



The Notion of Phallic Image in Anti Desai's *Fasting, Feasting*

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ABSTRACT

The current article tries to present a psychoanalytical and feminist critical analysis of Anita Mazumdar Desai's *Fasting, Feasting* (1999). The researcher does a close reading and a profound investigation of the novel within the conceptual framework of psychoanalytic theory drawing on well-known men figures like Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan. Based on their theories, feminist notions are also utilized to offer expanded evidences relating to the target theme. The target concept of this study is phallic image of women. It will help us to clarify how the symbolic order attempts to change women to phallic beings. Ultimately, Desai asserts that her female characters are regulated in the hands of the patriarchal law.

KEYWORDS : psychoanalytic and feminist theories, phallic image, women, patriarchal culture, Indian novel

مفهوم الصورة القضيبية (النمطية) في رواية الصيام والولائم للكاتبة انتي ديساي

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الخلاصة

تحاول المقالة الحالية تقديم قراءة تحليلية نقدية نفسية ونسوية لرواية أنيتا مازومدار ديساي "الصيام والولائم" (1999). يقوم الباحث بقراءة متأنية وتحقيق عميق للرواية ضمن الإطار المفاهيمي للنظرية التحليلية النفسية والنسوية مستعين بشخصيات كبيرة معروفة مثل سيجموند فرويد وجاك لاكان. واستناداً إلى نظرياتهم، يتم أيضاً استخدام المفاهيم النسوية لتقديم أدلة موسعة تتعلق بالموضوع المستهدف. المفهوم المستهدف لهذه الدراسة هو مفهوم الصورة القضيبية. سيساعدنا ذلك في توضيح كيف يحاول النظام الرمزي تغيير المرأة إلى كائنات قضيبية. وفي نهاية المطاف، تؤكد ديساي أن شخصياتها النسائية تنمطت تحت قبضة القانون الأبوي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: نظريات التحليلية النفسية والنسوية، الصورة النمطية للنساء، الثقافة الابوية، الرواية الهندي

INTRODUCTION

Literary texts enable human beings to change the spiritual matters of their selves via the cognitions and these alterations can be well interpreted via psychoanalytic literary criticism. This can encourage us to discover developed possibilities for studying, reading and teaching literary texts. Psychoanalysis is a psychoanalytic approach propounded by Austrian Sigmund Freud, French Jacques Lacan and other psychoanalytic feminist theorists. It is a powerful instrument in the critical analysis of literary works. It is considered one of the famous theories which are utilized in field of literary criticism. In this regard, Barry (2002), asserts that psychoanalytic literary criticism is a theory, which explain literary texts using methods and techniques of psychoanalysis. Recently, the literary theory is developed and expanded to cover a large number of theorists and theories.

Psychoanalytical interpretations have become one of the main instruments to discover the mysterious narrative of the fictional form. The current study mainly focuses on the application of Freudian and Lacanian notions and other psychoanalytical feminist theories to the explication of *Fasting, Feasting* by Anti Desai. The target notion of the study is phallic image of female characters as a central preoccupation dealt with by Anti Desai, the well-known Indian novelist, in her novel. The novelist explores the attitude of her characters and how they are responded and influenced to the symbolic system in which they are plunged in their day-to-day lives in the heart of patriarchal environment.

I hope this study provides with a profound critical analysis of the female characters via providing an appropriate combination of the literary text and the psychoanalytic and feminist theories to grant a life to the prospective narrative area.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Freudian interpretations of phallic stage and Oedipus complex are mainly concerned with the existence and absence of penis. By commencing of sexual life of boys and girls, during which sexual difference is recognized and encountered, Freudian interpretations of phallic phase and Oedipus complex are formed and developed. Through genital organs, the distinction between the boys and girls is occurred. The girls don't realize why they have no penis like the boys and the boys have the same understanding as the girls have. The boys become fearful of their castration and the girls have the same fear of their clitoris castration and therefore the fear that is commenced through of having no penis resulting in penis envy. In the phallic stage, Freud (2018, p.312) explained the child's journey to maturity in the following quotation:

a stage of libidinal development of both sexes, occupies a central position in that it is correlated with the castration complex and its acme that governs the setting up and the resolution of the Oedipal complex. The choice offered the

subject at this stage is simply that between having the phallus or being castrated. (Laplanche & Pontalis)

Freud also created the term Oedipus complex in which the children desire their opposite-sex parent. The boys have sexual feelings toward the mother and the girls to desire the father. This process results in aggressive and envious reactions toward the parent of the same sex. Ultimately, the children suppressed their sexual trends due to the fear of punishment by their parent of the same sex.

In the same context, the term Phallus was created by Ernest Jones, a psychoanalytic theorist, in a clear reference to its existence in Sigmund Freud's writings. The term is symbolically represented within the language of psychoanalytic theory as an image of penis. In this regard, Rine (2010) clarifies that the phallus is considered "as the supreme symbol of masculine power and, concurrently, of feminine lack"(p.1).

Freud refuses to consider phallus as biological characteristics which divide the human beings as male or female. Freud affirmed that the phallus must be given an interpretation that averts diminishing it to the biological distinction between the sexes. In fact, he considered the phallus as a distinguished account of its influence for diverse genders (Zohar, 2009).

In famous Freudian theories relating to the castration complex for boys and penis envy for girls are viewed during the ontological interpretation of penis as a potent male organ. Freud considered that within the stage from a round three to five years of age, "only one genital, namely the male one, comes into account. What is present, therefore, is not the primacy of the genitals but the primacy of the phallus" (1923, p.142). In his notion, Freud has no consideration of the effect of cultural background as a significant reason in creating the personal and social identity of woman. He summarizes that gender is biological. Many critics defined the concept of phallic mother within the psychoanalytic theory. It is defined in APA Dictionary of Psychology as "An image or fantasy of a woman endowed with a phallus, often discussed in psychoanalysis, where it is given an interpretation in the light of the phallic stage. Also called a phallic mother...combined parent-figure" (Colman, p.566-567, 2003). Missonnier (2005) also defines the concept, in the most general sense, "is a mother who is fantastically endowed with a phallus" (p.1261) In APA Dictionary of Psychology, it is defined as "the fantasy that the mother has a penis, or symbolically, the experience of a mother with masculine personality traits" (VandenBos, 2015, p.787). Accordingly, in Oxford Dictionary of Psychology, phallic woman is defined: "An image or fantasy of a woman endowed with a phallus, often discussed in psychoanalysis, where it is given an interpretation in the light of the phallic stage. Also called a phallic mother... combined parent-figure"

(Colman, 2003). Creed (2012) writes that phallic woman “describes any woman possessing traditionally masculine characteristics” (p. 157).

The notion of phallic mother is drawing on Sigmund Freud’s writings relating to the formulation of sexual views of children. According to his views, in the phallic stage, the children replace the phallus for the organ and believing that everyone should has a phallus, she/he creates a phallic mother imago. “The fear of the phallic mother imago tacitly affirms the threat of castration, while at the same time defensively negating it along with all its oral and anal pregenital foundations” (Missonnier, 2005, p. 1261).

The phallic mother is confined within the language of the psychoanalytic reading. The discourse of psychoanalysis is generated depending on female's castration as if possessing the phallus is the central criterion of a complete body. Jacques Lacan reviewed Freud’s theories. He believed that the Oedipus complex is created in a dialectic argument, whose main alternatives are to have or not to have the phallus, or to be or not to be the phallus (Felman,1993). Therefore, Lacan created a binary oppositional system between having the phallus and losing it.

In Lacanian model, the symbolic law indicates the metaphorical interpretation of power, mastery, and fecundity, thus, the phallus refers to be the signification, the meaning, or what is symbolized in its own right. This viewpoint of the phallus as the privileged signifier is especially one of the major notions of the Lacanian model (Lacan,1982). In other words, in Lacan's theory, language is a symbolic law in which the phallus signifies control and power; thus female, since she does not have the phallus, has no entry in her own right to the symbolic law. Annette Kuhn, (1981) explains the Lacanian notion as follows:

The human subject is.... masculine or feminine subject in relation to the Oedipus complex. Sexual difference is seen as structured by the subject's relation to the phallus, the signifier which stands in for the play of absence and presence that constitutes language. Because the oedipal moment inaugurates sexual difference in relation to the phallus as signifier, men and women enter language differently, and Lacan's argument is that the female entry into language is organized by lack, or negativity.” (p.37)

Lacan therefore created a binary oppositional construction which focuses on woman as the deficit or the negative and the phallus or man as the norm. He confirmed that the structure of language is drawing on a binary oppositional construction of gendered difference. Within this structure woman means or



signifies Other, or different from man. And because the structure of the symbolic law situates male at the centre, female is interpreted as negatively different from male.

Both Freud and Lacan appropriate the term the phallus as a major notion in their theories. They therefore established the phallus, based on the views of desire, envy, being, having and lacking. Given that the phallus is the privileged signifier of desire, and that desire is invariably masqueraded, veiled and indirect, it leads to the perception that female is the phallus, and male has the phallus.

The phallic law attempts to shape female as a submissive pattern to male. Female is regarded as worthless due to her loss of the phallus and the male is viewed the worthy part as he has the phallus thus, he strives to stereotype female to be suitable for the patriarchal order. Judith Butler's notion of being a phallus for woman is:

For women to be the phallus means, then, to reflect the power of the phallus, to signify that power, to "embody" the phallus, to supply the site to which it penetrates, and to signify the phallus through "being" its other, its absence, its lack, the dialectical conformation for its identity" (2001, p.234)

The phallus denotes to the world controlled by the law of father. Thus, the two sexes are separated into the two ways of possessing the phallus for the masculine and being the phallus for the feminine and the feminine subject attempts to be the object of desire for the masculine. A female, then, embraces a supported attitude to the symbolic law as the result of her attempt to become the phallus for the other.

METHODOLOGY

To explore the aims of the present study, the qualitative approach is used as a means for a profound understanding of this terrain of study. It has been stated by Taylor and Bogdan (2015) that qualitative research method is research procedure that generate data in the shape of descriptive verbal or written expressions from noticeable demeanor of people. Furthermore, Myers (2002) affirms the qualitative method is the best procedure for exploring cultural and social events or manifestations, since they deal with realizing people and the social and cultural contexts in which they exist, why people behave as they do: their beliefs, knowledge, fears and attitudes. The primary data established of the current study is a novel named Fasting, Feasting by Indian female writer Anti Desai. The mentioned literary novelistic work is chosen on the basis of incarnating



psychoanalytic and feminist notions. The target theme of this study is phallic image of women.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As it was mentioned in the theoretical framework, the psychoanalytic theorists, Freud and Lacan agree in their refusing to consider phallus as biological characteristics which divide human beings as a male or a female. They affirm that the phallus must be given an interpretation that averts diminishing it to the biological distinction between the sexes. In fact, Freud considered the phallus as a distinguished account of its influence for diverse genders. (Zohar, 2009). Relatedly, Lacanian notion of phallus is that the men are the possessors of the phallus and due to women lack the phallus, they try to become the phallus for the men.

Drawing on Lacanian and Freudian theories, the psychoanalytic feminist theorists like Judith Pamela Butler clearly clarifies that the phallic law attempts to shape female as a submissive pattern to male. Female is regarded as worthless due to her loss of the phallus and the male is viewed the worthy part as he has the phallus thus, he strives to regulate female to be suitable for the patriarchal order. Judith Butler's notion of being a phallus for woman is:

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Accordingly, Anti Desai demonstrates how her female characters should be and how patriarchal system strive to pressure them for conforming the required image. In her novel, Desai presents her female characters as clear examples of phallic creatures. These creatures believe that the attachment to the symbolic law would ensure their access to authority.

The novelist describes a phallic identity of Mama as a female character surrounded by a social environment which substantially imposes patriarchal traditions and values. She receives and absorbs those cultural systems until they become integral part of her entity. She is taught and trained that females are followers and males

are decision makers. Therefore, females become as a mere means for fulfilling male's endless various desires and needs.

Accordingly, Mama should be a means in the hands of her husband Papa to fulfill all his requirements and ambitions. Mama becomes just like a factory in which goods are produced by machines in accordance with their consumers. When she is painfully pregnant with her third child, Papa closes his ears towards her suggestion to have an abortion, even though of her heavy physical suffering and severe vomit. Papa and Mama are by no means identical partners because Papa has a powerful insistence to have a boy. He declares that they “have two daughters, yes quite grown up as anyone could see, but there was no son.” (*Fasting, Feasting*, p.16). However, by giving birth to a boy, Mama is able to regain her position considerably and their bond becomes “more equal than ever” (*Fasting, Feasting*, p.31). We come to conclude that woman who is able to produce boys is desirable in the symbolic order. The grip of the law of father is severe on Mama whose anguish with her tough husband is being further exaggerated by the traditional patriarchal society and ambitions. Mama has no freedom and choice because she stays psychologically objectified by her society in India. Her body is the object where the law of father is engraved because this body must fit the reductionist approach of a femineity as sexual object and creator of off spring.

Phallic mother is totally incarnated by the symbolic order that her husband represents. Mama's thoughts, views and decisions are always in accordance with Papa's. Papa repeatedly ignores what she says and therefore she is regulated that she never gives a contrary view. Desai mentions that

his thoughts were one with hers. Their opinion differed so rarely that if Mama refused to let Aruna wear a pearl necklace to the matinee at the Regal cinema or Papa decided Uma could not take music lessons after school, there was no point in appealing to the other parent for a different verdict: none was expected, or given. (*Fasting, Feasting*, p.14)

In this statement, a female in the symbolic order is not viewed human beings for the simple cause that she is a woman. When a male is considered as intellectual, strong and active then a female is viewed docile, emotional and weak. In this patriarchal model, females are considered everything that is not parallel to males. As has been written by De Beauvoir, (1973) that females are not born feminine, but that culture and society consider them to be females, molding them second status and stereotypes in patriarchal system. She declares that nothing or no one can interpret what a female is, but there are many different social influences that



establish her unjust circumstances and regulate what a female should be. In her own words, Beauvoir states “One is not born, but rather becomes, Woman” (p.301)

Anita Desai also deals with authoritarian relationship between Mama and Uma, her daughter. The former tries to remove the roots of her innocent daughter. The text has certain events where we observe how Uma’s mother stands against her goodwill. On one occasion, Uma runs away from their house to face Mother Agnes, so that she can be accepted again in the school. Mama reacts “see what these nuns do...What ideas they fill in the girl’s head! I always said don’t send them to a convent school. Keep them at home. I said-but who listened?” (*Fasting, Feasting*, p.29) Mama's character is taught to imitate Papa’s behavior. She could be viewed as the best sample of those phallic women whose cognition is always engaging in absorbing patriarchal cultures and therefore profoundly attracted and fascinated to imitate the culture of the symbolic law.

Phallic mother stands for the patriarchal values, she therefore rejects categorically all the other contrary ideas. For Mama who considers femininity as “a model of perfection”, beauty is viewed as a standard in the patriarchal societies. Mama has absolute dominance over Uma’s desires. Uma cannot take decisions relating to her destiny because she is obligated to follow Mama. She is totally controlled by her phallic mother and husband after she has received her bride price. (*Fasting, Feasting*, p.77)

The novelist introduces Uma as a gift of exchange for reinforcement the tribalism relations. Mama encourages Papa to write a letter to all their relations asking for marriage proposals for Uma. The letter is “Uma is still young but may be considered of marriageable age and we see no reason to continue her studies beyond class eight” (*Fasting, Feasting*, p. 75). Her parents strongly strive to marry her to any boy who has a head, two ears, two eyes, two legs, two hands like any boy. In this regard, Juliet Mitchell (2000) indicates kinship orders in which males exchange females for the sake of symbolic authority which fathers have within these orders, and the dire psychological consequences of this authority for females.

Moreover, Uma is treated as inhuman being because she cannot express her delight and sadness. Mama extremely refuses these feelings and she considers as effrontery and bad manners. It is interesting to observe that Mama believes that it is her daughter’s unattractive looks and uneducated position that never enable her to discover a fit suitor. Uma’s words show that, “Mama had always envied Lila Aunt for having a daughter like Anamika, a model of perfection like Anamika. No, that was not for her, she sighed” (*Fasting, Feasting*, p.77). Mama considers Uma as a means of satisfying the physical needs of the males.

When somebody intends to get married, it means that he or she is mentally and physically prepared to understand each other, respect, look after, accept the strengths and weaknesses of his copartner, and help one another; because of that, the significance of premarital education and knowledge to construct preparedness and preparation for marriage. Unfortunately, Uma has no choice except marriage to look forward to as a means for escaping from the hard familial responsibilities which she endures at home, and her phallic mother attempts despairingly to find her a husband. The two endeavors Mama and Papa do to marry her off fail and end up scamming the family and losing them more money. Desai mentions “having cost her parents two dowries, without a marriage to show in return, Uma was considered ill-fated by all and no more attempts were made to marry her off” (*Fasting, Feasting*, p.96).

The lack of fairness that Uma experiences in the hands of the symbolic system is relatively due to the phallic identity of Mama. Uma, though not a responsible mother takes great responsibility whose lifelong commitment is to look after her Mama and Papa. She likes going to school which is “streaked with golden promise” (*Fasting, Feasting*, p.20) but her unfortunate failure in academic school confines her at home. She also endures the responsibility of nurturing Arun, her new born brother because he requires “Proper attention” (*Fasting, Feasting*, p.31).

Uma’s school education is totally neglected and instead, her mother imprisons her amid the domestic duties. Mama also wants Uma to consider marriage as her profession instead of receiving education. Mama inquires:

What is the use of going back to school if you keep failing, Uma? 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 marriage for you. Not now,’ she added, seeing the panic on Uma’s face. ‘But soon. Till then, you can help me look after Arun. And learn to run the house’ (*Fasting, Feasting*, p.22).

The idea that marriage is the only profession and husband the only fate and destiny for a female is a rooted culture for phallic Mama. Phallic identity of Mama as obedient, subservient and submissive demeanor can be compared with Mrs. Patton’s self-confident demeanor. Mrs. Patton has freedom to do whatever she likes. She travels anywhere without her husband’s permission and she has no an obligation to explain to anybody, which is not the case with Mama. If Mama desires to go out home, she must wait for her husband to determine how and when; otherwise, Mama remains home. If she does not accompany him, she cannot go out as the following quotation shows: “Papa gets into the front seat and waits for Uma

and Mama to get in. He's taking them for an outing to the park" (*Fasting, Feasting*, p.11).

Phallic image of woman should be physically charming, household, realizing how to wear clothes and appeal to male. All these essential requirements are practiced by Aruna rather than Uma. During the maturing age, Uma is taught by her little sister, Aruna how to be attractive by applying makeup and the latest fashions while Uma is unconcerned about such phallic traits. These characteristics enable Aruna to succeed the required criteria while Uma fails miserably. In this regard, Cornillon clarifies that "women internalize the male idea of the feminine and create themselves in the shape of that idea" (cited in Savitt, 2009, p.1).

Anamika is another female character who grows up in a patriarchal order that views higher education to be the privilege of men, and marriage as the estimated destiny of women. Hence, the scholarship earned by her is utilized only as an instrument to gain her a husband who is viewed a parallel to the family's status. Anamika's phallic mother encourages the success of this venture but she is not annoyed by the fact that suitor is "so much older than her, so grim-faced and conscious of his own superiority", and is "totally impervious to Anamika's beauty grace and distinction" (*Fasting, Feasting*, p.70). Woman is repeatedly depicted as being subordinate to man. She is only used to attain man's needs. Anamika's mother is another pattern of phallic creature who is the prisoner of conventional culture. Marriage is usually viewed as a means to showcase the prowess of man in obtaining a good-looking bride. Anamika becomes "an instrument for her husband 'to enhance his superiority to other men'" (Choubey, 2004, p.97)

Similar to Anamika's mother and Mama, Anamika's mother-in-law depict the eminent role played by the phallic mothers toward the boys in the Indian patriarchal society. The position of phallic woman in the community is raised via the conception of the boys. After the marriage, the sons are probably to satisfy the expectations of their wives which is often hated by the mothers and they consider their daughters-in-law as a great rival power which threatens their powerful status in societal and the familial set up. Anamika's mother-in-law cannot tolerate the intelligence and beauty of her daughter-in-law since the time of the marriage. Anamika's husband, a typical to Mama's son by staying a silent spectator and eyewitness to his mother's beating of his wife. However, it should be said that this event of physical violence is a turning way in Anamika's life, after which she understands that her life could not continue for a long time. Anamika ultimately meets a tragic death in the hands of her mother-in-law

CONCLUSION

Anti Desai's *Fast Feasting* is a novel that revolves around the main notion that is phallic image of woman. Female characters undergo severe authority during their day to day lives. Both Anti Desai and the psychoanalytic and feminist theorists agreed that women are regulated to fit and serve the patriarchal order. Both continue on to declare that women are regulated by the social behavior and structures to satisfy the belief and norms of the cultural world they live in.

In the novel, Desai describes her female characters' status in the society. She depicts a world in which women have no choice and freedom. The females are male's objects and property, and the symbolic system has dislocated the females of everything, even their individuality. The characters of Desai also explore those who undergo to society's expectations which placed upon them. These annoying events gain readers' eagerness and work to destabilize the traditional restricted views of females.

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