even in more liberal societies, hidden pressures still affect both men and women. This suggests that no society is entirely free from these restrictions.

While much of the academic discussion has focused on the intersection of gender and cultural practices, this paper focuses on the psychological effects of these roles. It looks at how Uma's emotional repression and Arun's sense of alienation in America show the damaging impact of gender expectations. Anita Desai uses both characters to criticise the family structure, suggesting that these harmful expectations shape their identities and prevent them from living fulfilling lives. This paper will explore how these emotional struggles reflect the broader impact of societal pressures on individuals, irrespective of their gender or cultural background.

## Gender Roles in Indian Society

Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting* analyses the strict gender roles in Indian society, where women are often expected to be self-sacrificial, prioritise family, and focus primarily on domestic duties. Through the portrayal of Uma, the novel's central female character, Anita Desai examines how women's lives are often limited to roles of slavery, where their desires, ambitions, and needs are reliably placed at the bottom of the

societal hierarchy. The novel shows a rigid, patriarchal structure in which women are not seen as individuals with their own identities, but rather as additions to their families and the men within them. Uma's life is shaped by the deep-rooted belief that a woman's worth lies in her ability to serve others. Her identity is defined not by her thoughts, desires, or ambitions but by her role as a daughter, caretaker, and later, an obedient daughter-in-law. This often means that she must sacrifice her happiness and personal aspirations to fulfil the familial and societal expectations placed on her. The expectations placed on Uma are reflected in the broader societal trend of limiting women's roles to domestic spheres. This is especially evident when comparing Uma's treatment to her brother, Arun. While Uma's education is disregarded, Arun's academic and career aspirations are nurtured and encouraged. The gendered disparity in how they are treated is a direct reflection of the patriarchal mindset that privileges men's education and potential over women's.

This dynamic reveals the systemic nature of gender inequality in India, where the value of women is often tied to their roles in the household and as caretakers, rather than their intellectual or personal potential. Through Uma's character, Anita Desai highlights the emotional, psychological, and physical toll this rigid gender framework has on women. Women are forced to remain in a constant state of fasting, denying their desires and needs. At the same time, men are granted the freedom to feast on life's opportunities, whether through education, career, or personal growth.

Uma's journey also reflects how these gender roles limit women's autonomy and self-expression. While men in the family, like Arun, are free to seek their futures, women are restricted to a life determined by the family's needs and expectations. This leads to a sense of helplessness and lack of fulfilment, as women, like Uma, are often forced to abandon their dreams, leaving them with a deep emotional void.

Through this portrayal, Anita Desai critiques the familial dynamics and the broader societal structure that perpetuates gender inequality. Her exploration of these themes challenges the reader to reflect on the impact of such a system on women's agency and calls for a rethinking of how societal norms must evolve to allow both men and women the freedom to define their futures, free from the constraints of gendered expectations.

### **Uma's Role as a Daughter and Caretaker**

From a young age, Uma is taught that her primary value lies in her role as a daughter and later as a caretaker. Her education is not considered necessary, and she is expected to be passive and obedient, serving the needs of her family. In contrast, her brother Arun's academic success is ordered, highlighting the gendered division of labour and opportunity. This reflects the wider societal belief that a woman's purpose is to serve and support others, while a man can seek personal success and fulfilment. This unambiguous gender divide marks Uma's life. Her education is an afterthought compared to Arun's, evident when Anita Desai describes Uma's limited schooling. "Her books were handed down to her brother Arun, who consumed them with an eagerness Uma could never understand" (43). While Arun is encouraged to excel academically,

Uma is dismissed as incapable of achieving similar success. Her family sees her as less worthy of an education and more suited to domestic duties, strengthening the societal belief that women's roles are confined to the home.

Uma's experience mirrors the lived reality of many women in Indian society, where their identities are closely tied to their roles in the family rather than their potential. This is emotionally illustrated when Uma's parents decide that Arun, not Uma, should go abroad to study, thus denying her any chance for personal or academic advancement. Anita Desai writes, "Uma had always known that her parents' love for her brother Arun was far greater than their affection for her. Arun was their hope and pride, the bright future they had never been able to shape for themselves" (56). Here, Uma's parents view her brother as fulfilling their unfulfilled ambitions. At the same time, Uma is expected to remain behind to care for the family, supporting the patriarchal idea that the male child is the carrier of family legacy and future success. She is raised in a system that restricts her ability to explore the world outside the home, fostering a mindset of self-sacrifice and duty. Uma is repeatedly told that her primary responsibility is to take care of her family, rather than to seek fulfilment in her own life. After being denied her desires and opportunities, Anita Desai underscores this when Uma thinks, "She was not allowed to wish or dream; her life was shaped by others' wishes and dreams" (102). This is not just an external restriction but an adopted belief that she is of less value than her male counterparts and that her happiness is secondary to the well-being of others.

As Uma's story explains, it becomes evident that her education and dreams are suspended, while her brother is allowed to flourish in ways she is not. Her entire life becomes a series of sacrifices. Uma's future, which is dictated by her familial responsibilities, is shaped by the expectations placed on her because of her gender. She is not seen as an individual with her hopes or desires but as an extension of the family, whose role is to serve and give to others. Anita Desai effectively demonstrates how Uma's sense of self is subsumed by her obligations, with little room for self-expression or personal growth. When Uma's parents discuss her future, there is little mention of her potential beyond the home. The focus is entirely on what she can do for others, showing how her life is defined by her family's needs rather than her aspirations. Her exclusion from important family decisions, like her brother's future, speaks to her marginalisation. Anita Desai writes, "Uma's life was fixed in a pattern, a pattern that was already set by others long before she could form any wishes or desires of her own" (72). This statement summarises the suffocating nature of the role Uma is expected to play. Still, her will is never considered, and she is forever trapped in the mould of self-sacrifice.

### **The Unequal Treatment of Sons and Daughters**

A particularly touching moment in the novel is when Uma's father sends Arun to the United States for further studies. At the same time, Uma is expected to stay behind and care for the family. Anita Desai remarked, "Uma had always known that her parents' love for her brother Arun was far greater than their affection for her. Arun was their hope and pride, the bright future they had never been able to shape for

themselves" (56). These words highlight a crucial theme of the novel: the disparity between how sons and daughters are valued. Arun is viewed as the family's hope for success, an investment in the future that Uma, due to her gender, is denied.

In Indian society, it is common for daughters to be seen as temporary family members, expected to marry and move into another family. The unequal treatment is a reflection of deeply ingrained patriarchal values that prioritise male children. This is particularly visible in Uma's case, as she is expected to stay behind and care for her parents, while Arun is allowed to pursue his education and ambitions. The expectations placed on Uma and Arun reveal the harsh reality that gender meaningfully impacts one's access to opportunities, shaping the course of their lives in fundamentally unequal ways.

### The Symbolism of Fasting and Feasting

The novel's title, *Fasting, Feasting*, is deeply symbolic of the gendered nature of sacrifice and fulfilment. While women like Uma are expected to "fast," or reject their desires, men are encouraged to "feast" on life's opportunities, enjoying society's benefits. This symbolic contrast reinforces the cycle of deprivation and duty that women experience. Women are expected to put others' needs ahead of their own, often at the cost of their personal growth or happiness. The fasting symbolises self-restraint, deprivation, and women's sacrifice to maintain the family's wellbeing. In contrast, feasting represents tolerance, opportunity, and freedom, a space reserved for men in the traditional gendered division of roles.

Uma's life is an example of the "fasting" that women in her position must undergo. She is emotionally and psychologically starved as she sacrifices her dreams and desires for the sake of her family. This is not just a physical deprivation but a denial of her individuality. Her every need is neglected as she becomes a mere caregiver and nurturer, defined by her relationships with others rather than her sense of self.

### The Psychological Toll of Gendered Expectations

In *Fasting, Feasting*, Anita Desai illustrates how the oppressive social system limits women's freedom and stunts their emotional development. Women like Uma are often conditioned to suppress their frustration, sadness, and desire to fulfil their roles as caretakers. This emotional repression takes a toll on their mental health, leading to a sense of unfulfillment and alienation. Uma's inability to break free from the constraints placed upon her reflects the broader societal tendency to deny women agency and autonomy.

Uma's gendered division of roles is not unique to her character but reflects a broader societal structure. In her article "Gender and Society in India," Nandini Sundar explores the role of women in traditional Indian society, noting how gender roles are often tied to the concepts of family honour and duty. She quotes, "In a patriarchal society, a woman's identity is often defined by her relationships to the family, and she is expected to uphold the household's reputation" (Sundar, 2005). This resonates with Uma's experiences, where her worth is continually measured by her ability to care for others, particularly her male relatives. Leela Dube's work in *Women and Kinship* also



provides insight into the intersection of gender, caste, and class in Indian society. Dube argues that women's roles within the family are often dictated by societal expectations that limit their independence. She remarks, "The family is the primary site of socialisation, and it is in this context that girls learn their roles as caregivers and nurturers" (Dube, 2002). Uma's life reflects this very reality as she is taught from a young age to prioritise the needs of others over her own and to accept the familial role assigned to her without question.

## Conclusion

Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting* offers a deep evaluation of the gender roles in society, showing how these roles limit personal freedom and harm emotional and psychological well-being. Through the different experiences of Uma and Arun, Anita Desai explains how family and society shape and control the lives of both men and women, unmindful of the cultural setting. While Uma's life highlights the emotional and mental struggles of living in a patriarchal society, Arun's experience in the United States reveals that even in more modern societies, men are also affected by the pressures of family duty, though in different ways. Anita Desai's focus on gender roles encourages readers to think about how deeply cultural expectations shape who people are, their dreams, and their self-esteem. The novel challenges readers to question the price of these expectations, often leading to feelings of emotional isolation, disconnection, and dissatisfaction. The emotional burden of living under these pressures is shown clearly in the novel, revealing that gender roles are not just societal rules but powerful forces that affect people's lives in significant ways. By placing Uma in traditional India and Arun in modern America, Anita Desai shows that the struggle against societal norms is not limited to one culture or society. Both characters face pressures different from those in their environments. However, they share a similar inner conflict: a struggle for self-realisation, identity, and emotional fulfilment in the face of overwhelming family and social expectations. Anita Desai critiques Indian and Western cultures, suggesting that while cultural influences may differ, the result is the same: gendered expectations limit individual freedom and create emotional barriers.

In conclusion, *Fasting, Feasting* encourages readers to rethink how gender roles affect identity, emotional health, and personal growth. It calls for reevaluating the cultural systems that define gender and family roles, urging readers to examine how these systems affect personal agency and fulfilment critically. Through Uma and Arun's experiences, Anita Desai shows that the real cost of these gendered expectations is not just limiting opportunities but also causing deep emotional and psychological harm. The novel serves as a reminder that while society may change, the emotional impact of these roles continues to shape the lives of both men and women, urging us to think about how to create more fair and compassionate environments for future generations.

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