

# A Mother's Involvement in Preserving Patriarchal Power in Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting*

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## Abstract

*The issue of women's oppression is an actual issue which provokes endless discussion. This issue is the domain of feminist's struggle until now. There are many theories of feminism in literature. This article employs psychoanalytic feminism approach to examine the relation between women's oppression and women's psyche to finally reveal that a mother (Mama) is involved in preserving the power of patriarchy in the family through her typical treatments toward her daughters (Uma and Aruna). Three conclusions can be drawn. Firstly, Mama is depicted as a narrow-minded, insecure, and status-oriented woman. Uma is an alienated, inferior and curious daughter. Aruna is a superior, status-oriented, and beauty-addicted daughter. Secondly, Mama's treatment reflects patriarchal values. She prioritizes her son to get nutritious food and qualified education. Mama burdens her daughters with great responsibilities to take care of the house, gives them less freedom for self-expression, and teaches them that women's self-worth is determined by their physical attractiveness. Thirdly, there are two factors underlying Mama's involvement in preserving the power of patriarchy. The first factor is the influence of her mother who made distinctive treatments based on gender toward her children. The second factor is the influence of tradition that addresses child-rearing responsibilities to mothers. Fathers only set the rules, they do not participate in this duty. Mama passes this role down to her daughters. As a result, she is involved in preserving patriarchal power.*

**Keywords:** patriarchal power, psychoanalytic feminism, Anita Desai

## Introduction

Every human was born in a family. They grow up in a family, by nature they want to build a family and spend their life with their loved ones in the family. Throughout history, family holds a prominent role in shaping human life. Lawrence Wilson, MD, an activist of children development, gives the reason as he states,

*The family unit – principally a man and a woman living together in harmony and peace – is and always will be the basic social organization or unit of any society. This relationship alone provides stability in a sexual, emotional, intellectual and social way as no other can (drwilson.com, 2013).*

The existence of all human beings starts without doubt in a family. Family is a place where they can find love and establish their existence. Undoubtedly, family is valued as the best place to get a great happiness in life.

However, family can also be felt as a hell for some people. Instead of being a source of happiness, it can turn to be a source of terrors. This condition may occur when its members no longer feel accepted, loved, and find their existence as human beings. The loss of harmony in a family is marked by conflicts among its members. This chaotic condition is illustrated in the Bible as Jesus said, "They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-

law against mother-in-law" (Luke 12:53). The happiness turns into bitterness when there are many conflicts of interest within family members. Mismanaged conflicts create great harm on the relationship among them and finally lead to a family breakdown.

Parents are considered as the key persons behind either harmony or destruction of their family. Due to their position and authority, they are highly demanded to resolve various conflicts in the family. Parents also have a major role to form their children personality. As a famous proverb says, "Like father, like son," parents themselves are the role models for their children. Karen Stephen, an instructor of children development argues, "Children in general do tend to grow up to be a lot like their parents. Social scientists and genetic researchers have identified many cycles that loop from one generation to next" (easternflorida.edu, 2015). Thus, parents' behaviors are primary influences on developing good characteristics of their children. If they want their children grow up to be good persons who faithfully hold the principles of equality and justice, they should make themselves the models of these values.

A question may appear, "Can equality and justice really exist in a family?" Up to now, most families in the world still adopt principles of patriarchy. They do not accept equal status of women and men in family life. In patriarchal societies, the figures of father take control over women and children in the family. It is difficult to eradicate the system since it has been deeply rooted in human culture.

Patriarchal societies put men on higher position while women on the lower rank. Women become second-class citizen since they are considered as innately inferior to men, less intelligent, less rational, less courageous and so forth. Patriarchal system frequently disadvantages women psychologically, socially and economically. This condition is portrayed in Anita Desai's Novel, *Fasting, Feasting*. The novel is divided into two parts. The first part focuses on the life of Uma, the eldest daughter of a middle class family living in a small town in India.

She is neither attractive nor bright. Her father takes all decisions about the family matters including his children's lives. Her parents, whom she perceived as an inseparable entity, 'Mama Papa', treat her inhumanly. They see Uma failed in meeting their high expectations about a perfect daughter. The second daughter of the family, Aruna, is more beautiful, intelligent and confident. Even though the parents also show little care on her, she seemingly has a better luck. Marriage proposals from wealthy men pour in for her. Apparently, Mama is prouder of Aruna than of Uma.

The second highlights the life of Arun, Uma's youngest brother. He is very lucky for getting support from his parents to pursue a higher education in America. When he lives in an American suburban family, he notices the only daughter of the family, Melanie, suffers from bulimia. She lacks attention from her parents.

Desai's *Fasting, Feasting* actually reflects different side of a home in male-dominated societies. As depicted in the story, in such societies family becomes a source of terrors than a comfort shelter especially for daughters. Uma, the main protagonist tries hard to get freedom in her own family, but her attempts bring nothing than failures. The father only concerns about Arun, the only son of the family. He frequently criticizes and neglects Uma, because of which Uma feels abandoned, lonely and depressed. Mama who is expected to run her role as her children protector unexpectedly appears as a combatant strengthening Papa's dominance in the family.

It is quite interesting to know why a mother can position herself as the extension of the oppressor and why she refuses to show solidarity and compassion to her own daughter. Those questions may appear due to the fact that as a woman living in a patriarchal family, she is indeed a victim of patriarchy. The concepts of men's power still exist in Indian families today. Up to now, Indian women struggle for freedom and equal status. After marriage, Indian women must directly face some difficulties. It is stated that

In certain parts of Indian society, women are conditioned from birth to be subservient not only to their future husbands, but also to the females in their husband's family especially, their mother-in-law. Accordingly, the surrounding society mandates a woman's obedience to her husband and her in-laws. Any disobedience would bring disgrace to both, the wife herself and her originating family, and might lead to the woman being ostracized and neglected by her very own family and in her own home (saarthakindia.org, 2015).

It is also interesting to know what women feel while they are living under men's power regarding to their position as a wife. This condition may further affect their attitude toward their children – daughters and sons of patriarchal families. However, the relation between the figure of mother and son in *Fasting, Feasting* is not discussed further since the focus of research deals with mother- daughter relationship. The relation between the female characters, Mama-Uma-Aruna, is more explored as it is closely related with the research focus.

In order to find the answer, a psychoanalytic feminism approach is absolutely needed since it helps to comprehend relation between women oppression and human's psyche. In this study, Mama's characteristic to faithfully stand for the oppressor is analyzed by revealing internal factors behind her acts. As Michael Ryan says,

*Our self are complex, and they are not what they appear to be. Our conscious awareness is only part of what our "self" is. Our past, our personal history, is crucial in determining what we are, yet it exists for our consciousness only as fragments of memory. The practice of psychoanalysis aims to recover the past events and relationships have shaped us, it allow us to take control of things that might have control over us because we are unaware of how much influence they exert on our current behavior (2012: 44).*

His approach is a good guidance to understand the complexity of mother

personality in patriarchal societies. Through the perspective of psychoanalytic feminism, mother's involvement in preserving patriarchal power can be understood thoroughly and deeply. This study attempts to find out the answer to the following questions: (1) How are the female Indian characters, Uma-Mama-Aruna, described in Desai's *Fasting, Feasting?*; (2) How does Mama's treatment toward Uma and Aruna reflect patriarchal values?; and (3) What underlies Mama's involvement in preserving the patriarchal power?

On the definition of psychoanalytic feminist criticism Naomi Schor defines that "[the criticism is] centering on the oedipal relationship (mother- daughter, and less frequently, father-daughter) as they are represented in works of literature" (1981:204). This approach cannot be separated from the theory of psychoanalysis firstly introduced by Sigmund Freud. According to Freud, women's powerlessness come from the absence of a penis alone. In his theory, Freud does not consider the influence of cultural background as an important factor in forming feminine personality. He concludes that gender is biological. Many feminists criticize the classical theory of psychoanalysis due to the absence of women's perspective of their own life. They argue that women's powerlessness to men has little to do with women's biological differences, rather it is closely related to the social construction on femininity (Mciver, 2009:3).

This research specifically uses Nancy Chodorow's theory on psychoanalysis which provides method to investigate and understand how people develop and experience themselves and other. About Chodorow, in her thesis Victoria Mciver points out

*Chodorow revised Freud's theory by critically evaluating the formation of feminine and masculine identities". She examined how gendered subjects, boys and girls, are produced, not on the basis of anatomical distinction between the sexes, as reflected in Freud's theory of sexuality, but on the basis of object relationships*

*and the cultural construction of family dynamics (Mciver, 2009:14).*

## Theory of Patriarchy

Andrew Edgar and Peter Sedgwick define patriarchy as “The way in which societies are structured through male domination over and oppression of women. Patriarchy therefore refers to the ways in which material and symbolic resources (including income, wealth, power) are unequally distributed between men and women, through such social institution as the family, sexuality, the state, the economy, culture and language (1999:269).

In patriarchal societies, power is associated with men’s special property. In a small scope, family structure, the power and authority to control all of the family members remain entirely in the hands of men. On the contrary, women are kept away from the power system. They are placed in condition of being oppressed in which prompts “the feeling of powerlessness, discrimination and experience of limited self-esteem and self-confidence” (Sultana, 2011:7). It is an indisputable fact that men benefit in all things from patriarchy. Conversely, women are suffered due to their unfavorable and inferior position in all fields.

Particularly in India, the country where the story takes place, women are oppressed throughout their lives because the rules, social mores and values mostly stand for men’s favor. On the their article about the real practice of patriarchy in India, Pamela S. Johnson and Jennifer A. Johnson state,

*India is a society governed by a system where males hold the power include feticide, the disproportionate gender ratio, the fact that most women are not allowed to be employed, and the belief that from birth until death a woman’s role is to serve men. It is recognized that patriarchy and the control and dominance of women by men have significant roles to play in the violence perpetrated against women (2001:1053).*

In this country, daughters are often regarded as burdens. Conversely, sons are regarded as investment. The poor judgment on women is deeply rooted in Indian tradition, known as the dowry system. Dowry is one way flow of goods from bride’s family to grooms’ family as compensation for the groom’s family for taking on the economic burden, i.e. the bride (Johnson, 2001:1056). It is the answer of why sons are highly valued by Indian family than daughters. Through them, the family receives dowry which they themselves may determine the amount. Johnson (2001:1056) adds “... most often it is the groom’s family that sets the dowry. It is believed that the larger the dowry offered, the better the bride’s family appears to the community at large. Large dowries also assure that more desirable husbands can be found”.

Boys and girls of Indian family mostly receive unequal treatment in term of educational opportunity. Women are dependent economically on men. Girls are prepared for marriage, not for becoming earning members of their family. Then, education is not seen as women’s basic necessity. On this matter Ramandeep Kaur proposes,

*In most of the families, boys at home are given priority in terms of education but girls are not treated in the same way. Right from the beginning, parents do not consider girls as earning members of their family, as after marriage they have to leave their parents’ home. So their education is just considered as a wastage of money as well as time. For this reason, parents prefer to send boys to schools but not girls (mapsofindia.com, 2013).*

Women receive less opportunity to develop their minds and talents because patriarchal societies want to keep them subordinated in a number of ways.

Historically, the principle of patriarchy has been fundamental to every segment of human life. Patriarchal concepts exist in social, legal, political, and economic organization of all nations and absolutely also in literary works. There are many stories

which take patriarchal society as the setting and women's oppression as the theme. Literature can be used as a means to construct the idea of men-domination over women. Nevertheless, literature can also be used as a means to reconstruct the idea about male-power and spread the idea of women's freedom.

### **Mother-Daughter Relationship**

Mothers and daughters have a complex relationship. Mothers are daughters, and daughters have a potency to become mothers. Commonly mothers want to change her daughters to be like them, even to be their role models. Nancy Chodorow as quoted by Hirsch states,

*Mothers identify more strongly with female infants, seeing them more as extensions of themselves, whereas they encourage boys to become separate and autonomous. Ego boundaries between mother and daughters are more fluid (1981:206).*

Through self-identifying to their daughters, mothers promote differentiation based on gender toward their children. Mothers and daughters are connected strongly to each other. The condition results in a problem of separation and individuation for daughters (Chodorow, 1974:48). Therefore, it is difficult for daughters to express their true self – their own personality, without their mother's shadow.

The close relation between mother and daughter is expressed clearly in mothering. According to the tradition in most societies, mothers are the ones who should be responsible for child-rearing. Fathers, on the other hand, are free from this duty. They only set the rules. The condition is described by Adrienne Rich when she says that motherhood is actually an institution in patriarchy. It is unique female experiences shaped by male expectations (Hirsch, 198:206). The task of child-rearing is passed down from mothers to daughters. Judith Arcana, as quoted by Hirsch, says, "[what] all our mothers teach us is what they have learned in the crucible of sexism. They cannot

give us a sense of self-esteem which they do not possess" (1981:213). A mother who adopts patriarchal mindset in raising her daughter may produce a daughter who potentially adopts the same mindsets. The mindset turns into real action when the daughter becomes a mother. In other words, a mother with low self-esteem presumably emphasizes women's powerlessness and limitation on her daughter.

Mothering can be seen as a device to spread the concept of women's secondary status. Commonly, mothers teach their daughters about women's roles which are mostly related to domestic sphere. Nancy Chodorow points out, "in mothering, a woman acts also on her personal identification with a mother who parents and her own training for women's role" (2002:13). A woman who finally becomes a mother undergoes dual identification process, with her own mother and with her daughters. The treatments toward her daughter are largely formed by the experience she had before with her mother. Therefore, women's oppression is like a cycle, always repeated again and again, from generation to generation – from mothers to daughters.

Mother-daughter relationship has become a major theme in many literary works. It might happen for the reason that all women writers are daughters, and many of them are mothers. Their natural fascination with the emotional bonds between daughters and mothers has led them to create stories about complex and varied relationships of mother-daughter. Hirsch states that, "the story of mother- daughter relationships has been written even if it has not been read, that it constitutes the hidden subtext of many text" (1981:214).

### **The Description of Mama, Uma, and Aruna**

#### **Mama as a Daughter**

As a daughter of patriarchal family, Mama is acquainted with poor attention and limited condition. In her family, sons deserve

all the best, while daughters do not. Mama recalls, "...in my days girls in the family were not given sweets, nuts, good things to eat. If something special had been bought in the market, like sweets or nuts, it was given to the boys in the family" (6).

She also was conditioned to be less educated and less experienced. Her parents restricted her from getting formal education. They only got a tutor to teach her some skills which she took no interest in and consequently she has limited sphere of thinking (18). Mama believes she is not capable to build a living outside the house. She thinks that the happier place for a woman is at home (22). She grew up to be a narrow-minded woman.

### **Mama as a Wife**

After Mama gets married, apparently the condition does not change. She still lives within a community in which only men can hold positions of power and prestige. Mama believes that marriage is the ultimate goal of women. She cannot stand for independent life performed by other female characters in the story. She dislikes Mira-masi who bravely expresses her freedom by taking a spiritual journey as a Shiva worshipper. She also dislikes Dr Dutt, an unmarried woman whose life is dedicated to education and career (141). She always refuses ideas that seem too modern. She perceives those ideas as serious threats to traditional values. In her opinion, all Indian women must tie themselves in a marriage, and domestic affairs. By doing so, they take responsibility for keeping the tradition.

In *Fasting, Feasting*, Mama is portrayed as a submissive wife. Papa plays significant role which shape this characteristic. Coming from a very poor family, he worked very hard to climb the social ladder and made a better life for himself and his family. Authority, wealth and social status are crucial to him (5). Papa ignores anyone who dares to challenge his power and authority. These conditions form Mama's behavior day by day. She totally accepts Papa's authority over her otherwise she will lose him.

The characteristics of Mama as a submissive wife is presented by Desai through her action and reaction toward Papa's will. She makes hard effort to fulfill Papa's need. Furthermore, she allows him to take leadership in their relationship. She rarely speaks up her mind because she believes Papa's words are more than enough to describe her mind and feeling.

She knows that a woman will not be valued as a good wife if she cannot produce a male heir. When Arun is conceived, Mama feels the pregnancy is painful that she is about to terminate it. Since Papa wants a son she accepts the pain. She wants to perform her submission and make him satisfied.

*More than ever now, she was Papa's helmet, his consort. He had not only made her his wife, he had made her the mother of his son. What honor, what status. Mama's chin lifted a little into air, she looked around her to make sure everyone saw and noticed. She might have been wearing a medal (31).*

However, in reality Mama has another intention behind her sacrifice. She is actually trying to raise her social status to be 'the mother of a son' (15).

In *Fasting, Feasting*, Desai also seems to present Mama as a status-oriented person. She provides description of Mama's struggle for enhancing social status. Being a wife of an attorney brings about a feeling of being more important than other women. She manages her look very carefully to look matched with Papa. Mama has excessive concerns with her appearance especially when she accompanies Papa attending special occasions. Her purpose is to make him proud of having her as a wife.

Her submissiveness actually does not come from her true respect to Papa. Rather, it comes from insecure feeling in the relationship with him. She actually keeps an inner struggle for seeking her own power in the structure of patriarchy. She fears of being rejected by Papa and the community. She is certain that her value merely depend on how

well she is able to do what is required by her husband.

From the above description, it can be concluded that Mama actually hides a feeling of insecurity. This feeling can be identified through some clues.

The first clue is her anxiety to make mistakes. It can be seen from how she treats Arun in order to please her husband. Mama developed a nervous fear of Arun's feeding: the exercise always left her spent, and after it she still had to face Papa's interrogation regarding its success or failure (32).

The second clue is her tendency to repress her own interest. When Papa goes for work, Mama often slips away to play cards games with other women in the neighborhood. It is the only chance she can laugh loudly and show her playful side. However, when Papa gets home, she pretends that she did not leave the house that day (7). In such an occasion and only among a group of women she knows well, Mama dares to slightly express her interest. Above all, by observing her actions a conclusion can be drawn. Mama has a serious problem to show her true self.

### **Mama as a Mother**

Mama is depicted as an unfair mother. She gives unequal treatment toward her daughters and her only son. Since his birth, Arun becomes a great pride of Mama. Because of his presence, Mama gets honorable status as 'the mother of a son' (31). Uma and Aruna are treated as burdens. Both of them receive little cares poor from their parents. Mama encourages Uma and Aruna to be familiar with limited condition in all aspects. She wants them have similar experiences with her own experience as a daughter.

Having not gone to school herself, she strongly objects to Papa's decision to send Uma and Aruna to a convent school. She shouts, "What ideas they [the nuns] fill in the girls' head! I always said don't send them to a convent school. Keep them at home, I said – but who listened?" (29). She has a belief that

their best place is at home, and their value is in domestic abilities. Nevertheless, she supports Arun to get higher education abroad. She considers it as future capital for increasing social status of the family. Then, from her utterances can be concluded that Mama does not see the importance of education for her daughters. She is not aware the main purpose of education – to liberate human's mind.

As a mother, Mama wants her daughters have the same qualities like hers. She teaches her daughter the importance of being a submissive wife. After Anamika, Uma's cousin, got miscarriage, Uma thinks it is better for her to live with her parents than with her husband's family. Uma and Aruna know that Anamika has been betrayed regularly by her husband and mother-in-law. Surprisingly Mama shows different reaction to this case. She insists that Anamika must not leave her husband although her life is threatened (71).

Mama gives more attention on the social status of her daughters' suitors. Their status is assumed as something more important than their personal qualities. She hopes her daughters marry into a respectable and wealthy family. Despite Uma's clumsiness may give rise difficulties to find a husband, Mama still concerns with seeking a man with good social or economic background for Uma. The first suitor comes from Mrs. Joshi's relatives. She is interested more in his work in 'the leather business' than in his characteristic (75). The second suitor impresses her due to his origin – 'a merchant family' (81). While the third man makes her interested for he is written in the newspaper as a man 'working in the pharmaceutical business, a travelling salesman who receives a commission in addition to his salary' (87). She takes for granted that those men are good. She never asks who they are. She never ponders whether they are willing to love and accept Uma or not. The above description strengthens the characterization of Mama as a status oriented person.

Based on Phelan's theory about three components composing characters the mimetic, synthetic and thematic, a conclusion

can be drawn. The character of Mama can be the image of a real and possible woman living in a patriarchal society even though the character is literary constructed. Through the description of Mama as a woman, a wife and a mother, reader can get the insight how patriarchal values contribute in shaping women's life and personality.

### **Uma as a Daughter**

She is the victim of unsympathetic characters – Mama and Papa, who are deeply interested in increasing their wealth and status. They control their children life by creating strict rules because of which the children live under pressure. Uma is assessed as a threat of the family status. Hence, they expect a lot from Uma without considering her ability to meet their demands. Uma can have neither privacy nor intimacy.

Her days as a daughter are marked by feelings of lonely, unloved and unaccepted. Her parents have a major role to create the experience of alienation. Uma is considered the child who has put the whole family to live in shame. Mama says sharply, "You, you disgrace to the family-nothing but disgrace, ever!" (53). They cannot see something good in her which make them proud of her. Rather, they only find failures and weaknesses. She is imprisoned in her house because the parents for three times fail to find a husband for her.

The parents apply different treatment to Uma and her siblings – Aruna and Arun. Regarded as the family's disgrace, Uma receives little care. She does not get proper treatment for her myopic eyes (110). The parents support Arun to pursue 'the best, the most, the highest' education in USA (118). They also allow Aruna to continue her study in a nearby school although she takes no interest in it. By contrast, Uma should end her study at class eight despite her enthusiasm for going to school. Thereafter, she is forced to spend her life to be an unpaid housemaid for her own parents. She loses much time for herself.

Mama and Papa limit her freedom to speak up her mind. It happens when when Dr Dutt offers her a job in her medical institute.

Mama refuses the job by saying, "... as long as we are here to provide for her, she will never need to go to work" (143). Uma is not allowed to state her decision whether she agrees or disagrees with the marriage arranged for her. Rather, she is forced to accept all decisions made by her parents even if it is related to her own future.

The parents limit Uma's right to build friendship with people outside their house. Mama actually does not object Uma visiting the neighbors as long as it is not too often or without her knowledge (129). If Uma breaks this rule, Mama will try to show her friend's flaws.

Uma is less confident to state what she wants to her parents even for very simple things. When she accompanies Mama walking in the park, all at once, she hungrily smells roasted nuts and cooked gram. Instead of asking Mama to buy the food for her, she prefers to say nothing (13). Uma is fully aware as a girl she does not deserve good food she likes.

As a mistreated daughter, Uma never finds courage to fight against her parents' rule that she deserves building her own life. Uma likes living in the ashram with Miramasi who kindly introduces a life she dreams of. However, when her parents order Ramu to bring her back, Uma feels powerless. She is unable to act on her behalf. Hence, she obeys their decision despite her enthusiasm to build a new life with other pilgrimage (62). Uma thinks various ways to escape from her bitter life. She often feels trapped in her own house – lonely and unloved.

She ever begs Mrs. Joshi to adopt her soon after Moyna, Mrs. Joshi's daughter, moves to another city for work (131). Uma cannot visualize the idea of escape in the form of a career. On a trip to a river, she jumps off the boat into the river. She lets the current washes over her body and wishes she would not be saved (110). All of her efforts to get rid from the misery end in vain.



## Uma as a Wife

Uma does not really know who is her husband. He is chosen by Mama and Papa. She is unsure that her marriage will bring her into a happy life. Readers can read this clue from her thought while she is seeing her husband's act in the wedding ceremony. The ceremony wound on at its own ponderous pace. Finally the sullen bridegroom broke in and said curtly to the priest, "Cut it short, will you – that's enough now. The priest looked offended, Uma was mortified. If he could not even tolerate the wedding ceremony, how would he tolerate their marriage? (90).

Her suspicion is proven right after the wedding is over. Harish never touches her after they get married. He leaves her with an excuse that he should go to Meerut for work (91). It hurts her dignity as a woman.

Living with Harish's family gives her another problem. Just like in her own family, Uma also has to accept an experience of alienation. While joining her in-laws in the kitchen she hopes that they will speak directly to her and ask questions of her. Rather she notices that "they talk to each other, in lowered voices, but still loud enough for her to hear their remarks on her clumsiness, her awkwardness, her clothes and her looks" (92). In front of her husband's family, Uma feels unworthy. She is treated inhumanly as an object and valued only based on her poor physical appearance.

Her self-pride shattered when Papa comes and gives her shocking news. Papa tells her that Harish was already married. He has a wife and four children in Meerut. Harish needs the dowry to save his pharmaceutical factory (93). After being cheated by her husband, Uma keeps 'her head wrapped in her sari in an effort to screen her shame' (94). Her act can be interpreted as an effort to protect herself from being judged as an ill-fated woman.

## Aruna as a Daughter

Even though Aruna is used to get compliments for her achievements and beauty, she still feels not really loved and

accepted by her parents. Mama and Papa idolize Arun, the only son of the family. There is no likelihood for Aruna to get big attention from them, as big as what is given to Arun. More over because of the custom of 'dowry', as a daughter she is valued as family's burden. It evokes in her a feeling of low self-esteem.

The characteristic of Aruna develops as the plot develops. At first, Aruna can keep her objection toward her parents' unequal treatment. She never shows it explicitly. When she grows up to be a beautiful young girl she becomes aware of her power. She dares to break her parents rule. She insists to wear a pearl necklace when she goes to watch matinee movie in the Regal cinema (14).

After she marries a very wealthy and respectable man, her objection turns to be a rebellion against her parents. She makes a distance between her and the parents whom she views, do not really love and accept her. Aruna hardly struggles for a better life, free from anything making her feels unloved – her own family. After she leaves the parents to follow her husband living in Bombay, she becomes more concerned with Arvind's family than with her own. She rarely comes to visit her parents (103). Should she come, she arranges her visit "at long intervals so that every time they saw the children, they had turned into strangers again and were unrecognisable" (103). Therefore, the separateness becomes stronger.

She proves her quality by becoming a fault finder. She complains to Mama, "Why have you washed your hair in the middle of the morning? Couldn't you do it at night instead of sitting here with it all open? It looks so *sloppy!*" Dashing into kitchen she complains how the cook makes salad. "All he does is slice up tomatoes and cucumbers and unions and spread them flat on the plate – where's the dressing?" (108). Her words show her arrogance.

Aruna tries to affirm her differences with her family. Aruna sees the family in a new outlook. She considers them very backwards and country so that she addresses her family

'villagers' (105). In her letter to her parents she describes her new life as the wife of a rich man. She tells them in detail the property she has now.

These were the words that Aruna used in her letters. They were not words anyone in their town used, either because they did not know them or because nothing in their town merited them. But such words, such use of them did seem to raise Aruna to another level (103). Through that ways Aruna proclaims that she has already stepped a higher level of position. Having a higher status than her parents' status is a way to show them how precious she is.

### **Aruna as a Wife**

Aruna's superiority complex also can be observed in her life as a wife. She tries to build a perfect self-image in front of her husband and his family. To realize her dream, she hides her family flaws. She feels ashamed for Uma getting seizure in front of Arvind's family. Desperately she says to Mama, "She should be put away, locked up (102). Aruna really concerns about what Arvind's family may think of her. To build a perfect image as a remarkable woman, she insists on every detail of her wedding day.

Then, she arranges her wedding day at Carlton Hotel to be a sophisticated and westernized wedding which nobody in the city has ever done. She aims to make Arvind and his family impressed.

Aruna is very proud of being Arvind's wife. It is not only because he is a respectable man but because he can bring her into a comfortable and luxurious life that other women do not have. Her proud can be seen in how she describes her life with Arvind.

*Aruna was whisked away to a life that she had said would be 'fantastic' and was. Arvind had a job in Bombay and bought a flat in a housing block in Juhu, facing the beach, and Aruna said it was 'like a dream' (103)*

The words 'fantastic' and 'like a dream' are important clues to interpret her

satisfaction of her new life. Aruna is obsessed to be acknowledged as a good wife, and a good in law. Aruna cares more about his family than her own.

When she brings along her mother-in-law and Arvind's relatives to bathe in the holy river she forces Mama and Uma to be good host. They both are demanded to fulfill all their needs according to their high standards (104). She takes this way in order to secure her position within Arvind's family.

Even though she is proud of being Arvind's wife, Aruna also often criticizes him. She scolds him for having spilt tea in his saucer, wearing shirt which is not matched with the trousers or coming to dinner with his bedroom slippers. Aruna places herself as a model of perfection through which Arvind admits her perfection.

From her moral, dispositional and emotional qualities readers can read the signs that she is obsessed with self-importance. She maintains a feeling that she is better or more important than other people.

### **The Reflection of Patriarchal Values on Mama's Treatment toward Her Daughters**

Patriarchal values are reflected in Mama's unfairly treatments to Uma and Aruna through the following contexts:

#### **Son Preference**

Sons are highly valued in Indian families. Indian patriarchal societies consider that having sons are more advantageous rather than having daughters. The reason lies in the fact that sons have better earnings prospects in work place. "Males do not require dowry, they will be able to support their parents in their old age, and they are the only ones who can perform the death rituals" (Johnson, 2001:1058). They provide the continuation of family names. In India, a wife possibly faces violence and humiliation from her husband and in-laws if she cannot have a son. Therefore, mothers in patriarchal families prefer to give more attention for sons and neglect daughters.

The concept of son preference influences how Mama behaves to her son and daughters. She is willing to sacrifice her life when conceiving Arun. She is willing to suffer so much for a son. Arun's birth cheers Mama up. Mama tries to give him the best attention for the object of pride, Arun. She burdens Uma a huge responsibility to care for Arun. That Arun grows up to be sick and weak greatly distresses her. On the contrary, she gives minimal attention to Uma who suffers from epileptic seizure and myopic eyes.

Compared to Uma, Aruna's burden is bit lighter. She is not much forced to care for Arun. Yet, obviously Mama is more concerned with Arun than Aruna. When she conceived the second child, she hoped that it would be a boy, not a girl. It indicates that Aruna's birth is not really desired. Through Arun, Mama's wishes to change her status within the family and gain power are fulfilled. Therefore, she makes sure Arun gets all the best, but neglects Uma and Aruna.

### **Food Discrimination**

The impact of son preference is reflected in food distribution among the family members of patriarchal families. The best and the most nutritious food is served to sons. On the contrary, what might be left over is given to daughters. Manisha Priyam illustrates this condition as "training for the development of womanly virtues like self-effacement and sacrifice that she [the daughter] would need in her husband's house" (Priyam, 2009:101).

Mama's recollection that in her childhood sweets were served to boys shows her attitude in distributing food within her family. Despite his vegetarianism, Mama provides meat and nutritious food for Arun, not for Uma and Aruna. Food provided in the family is mostly based on men's appetite. She thinks it is women's duty to satisfy men's appetite and ignore their own. When Mama, Uma and Papa walk on the park, Uma hungrily smells roasted nuts and cooked gram. Instead of buying Uma what she wants most, Mama tells Uma they should back home to serve lemonade for Papa (12).

Food discrimination often occurs during mealtime rituals. "Uma picks up the fruit bowl with both hands and puts it down with a thump before her father. Bananas, oranges, apples – they are there, for him" (23). At the ritual, Mama should be fully alert to Papa's non verbal demand. When Papa remains silent and does not take the fruit bowl handed, she orders Uma to peel and part the fruit for him. Uma is not allowed to enjoy the food served at the mealtime with her father. She is needed there just to serve him.

### **Burden of Household Work**

In patriarchal society all burdens of the house work remain in women hands, while men are responsible for getting income for the family. Based on Indian tradition, a daughter will leave her parents to live with her husband and in-laws. "Female children belong to their fathers until they are married, at which time they become the property of their husbands and are expected to be of service to them" (Johnson, 2001:1055). Hence, an Indian mother should teach her daughter how to do household chores properly so that she will be accepted by her husband and in-laws.

Mama expects her daughters to help her maintain the family being. For this reason Mama does not allow Uma to work outside the house and be actively involved in social activities. Rather, she is forced to do endless house chores until she has no time for herself. She should be ready to serve Mama and Papa and also all guests coming to their house. While Uma is still sleeping, Mama is not reluctant to wake her up if she needs her help. Uma's burden in doing the house work is heavier than Aruna's. But, she is not good at cooking. Aruna is better than her. She can make *samosas* without no one teaches her intensively (85).

### **Education Opportunity**

Daughters in Indian patriarchal families have to cope with lack of educational opportunities. The parents think education is primarily necessary for the sons, not daughters. "Right from the beginning, parents do not consider girls as earning members of

their family, as after marriage they have to leave their parents' home. So their education is just considered as waste of money as well as time" (mapsofindia.com, 2013). In this country, daughters are prepared for marriage, on the other hand, sons are raised to be educated. The more educated they are, the more benefits can be gained by the parents in the forms of dowry and family pride.

The condition happens in Uma's family. Mama is unable to see the importance of education for her daughters. Uma and Aruna from their childhood do not get equal chance, compared to Arun, to develop their qualities. Mama forbids Uma from going to school due to her failing grade. Arun, on the other hand, is supported to get scholarship to study in America. Aruna, despite her smartness, is not given the same opportunity. The good chance solely falls on Arun.

Mama believes their daughters' role is at home. Their value is in domestic abilities rather than in their education. Development of their spirit and mind is seen as a secondary thing for daughters. She comments, "All this convent education – what good does it do? Better to marry you off than let you go" (71). That is the reason why Mama dislikes Uma's preference to play and go to school. The daughters are fed up with the benefits of preparing themselves for marriage than studying. For Uma, this decision is hard to accept due to her hunger to learn new things.

## **Freedom**

T.A Baig as quoted by Pamela S. Johnson proposes, "From the day she is born until the day she dies an Indian women is expected to be under the control of a man and serve him without question" (Johnson, 2001:1054). Patriarchal values keep women away from power system. As a result, women are powerless to speak out her opinion and to choose their destiny.

Mama also adopts this value in the treatment toward Uma and Aruna. To Uma, Mama emphasizes absolute obedience. Uma cannot speak for herself. She is not allowed to

express her opinion freely, even if it is regarded with her own destiny. Uma is never asked whether or not she wants to marry or to live with Mama and Papa. Uma has no right to choose her husband; rather Papa, supported by Mama, actively imposes the decision on her. They do not allow her to design her own wedding with Harris. She cannot determine things which should be carried in her trunk before moving to her husband's house. All things are arranged by Mama. When Dr Dutt comes offering a job, she is not allowed to state her mind. Mama pretends to have serious ill, through which she can keep Uma to stay at home.

Nevertheless, Mama's attitude to Uma and Aruna is a bit different. Aruna seems a bit lucky. Mama lets her choose her husband among the wealthy suitors. Mama also allows her to arrange an outstanding wedding party considering this occasion increases the family pride. Even though Aruna is given more freedom and care than Uma, both of them are used to work for the parents' dream, not for their own.

## **Control over Women Bodies**

Patriarchy measures the worth of a woman by pleasure she can provide to her husband. One of the pleasures she can give to her husband is her beauty. Having a beautiful wife can increase the husband's self-pride. As a result, women, who are conditioned to be inferior, live under immense pressure to look beautiful—to be more pleasurable for their husband. In other words, the value of woman is found through the husband rather than through herself. Women who are innately beautiful feel more confident than those who are not. It results in great efforts to transform one's look to be perfect. Make-up, jewelry and dresses become integral parts of women's lives. In such things they find a chance to transform their looks and enhance their self-esteem.

Mama believes it is important for every woman to keep their looks nice through which their worth is signified. Many men are captured with Aruna's beauty and want to marry her. Uma, the first daughter who is supposed to marry first, is unattractive.

Therefore, Mama takes great effort to change Uma's appearance to be more appealing. She gets a local photographer to change Uma's appearance on her photograph before sending it to everyone who advertised in matrimonial columns of the Sunday papers.

Mama searches energetically for a husband for Uma. When the suitor comes, she powders Uma's face, dresses her in a beautiful sari and colors her lips with lipstick. She tries hard to make Uma chosen by the man. Mama ignores Uma's preference to look humble. She does not give Uma chances to form herself as she wants to be. Instead, she takes great efforts to transform Uma's looks according to men's favor. When Uma marries to the third suitor, she puts in Uma's trunk, jewelry, saris, and any stuff needed to look more elegant in front of her husband. Yet, Mama's plan ends in vain since Harris abandons Uma.

On this matter, Mama's treatment to Aruna is a bit different. She does not force Aruna to be more concerned with her appearance. She instinctively knows how to dress well for any occasions. Mama allows Aruna to act with greater confidence because of her beauty. She is proud of Aruna since her beauty results in increasing of the family pride.

### **Underlying Factors of Mama's Involvement in Preserving Patriarchal Power**

As already explained in the previous chapter, there are two factors shaping Mama's personality and behavior. The first factor is the object relationship of Mama and the second factor is cultural construction of the society. Through observing these two factors, her involvement in preserving patriarchal power can be understood deeply.

### **The Object Relationship of Mama**

According to Nancy Chodorow, human's personality is a result of a boy's or a girl's social relational experiences from earliest infancy (1974:45). To reveal Mama's personality, the first thing should be done is tracing back her social relational experience

in the earliest life. Regarding to this matter, it is important also to examine the role of Mama's mother. She is the influential figure during Mama's earliest life.

Mama is a daughter and a mother at once. The analysis of Mama's social experiences in the earliest infancy should be completed with the analysis of its development in the adulthood, when she becomes a mother. As a mother absolutely she takes part in forming the first social relationship of her children. The analysis on Mama's inner world is divided into these following parts.

### **Mama as a Daughter**

Chodorow gives a special attention to the pre-Oedipal phase, in which the first social relationship between an infant and its mother is formed. In this phase, Mama did not differentiate herself from her mother. Rather, she experienced a sense of oneness with her as the primary care-giver. The phase is actually continuation of Mama's experience when she lived in her mother's womb – being part of her mother's body, emotionally and physically for nine months.

According to Chodorow's theory, boys and girls undergo different pre-Oedipal phase. It happens because, "a mother experiences his son differently; she will tend to end the symbiotic period early to emphasize his otherness, by emphasizing his masculinity in opposition to her female self" (McIver, 2009:14). Mama was born in an enormous family in the city of Kanpur (5). From her story about tradition of giving different food for boys and girls in her family, it can be concluded that Mama is not the only child of her parents. Mama had close relationship with her mother even her aunts. All of them are female. They spent most of their time together in home, doing the same activities and surely eating the same food (6).

Sons were not involved in the activities. They were encouraged to be separated and autonomous. Consequently, Mama became more identical with her mother. She grew with feminine personality that "defines itself in relation and connection to other people"

(Chodorow, 1974:44). Mama's mother given different treatment toward Mama and her brother. As a result, Mama's mother had unconsciously participated in developing the seed of discrimination based on gender.

In the Oedipal phase – the phase when the father appeared, Mama did not completely reject her mother in favor of her father. Rather, she continued her pre-Oedipal relationship with her mother (Mciver, 2009:14). Mama is still attached to her mother and the relationship became a permanent connection which extends her lifespan. It can be simply concluded that throughout her life Mama undergoes a self-identification process with her mother.

Mama's mother tried to change Mama to be more identical with her. Since she was a child, Mama was trained to receive her lower rank. Women's subordinate position is depicted in her memory about sweet and good things to eat which were prepared for boys only. Mama adds, "But ours was not such an orthodox home that our mother and aunts did not slip us something on the sly" (6). From her mother Mama learned to not express her true self and her interest freely. It provoked a feeling of insecurity within her. When she grows up, the feeling is expressed in her hesitation to build 'a little private life of her own'. It is also reflected in her ambition to be perfect and important person in the relationship with Papa.

Mama was also trained to develop domestic skills before she married Papa at sixteen (5). Undoubtedly, home became the center of her activities. Everything she did mostly take place at home, even for getting education (18). Her mother was always around her and the relation of mother-daughter became strong. Her mother taught her how to look after babies so that one day when she becomes a mother, she can teach her daughters this skill (29). The close relation brought about self-identification in which only she (and her sister/s), not his brother/s, adopted the personality characteristically related to mothering.

All values taught by her mother are internalized within her. When she finally

married to Papa, Mama less showed her independency – just like her mother. She tied herself in unequal relationship with Papa, even though they look inseparable, i.e. "MamaandPapa, MamaPapa. PapaMama" (5). Mama is not confident to express her true self. The relationship is more like a relation as subject-object. Her total submission to Papa and her belief that women only deserve domestic roles indicate that she puts herself as the object. Further it also indicates that she has a feeling of inferiority.

### **Mama as a Mother**

Like her mother, Mama has a significant role in forming their children's personalities. Her influence is strongly felt in their earliest infancy – the pre-Oedipal phase. At first, Uma, Aruna and Arun experience a sense of oneness with Mama as the primary caregiver. They have a strong attachment to her who nurses and carries them all. However, Mama feels that she does not share the same sense of oneness with Arun as she experiences with the same-sex children. It results in a tendency to identify herself more strongly with Uma and Aruna than with Arun.

She treats Arun and his sisters differently. Mama encourages Arun to be separated and autonomous. She gives Arun a 'proper attention' which is actually a form of separation she makes for little Arun. This special treatment reinforces her role in introducing gender discrimination to her children. Arun bites Uma's finger while she is trying to feed him. Mama seems not to do anything to help Uma (33). The different treatment develops in Arun a sense of superiority. He threatens Uma, "Shall I tell MamaPapa what you gave me to eat? What will MamaPapa do if they know what you gave me to eat?" (34). His threat successfully makes Uma frightened. Arun knows he is more powerful than his sisters since the parents always stand behind him.

In contrast, Mama encourages Uma and Aruna to be more identical with herself, even to be her role models. This condition illustrates what Chodorow says, "Mothers identify more strongly with female infants, seeing them more as extensions of

themselves" (Hirsh, 1981: 206). Unlike Arun, Uma and Aruna are less encouraged to be autonomous and also less nurtured. She unconsciously teaches them to receive inferior position. She gives them treatments just like the ones she received from her mother. She says to Uma, "Stay home and do your work – that is best" (114). Mama encourages her daughters to accept that marriage is their life goal, home is their right place and domestic abilities are their main task. Hence, the treatments develop in them feminine qualities. They both are expected to mirror Mama perfectly that she can identify herself in them.

Chodorow highlights the continuity and the lack of separation or differentiation between mother and daughter. The daughters face difficulties in the process of individuation (Chodorow, 1974:48). Mama is always around Aruna and Uma. They spend most of time together at home. Consequently, it is difficult for them to express their true self without Mama's shadow. For example, they often see Mama sneaks off to play cards with women neighborhood, while Papa is working at his office (7). Unconsciously, they adopt Mama's behavior in their life. While everyone in the house is taking nap during a hot afternoon, Uma runs away from home. She hires a rick saw to see Mother Agnes and begs her to allow her to go back to school (25). Despite her rebellion against her parents' rule, Aruna imitates her mother's behavior.

In the relation with Uma and Aruna, Mama undergoes unresolved relationship with her own mother. Mama experiences dual identification as a mother to her own daughters, and also unfinished identification process as a daughter of her own mother. Her own mother-child history is repeated. Mama cannot perceive the fact that Uma and Aruna are autonomous people. Rather, they are perceived as her extensions and consequently they are used as vehicles for her achievement. Her feeling toward Uma or Aruna is determined by how far they are able to perform themselves as her role models.

Despite her spirit of rebellion against her old-fashioned family, in some ways Aruna

succeeds in imitating Mama. Aruna and Mama share many similarities. Mama, a daughter of a merchant family, married Papa, an attorney, the son of a tax inspector (5). Aruna marries Arvind, the handsomest, the richest, the most exciting of the suitors who presented themselves in front of the family (100). Papa and Arvind are models of respectable husband. They are able to enhance the social status of the family. Mama and Aruna perceive that marriage and respectable husbands as something crucial for women's life. Mama is aware of the essential requirement for being that a woman should be physically appealing to her husband. She tries to always look attractive in front of Papa. Aruna also shows an interest in maintaining her physical attractiveness. Mama expects her daughters to be good at cooking. She notices, Aruna has this skill, even better than her. She instinctively knows how to serve delicious food properly (108). For those reasons Mama seems to like Aruna better than Uma. The process of self-identification of Mama to Aruna flows naturally without considerable obstructions.

In contrast, the process of self-identification of Mama to Uma is obstructed very badly. They have many differences that Mama cannot identify herself in Uma. In other words, Uma is proven fail to be her role model. No man shows interest in her. She does not consider marriage as her life goal. She is also less interested in mothering and cooking. She does not know how to dress up. Moreover, in certain cases Uma shows characteristics of being separated and autonomous. She has independent ways of thinking. She views that a marriage should be based on love (31). It contrasts to the norm of arranged marriage. While Mama dislikes Mira-masi, Uma adores her since her life symbolizes women's freedom. Mama's hope to feel a sense of oneness with Uma is shattered. Then, she treats her like an outcast. She barks orders to Uma about all chores she must do at once.

### **Cultural Construction of the Society**

Chodorow sees mothering role is the most important feature in prompting secondary status of women. In most societies,

men less participate in domestic sphere. The role of child rearing is addressed to women. Interestingly, men who set most of the rules in child rearing are not burdened with this responsibility. It illustrates that motherhood is actually an institution of patriarchy. "It is a female experience shaped by male expectation and structures" (Hirsch, 1981: 201). This role is continuously passed down from generation to generation, from mothers to daughters. Through passing down this role, mothers are largely involved in preserving patriarchal power.

In *Fasting, Feasting*, Mama takes great responsibilities in raising her children. Papa only sets all the rules. He determines the type of treatment given to every child in the family and he gets Mama to carry out this task. All burdens of the children-rearing lay on Mama's shoulders. The care Papa has for Arun is unequal comparing the care he puts on his daughters. For example, he does not permit Uma of having consultation with a good optician in Bombay. He says, "No need, no need. Why waste money on a trip to Bombay?" (107). Meanwhile, as the object of the family's pride, Arun receives extraordinary treatments.

Papa is very much concerned with every detail of treatment to Arun, such as the matter of Arun's feeding. Papa forces Mama to make Arun likes meat. She should make hard attempts so that Arun, who is lately known as a vegetarian, accepts meat or eggs. After the attempts, Mama still has to face Papa's interrogation regarding her success or failure (32). Under Papa's instruction, Mama treats Arun as the first-class child and the daughters as the second-class children.

Papa views the treatment to Arun should strengthen his masculinity while to Uma and Aruna, their feminities. Knowing Arun grows weakly and not healthy, he says to Mama, "And have you seen the Joshi's son? He is already playing cricket!" (32) Papa wants Mama to change Arun to be a sporty and stronger boy. That Arun dislikes meat distresses Papa who sees meat as a sign of power. Under Papa's orders, Mama prepares the daughters for marriage. The daughters must learn how to run the house and look

after babies. She says to Uma, "You are a big girl now. We are trying to arrange a marriage for you" (22). Papa who sees marriages as women's affair leaves this duty to Mama (82).

Based on the tradition, Mama should pass child-rearing skills down to her daughters. When Mama accompanies Papa going to the club she leaves the baby boy to his sisters. Uma and Aruna stay at home with Ayah, the family servant, to look after Arun (31). She shows Uma how to pour a little oil on her finger tips and then massage Arun's limbs (29). When she orders Uma to stay at home with Arun, Mama infuses her mind with concepts that women's place is at home and child-rearing is women's main duty.

She involves Uma in her attempts to make Arun swallow boiled egg and meat so that she grows to be a strong boy. By passing down this skill to her daughters Mama contributes in maintaining sex-role differentiation. Her act also strengthens women's secondary status. It is created and re-created through years.

It can be summarized that women's powerlessness actually is not caused by women's biological differences as stated by classical theory of psychoanalysis. Women's oppression is caused by the object relationship of women and cultural construction of the society. Adrienne Rich highlights women's role in patriarchal power with her statement, "Women's oppression involves participation woman's role as a mother of daughters and as a daughter of mothers" (Hirsch, 1981:202).

### Concluding Remarks

The female characters in Desai's *Fasting, Feasting* – Mama, Uma Aruna, are portrayed as victims of the oppressive patriarchy. They are fenced in by patriarchal rules and regulations within the family and society since they were born. Even though they have different characteristics and different position in the family, they all fight for equality and freedom. They have to harmonize the self- needs with the social demands.



Those female characters represent women in general. They face difficulties to get out from this problem. Actually, women themselves are involved in preserving the oppression of men toward women. With feminist psychoanalysis which deeply analyzes the mother-daughter relationship of Mama- Uma-Aruna, the form of women's involvement in preserving patriarchal power can be revealed. The involvement can be seen in the different treatments based on gender given by a mother to her children. The treatment massively and constantly sharpens the differences between boys and girls, then men and women.

A mother identify herself more strongly with the same-sex children. She introduces them any roles related to feminine qualities. The relationship naturally becomes a permanent connection through which daughters are conditioned to be dependent and powerless to express their true-self.

The cultural construction of patriarchal society also influences women to be involved in preserving patriarchal power. The society addresses child-rearing task to mothers only, on the other hand, fathers only set the rules. Through passing down child rearing role to daughters, mothers strengthen the secondary status of women, and consequently, preserve patriarchal power. Desai's *Fasting, Feasting* gives an insight to the readers to understand the cause of women's oppression from the perspective and the experience of women.

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