

FASTING FEASTING: AN INTEGRATED APPROACH TOWARDS LIFE

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ABSTRACT

Fasting Feasting, a well-known novel of Anita Desai, published in 1999, portrays such female characters who do not create balance between values and rights in their lives. Through these characters, Anita Desai, the prolific writer of *Fasting Feasting*, has presented a message that if we need a progressive society, we need to empower our children with the tools of real knowledge, self-regulating powers and make them independent so that they can lead a balanced life that is the mantra of successful and happy life. The aim of present paper is to underline the importance of having an integrated approach towards life. Such perspective is not only imparted through education but also through right upbringing which contributes a lot in the formation of personality of an individual being.

andham tamah pravasanti
ye vidyam upasate
tato bhuya iva te tamo
ya u vidayam ratah.

This mantra of Sri Ishopanisad is highly relevant for modern man who remains in constant pursuit of real happiness and knowledge, but to get it becomes a far-fetched idea for him. This mantra suggests a comparative study of vidya or real knowledge and Avidya or ignorance. Avidya is really dangerous but vidya proves more dangerous when it is mistaken or misguided. Thus, a holistic and integrated view is needed to maintain balance in life. In human life, rights and values serve as complement to each other; for the proper use of rights one needs to have values. Values without awareness of rights make a person feeble and weak. Thus, for the development of a healthy personality, one needs to create balance between values and rights. In the present scenario, the younger generation undermines the importance of values but claim a lot for its rights. The need of time is to create balance between values and rights because blind adherence to values and unawareness of rights also leads to fatal end.

Fasting Feasting, a well-known novel of Anita Desai, published in 1999, also portrays such female characters that do not create balance between values and rights in their lives. Uma, the

protagonist of the novel, is an embodiment of values, but unaware of her own rights. Her ignorance regarding her rights may be blamed due to her inability to receive even her primary education completely. She loves school and learning but due to her weak grasping power, she remains an abject scholar. Her constant efforts to secure pass marks in exams prove futile when her mother advises Uma in a very traditional tone. "You will be happier at home. You won't need to do any lessons. You are a big girl now. We are trying to arrange a (sic) marriage for you Till then, you can help me look after Arun. And learn to run the house" (*Fasting Feasting*, 22). Such conservative and rigid attitude of her parents casts a negative impact on her personality as they don't allow her to go to school. Despite being a failure many times, Uma wanted to pursue her education. Her ardent desire for learning is perceptible through her miserable behavior when she confronted Mother Agnes:

Uma hurled herself at Mother Agnes, threw her arms around her waist, hid her face in the starched white cotton skirts and howled aloud. She was messy weeper: her face was wet, her hair distraught. Her mouth was twisted and her eyes and nose ran. She knotted her hands in Mother's skirts and girdle. 'Mother, oh Mother', she wailed, and when Mother Agnes tried to pluck off her skirts and hold her aside. She flung herself down at the nun's sandaled feet and lay on the floor, abjectly wailing (27).

In initial stage, Uma shows some signs of rebellious attitude when she points out to her mother that, "Ayah had looked after her and Arun as babies" (30) and demands her right to get education. She reacts vehemently while getting instructions from her mother regarding the care of her brother Arun. But her mother's stern behavior compels her to suppress her feelings. Afterwards, such repression of feelings results in disease and turns her life into a series of failures. Thus Uma's parents imposed their will on her and failed to consider her uniqueness and different needs. If she was not good at studies, her parents would have given her any vocational training or any other opportunity to explore herself. She was not even allowed to step out of the house alone and her parents were against her friendship with Mother Agnes, Mrs. O'Henry, Dr. Dutt and other nuns who provided her opportunity to explore her ability. Uma tries to assert her individuality by accepting the invitation of Mrs. O Henry in assisting her in the Christmas Bazar. Though it is the first occasion in Uma's life when she went against her parent's decision but after attending that shop, she achieves self-confidence and a hope of new possibilities occurs in her life. She thinks:

A CAREER. Leaving home. Living alone. These troubling, secret possibilities now entered Uma's mind-as mama would have pointed out had she known whenever Uma was idle. They were like seeds dropped on the stony, arid land that Uma inhabited. Sometimes, miraculously, they sprouted forth the idea. Run away, escape. But Uma could not visualize escape in the form of a career. What was a career? She had no idea (131).

Thus, Uma was not as dull as her parents thought her to be. She used to perform all the tasks skillfully assigned by her mother. But deprivation of education creates a loophole in her personality and breeds inferiority complex in her. Though her mind holds the potentiality to learn more, her doubts regarding her capacity and restrictions of her parents restrain her from expanding the horizon of her knowledge. She does not develop an awareness regarding her rights.

Anamika, the cousin of Uma, is a perfect amalgamation of beauty and sensibility. She is so brilliant and studious that she has won the scholarship of Oxford University where only "the most favoured and privileged sons could ever hope to go"(68)! Anamika's parents do not allow her to avail this scholarship and go abroad. Her marriage was their main priority. She also does not insist on going abroad because she does not want to go against the wish of her parents. But being an educated girl, had she made some efforts to convince her parents, she would have not met such a fatal end. Anamika is educated but not aware of her rights. She is not bold enough to raise her voice against injustice. Rather she sacrifices herself on the altar of false values. Her education is confined only to books; it does not empower her. In the Bhagwad Gita , the real aim of education is clearly stated when Sri Krishna motivates Arjuna to apply the knowledge and to get the solution of his problems. This is clear from the 63rd verse of the 18 chapter, where Sri Krishna says:

Iti te jnanam akhyatam guhyataram maya
Vimrsyaitad asesena yatecchasi tatha kuru.

Thus, Anamika gets her degrees but her education and upbringing does not enable her to take decision, and to realize her real self. She does not make the best use of her knowledge when she is required to do so.

In the character of Uma and Anamika, one similarity is perceptible - i.e. both of them are full of values but unaware of their rights. They follow the diktat of their parents blindly and accept their

decisions without grudging and questioning them.

Aruna, the younger sister of Uma, stands in sharp contrast to Uma and Anamika. Though Uma and Anamika are brought up in patriarchal social system, Aruna is naturally active and conscious of her future and rights because she was not forced to mould her personality according to the wishes of her parents. She gets freedom to move with her friends and gets an opportunity to complete her education. Though her character is not full of values but her awareness regarding her rights makes her character more assertive. Her character illustrates the “custom of leading a procession with a decorated dead body for the pleasure of lamenting relatives” (Sri Isopanishad 9). In the same way, Aruna wants to cover the perpetual miseries of her materialistic existence through a patchwork of activities. Her life is empty from inside. All her achievements can be summed up in a few words “a house at Juhu beach on looking the sea, children studying in good convents, shopping from Singapore” (109). These materialistic attainments lure her heart and she hardly thinks about values. She is highly practical and clear about her destinations; she means to achieve success in life. She misses no chance of scolding her parents and her husband Arvind. “She had a vision of a perfect world in which all of them- her own family members as well as Arvind’s -were flaws she was constantly uncovering and correcting in her quest for perfection”(109).

Through education Aruna has become bold and self-confident. She does not care for obsolete values of society. She protests even against her mother in Anamika’s case. Her mother thinks, if Anamika’s parents bring her back in their house. “What will people say? What will people think?”(71). At this point Uma remains silent but Aruna reacts aggressively and says, “who cares, what they say? Who cares what they think” (72). Thus, Aruna is a strong character but somewhat devoid of values.

Through the inclusion of such a practical character as Aruna, Anita Desai has underlined the importance of creating a balance and an integrated approach towards life. She has emphasized the role of parents in the formation of the personality of a child. Through the character of Uma and Anamika, Anita Desai has diverted the attention of her readers from traditional parenting to new approach of parenting in which they provide enough freedom to their children to take decisions. She has presented a message that if we need a progressive society, we need to empower our children with the tools of real knowledge, self-regulating powers and make them independent so that they can know their rights and are able to differentiate between value and exploitation. The goal of education and parenting should be to create human awareness regarding rights as well as inculcate moral values in children.

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