

Exploring Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting* with feminist view

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ABSTRACT

Anita Desai, with keen observation of Indian life, has written exclusively in English since she debuted in the mid-1960s. Throughout her novels and short stories, she focuses on the personal struggles of Anglicized, middle-class women in contemporary India as they attempt to overcome the societal limitations imposed by a tradition-bound patriarchal culture. Set amid the cultural and social changes that have swept India since its independence from Britain in 1947, most of Desai's narratives validate the importance of familial bonds and explore the tensions that exist between different generations.

*Fasting, Feasting by Anita Desai relates the disastrous attempts of an Indian daughter to leave her parents' home and achieve independence without marriage. Her parents, referred to as the indivisible unit Mama Papa, barely notice their daughter's aspirations as they lavish all of their attention on their only son. Uma, the principal character, loves school even if she isn't able to get good marks; she loves learning, she wants to try again, to spend another year at school, she's sure she will improve. She suffers when Mum dad decide she should give up her studies. She suffers when she understands she is not as beautiful, intelligent as her sister Aruna, and so she is considered a lesser woman. Uma suffers silently, she accepts her condition of inferiority, yet she is always looking for a moment of glory that, unfortunately, never comes. She is like the most humble flower that grows up silently, that is trampled from the gardener that gave her birth, because a rose is blooming next to the humble flower and he must be there to praise the perfection and beauty of the rose. She is not just describing life as we witness it, but is rather transcribing experience into words. In *Fasting, Feasting*, Anita Desai deals with the marginalization of both the Indian and American women in this multicultural text.*

Postcolonial literature is a body of literary writings that reacts to the discourse of colonization. Postcolonial literature often involves writings that deal with issues of decolonization or the political and cultural independence of people formerly subjugated to colonial rule. It is also a literary critique to texts that carry racist or colonial undertones. Postcolonial literature, finally in its

most recent form, also attempts to critique the contemporary postcolonial discourse that has been shaped over recent times. It attempts to re-read this very emergence of post colonialism and its literary expression itself. Post colonialism as a literary theory (with a critical approach), deals with literature produced in countries that once were colonies of other countries, especially of the European colonial powers Britain. It also deals with literature written by citizens of colonial countries that portrays colonized people as its subject matter. An important consequence of post colonialism has been the acknowledgement and reappearance of women's experience after being concealed from the histories of colonial studies. With keen observation of Indian life, Anita Desai has written exclusively in English since she debuted in the mid-1960s. Throughout her novels and short stories, she focuses on the personal struggles of Anglicized, middle-class women in contemporary India as they attempt to overcome the societal limitations imposed by a tradition-bound patriarchal culture. Set amid the cultural and social changes that have swept India since its independence from Britain in 1947, most of Desai's narratives validate the importance of familial bonds and explore the tensions that exist between different generations. She is not just describing life as we witness it, but is rather transcribing experience into words.

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The novel is in two parts. Desai projects the family in two different cultures, the east and the west. The first part, which covers the major portion of the book deals with an Indian higher middle-class family in the small town while the second part focuses on the Patton's living in the American suburbs. She has used the metaphor of hunger to illustrate both the situations: India as a land of paucity and the USA as a land of plenty. In the first part the story revolves round the family of lawyers consisting of anonymous parents and their three children, two daughters and a son. Uma, the principal female character, is a victim of the Indian tradition of gender discrimination. Her parental home (and her in-law's house during her short stay) almost resembles a prison. She leaves this prison only on a few occasions with the approval of her parents even at the age of 40. She is treated more

like a servant than a daughter. Anamika, her cousin, too falls prey to the Indian dowry system. Her married life is made traumatic by her mother-in-law with the support of her husband. Along with the male, the women too contribute to the oppression of the females in this country. In the USA Melanie's bulimia is an outcome of American consumerism and lack of filial love. Mrs. Patton too craves for attention from her husband and children. Thus Desai shows the marginalization of women in developing countries as different from the West. Here females are both the oppressor and the oppressed. Character like Mama and Anamika's mother-in-law has internalized the conventions of society. They contribute to the sufferings of Uma and Anamika.

In fact Desai and managed to portray objectively the panoramic view of the family in both the worlds along with its victims. The novel is remarkable for its narrative technique.

Anita Desai belongs to the group of contemporary writers who are looked upon by the West as authentic voices of the sub-continent.

It is hard to believe that girls are not allowed to study after class eight or matriculation in an upper middle-class Indian family. Uma is never allowed to continue her studies after the much awaited birth of a male child in the family. Uma has to take good care of her baby brother because an ayah is not enough for the son. Again, cousin from Bombay is not allowed to continue her education and study abroad even when she wins a scholarship for Oxford. After her matriculation the parents want to marry her off. Desai refers to it as natural. She is young, beautiful and intelligent and yet she does not resist her marriage to an elderly man.

The primary concern of these middle-class parents seems to be to get their daughters married off. They appear to be in great haste to dispose off their liabilities as soon as possible. After that their responsibilities seem to be over. It was as if their mothers had been tending them in the flowerpots just for this moment. Anamika is married off to an elderly person who had also won medals in his career. Desai also fails to handle the Anamika's episode in which she, after 24 years of marriage to this man is finally burnt to death. Here she focuses on the dowry deaths and brides' condition in India. One fails to understand why Anamika was burnt after 24 years of marriage when she no longer is bride. Both the son and the mother would have been quite old by then to go for another marriage. Moreover, her family takes it to be her fate. It is rather absurd that a family of lawyers staying in Bombay should remain silent after knowing the

plight of their daughter, the regular beatings to the point of a miscarriage for 24 years and later taking the death as a suicide. Desai blissfully caters to the taste buds of the West who take dowry deaths as landmarks of Indian society. The novel lacks the felt-experiences of Anamika.

The author not only focuses on the outdated themes of bad marriages and poor education but also reflects on the parent-child relationship. The anonymous Mama and Papa are figured as clumsy idlers who while away their time swinging to and fro and sometimes, visiting clubs. Mama enjoys rummy and kitty parties. The father goes out to play tennis and behaves like a sahib: He has internalized the colonized mindset: an outcome of the colonized past. He represents not only the patriarchal voice but also has the tendency to take on the role of the colonizer. The colonized often have the tendency to play the role of the colonizer at home. He is, in fact, the only one in the house who is given the finger bowl and a napkin. The parents who are well off do not allow Uma to continue her studies beyond class eight. They throw orders at their 40 year old daughter all the time in spite of a gardener, a cook and a chauffeur. She is bullied by her parents and is treated like a servant. At the age of 40 Uma is not allowed to go to a small tea party or to take up a job of housekeeping or even to use a telephone, which is always kept locked. It happens that one evening when her parents are out, she furtively uses the phone and forgets to lock it. Papa immediately discovers it on his return and scolds her for wasting his money. He also taunts her on the loss of two dowries in their attempt to marry her off. As Uma grows of the age of marriage, Papa takes it upon himself to find a suitable candidate for her for she cannot find anyone worthwhile to get married to. However, Uma proves rather difficult to be a suitable bride due to her limited education and looks. When Papa is finally able to find a suitor for Uma, Papa is duped into paying a hefty amount in dowry only to be left dangling mid way with the cancellation of the marriage. Papa sees this as an embarrassment and inevitably blames Uma for bringing shame to the family. After a long search for more eligible suitors, Papa encounters the family of a merchant who asks for Uma's hand. Papa gets her married only to be conned once again when she finds out that she is actually the second wife of the merchant. Papa becomes furious not because his daughter's life is ruined but because he has once again wasted a large sum of money on Uma's dowry. It is evident that Papa never considers the feelings and emotions of his daughter, but is more distraught of the fact that he lost his

money due to his worthless daughter. Papa's patriarchy is highlighted in this particular incident because instead of offering words of comfort for his daughter, he is more ashamed that his status is jeopardized and his personality disintegrated.

Later on when Uma develops a problem in her eyes and is advised to consult a doctor in Bombay she is denied this facility even though her sister lives there. On the other hand Aruna has a successful marriage but she loses every trace of her provincial roots. Here again Desai is not implying that the unburnt brides and the well-settled ones may live a content life. In this regard, she portrays the story of Aruna, Uma's smart and pretty younger sister who makes a discreet choice and marries "the wisest, ... the handsomest, the richest, the most exciting of the suitors who presented themselves"(101). Aruna's marriage to Arvind who has a job in Bombay and a flat in a housing block in Juhu, facing the beach is just a like a dream-come-true. Yet to live that dream-life fully she transforms herself and desperately seeks to introduce change in the lives of others. She cuts her hair, takes her make-up kit wherever she goes, and calls her sister and mother as 'villagers' once they refuse to accept her sophisticated and flashy style of life. For that reason, she avoids visiting her parents' home and the rare occasions of her short visits are spent in blaming the untidiness of the surrounding and the inhabitants. Even she goes to the extent of scolding her husband when he splits tea in his saucer, or wears a shirt, which does not match, with his trousers.

In this way, Aruna's entrapment is different from the rest. She has liberated herself from the customs and dominating home rules that bind the rest of the characters like Uma and Anamika. Yet, in negating those codes, she ensnares herself in her mad pursuit towards a vision of perfection. And in order to reach that perfection she needs to constantly uncover and rectify the flaws of her own family as well as of Arvind's. When none other than Uma sees through the entrapment of Aruna, she feels pity for her: In the neighborhood, in the house of Mr. Joshi, the daughters are happily married off except the younger daughter who has explicitly developed a

desire to be different, to have a career. They are all surprised and amused. Desai calls her desire of having a career as her "little whim". Every one laughs at her while waiting for her return from Delhi.

The second part of the novel centers on the life of Arun in the USA who has gone there for higher education. But Desai's vision is focused more on the kitchen than on the university campus. Arun is a flat character, shown as shy and timid young man who is even afraid of mixing up with fellow Indian students. He longs for complete isolation, "the total absence of relation, of demands, needs, requests, ties, responsibilities and commitments...no past, no family and no country". During his summer vacation he stays with an American family where everyone is free and there is no one to dictate, where men cook meat while women sit idle instead of doing any household work. In this family Melanie suffers not because of her lifestyle. This is in contrast to the Indian family where Uma becomes the victim of her parents and Arun is made to bear the burden of parental expectation far away in the USA.

The title is important. Fasting, Feasting presents apparent opposites, two contrasting, if imbalanced scenarios, India and the USA. It offers two deformed observers, Uma and Arun. It picks up two contrasting cultures and finds that women are slaves in both. The opposites are thus ultimately similar, hardly opposed.

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