POLITICS OF FOOD AND GENDER IN ANITA DESAI’S FASTING FEASTING AND MARGARET ATWOOD’S THE EDIBLE WOMEN

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Abstract: Food is an inevitable element in the life of a human being. It has a very important role in our everyday life. We live in a society where inequality, injustice, and discrimination based on race, gender, caste, and creed frequently happen. The novels Fasting and Feasting and The Edible Woman shows how society uses even the most basic requirement of human beings and turn them into a tool of oppression. Several instances are seen in both novels where women are discriminated against on the basis of food.

Index Terms – Food politics, Women, Patriarchy

I. Introduction

Food is sustenance and absolutely essential to life, but it is never simply about nutrition. The term ‘Food Politics’ means different things to different people. It could mean politicizing food at one level; while at another it could mean tensions over control of food and its sources. It could also mean governmental policies over food leading to a discussion of different food policies or agricultural policies. According to the online version of Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary, food refers to “as any material consisting essentially of protein, carbohydrate, and fat used in the body of an organism to sustain growth, repair and vital processes and to furnish energy, also such food together with supplementary substances”. The consumption of food, like other biologically supportive activities, is an aspect of cultural behavior. The choice of food is also a cultural decision.

Food, therefore, is one of the most visible and vital symbols of identity and difference, uniting men. Food is also linked to class, status, and ethnicity. Even a simple meal at the table shows a social structure; members of a community segregate themselves from other communities. The different modes of consumption or patterns are one of the ways the rich distinguish themselves from the poor and the men from the women. Many studies demonstrate that men eat the first, best, and the most. Women are denied nutritious food. Marginalization even happens on the basis of food. In society, a good percentage of women are restricted from eating according to their wishes. The patriarchal society demands only men and never considers women.

It is a common statement that ‘A person is what she eats.’ Food is a part of one’s identity, the thing that creates or strengthens what one is. Gender, nationality, ethnic origin, religion, and class are all linked with food. What, where, and how one eats are ways of constructing one’s subjectivity and identity.
II. The Role of Women Writers in Indian English Literature

The Indian English novel saw its birth only during the latter half of the nineteenth century. This was a result of the Western impact on India. Indians sought English as a medium for communicating with the world outside India. According to Sreeram Sreenivasay “Indians have written and are writing in English for communicating with one another and with the outside world, for achieving self-expression to artistically use English, necessarily in an Indian way”. India sought inspiration deeply from England but after independence, the Indian novelists were also influenced by American, Russian, and other oriental countries. Indian writing was male-dominated during the pre-independent and post-independent periods.

The post-independent period saw the rise of women novelists who began exploring and enriching the Indian experience through their novels. Writers like Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Prawer Jhabwala, Anita Desai, Santa Rama Rau, Nayantara Sehgal, Uma Vasudev, Bharati Mukherjee, Meena Alexander, Shashi Deshpande, Kamala Das, Gita Metha, Shoba De, Arundhati Roy, and Jumpha Lahiri have made a significant contribution. With the rise of women writers, the scope of Indian English fiction has achieved greater richness and depth. Women writers have taken fiction as a form to achieve their aims of representing women’s lives. After their arrival, there was a strong change in themes as well as in the narrative techniques of the Indian English novels. They have shown how women novelists are different or in some cases counter to the male writers in their portrayal of characters, delineation of plot, and their critique of Indian societies. Both male and female writers have shared a common feature like the quest motif. It is a quest for identity, power, freedom, self-recognition, self-realization, or to find meaning in life. Man’s quest for identity has remained a dominant motif in most novels. They try to explore man’s interests and purpose in life. There are eminent women writers who have devoted themselves to discussing various aspects of the human psyche. This subject has been treated by writers like Anita Desai, Bharati Mukherjee, and Arundhati Roy.

III. The Writing Style of Anita Desai

Although all women novelists deal with the experiences of women, the presentations are different and are unique in characterization. Reading Anita Desai’s novel shows that she is not an ordinary writer. Her novels reach deep into the psyche of her characters. Anita Desai has chosen a new style of writing. She has begun to encapsulate her characters' sensations, emotions, and feelings within her writings. She focuses her attention on the psychic life of her characters. She is keen on presenting her characters' inner world rather than the outer world of action. Her novels are based on family relationships, on how the life of one character has an enormous influence on the lives of others. Her style of writing can be considered to be influenced to a certain extent by Virginia Woolf.

Anita Desai is interested in projecting female protagonists, living in separate, closed, sequestered worlds of existential problems and passions, loves and hates. She portrays each of her individuals as an unsolved mystery. As she gives more importance to character delineation, she tries to depict the inner turmoil and anguish of the female mind. According to her story, action, and drama arise from characters; therefore, she writes about their dreams, wills, and actions. Whatever action in her novels is a part of the integral whole composed of the human psyche, the human situation, and the outer and inner rhythms.

IV. Canadian Literary Influence on English Novels

In recent years, Canadian writing in English has been recognized as an important literary field. The 1970s saw the rise of the novel in Canada. Canadian literature may be divided into two linguistic categories, namely the francophone and the Anglophone writings. Yet the ethos of both these writings is purely Canadian.

Most Canadian literature reflects three main issues: nature, frontier life, and survival. Margaret Atwood, Robertson Davies, Alice Munro, Rohinton Mistry, Mordecai Richler, Carol Shields, Margaret Laurence, and Michael Ondaatje are some of the eminent writers of Canadian writing in English. Arguably, the best internationally renowned known living Canadian writer is Margaret Atwood.

V. The Writing Style of Margaret Atwood

Margaret Atwood is not only the best-known contemporary writer in Canada but a novelist who portrays a strong feminist stance. Questioning and critiquing Atwood’s works is very interesting as they significantly underline societal stances. Her novels are generally intellectually engaging and she believes the writer is a social critic and artist. Margaret Atwood holds the view that the artist is a responsible laboring citizen and not a passive victim. She has based her career on this premise.

Margaret Atwood’s ways of representation and her creativity in the production of new fiction based on political and social life, have made her the voice of today’s speculative fiction. Atwood tries to write novels that are part of social life through the formation of her characters.
VI. Comparing and Contrasting Fasting Feasting and The Edible Women

Anita Desai’s *Fasting Feasting* is a novel not of a plot but of comparison. In beautifully detailed prose, Desai draws the food and textures of a small Indian town and of an American suburb. The novel discusses the problems women face in a society where they are oppressed even regarding food. It is a part of society’s norms and conventions, which always burdens women.

*The Edible Woman* is her first novel where Atwood carves out a character searching for independent individuality in a patriarchal system. *The Edible Woman* presents food on the metaphorical level and the concrete level. It also presents the symbolic elements of hunting, marriage, the exchange of women, consumerism, motherhood and pregnancy, commitment, and their influence on women. Hunger is present throughout the novel from the very beginning itself.

In the novel *Fasting and Feasting* the condition of Uma and her brother Arun who is abroad is similar. Uma is facing gender inequality at her home. The same situation is faced by Arun in America, as he is an Indian and is regarded as a second-class citizen. Her life is under the chains of the masculine oppressor just as Arun is oppressed as a migrant in a first-world country. She is not allowed to live according to her wishes.

Similarly, Marian, in *The Edible Woman*, also faces mental oppression as a woman. Peter who decides to marry her is not a fair man who loves purely. He represents the patriarchal society where women are suppressed to the lowest section of society, under male authority. Towards the end of the novel, the same tools of oppression, food, are used to protest against the evil towards the women.

Food is a metaphor consistently used as a trope by Atwood in *The Edible Woman*. Extended metaphors and repeated images also control the flow of the novel: Food and sex are inextricably linked in the novel, as they are in life. Food is to the individual what sex is to species; it becomes a means of procreation and annihilation. If a human is weaker, she is lower in the food chain, edible, and thus powerless. Through a refusal to eat or to be eaten, Marian is empowered and becomes somewhat more human. Atwood reinforces this point by using extended metaphors related to food and consumption.

Atwood suggests that, in a conventional society, women are edible. They are swallowed up by their male counterparts. Marian accepts this and decides that if she must be eaten, she will take control of her own life and eat herself. The objective of this novel is to present female confrontation with social expectations and demands which is inseparably associated with the female body. Therefore, eating disorders in Atwood’s works symbolize women’s bodies’ response to the social pressures exerted on them. The novel reflects the constant theme of the lack of a distinct identity.

In Desai’s novel, women do not necessarily inflict violence directly, but very often become willing agencies of violence by submitting to male oppression and ignoring their own feminine needs as well as those of the younger women in their families. These women, the shadowy figure in themselves, have suppressed their individuality. One cannot merely blame male chauvinism and patriarchy for the present status of women’s existence; but should also be on female reluctance, easy acquiescence, and lethargy. What makes matters worse is the women joining men in their pride as unchallengeable legislators of a patriarchal society. A tradition of violence perpetrated by women on other women is exemplified in Uma’s mother, exerting it on her own daughter. A good mother, who has been a victim of patriarchy, would not wish it upon another woman. However, the overarching reaches of patriarchy turn women and men into its tools of oppression.

VII. Conclusion

In the novels of Desai and Atwood, food, a daily means of sustenance is made political in terms of feminism. The preparation and consumption of food seem simple and in the domain of domestic work. However, the necessity and the social pressures attached to it, as part of womanly duties make it a tool of oppression. This paper tried to understand how these two authors not only associate food with women’s oppression but make it a metaphor for patriarchal power relations in society. Women’s relationship with food reflects women’s oppressed position inside the patriarchy. Challenging food practices, thus, also challenges her weak position in society. Food is not merely food, these authors seem to say, but an extended metaphor for women’s
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