

Representations of Masculinity in Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting*

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SIUKONEN, SINI: Representations of Masculinity in Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting*

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Tutkielmassani tarkastelen maskuliinisuutta ja patriarkaalisen yhteiskunnan merkitystä intialaisen kirjailijan Anita Desain romaanissa *Fasting, Feasting* (1999). Romaani kuvaa intialaisen keskiluokkaisen perheen elämää kahdesta näkökulmasta: romaanista suurimman osan kattava ensimmäinen osa painottuu perheen naimattomaksi jääneen tyttären, Uman, perspektiiviin; romaanin toinen, lyhyempi osa puolestaan valottaa perheen pojan, Arunin, opiskelua Yhdysvalloissa tämän asuessa paikallisen perheen luona.

Anita Desaita on totuttu pitämään feministisenä kirjailijana: suurin osa Desain varhaisesta tuotannosta käsittelee intialaisten naisten ajatus- ja kokemusmaailmaa. Myöhemmässä tuotannossaan Desai on tietoisesti pyrkinyt lisäämään myös mieshahmojen kuvausta, mikä on nähtävissä myös *Fasting, Feasting* -romaanissa.

Romaania on usein analysoitu feministisistä näkökulmista painottuen naishenkilöihin, erityisesti Umaan. Analyyseissä usein mainitaan patriarkaalinen, miesten hallitsema yhteiskunta ja sen tukahduttava vaikutus naisten elämään, mutta yksittäisten miesten ajatusmaailmaan ei useinkaan syvennyttä. Näin ollen tutkimuksessani pyrin selvittämään, miten maskuliinisuutta kuvataan romaanissa: nähdäänkö miehet lähinnä naisten alistajina, vai onko mieshahmoista löydettävissä myös muita ulottuvuuksia? Entä ovatko naiset osaltaan ylläpitämässä patriarkaalisia rakenteita? Tutkielmani teoriaosassa esittelen patriarkaalisen yhteiskunnan piirteitä sekä maskuliinisuuden käsitettä; lisäksi tuon esille tekijöitä, jotka ovat vaikuttaneet maskuliinisuuden ihanteisiin sekä Intiassa että Yhdysvalloissa.

Analyysissäni ilmenee muun muassa, että erityisesti intialaisen perheen isä kuvastaa selkeästi patriarkaalisen yhteiskunnan arvoja. Hän käyttää valtaansa kontrolloiden muiden perheenjäsenten elämää. Perheen äiti hyväksyy oman alisteisen asemansa ja toisaalta käyttää valtaa suhteessa tyttäriinsä. Myös amerikkalaisessa perheessä puolisoiden välillä on nähtävissä selkeä valta-asetelma, mutta toisaalta puoliset ovat hyvin etäänntyneet toisistaan.

Avainsanat: Desai, Intia, maskuliinisuus, patriarkaatti

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1 Introduction

In my second subject thesis I will analyse the male characters in *Fasting, Feasting* (from now on: *FF*), a novel by the Indian writer Anita Desai. The novel was originally published in 1999 and it depicts the life of an Indian upper middle-class family. The novel is divided into two parts: the first one, covering the majority of the novel, concentrates on the family's firstborn daughter, Uma. The second, briefer part portrays the life of Arun, the family's son, who is studying in the States and temporarily staying with an American family, the Pattons. Before presenting the aims of my research, I will begin by giving a brief introduction into the novel itself.

FF has a complex structure with no clear plot; the story moves on both in the present time and, through numerous flashbacks, in the past. The chapters in the novel are short and they often begin by first presenting a concrete situation showing interaction between the characters; these situations are then followed by background information (in the form of flashbacks). The narrator in the novel is extradiegetic; however, through internal focalization, it is particularly Uma's perspective that is presented in the first part and Arun's in the second part of the novel¹.

Uma, the protagonist of the novel's first part, is a tragic figure. She seems to fail in everything she tries: she is enthusiastic about school, but she keeps failing in the exams; she is also clumsy and therefore not especially good at housework. To crown it all, her parents' arrangements for her marriage fall through one after another, and Uma has no choice but to live in her childhood home, under the strict control of her parents. Uma's little sister Aruna, in turn, is ambitious and attractive, has no trouble in getting married and soon enjoys a modern life in Bombay. In addition there are many other minor characters involved in the Indian part of the story, such as Anamika, Uma's cousin, who eventually dies as a result of an unhappy and violent marriage (whether it is a suicide or a murder, is not completely clear).

¹ In addition, there are a few instances in the first part of the novel where the focalization momentarily shifts from Uma to some other character. Also, the narrator often comments the story, usually in an ironic way.

Arun, the long-awaited son of the family, is overwhelmed by the father's expectations of him. He feels alienated in America and tries to avoid human contact. During his stay with the Pattons, Arun discovers that freedom does not guarantee happiness: the members of the American family hardly have any contact with each other. Arun is, for example, the only one who notices that the family's teenaged daughter Melanie suffers from bulimia. Thus, Desai's idea of America differs from the traditional image of America as the land of unlimited opportunities².

Anita Desai was born in India in 1937. Her mother was of German origin and her father a Bengali businessman – this mixed parentage developed her knowledge of both Indian and Western culture from early on (Tandon 2008, 8). Desai's first novel, *Cry, the Peacock*, was published in 1963, and since then, she has published numerous novels as well as short story collections and children's books. She lived and worked in India until the early 1990s when she started to share her time between her home country and the United States (Ho 2006, 1). Despite her German Indian parentage, she finds her identity "totally Indian", although she also has made a distinction between her feelings and her thoughts regarding India: "I feel about India as an Indian, but I suppose I think of it as an outsider" (quoted in Ho 2006, 1). This outsider's view on India can either be interpreted as a strength, as a "critical distance", like Ho (ibid.) writes, or a weakness; some critics even accuse Desai of Eurocentrism: presenting India as a backward country to the already prejudiced western audience (e.g. Hussain 2005).

Desai is often regarded as a feminist writer. She herself, however, does not like being labelled as such, at least if we define feminism as a collective movement, passing off the experiences of women as individuals: in an interview in 1979 she stated, "I find it impossible to whip up any interest in a mass of women marching forward under the banner of feminism. Only the individual, the solitary being, is of true interest" (quoted in Mann 1995, 173). She has also pointed out that the

² According to Gopal (2009, 174–175), Indian American writers typically "figure Americanness as the emancipatory apotheosis of a life seeking freedom".

purpose of her writing is not to make societal statements: “My novels are not reflection of Indian society, politics or character. They are my private attempt to seize upon the raw material of life” (quoted in Singh 2007, 85).

However, there clearly has been a focus on women especially in Desai’s earlier fiction. Desai has typically concentrated on the feminine psyche and feelings of loneliness and alienation. Her stories often involve troubled relationships between married couples or family members (Gopal 2009, 152). Desai’s restriction to middle or upper class characters has sometimes been criticized; some critics find middle class characters “unrepresentative” of Indian women – or India generally³. However, as Ho (2006, 99–101) argues, even though Desai’s characters hardly suffer from poor conditions from a purely material point of view, they do face predicaments of other kinds: the social injustice hidden behind the bourgeois façade. One might also question whether it is realistic to expect a single writer to be able to represent India in a way that would be “representative” of all the more than one billion people living in India (and whether this kind of representation is necessary).

In an interview in 2001, Desai described a change that was taking place in her literary production (Ravichandran 2005, 88–89). She felt that she was returning to the same topics again and again – to the portrayal of the lives of women, especially women “who are confined to home and family”. This is why she deliberately wanted to broaden her horizons and started to write more about male characters; this tendency can already be seen in *FF* where the second part of the novel is narrated from Arun’s perspective. The examination of this widened perspective also constitutes the basis of this thesis.

Anita Desai is one of the most well-known Indian writers, so it is no wonder that her works have been widely studied before. There is a lot of previous research concerning the female characters in Desai’s novels, whereas the representation of men has gained less attention from

³ See the discussion in Ho (2006, 99–101).

critics. Only a few novels (*In Custody* from 1984 and *Baumgartner's Bombay* from 1988, mainly) have been studied with the focus on the male characters (e.g. Ho 2006, 43–65). As for *Fasting, Feasting*, one can find numerous articles concentrating on women (especially Uma), but I have not been able to find studies that would clearly have their focus on the male characters. Thus, with my second subject thesis I will complement the previous studies.

Whether or not it was Desai's intention, *FF* undeniably highlights the social evils that have affected and still continue to affect the lives of many Indian women. But what kinds of conclusions could we draw from the representation of *men* in the novel? As far as the male characters in *FF* have been analysed, most critics have concentrated on the question of power, arriving at divergent interpretations. Many critics (such as Prasad 2003, 71–80) emphasize the women's inner life, their experience and silent suffering in the suffocating, male-dominated environment, but they do not analyse the actions or the personalities of the male characters in detail; male dominance simply "is there" – as if the male characters in the novel did not really represent this dominance. On the other hand, some critics, such as Devika (2004, 256), argue that male chauvinism is not merely an underlying factor in the novel – the male characters actively oppress the women:

The male characters act as a block in the women's process of finding their self and reaching at some sort of realization. In Anita's fictional world it is the males who rule over these women; they hold the reins of all the females in their family and this spoils the efforts on the part of women to find out on their own the core of life.

In other words, the role of men is often interpreted as the oppressor (either as active or a faceless group in the background) and the role of women as the oppressed. However, it is also possible to find another dimension in Desai's representation of the gender relations. As Choubey (2004, 89) argues, "Desai as a true humanist puts the blame not only on men who are suffering with the complex of male-superiority [sic] but also on women who oppress their kind". Thus, the division of gender roles may be more complex than a simple oppressor/oppressed relationship.

In this thesis, I will draw attention to the personalities of the male characters. I am particularly interested in how the male characters feel and think about themselves as *men*, and what kinds of issues might have affected their masculinity. However, especially in the Indian context the questions of masculinity and power are inseparable; therefore, male power is also of interest in this thesis. Particularly I will examine to which extent the male dominance becomes visible through the actions of the male characters in the novel; do they actually put their power into action in the story? Or, do men “exist only as projections of women’s point of view”, as Tandon (2008, 106) writes? At least the character of *Papa*, the father of the Indian family, represents authoritative power over women; however, his character can also be analysed further than this – an interesting question is whether his actions are explained somehow. My further aim is to work on the idea presented above by Choubey and find out examples of how men suffer within the patriarchal system and, on the other hand, how women themselves are (even without realizing it) involved in sustaining patriarchal structures. The Indian male characters have a more significant role in the novel than their American counterparts; therefore, the analysis will focus more on the Indian men.

And finally, not only concerning Anita Desai’s works but also more generally, there seems to be a need for more research when it comes to the male characters in female writers’ fiction. As Frantz & Rennhak (2010, 2) argue, “feminist literary criticism has been primarily concerned with examining the manufacture, significance, and ideological consequences of female characters in texts written by women, ignoring or neglecting the texts’ male characters”. Frantz & Rennhak (ibid.) further suggest that when female writers construct male characters in their fiction, they “not only analyze the causes and effects of patriarchy ... but they also construct their own realities, imagining alternative masculinities that are desirable from a woman’s perspective”. In other words, female writers participate, according to Frantz & Rennhak, in the reconstruction of ideal masculinity. For the analysis of *FF*, this statement offers an interesting viewpoint. As a “counterbalance” for the rather negative image of manhood that has been read in *FF* by many

critics, is Anita Desai also portraying ‘ideal’ masculinity (through Arun)? (Or does she, at all, comment on what is ‘ideal’ masculinity and what is not?)

In the theoretical framework of my thesis I will use theories from the field of sociology. In section 2, I will introduce the concept of patriarchy. In order to understand masculinity in the Indian context, it is necessary to be aware of the basic structures of society; a society in which gender plays a key role inevitably affects the lives of the individual men. In section 3, I will define the term masculinity, as well as bring up some issues that have affected the notion of masculinity both in India and in America (particularly in recent history).

2 Male power in a patriarchal society

For the sake of clarity, it should be noted that the term *patriarchy* is used in three different meanings in modern English. Firstly, it can be used in the ecclesiastical sense, referring to the power of men recognized as Christian leaders. Secondly, patriarchy is used to refer to the powers of the husband/father over his wife and children⁴. In seventeenth-century England, patriarchy in this sense was extended into a political theory, according to which the power of kings derived from the power of fathers (Bennet 2007, 55). Thirdly, the term is used in feminist critiques to refer to the male power over women. In this section, it is this third meaning of the term that will be adopted. Some researchers use other terms in referring to the same concept; for instance, Holter (2005) prefers the term ‘structural gender inequality’ to ‘patriarchy’. It is also worth mentioning that the theory of patriarchy is only one of the several theories describing the distribution of power between men and women. However, in this thesis I will use the theory of patriarchy as a starting point, because it is especially for the Indian context the most applicable⁵.

⁴ Literally, ‘patriarchy’ means “the rule of the fathers” (Ruth 1998, 57).

⁵ As for India, patriarchy can be thought to refer both to the general male dominance in society, and also to the more traditional idea of the “rule by fathers”; in India, father is still considered the head of the family.

The term ‘patriarchy’ was introduced into feminist scholarship in the 1970s by the radical feminist Kate Millett (Whitehead 2002, 86). Feminists see patriarchy as a society in which men hold power, but also, furthermore, as a society “reflecting the values underlying the traditional male ideal” (Ruth 1998, 57). In the following, the concept of patriarchy will be discussed in more detail, mostly following the characterization by Allan Johnson (2005)⁶. Talking about patriarchy is often misunderstood as an attack against men; however, as Johnson (2005, 5), points out, patriarchy “is *not* simply another way of saying ‘men’”; for Johnson, patriarchy is, above all, a system in which both men and women participate. As Bennett (2007, 56–59) specifies, women are not necessarily innocent, passive victims of patriarchy: some women support and even benefit from it. Bennett (2007, 58) also remarks that while the concept of patriarchy is basically one and the same everywhere, its specific manifestations depend on the location.

Johnson (2005, 5–6) further defines patriarchy as a society characterized by four main features. The first of them is *male dominance*: positions of authority (political, legal, educational, religious and so on) are reserved for men. The fact that men occupy these positions also strengthens people’s associations with men’s general superiority to women. However, even if the society as such was dominated by men, all men are not powerful in their individual lives.

A second feature of a patriarchal society is *male identification*. This means that the cultural ideas about what is considered good, desirable and normal are connected to the culture’s ideas about masculinity. The criteria used to define an ideal man also represent the most important values of society. These male-identified qualities include, for example, rationality, autonomy, strength, coolness, toughness, competitiveness and control over emotions. These kinds of qualities are also associated with professions that are most highly valued in patriarchal societies – professions within law, medicine, business and so on. On the contrary, other qualities are associated with femininity

⁶ Even though Johnson writes from the viewpoint of a western sociologist, he does not limit his discussion of the basic structures of a patriarchal society to any specific culture; therefore, his characterization is applicable to Indian society as well.

and thus devalued: cooperation, mutuality, equality, compassion, emotional expressiveness and intuitive thinking, to mention some (Johnson 2005, 6–7).

On the other hand, some female qualities are selectively valued; women may find appreciation for their beauty. Women, particularly mothers, may also become objects of cultural romanticization. However, this can hardly be seen in the ways how women are treated in their everyday life. In a male-identified society, it is difficult for a woman to reach a high position. The more powerful the position of a woman under patriarchy is, the more “unsexed” she becomes in the eyes of other community members, whereas for a man, the situation is exactly the opposite: the more powerful his position is, the more masculine he is considered (Johnson 2005, 7–8).

Patriarchal societies are also characterized by *male centeredness*. Johnson (2005, 10–14) argues that the focus of society is usually on men and their achievements. However, men do not always agree with this claim, as they do not feel at the centre themselves. This, according to Johnson, is an ironic consequence from the male privilege. Men learn to think that they can only get acknowledgement through what they accomplish, whereas women are evaluated less by their achievements; what is considered more important is women’s ability to empathize with others. If men want to be seen and acknowledged by others, they have to meet the standards of patriarchal manhood (this is also manifested in competition between men). Women’s focus on others and men’s focus on themselves also reinforce the male-identified and male-centred aspects of the patriarchal society, which, in consequence, supports male dominance in society.

The fourth characteristic of patriarchal society is the *obsession with control*: men maintain their privilege by controlling women (Johnson 2005, 14–15). The male-identified qualities (such as rationality, strength, logic, unemotionality, being always right and in command of every situation) are used to mark men as superior and justify their privilege. Johnson points out that control as such does not inevitably lead to oppression. In fact, it is even essential for humans: we need control to get things done. However, in patriarchy, control means more than this: it is “valued and pursued to a

degree that gives social life an oppressive form by taking a natural human capacity to obsessive extremes”, as Johnson (2005, 14) describes. And, the more men see control as belonging to their “essence”, the more eagerly they strive to organize their lives around it.

Disconnection is an essential part of the relationship between controller and controlled: the controller sees the controlled as a separate “other”. The controller sees others simply as objects to act upon, ignoring their complexity as human beings. However, in patriarchy it is not control generally but *male* control in particular that plays a central role. Therefore, it is *men* who practice control and see themselves as autonomous and disconnected from others. Women’s lives also involve control to some extent, especially in relation to their children. But control does not define womanhood in the same way as it defines patriarchal manhood. Hence, women are criticized if they pursue control (Johnson, 2005, 14–15).

According to Johnson (2005, 17), people often refuse to see the depth of the inequality problem in society. The efforts to solve the problem have often been directed at the “symptoms”, whereas the ultimate reason of the problem remains ignored:

Thus far, mainstream women’s movements have concentrated on the liberal agenda, whose primary goal has been to allow women to do what men do in the ways that men do it, whether in science, the professions, business, or government. More serious challenges to patriarchy have been silenced, maligned, and misunderstood for reasons that aren’t hard to fathom. ... It is easier to allow women to assimilate into patriarchal society than to question society itself.

In other words, it is difficult to change patriarchy, because it is a complex structure, and deep-rooted in society.

Families, schools, media, religion and other such institutions convey ideas of the various social structures around us. People develop a sense of personal identity (including gender) and of one’s relation to other people. This process, in which people learn how to participate in social life, is called *socialization* (Johnson 2005, 31). The ideas people learn through socialization are not necessarily “true”, but it is often difficult to contest the dominant ideology. People rationalize what

they have learned; challenging the prevailing ideology could lead to one's disapproval in the eyes of other community members (Johnson 2005, 32). Johnson (*ibid.*) uses the term *path of least resistance* to refer to the conscious and unconscious choices people make in social situations. People usually have numerous options of how to react in a certain situation, but they tend to choose the safest, the most comfortable or familiar one; in other words, the path of least resistance. This feature in human nature is one of the main factors sustaining patriarchal structures: as Johnson (2005, 33) states, “[i]f a society is oppressive, then people who grow up and live in it will tend to accept, identify with, and participate in it as ‘normal’ and unremarkable life. That’s the path of least resistance in any system.” On the other hand, the chance to make a change in society lies in stepping off the path of least resistance. If someone chooses to object to a certain oppressive practice, it may change other people’s views on what is socially acceptable and what is not. As the social resistance increases, it becomes difficult to stick to the oppressive practices (Johnson 2005, 32–33).

As a final remark on patriarchy: despite all the discussion of male power that has been presented above, one should keep in mind that *all* men are not necessarily powerful⁷. As Pleck (1989, 25) notes, “men do not just happily bond together to oppress women. In addition to hierarchy over women, men create hierarchies and rankings among themselves according to criteria of ‘masculinity’”. In fact, since these patriarchal dynamics in male-male relationships are less obvious than those in male-female relationships, they may remain unnoticed. This may be risky for men: whereas women’s situation may be (somewhat) improved by women’s movement, no actions are taken to prevent men’s oppression (Pleck 1989, 27).

⁷ Another misconception is that power automatically leads to happiness – in fact, the situation might be exactly the opposite; men can be privileged and unhappy at the same time. Men’s misery is a consequence from their anxiety of preserving their power: “A person who values control over anything else is incapable of any relation that might weaken or penetrate that surface of control; thus such a person becomes almost incapable of intimacy, equality, or trust, each of which requires the abdication of control” (French, quoted in Johnson 2005, 172).

3 Masculinity

There have been many attempts to define masculinity. R. W. Connell (2010, 68–71) distinguishes between four types of definitions. *Essentialist* definitions concentrate on features that are supposed to define the “core” of the masculine. In the course of time, the essence of masculinity has been connected with various qualities. The obvious problem of essentialist definitions is that the choice of the “essence” is totally arbitrary. Nothing obliges the supporters of different essentialist definitions to agree with each other (Connell 2010, 68–69).

Positivist social science insists that the definition of masculinity should be based on facts; what men actually and empirically *are*. This kind of definition is used, for instance, as the basis of masculinity/femininity scales in psychology (Connell 2010, 69). According to Connell (*ibid.*), there are three main difficulties involved in the positivist definitions. Firstly, the ostensibly objective definitions are in reality underpinned by certain assumptions about gender (for example, in order to establish an M/F scale, one already needs to have an idea of what to list in it). Secondly, to examine what men and women ‘are’, they first need to be categorized into “men” and “women”; and, these categories are unavoidably based on “common-sense typologies of gender”, as Connell (*ibid.*) puts it. Thirdly, if masculinity is defined by empirical findings of what men are, it is no longer possible to call some men ‘feminine’ or, correspondingly, some women ‘masculine’. And finally, this kind of definition of masculinity actually makes the term itself useless. If we merely spoke of differences between men and women as two separate groups, we could simply use the terms *men’s* and *women’s* or *male* and *female*. But, as Connell (*ibid.*) states, “the terms ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ point beyond categorical sex difference to the ways men differ among themselves, and women differ among themselves, in matters of gender”.

The third type of definition is *normative*. Normative definitions recognize the differences between men, and present a standard: masculinity is what men “should” be. However, it is in practice only a few men that actually meet the standards of normative masculinity. Connell (2010,

70) finds this problematic. Is it expedient to establish a norm that hardly anyone meets? Are the majority of men, then, unmasculine?

Semiotic approaches, following the model of structural linguistics, define masculinity through “a system of symbolic difference in which masculine and feminine places are contrasted”; put differently, masculinity is defined as not-femininity (Connell 2010, 70). Masculinity as contrasted to femininity is considered the unmarked term⁸: “[t]he phallus is master-signifier, and femininity is symbolically defined by lack” (ibid.). This kind of definition has been widely used in cultural analysis. However, what Connell (2010, 71) regards as its weakness is the limitedness of its scope; a semiotic definition of masculinity restricts the term to discursive uses.

Connell (2012, 68; 71) argues that instead of trying to define masculinity as an isolated object, one should look at masculinity as an aspect of a larger structure. He offers the following practically-oriented definition; this is also the kind of definition this thesis will lean on (Connell 2010, 71):

[W]e need to focus on the processes and relationships through which men and women conduct their gendered lives. ‘Masculinity’, to the extent the term can be briefly defined at all, is simultaneously a place in gender relations, the practices through which men and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices in bodily experience, personality and culture.

In patriarchal contexts, the idea of men being essentially ‘masculine’ and women ‘feminine’ as well as the oppositeness of the two sexes are highlighted (Johnson 2005, 85–86). In fact, in a patriarchal society, the cultural ideas about ideal masculinity and femininity are tools, or even *weapons*, of social control that are used to maintain the patriarchal order (ibid., 92). According to Johnson (ibid.), an individual needs to have a relatively stable sense of his/her identity and place in the world; and, in a patriarchal society, the importance of gender in the formation of one’s identity is crucial. Therefore, attacking people as being “insufficiently” masculine or feminine can be used to

⁸ Markedness refers to the idea that in the binary opposition of two elements (such as masculinity and femininity), one element is considered unmarked, in other words more frequent or less noticed than the other. In the opposition of masculinity and femininity, masculinity is regarded as the unmarked term, the “default” (Reeser 2010, 8).

control them: this kind of attack impugns their sense of who they are and also makes them feel like outsiders.

3.1 Gender issues in colonial and postcolonial India

Women are subordinated to men in India, but this has not always been the case: originally the status of women was higher, but it declined over the centuries (Nubile 2003, 2). It is, however, beyond the scope of this thesis to provide a comprehensive discussion of the history of Indian society⁹. Instead, I will focus on events in recent history; in other words, the colonial past of India and its impact on the gender relations.

Gender issues gain in significance in colonial and postcolonial contexts. Different aspects of gender have been used both for the purposes of the colonizer and the colonized. In anti-colonial struggles and in postcolonial states, the status of women often deteriorates as a consequence of nationalist movements¹⁰. In nationalist discourses, the concepts of tradition and value are eventually intertwined with debates about the role of women, because women are seen as “reservoirs” of values and traditions as well as symbols of the nation’s purity; this, in consequence, leads to the need to control women. But the construction of the national identity in postcolonial states does not only affect femininity but also masculinity. Nationalism, in particular, becomes associated with masculinity (Nayar 2010, 101–109). This has also been the case in India. In the following I will explain in more detail what kinds of consequences Indian nationalism has had in the lives of both Indian men and women.

Cultural nationalism arose in India in 1830s as a response to the colonizers’ attacks on Hindu civilization. One such intervention by the colonizers was the abolition of *sati* (the immolation of the widow on her husband’s funeral pyre). For Hindu nationalists, this was an intrusion into the Hindu

⁹ For more information on the changes in the status of Indian women, see e.g. Nubile (2003, 1–30).

¹⁰ In this thesis, nationalism is discussed only from the viewpoint of gender.

family, the most sacred sphere of Hindu culture. Also, the representation of Hindus as morally inferior by highlighting the brutality of sati and other forms of female oppression incited the nationalist celebration of Hinduism (Derné 1999, 238). Furthermore, the nationalist movement was also a reaction to the colonialist representation of Hindu masculinity (ibid., 239). The colonizers created an image of manly European men, and, on the other hand, effeminate Indian men – except for certain ethnic groups such as Sikhs or Gurkhas that were declared to be “martial races” (Flood et al 2007, 329). One of the first responses by Indian nationalists was to revive the pre-colonial, martial spirit; to associate Indian masculinity with Hinduism’s indigenous martial tradition. Physical strength of the male body became an important manifestation of masculinity; some men rediscovered indigenous traditions such as wrestling, whereas others followed the European ideals of the male body. Others reclaimed their masculinity by the practice of celibacy. Still today, some Indian men who have adopted an ascetic way of life feel that Indian masculinity is threatened by modern influences (Derné 1999, 240–242; Flood et al 2007, 330).

Some Indian nationalists wanted to refute the colonialist assertion that Hindus were unable to rule themselves – of which the oppression of women was seen to be proof – and strove to reform Hinduism to improve the status of women. However, as Derné (199, 242) points out, even if “Indian nationalisms aimed at reforming Indian patriarchy [they] usually ended up reinventing it”. The control over the female body was connected with the honour of the nation. The nationalists wanted to “protect” women by confining them to the domestic sphere; women’s participation in working life was criticized. And, whereas women were restricted to the traditional, subservient roles, men had the freedom to adopt modern values (ibid., 242–244).

This kind of ideology still has a foothold in India. According to Derné (1999, 245), “many men continue to emphasize the importance of women’s adherence to traditional cultural norms as a way of bolstering their own sense of Indian identity – even as men themselves embrace important

aspects of Western culture”. In other words, it is the sari-wearing, modest Indian wives in the home who connect the “Westernized” Indian men to Indian tradition.

Rather than choosing celibacy, many Indian men “emphasize the importance of reproducing another pure generation of Hindus”, as stated by Derné (1999, 248). One aim of the nationalist movement was to use the women’s “biological potential” in order to regenerate the race that was considered weakened. This is why it was important to keep women confined to the domestic sphere. Still today, many Indian men want to keep their wives at home – they regard the wife’s willingness to obey her husband (in practice, to do the domestic work as well as please her husband sexually) as her most important quality – which might be threatened by alien influences. If women become more independent, men might lose their privileged position. Therefore the nationalist ideology continues to be appealing to many Indian men (Derné 1999, 249). At the worst, men’s need to control women has manifested itself in domestic violence (*idib.*, 252).

So, to recapitulate, there have been different forms of Indian nationalism, but they all share some common features. Firstly, they aim at controlling the body – both male and female. Secondly, male nationalists usually concentrate on protecting their identity as men, reinforcing the subordinate status of women. Thirdly, male nationalists feel threatened by modernity, which leads to the reconstitution of the traditional gender roles for men and women (Derné 1999, 253–254).

3.2 Masculinity in America: The legacy of the Self-Made Man

According to Kimmel (1996, 9), the earliest embodiments of American manhood were landowners, independent artisans, shopkeepers and farmers. During the first decades of the nineteenth century, the industrial revolution started to influence the way American men thought of themselves. Manhood was now defined through the man’s economic success. This was the origin of the “Self-Made Man” ideology; the new concept of American manhood that was less stable than the previous image of a landowner or an artisan, but also more exciting and potentially more rewarding for the

men themselves. The image of the Self-Made Man has had far-reaching effects on the notion of masculinity in America.

The emergence of the Self-Made Man put men under pressure. As Kimmel (1996, 43–44) states,

... American men's economic, political, and social identity was no longer fixed. If social order, permanence, could no longer be taken for granted and a man could rise as high as he aspired, then his sense of himself as a man was in constant need of demonstration. Everything became a test – his relationships to work, to women, to nature, and to other men.

According to Kimmel (1996, 44), men's reactions to the new situation were *self-control*, *exclusion* or *escape* – themes that continue to characterize American masculinity still today.

The need for control evolved from the men's experience that the world (especially in the mid-nineteenth century) was disordered; it was rushing towards the industrial future without any control or stability. Control was first directed at men themselves; from the 1830s to 1850s, numerous advice manuals were published, counselling men on how to control their sexual desires (Kimmel 1996, 44–48). Besides controlling sexual behaviour, there were efforts to reduce men's alcohol consumption. The separation of the 'masculine' and 'feminine' spheres was also a consequence of the men's need for control. The workplace became masculinized, the home feminized. As Kimmel (1996, 52) notes, "separate spheres allowed insecure middle-class men to feel like men, both in the homosocial workplace and when they returned to their homes".

By exclusion Kimmel (1996, 90–92) refers to the belief that the white, middle-class American men could only preserve their gender identity by excluding the "others": those who were considered less manly (i.e., blacks, women, immigrants, Native Americans, homosexuals). In the 19th century, the theories of Social Darwinism were used to justify this exclusion. In Social Darwinist thinking, both racist and anti-feminist ideas were often interrelated. It was believed that men were at a higher state of evolution than women, and, non-white men and white women were "equated".

The third cornerstone in the realization of the Self-Made Man, the urge to escape, resulted from the separation of the spheres. Gradually, women had become constraints of masculinity. Home was now women's "playground" where mothers and wives, the personifications of Christian virtues, tried to civilize men. Men felt uneasy in their homes, and their solution was to escape; to find a place where they could be real men again. One of the most extreme manifestations of the need to escape was the California Gold Rush which drove thousands of men westward in search of freedom, adventure and wealth (Kimmel 1996, 59–62).

Because of the separation of the feminine and masculine spheres that had been promoted, women and men now lived in separate worlds. By the turn of the twentieth century, men realized that their exclusion from the domestic sphere was in fact harmful to them: it left men "unable to experience the love, nurture, and repose that the home supposedly represented" (Kimmel 1996, 158). Men were also worried about the "feminization" that potentially threatened their sons: men feared that women, who had the main responsibility for the upbringing of the children, would make the sons into "sissies". For these reasons, fatherhood movements and ideas of companionate marriage came into view (*ibid.*, 158–159). However, it turned out to be difficult to alter the already established positions, and American men continue(d) to struggle within their restrictive roles long after.

By the 1960s, the feelings of powerlessness and alienation had significantly increased among American men, mainly because of the stress and frustration they experienced in the working life: "[t]he pressure to be a successful breadwinner was a source of strain and conflict, not pride and motivation" (Kimmel 1996, 265)¹¹. Along with the rise of feminism, men's liberation movement emerged in the 1970s, critiquing the image of the success-driven and individualistic Self-Made Man as the source of men's unhappiness. According to the liberationists, the situation could only be

¹¹ Kimmel (1996, 310) also notes that men's disappointment with their work drove them to search another ways of proving their masculinity; one of the "methods" men resorted to was excessive physical exercise. Thus, the idea of physical ability as a manifestation of masculinity has characterized both Indian and American culture.

improved by changing the men's roles, both at work and at home: men needed new models for manhood (ibid., 280–283). As a response, the warm, sensitive, compassionate man (an image created by popular culture, such as films) was offered as a new role model for American men in the 1980s. However, for most men, this “sensitive New Age guy” was synonymous with a “wimp”; therefore, men rejected their new model. In the fear of being perceived as “wimps”, men now actively strove to assert their masculinity (Kimmel 1996, 291–299).

Since the 1980s, some American men have felt “beleaguered” because of the changes that have taken place in society, especially concerning gender equality (Kimmel 1996, 299). Women have entered workplaces and other arenas of life that earlier were occupied by men. According to Kimmel (1996, 300), a “small but vocal group of men” demand that the traditional image of Self-Made Man should be revived. These traditionalists feel that men are the actual victims of gender inequality; they are oppressed by the “feminazis”. Kimmel (1996, 330) argues that many American men of today remain puzzled by the new challenges. In the globalizing and changing world, the Self-Made Man as the prevalent model of manhood “leads more than ever before to chronic anxiety and insecurity” (ibid.).

In conclusion: even though Indian and American societies – as well as the processes that have shaped the ideals of masculinity within both cultures – are different in many respects, one may also find some tendencies that are reminiscent of each other. The division between the public (masculine) and the domestic (feminine) sphere has been characteristic of both India and America, although it certainly has been more drastic in India. Control also seems to have been a central theme in the pursuit of “real” masculinity. And finally, the representation of men as effeminate, the fear of “feminization” and the rise of feministic movements have led to masculinist backlashes among both Indian and American men.

4 Masculinities in *Fasting, Feasting*

I will now move on to the actual analysis of the male characters in *FF*. Many themes in the novel are interrelated with each other; therefore, the division of the analysis into separate sections is partly artificial, but for the readability of the analysis, such a division is of course necessary. I will begin with the Indian characters. In 4.1, I will mostly concentrate on Papa, especially analysing him in his roles as a husband, a father and a “personification” of the patriarchal values of Indian society. At the end of 4.1, I will also briefly discuss the character of Ramu, Papa’s nephew. Section 4.2 will be dedicated to analysing the character of Arun, in relation to both his own family in India and his host family in the States. In section 4.3, I will further study the American family, and particularly the father, Mr Patton. Finally, in section 5, I will return to the Indian context, focusing on the question of women’s role in sustaining patriarchal structures.

4.1 “He never became less like himself, only more so” – Papa

The parents of the Indian family are often referred to as *MamaPapa*¹², as if they were not separate persons. In their current “Siamese twin existence”, the parents hardly even speak about the time before their marriage. As a united team, they have more authority over the children; there is something impressive (if not even threatening) in their appearance: “Having fused into one, they had gained so much in substance, in stature, in authority, that they loomed large enough as it was; they did not need separate histories and backgrounds to make it even more immense” (*FF*, 6). The representation of the parents as having “fused into one” also reflects how complete oneness between a married couple has been idealized in India. As Nubile (2003, 24) states, in Indian culture, “[t]he

¹² The parents are given no names; throughout the whole novel, they are simply Mama and Papa. Many critics, such as Tandon (2008, 69), have interpreted this as a way of generalizing the characters; many parents in the Indian middle class could be like them. On the other hand, Ho (2006, 85) suggests that “in being unnamed, MamaPapa seems devoid not only of parental nurture but of finer human qualities”. A third possibility is that ‘Mama’ and ‘Papa’ indicate that the parents are mainly presented from the children’s perspective (as restricted to their parental roles rather than as multidimensional personalities).

married human couple must represent ideal oneness: husband and wife are considered as complementary halves of one whole” Nubile further adds that this oneness, however, is not a balanced situation for the spouses: it is achieved by the self-effacement of the wife. This is also the case in the family portrayed in *FF*; particularly when it comes to decision-making, it is Papa who has more power.

Mama and Papa usually agree with each other on everyday matters. The only thing they debate about is what to have for dinner; however, it is always Mama who has the final word. But when it comes to more significant questions, Papa makes the decisions alone. When Mama falls pregnant at a mature age, Papa turns a deaf ear to her wishes to have an abortion, even though she suffers from severe nausea. Or, when Uma’s eyesight is worsening and the local optician recommends she should consult a specialist in Bombay, it is Papa who firmly rejects this idea. Neither does Papa listen to Mama’s protests when he wants to send Arun abroad to study; he does not expect her to understand the opportunities offered by a foreign degree. Thus, despite their “oneness”, Mama and Papa are by no means equal companions. However, by giving birth to a son, Mama is able to elevate her status considerably¹³: after Arun’s birth, the parents are “more equal than ever” (*FF*, 31). Ironically, Mama herself seems to think of their son merely as Papa’s achievement; as the narrator describes, “[m]ore than ever now, she was Papa’s helpmeet, his consort. He had not only made her his wife, he had made her the mother of his son. What honour, what status” (*FF*, 31). All in all, Papa and Mama follow the traditional roles: they seemingly act as one entity, “MamaPapa”, but ultimately, Papa is the head of the family, and Mama subservient to him.

Some information about Papa’s background is revealed at the beginning of the novel: “Papa, [born] in Patna, the son of a taxi inspector with one burning ambition, to give his son the best

¹³ The idea of a son as an honour for the mother also depicts the deep-rooted gender-discrimination in India as characterized by Nubile (2003, 22–23): giving birth to a daughter is a shame – a daughter brings dowry debts and may also ruin the family’s honour.

available education, had won prizes at school meanwhile, played tennis as a young man, trained for the bar and eventually built up a solid practice” (*FF*, 5). If Papa tells stories about his childhood or youth, they usually have to do with studying. He wants to highlight how he achieved success in his life, even though the conditions were tough (*FF*, 6): “We did not have electricity when we were children. If we wanted to study, we were sent out to sit under streetlight with our books. ... But we did it – we passed our exams”. Later, Papa focuses all his energy on promoting Arun’s education. After long days at school, Arun continues to study under the guidance of his tutors. When the tutors have left, the next thing Papa plans to do is to drag Arun out to play badminton or cricket – which Mama sometimes tries to prevent, noticing how exhausted the boy is. Without realizing it himself, Papa acts like a slave driver towards his own son. But considering Papa’s own childhood in a family where education was valued more than anything else, Papa’s fixation is understandable; this is also speculated by Uma. Uma even wonders whether Papa is trying to “relive” his life and fulfil his own ambitions through Arun (*FF*, 120–121):

Perhaps Papa’s memories of studying under the streetlights and of the painful beginnings in dusty provincial courts filled him with this almost manic determination. Was he fulfilling through Arun a dream he had had there under the streetlights, or in the shabby district courts? Uma watched, trying to find out. Of course he would never tell: how could Papa admit he had unfulfilled dreams? That he had done anything less than succeed, totally?

As Henderson & Thompson (following Satir) argue, parents who try to relive their life through their children may suffer from low self-esteem (2010, 503). The children may then be used to raise the parents’ status in the community – and this especially true in India, where sons are preferred to daughters, and the inability to produce a son may even be considered a stigma. In such situations, according to Henderson & Thompson (*ibid.*), “parents never see children as individuals with separate worth, value and identities”, and the children feel the pressure of fulfilling their parents’ aspirations. This is also the case with Papa and Arun. But the way Papa ignores Arun’s individuality is characteristic for many other relationships in *FF* as well. As discussed in section 2

(p. 9), *control* is an essential feature in a patriarchal society. The controller disregards other people's complexity as individuals and treats them merely as a means to an end. This is exactly what happens between Papa and Mama, the most illustrative example being that Mama has to accept her third pregnancy against her own will. But even more clearly the use of control can be seen in the way the parents – both Papa and Mama – treat their daughters, especially Uma, who is “unable” to bring off a marriage and who therefore is seen as nothing but a burden.

Men often control not only others but also *themselves* in order to assert their masculinity; so does Papa. He hardly shows any kinds of feelings – except for the negative ones. He is characterized by taciturnity, even bad temper; he always finds something to criticize. Papa finds it necessary to keep himself under control; only a few times the family members witness an emotional outburst by Papa. The most peculiar one takes place when Arun is born (*FF*, 17):

Arriving home, however, he sprang out of the car, raced into the house and shouted the news to whoever was there to hear. Servants, elderly relatives, all gathered at the door, and then saw the most astounding sight of their lives – Papa, in his elation, leaping over three chairs in the hall, one after the other, like a boy playing leap-frog, his arms flung up in the air and his hair flying. ‘A boy!’ he screamed, ‘a boy! Arun, Arun at last!’

As Papa tries to affirm his own masculinity, he simultaneously represses any signs of feminine qualities in his personality. Furthermore, such qualities in general seem to irritate him. Papa cannot, for instance, stand any kind of weakness – neither in himself or in the others. As Uma's eyes start to hurt after writing a letter for Arun (dictated by Papa), Papa despises her – even though he himself has been unwilling to let Uma go to an eye specialist. Papa also tends to show a practical, unemotional point of view on most things, and he dislikes sentimentality. For example, when Arun gets the chance to stay with the Pattons during the summer break from the university, Mama is concerned whether the Pattons will “look after Arun properly” (*FF*, 126); Papa, instead, “glares at her and tells her how fortunate Arun is to have a home offered to him free of charge”.

According to Johnson (2005, 190), repressing the feminine qualities in oneself can have tragic consequences for a man's welfare:

... the more men reject ... the qualities that patriarchal culture associates with women, the more limited their inner and outer lives become. It precludes them from knowing true intimacy with other people, estranges them from their own feelings and the bodies through which feelings are felt, and denies them powerful inner resources for coping with stress, fear, and loss.

Needless to say, there certainly is no “true intimacy” between Papa and his family members. A whole other question is, whether Papa is happy with his situation or not. Since we do not have access to Papa’s thoughts, we cannot ultimately know whether the quotation above applies to him. And as Uma surmises, Papa would never admit – not even to himself – that “he had done anything less than succeed”. However, Papa’s habitual sulkiness and the scowl on his face do hint at the direction of a somewhat unhappy person. His unhappiness is thus a consequence from his inclination to emphasize his manliness and to suppress those qualities that he associates with femininity. But another factor behind his (supposed) unhappiness is his constant effort to preserve his powerful position – as discussed in section 2 (p. 10), power often entails the fear of losing it. Within the family, Papa’s authority is usually unchallenged, but outside the sphere of the family, Papa feels insecure. He needs to prove his authority, especially for his colleagues, by showing his skills and physical condition in tennis or by cracking jokes that no one else finds amusing. In reality, Papa is “rattled, shaken by what he saw as a possible challenge to his status” (*FF*, 9).

The disapproval of working women and the idea of the public sphere as belonging to men only – attitudes still common in India as described by Derné (1999) – are also portrayed in *FF*, especially through the character of Papa. When Dr Dutt comes over to offer Uma a job as a housekeeper at the nurses’ dormitory, Papa is almost offended by her suggestion. For Papa, a woman in a highly esteemed profession is a threat to his own position. The fact that Dr Dutt is unmarried and childless makes her all the more suspicious in Papa’s eyes: as Nubile (2003, 22–23) states, unmarried and childless women are often stigmatized in India. The expression on Papa’s face reveals his disapproval (*FF*, 143): “The frown was filled with everything he thought of working women, of women who dared presume to step into the world he occupied.” Worse still, the woman

dares to offer his daughter a job: for Papa, this is a suggestion of his incapability of providing for his family; whether Uma would actually *like* to work, is a question that does not cross his mind. Desperate to get the job, Uma calls Dr Dutt when her parents are not at home; unfortunately, Papa finds out about her phone call afterwards and blames her for the telephone bills: “‘Costs money! Costs money!’ he kept shouting long after. ‘Never earned anything in her life, made me spend and spend, on her dowry and her wedding. Oh, yes, spend till I’m ruined, till I am a pauper –’” (*FF*, 146). The irony, again, is obvious: Papa accuses Uma of wasting money but does not let her accept the job she was offered.

For outsiders, Papa wants to give the impression of being modern and liberal, even somewhat egalitarian, but within the family, he supports the traditional role differentiation, according to which only men are allowed (or even encouraged) to adopt Western values: “Papa was quite capable of putting on a progressive, Westernised front when called upon to do so – in public, in society, not within his family of course” (*FF*, 141). Papa is particularly convinced of the benefits of a meat diet: for Papa, meat, cricket and the English language represent some kind of “holy trinity” of progress, and he looks down on those who stick to the traditional vegetarian diet. Therefore Papa is upset to discover that Arun is not willing to eat meat; Papa seems to be almost offended by the fact that his *only* son wants to “return to the ways of his forefathers, meek and puny men who had got nowhere in life” (*FF*, 33). Papa’s strong urge to distance himself from his “forefathers” reveals the inferiority complex he is suffering from because of his Indian origin. The inferiority complex as a psychological effect of colonialism (on the black native) was introduced by Frantz Fanon in the 1960s (Nayar 2010, 8). Fanon argued that this complex was the result of the process of dehumanization in the colonial context where the black man had started to look at himself through the white man’s eyes. The white man had portrayed the native as the negative, primitive “Other”, and the black man was finally indoctrinated to believe this was true. The white man, in turn, became the “epitome of perfection” whose example the black man strove to follow. As a consequence of

this internalization of colonial attitudes, the native adopts Western values, religion, the language and other practices and rejects his own traditions (Nayar 2010, 8–9). Similarly, Papa’s view on the traditional Indianness is very negative, and he needs to convince himself of his superiority. Papa’s way of thinking seems contradictory, as he chooses to reject certain traditions, but, at the same time, he embraces others. In a way, Papa is creating an image of Indianness to his own liking, by dismissing the signs of weakness (or, what he considers as such, as a result from India’s colonial past) and preserving those traditions that are beneficial for himself as a representative of the privileged gender.

The depiction of Indian society in *FF* suggests that life is tough for those who do not meet the standards of a patriarchal society. Uma, who has no success in the marriage marketplace, becomes an outcast, because marriage would have been the only opportunity in her life, considering the fact that she would neither have had the talent or her parents’ support to continue studies and create a career. An outcast from the masculine world, in turn, is portrayed through Ramu, Papa’s nephew. Papa’s brother Bakul has two children: the beautiful and intelligent daughter Anamika, and the son Ramu, who has rejected the conventional way of living and who therefore is considered the black sheep of the family. He is unmarried, and spends his time travelling around; there are even rumours of an alcohol or drug problem. Once he pays an unexpected visit to Uma’s family. Whereas for Uma, the rare visit of her favourite cousin adds variety to the greyness of her everyday life, Mama and Papa cannot share her delight; they are highly disapproving of what they regard as bad manners and impudence. As Ramu takes Uma out for a dinner, the parents are outraged. Finally, by the time of Aruna’s wedding, Ramu is excluded from the family and society: “No one mentioned Ramu; he was not considered fit for society any more and had not been sent an invitation” (*FF*, 102). This kind of exclusion from society might result from men’s effort to secure their privilege. As Johnson (2005, 155) states, men “are often made invisible when their behavior is socially undesirable and might raise questions about the appropriateness of male privilege.” The case of Ramu, as well as

Papa's need to prove his authority outside the familial sphere, also confirm the idea presented by Pleck (1989): in a patriarchal society, men do create hierarchies and compete against each other, even exclude those who might endanger men's privileged position.

4.2 “A small, underdeveloped and asthmatic boy from the Gangetic plains” – Arun

As Adams & Coltrane (2005, 233) state, becoming masculine requires becoming “not-feminine”. Especially in a patriarchal society, to become “real” men, boys need to repress “anything that seems remotely feminine” (Johnson 2005, 190). In Papa's ideology, the ultimate masculinity can be achieved by education as well as by strength, both physical and mental. Papa had already lost his hope of ever having a son, but when a son is (unexpectedly) born, Papa soon develops unrealistic expectations for him. Already in Arun's early childhood, Papa seems uncertain whether Arun (“this puny creature who appeared to take forever to raise his head, or to get to his knees, finally to stand upon his legs”, *FF*, 31) will correspond to these expectations. During the first years of his life, the little boy has a weak appetite, and Mama's desperate efforts of feeding him usually end up with Mama on the verge of tears. Meanwhile, Papa has already started to compare Arun with other boys, such as the neighbours' son (*FF*, 32): ““And have you seen the Joshis' son? He is already playing cricket!””

Against Papa's ideals, Arun is characterized by physical weakness: as a child, he catches all the possible infectious diseases from mumps to measles. He also shows a reluctance to eat meat, which Papa finds incomprehensible. Neither is he interested in sports: if he could choose, he would rather stay in his room reading comics rather than go and play outdoors. Instead of accepting Arun as he is, Papa tries to “promote” Arun's masculinity by pressuring him to study and exercise. Since Arun's childhood, Papa makes every effort to give his son the best education he can. Throughout his childhood and youth, Arun accepts his fate without protest. Uma and Mama witness Arun's condition worriedly: in the evenings he is so worn out by all the studying that he can do nothing but

“rise creakily to his feet, scrabble together his books and notes in a great pile, and shuffle off to his room with the gait of a broken old man” (*FF*, 119).

The strict upbringing leaves its imprint on Arun’s personality. When Arun receives the letter of acceptance for his studies in Massachusetts, his face remains totally expressionless; there is no sign of joy, relief, fear or any other emotion. As Uma observes, “[a]ll the years of scholarly toil had worn down any distinguishing features Arun’s face once might have had” (*FF*, 121). Only when Arun is getting into the train to Bombay (from where he will leave for the States), the focalization shifts to Arun for a moment, and the reader gets an idea (even if a subtle one) of his feelings (*FF*, 122): “Looking back, he saw Uma on the platform beside his parents and suddenly noticed how old she looked: his sister Uma, already beginning to stoop and shrink. He threw her a stricken look”. The feeling of “strickenness” may simply imply Arun’s nervousness over his departure, but most likely this nervousness is mingled with the sudden realization of how old his sister has become. During that moment Arun realizes that he and his sister are in the same boat: neither of them has the chance to get loose from the shackles of their childhood home. Even though Arun will be able to enjoy freedom from his parents during his studies in the States, he was not the one to decide that he would go abroad in the first place; his entire existence is “arranged for him by Papa” (*FF*, 121). Whether at home in India or in the States, one is not able to decide the direction of one’s own life. Arun feels pity for Uma – and for himself.

Hardly any interaction between Arun and Aruna is depicted in the novel. One can conclude that Arun has a closer relationship to Uma, because Uma (as an older sister) had more responsibility of taking care of him as a child. Aruna’s feelings towards Arun are probably complicated by the fact that Aruna realizes she had been the disappointing “female version” of Arun; when Aruna was born, the parents had already chosen the name *Arun* in the hope that the child would be a boy. Later, witnessing her father’s elation over Arun’s birth starts for Aruna “a lifetime of bridling, of

determined self-assertion” (*FF*, 17). Aruna’s whole life becomes defined by her insatiable ambition and search for perfection which ultimately derive from the feeling of being fundamentally inferior.

Even though Arun empathizes with his sisters, particularly with Uma, he also occasionally lumps together all his family members as having contributed to controlling his life. As Arun finds out that “his family” (Papa, that is) has made the arrangements for his accommodation with the Pattons, he wonders, irritated (*FF*, 175):

Had they *still* not stopped discussing him, plotting and planning his life for him? ... Immediately Arun was overcome by the sensation of his family laying its hands upon him, pushing him down into a chair at his desk, shoving a textbook under his nose, catching that nose and making him swallow cod liver oil, spooning food into him, telling him: Arun, this, Arun, that, Arun, nothing but...¹⁴

Arun tries to avoid contact with people. The letters he sends to his family from Massachusetts are highly impersonal, their contents mostly dealing with the studies or the weather. Even though Arun does not feel comfortable in social situations, he seems to have deep knowledge of human nature and can make sharp observations about interactions between people. He is good at interpreting other people’s facial expressions. Mrs Patton is the easiest: “her face was the most transparent he had encountered: she had no guile at all” (*FF*, 177). Arun’s own interactions with people, on the contrary, are problematic. His effort to be polite and the way he carefully weighs his words sometimes prevents him from saying anything at all. For example, when Arun becomes aware of Melanie’s eating disorder, he finds himself in an awkward position: on one hand, he feels obliged to help her (or at least to inform Mrs Patton about the situation), but on the other, he would not like to interfere in the family’s affairs or let Mrs Patton get the impression that Arun would have an interest in Melanie. Or, when Mrs Patton urges Arun to cook himself an Indian dinner, Arun thinks he cannot tell her he has never seen his mother cook, because “she would understand that to

¹⁴ Uma regularly helped to feed Arun and gave him his dose of cod liver oil (which Papa had prescribed to supplement Arun’s vegetarian diet).

mean that he never ate at home but starved” (*FF*, 193). Why does not Arun simply tell Mrs Patton that his family has a cook and that Arun himself has no experience of cooking whatsoever?

Arun’s attitude to America is two-sided. He had hoped that studying abroad would offer him a way to escape his parents. Later he learns that they still continue to meddle in his life even from another continent; they, as mentioned, arrange Arun’s accommodation with the Pattons. On the other hand, Arun also develops feelings of nostalgia for India. Particularly, he longs for Indian food (*FF*, 185):

For the first time in his existence, he found he craved what he had taken for granted before and even at times thought an unbearable nuisance – those meals cooked and placed before him whether he wanted them or not (and how often he had not), that duty to consume what others thought he must consume.

The passage above, however, also bears a deeper meaning: it reflects Arun’s incapability of adapting himself to his new life situation in America. Arun is so accustomed to being supervised by others that he cannot enjoy his independence. But Arun also seems to be disappointed in American culture in many respects; for Arun, America is “like a plastic representation of what he had known at home” (*FF*, 185). He is particularly baffled by consumerism as a lifestyle; he cannot understand the pleasure Mrs Patton finds in loading her shopping cart with heaps of food.

Another feature in American culture that draws Arun’s attention is the role of the family. Many times Arun compares his own family to the American host family. Mostly, Arun’s observations are directed to Mr Patton, but Arun also draws comparisons between Mama and Mrs Patton and ponders upon the family dynamics generally. For Arun, motherhood (Indian motherhood in particular) seems to be, above all, a *role* that women perform; a role that they *have to perform*¹⁵:

She smiles a bright plastic copy of a mother-smile that Arun remembers from another world and another time, the smile that is tight at the corners with pressure, the pressure to perform a role, to make him eat, make him grow, make him worth all the trouble and effort and expense. Mrs Patton’s smile contains no hint of pressure (*FF*, 194)

¹⁵ Interestingly, not only Arun but also Uma refers to motherhood as a role (*FF*, 121): with Arun’s departure at hand, Uma was “uncertain if Mama was sorrowing at the thought of Arun going away, or if this were a role mothers had to play”.

The passage above shows that Arun senses a difference in how his own mother and Mrs Patton act; whereas Mama's actions are determined by the pressure to perform the mother's role, Mrs Patton is free from this kind of pressure. Thus, the differences between Indian and Western motherhood are here represented through Arun's observations. In Western culture, motherhood is not considered an obligatory part of a woman's life anymore, unlike in India, where "marriage must be necessarily followed by motherhood" (Nubile 2003, 24). Childless women may become victims of stigmatization and discrimination (*ibid.*, 22–23). Therefore, Indian women may feel very anxious about their "performance" as mothers. Inevitably this anxiety also affects the relationship between the mother and her children – male children in particular, as the nurture of a male child is considered more important than that of a female child; as Mama emphasizes, the baby Arun needs "proper attention", unlike Uma or Aruna (*FF*, 30). If Mama's relationship to Arun has primarily been based on the pressure to perform the mother's role, Arun may also have felt a need to perform his role as a son, too.

Arun is surprised at what Mrs Patton tells him about the family's dining habits: they hardly ever sit down to have a meal together – everyone eats what they like, when they like. Even though the mealtimes at home in India are characterized by seriousness and gravity, and Arun has never thought of them as "models of social and familial gathering", he also thinks there is "something troubling about the Pattons' system, too" (*FF*, 197). The lacking sense of community between the family members is what puzzles Arun.

Melanie is hostile towards Arun; presumably she is jealous of the attention her mother directs at Arun instead of her. She does not want to eat the vegetarian meals her mother has started to cook and, bitterly, gorges on candy instead. Arun, on the other hand, would like to settle the differences with Melanie, but eventually withdraws, as he realizes it would sound like a criticism of Mrs Patton.

Whether in India or in the States, Arun always finds himself “in the sugar-sticky web of family conflict” (*FF*, 195). Arun notices something familiar in Melanie’s anger (*FF*, 214):

Then Arun does see a resemblance to something he knows: a resemblance to the contorted face of an enraged sister who, failing to express her outrage against neglect, against misunderstanding, against inattention to her unique and singular being and its hungers, merely spits and froths in ineffectual protest. How strange to encounter it here, Arun thinks, where so much is given, where there is both licence and plenty. But what is plenty? What is not? Can one tell the difference?

All the discussion above about Arun’s character reveals that Arun is in many respects the exact opposite of the patriarchal ideal of manhood. Unlike his father, Arun is not trying to make himself a “real” man through a meat diet or physical exercise or other such “method”. He is not ambitious, competitive or tough in the slightest. He does control his emotions in the interactions with other people, but he does not do this in order to maintain authority, but rather to avoid any conflict. He also considers women as equals, and he understands how Uma, Aruna and Melanie all have suffered because of parental neglect. The inferiority complex that characterizes Papa, making him want to “renew” his Indianness, is not to be found in Arun, at least not in the same form. However, as Rod asks whether Arun would like to go jogging with him, Arun’s self-criticism becomes clear (*FF*, 191):

Nervously, Arun shakes his head, then smiles to show he means no offence: the idea, in one sense glamorous and flattering, of jogging beside the transcendent Rod, is too fanciful to be entertained. There is no way that a small, underdeveloped and asthmatic boy from the Gangetic plains, nourished on curried vegetables and stewed lentils, could compete or even keep up with this gladiatorial species of northern power.

In other words, Arun’s self-image is that he is weak and “underdeveloped”, unlike the athletic Rod, the incarnation of “northern power”; for Arun, this is an actual fact and he accepts this – almost as if his inferiority were a nature of law.

To be an “untypical” man in a patriarchal society means walking on a tightrope. According to Johnson (95, 2005), the risk for a man who does not support patriarchal values is to become perceived as an outsider, even a traitor of one’s own gender. Thus, for a man who does not identify

with patriarchy, the path of least resistance is to remain silent about one's real opinions. This is also the way Arun acts. Even though he empathizes with his sisters and with Melanie, he is too afraid to actually help them. He also has a certain need to be included among other men¹⁶. Once he even goes jogging, only to feel like a "normal" man, like the *others* (*FF*, 200): "... he will jog and jog – like Rod, like all those others ..."

4.3 "He reacted by not reacting" – American men in *Fasting, Feasting*

In *FF*, Rod is the representative of the younger generation of men in America. His role in the novel is minor; therefore it is not possible to analyse his character in much detail. Some observations, however, can be made. Rod spends most of his time exercising. Apparently, his father has encouraged him to train for a sports scholarship (which Rod later receives). Rod seems so fanatic about sports that he probably would exercise even without his father's encouragement. Pleck (1989, 25) argues that the physical strength and the athletic ability are the qualities that young American men in particular use in comparing each other (whereas later in life, men compete in financial success as well as success with women). Thus, as a fitness enthusiast, Rod is actually a fairly typical example of a young American man.

What is rather striking about Rod is his lack of compassion for Melanie. Arun, his Indian "counterpart", often shows understanding not only for his own sisters but also for Melanie. Rod, in turn, has noticed Melanie's habit of binge-eating and vomiting, but does not realize she is in real distress. On the contrary, he is even scornful of her: "Wants to turn herself into a slim chick. Ha! ... Man, she's nuts, that kid, she's nuts" (*FF*, 204). Rod sees Melanie's eating disorder merely as foolishness, not as a serious mental problem caused (at least partly) by the emotional vacuum prevailing in the family. Rod also uses Melanie's weakness in order to underline his own

¹⁶ This is illustrated, for instance, through the scene in which Arun looks into the living room and sees Mr Patton and Rod watching a baseball match. He would like to go in ("the scene is so convivial, so inviting", *FF* 191), but something prevents him from doing that – probably his sense of alienation, his sense of being different.

superiority: “That’s all these girls are good for, y’know. Not like guys. Too lazy to get off their butts and go jogging or play a good hard ball game. So they’ve got to sick it up” (*FF*, 204). This comment reveals the more or less chauvinistic attitudes the young man has adopted.

When it comes to gender identity, boys and girls are raised somewhat differently. According to Adams & Coltrane (2005, 234), gender stereotypes are especially often passed on from fathers to sons¹⁷. One reason behind this is the idea of masculine gender identity as being more “fragile” than feminine gender identity. As Adams & Coltrane (2005, 234–235) argue, “it [masculine gender identity] takes more psychic effort to maintain because it requires suppressing human feelings of vulnerability and denying emotional connection”. Therefore, fathers are anxious to make sure that their sons do not become “sissies”. Adams & Coltrane (2005, 235) further argue that as a result, these “boys-turned-men will be predisposed to spend considerable amounts of time and energy maintaining gender boundaries and denigrating women and gays”. The idea that Rod may have acquired his chauvinistic attitudes from his father seems plausible, considering the fact that Mr Patton treats his wife in very a similar way as Papa. And if Rod has, through his upbringing, learned to detach himself from emotions, it is understandable that it is impossible for him to identify with her sister.

Several parallels can be drawn between Papa and Mr Patton. Mr Patton has conservative ideas about male and female roles. He is the bread-winner of the family (what he actually does for living is not mentioned), and Mrs Patton is a housewife. At home in India, Arun has become used to the traditional division of labour, and is surprised to see how dysfunctional it is in the Patton family. Mama and Papa are willing to perform their assigned roles, and they are also able to pull together; to work as a “united” team. On the contrary, Mr and Mrs Patton barely have any connection between each other. They do not seem happy with their separate roles, but for some reason, they do

¹⁷ This is the case especially with fathers who are not as involved in the upbringing of the children (as it seems with the Patton family in *FF*); on the contrary, if the father is an active co-parent, he is less likely to enforce gender stereotypes (Adams & Coltrane 2005, 235).

not take any action to improve the situation. According to the traditional ideology, the home, especially the kitchen, should be the wife's "realm", but the confused, lonely Mrs Patton in the kitchen hardly corresponds to the traditional image of a devoted housewife; as Arun notes (*FF*, 162), "[s]he is frozen, with a stricken look upon her face, like an actress who has forgotten her lines. Although at the very heart of this domestic scene, she seems lost." To fill the emptiness in her life, Mrs Patton spends her time wandering around supermarkets. Mr Patton, in turn, is mostly absent, at work. When he is at home, he is often characterized by the same kind of bad temper and discontent as Papa. After coming back from work, he sounds tired and irritated, and keeps asking (*FF*, 202), "'Where's everybody? Sitting on their butts in front of the TV? Doesn't anyone in this house do any work?'" Apparently, he feels overwhelmed by his role as the only provider in the family. Nevertheless, he later even takes on a night job to pay the bills for Melanie's treatment in an institution specialized in young girls' mental disorders. Mr Patton does not want to resign his provider role, even though it is a burden to him; giving up this role would also mean giving up his power within the family. Also, social pressure is probably an important factor maintaining the traditional gender roles; as discussed in 3.2, the separation between the domestic, feminine sphere and the public, masculine sphere has existed in America already for a long time, and it is not easy for an individual to challenge the status quo. Papa's situation is very similar; although he sometimes complains about his provider role, he would never give up his position, because it guarantees his power. Even after retiring from his work, Papa still wants to keep his office open in order to preserve the "vestiges of his authority and power" (*FF*, 113), and is utterly irritated if anyone dares to mention his retirement.

Exactly like Papa, Mr Patton often ignores his wife's thoughts and opinions. For instance, when Mrs Patton becomes interested in traditional medicine, astrology and other alternative sciences, Mr Patton simply expresses his disapproval, failing to notice how desperately his wife is trying to find a meaning in her life (*FF*, 227): "'What in God's name is numerology? Or gemology?"

Karmic lessons! What's that? Hell, what's this you're getting into?" Another example is Mr Patton's discouraging attitude to vegetarianism. Mrs Patton has always disliked eating meat, but in order to please her husband (and the entire family), she has pushed aside her idea of becoming a vegetarian. Now, inspired by Arun, she would like to try vegetarian diet, but on the other hand, she would not like to cause any conflicts in the family. She pretends to be eating the grilled steaks her husband has prepared, praising the food aloud. Arun immediately realizes the power structures within the family (because of their similarity to those he has become acquainted with at home), and even analyses Mrs Patton's survival strategy (*FF*, 167): "Will she never learn to leave well alone? She does not seem to have his mother's well-developed instincts for survival through evasion." When Mrs Patton finally has the courage to tell her husband that she is going to turn to vegetarian food, she feels she has betrayed him¹⁸. Mr Patton does not show any reaction to her announcement; he reacts "by not reacting, as if he had simply not heard, or understood" (*FF*, 185). This particularly is something that reminds Arun of his own father (*FF*, 185–186):

That, too, was something Arun knew and had experience of, even if a mirror reflection of it – his father's very expression, walking off, denying any opposition, any challenge to his authority, his stony wait for it to grow disheartened, despair – and disappear.

Masculinity and meat-eating are often juxtaposed in *FF* (as well as vegetarianism is associated with femininity or weakness). Back in India, Papa believes that a meat diet is a sign of progress and of true masculinity; he despises vegetarians, the "meek and puny men". Mr Patton, in turn, marinates and barbecues his steaks in great earnestness, as if the cooking was a religious ceremony, a "sacrament", as it is called in the novel (*FF*, 167). According to Kimmel (1996, 158), when a man feels excluded from the domestic sphere, he often seeks to "find a small corner that could be unmistakably 'his'". Undoubtedly, the grill on the patio is for Mr Patton his "corner", the

¹⁸ Mrs Patton also realizes that her husband only tolerates her vegetarianism as a temporary arrangement: "It'll be my vegetarian summer" (*FF*, 180), as she says. After Arun's departure, she will have to return to the "normal" state of affairs.

only place in his own home that is truly “his”; this is why he takes his cooking so seriously. When Mrs Patton reminds him of Arun’s vegetarianism, he expresses his disappointment with “such moral feebleness” (*FF*, 166): he cannot see why anyone would refuse a good steak. Neither does he show any respect for a foreign culture; tactlessly, he blurts (*FF*, 166): ““Yeah, how they let them [cows] out on the streets because they can’t kill ’em and don’t know what to do with ’em. I could show ’em. A cow is a cow, and good red meat as far as I’m concerned.”” Interpreting vegetarianism as a sign of weakness and irrationality and thus excluding Arun (as well as other vegetarian men) from the “true” masculinity, Mr Patton seeks to emphasize his own manliness. It is not possible to make very far-reaching conclusions about Mr Patton’s personality (because of his minor role in the novel), but nevertheless, it can be stated that he does share similarities with the image of the “Self-Made Man”. He strives to affirm not only his own masculinity but also Rod’s masculinity by encouraging him to exercise. He also prefers to spend his spare time with his son, rather than with his wife or the entire family; this can be interpreted as an urge to escape into the masculine world.

5 “I don’t want to hear all these modern ideas” – Indian women supporting patriarchy

As a secondary research question, I wanted to study to which extent women’s “co-operation” in the Indian patriarchy becomes visible in *FF*. As already briefly discussed in section 2, it would be a delusion to think of women merely as victims of patriarchy. As Johnson (2005, 165–167) states, not only men but also women participate in the patriarchy, because that is where they have been socialized into, and they do not see an alternative: women have learned to identify with patriarchy and even defend it. They accept their inferior status, because that is all they can get (or this is what they have learned to believe); going along patriarchy becomes women’s path of least resistance. In a way, women make the best of what they have and “build whatever basis of power and influence they can”, as Johnson (2005, 166) puts it. In *FF*, the power used by women can especially be seen in mother-daughter relationships. However, one should also keep in mind that men and women are

not equal “conspirators”; as Johnson (2005, 167) points out, patriarchy “gives men and women different interests, resources, and experience”.

It seems that Mama uses even more power over Uma than Papa does. Whereas Papa often expresses his disapproval by wordless sulking and only rarely speaks out his anger or disappointment, it is Mama who openly criticizes Uma: as the narrator describes the division of roles between the parents, “Papa’s chosen role was scowling, Mama’s scolding” (*FF*, 10). One of the most conspicuous examples of Mama’s verbal abuse against Uma takes place when Ramu and Uma return from their visit to a local restaurant late in the evening, Uma tipsy from the shandy she has been drinking. Uma had never been to a restaurant before, and she is now eager to tell her mother how much fun she had. But instead of sharing her joy, Mama yells at her (*FF*, 52–53): “‘Quiet, you hussy! Not another word from you, you idiot child!’ Mama’s face glints like a knife in the dark, growing narrower and fiercer as it comes closer. ‘You, you disgrace to the family – nothing but disgrace, *ever!*’”

There are also other mothers in *FF* who mistreat their daughters. Ayah, the female servant of Uma’s family, trivially talks about how she beats her good-for-nothing daughter Lakshmi. In addition to mothers, mothers-in-law are another group of women who resort to violence. It is rumoured that Anamika, Uma’s cousin, is regularly battered by her mother-in-law. Mrs Joshi, Uma’s neighbour, had shared the same fate in her youth. It is worthy of remark that the only kind of violence that is implied in *FF* is practiced *by women against women*¹⁹; there are no violent men in *FF*. Thus, it is women who are responsible for the most flagrant mistreatments against other women.

While Papa arranges Arun’s life through the obsessive education, Mama’s area of responsibility is marrying off the daughters; Papa “saw marriage as a women’s affair and left it to

¹⁹ As for Anamika’s death, it is unclear whether she commits a suicide or whether she is killed by her mother-in-law (who either would have acted alone or together with his son; his potential complicity in the murder is thus the only case in *FF* where male violence is hinted at).

her” (*FF*, 82). Thus, Mama is more actively involved in the actual search of the husbands, whereas Papa mainly takes care of the financial arrangements (dowry and wedding costs). When Mama discovers that Uma’s first potential suitor had expressed his interest in the thirteen-year-old Aruna, instead of Uma, Mama is scandalized for his impudence, but shows no compassion for Uma: “Uma gave a startled look and hurried away. Mama did not notice, or care” (*FF*, 78–79). And, when Uma is humiliated for the second time (a family takes a dowry but backs out of the marriage plans), Mama again wallows in her own disappointment, not paying any attention to Uma²⁰. Correspondingly, Mama experiences Aruna’s prosperous marriage as her own achievement, as a sign of her competence in training her daughter for marriage.

Mama supports conservative values, even if they are in an obvious contradiction with women’s well-being. When Anamika has a miscarriage, presumably caused by the beating by her mother-in-law, and as a consequence is no longer able to have children (“she was damaged goods”, *FF*, 71), Uma and Aruna think it would be best for her to return to her childhood home, even though other people might disapprove of a divorce. But for Mama, reputation is all that matters, and she condemns the girls’ naïve thoughts (*FF*, 71): “‘Don’t talk like that,’ Mama scolded them. ‘I don’t want to hear all these modern ideas. Is it what you learnt from the nuns at the convent?’” Mama clearly associates the “modern ideas” with Western (Christian) culture, as she names the convent school as their potential source. Mama rejects the Western values because they could lead to Uma and Aruna questioning her authority; or, what is worse, the girls could become converted. For this reason, Mama and Papa are unwilling to let Uma go to a coffee party organized by Mrs Henry, the wife of a Baptist missionary. One cannot fail to notice how differently the parents treat their children based on their gender: whereas the parents (Mama in particular) are concerned about their

²⁰ Even the third, final attempt to marry off Uma turns out to be a fiasco. That is, Uma eventually does get married, but Papa soon learns that the husband is a swindler: he is already married and has a family in another town, and he only wanted to get his hands on a new dowry. The marriage is annulled, and the parents finally have to accept the fact that Uma will stay home, helping her parents in the household.

daughters' "Westernization", they have no such concerns regarding Arun – on the contrary, Papa is more concerned of Arun not becoming Westernized *enough*.

In her relationship to her daughters, Mama clearly takes the opportunity to use power; the power over her daughters is, after all, the only kind of power she will ever achieve (this confirms Johnson's statement about women building "whatever basis of power and influence they can"). In her marriage with Papa, Mama has accepted the fact that she will never be fully equal with him, but on the other hand, she has also created "survival strategies" which strengthen her position. It is partly difficult to perceive Mama as an oppressed woman, because she seems to enjoy her life, and even furtively indulges in activities that Papa would disapprove of, such as playing rummy with her friends or chewing betel leaves. Against the common expectations, the American housewife, Mrs Patton, seems even more disempowered than Mama, in the end.

6 Conclusion

In this thesis I wanted to look into the representation of masculinity in Anita Desai's novel *Fasting, Feasting*. Because of the patriarchal nature of Indian society, the question of power was also of interest; my aim was to examine whether men are presented merely as oppressors, and women as their victims. The most important result of my study is that the division of these roles is far from being as straightforward as one might think. Johnson's (2005) view on patriarchy as a society in which everyone participates (whether they want to or not) is in accordance with the portrayal of society in *FF*. There are some characters in *FF* who choose not to conform to the patriarchal ideology (such as the career woman Dr Dutt), but the majority choose the easier way, the path of least resistance. In fact, most people are so strongly socialized into the dominant ideology, that they do not even recognize their alternatives.

Papa is a paragon of the traditional Indian man, the head of the family. But even though he has power within the family and a relatively high status in society as well, he shows a constant need

to bolster his self-confidence and authority. Mama, although subservient to Papa, is a powerful figure compared to the daughters. The parents clearly ignore their children's emotional needs, but they are not, however, presented as totally inhuman. Rather, using devices of irony and humour, Desai creates an image of the parents as products of their society; they cannot see anything problematic in their actions, as they simply continue the very same traditions they themselves have been accustomed to throughout their lives.

Being a man in India does not automatically mean being privileged; one also has to meet the standards of patriarchal masculinity and support patriarchy, otherwise one ends up in the same situation as Arun, who has to balance between his real opinions and the surrounding values. On the other hand, the characters of Papa and Mr Patton show that a powerful position is not a guarantee of happiness; in their endless effort to affirm their masculinity, they lose their ability to feel true intimacy in their closest personal relationships. Also, the idea of women as innocent victims of patriarchy is proved wrong by Mama and the other female characters (some of whom are even violent against other women). Neither does Mrs Patton correspond to the common conception of an emancipated Western woman: in her marriage, she is not even able to choose the kind of food she likes. The idea presented by Frantz & Rennhak (2010, 2) of female writers constructing "alternative masculinities that are desirable from a woman's perspective", is not very accurate for *FF*. Desai is not proposing an 'ideal' type of masculinity; instead, all the characters in the novel (both male and female) seem to be, in one way or another, victims of the circumstances.

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