

## **The Treatment of 'Food' in Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting***

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### **Abstract**

The paper focuses on the treatment of 'food' in Anita Desai's 'Fasting, Feasting' (1999). In this novel 'Food' is treated as metaphor. Desai uses food to compare and contrast between the two families. In one culture, food is used as a vehicle to express 'communication'. In the other culture the food is used as express 'isolation'. Desai uses the trope of food to represent the most oppressive legacies of patriarchal subjection of women under the rubric of modern-day capitalism. Colliding and collapsing the binaries of India and the U.S. Desai shows that hunger and appetite unyieldingly construct the gendered subject whose troubled relationship with food is in a certain way symbolic of her lack of power and her struggle towards self-preservation.

**Keywords:** Anita Desai, *Fasting, Feasting*, Communication, Isolation, food

Desai's women belong principally to the domestic sphere who fail to register effective protest against the dominant traditions, their standards and values competes with Shashi Deshpande is drawing our attention to those lives that lay buried, unread, infrequently noticed and mostly misinterpreted. Both reveal concern with the split self, with the sense of isolation and would be writer feels between her social female self and her inner artistic self. They share a common understanding of women writers as having been traditionally isolated from a primarily masculine culture precisely through the elements- gender, female experience, artistry, and imaginings.

Desai uses 'food' as metaphor in the **Fasting, Feasting** of the title to compare and contrast the two families. In one culture, food is used as a vehicle to express communion. In the other way, it is used to express isolation. In India the sharing of meals assumes almost ritualistic importance. The family is drawn together for their meals even though communication falters and all are there to cater to the father. Food is a frequent topic of discussion, when to cook, what to cook, what food to offer guests, and who should or should not be invited to share meal. By contrast, the Patton family has a problematic attitude toward food. The mother stuffs the freezer and refrigerator with food even though what is already there hasn't been eaten. The father grills steaks that no one else wants to eat. The daughter on peanuts and candy only to vomit everything out a few minutes later. The son forages for leftover meat on the implements used for grilling.

Anita Desai keenly observes of human behaviour. Her character comes to life within the first view pages. They are revealed through elaborate details- gestures, facial expressions, words said and

words left unsaid. Desai shows rather than tells. In Part-I, for illustration, there is a wonderful scene where the Indian family sits at the dinner table. Having finished the main meal, the father waits a “sphinx like” expression. The mother takes it as her cue to peel him an orange. She scrupulously removes the pips and places slice by slice carefully on the father’s plate. The father then lifts each slice, placing it ceremoniously in his mouth. Everyone watches in deafening silence at this amazing feat. When he finishes, mother sits back, flushed with pride at her achievement while father maintains his stony-faced silence without so much as a nod of appreciation. This scene speaks volumes.

Unfortunately, the novel ends abruptly, lacking in closure. We are told Arun leaves the Patton household to return to the dorms at the start of a new semester. We hear no more about his family. In spite of an ending that falls short, however, Desai’s skill at characterization through telling description is impressive and makes the novel well worth reading.

The novel **Fasting, Feasting** is divided into two parts. Part I of the novel set in a cold and isolating home in the Massachusetts suburbs. Both sections of the novel are told in third-person limited –omniscient point of view, chronicling two members of the same Indian family. In Part –I, the narrator through flashback, explores Uma’s quest to find independence and identity within the repressive and regimented household atmosphere of Mama and Papa. Obsessed with maintaining a traditional authority in the home, Mama and Papa are often described as one conflated unit, Mama and Papa. Uma’s journey is littered with personal set back and failure. Simpleminded and limited intellectually, she is pulled from her beloved convent school after repeatedly failing exams. Her failures in school are followed by failures in marriage. Her parents, desperate to marry her off, are swindled out of two dowries by another family’s eager to capitalize off of their desperation.

Because success is defined so narrowly for men and particularly women in Uma’s society. While her younger brother Arun goes to America to attend college and her younger sister Aruna is married off to a amazing and rich husband in Bombay, Uma remains confined to her parents home, where she lives as a practical servant, accommodating her parents’ unending whims and commands. Even when an opportunity to escape her parents’ household presents contrive to keep her in the home and thwart her attempts at establishing a separate identity.

In Part-II explores Arun’s own difficult quest to fins independence and freedom from familial obligation in America. While his time at college is marked by unparalleled freedom- the first time he has ever experienced a life free from the endless obligations of his family. When the school year ends, he is forced, by circumstances and his parents’ arrangements, to rent a room in the Patton family home during the summer break. Arun, thrust into yet another family web of conflict and obligation, is forced to confront a uniquely American brand of familial alienation and dysfunction. The narration and portrayal of the American landscape illustrates spotlessly clean suburban streets, endless shopping malls and strip malls, and cars advertising their drivers’ dreams and pride with hollow bumper sticker slogans. Lost in this patterned daily ritual of mindless consumerism and

spiritual alienation, each member of the Patton family has their own problematic method to survive with the void of meaning and connection in their lives.

Stuck in yet another familial web, Arun struggles to find privacy and independence within the family. Central to this challenge is a struggle for clear and open communication. Squelched by the unquestionable authority of Papa and raised to be a dutiful and obliging son, Arun never developed the social and communication skills necessary to shape out independence and shared understanding.

In **Fasting, Feasting** this is particularly clear when it concerns the introductory passages of each part respectively, which deal with the division of power and its hierarchy. The novel introduces to us an Indian contemporary middle class urban Hindu (most probably Brahman) nuclear (not joint) family. These precisions are important because it is necessary to view each specific context with which we have to deal in its ethnic, social, religious, and historical perspective, especially so as it concerns the "Indian" society with its extremely varied and multiple features (see Mohanty 207, 211). The opening of the novel brings us into the middle of a domestic scene of the family, an environment that becomes representative of a hierarchy of power. The parents are on a garden swing, thinking over what they should have for tea. Their adult daughter Uma, who is packing a parcel for her brother, a shawl and tea, is summoned by her mother to tell the wish of the father to the cook.

The pattern of the scene becomes a hypothesis of the family hierarchy: its hardened features come out best in the explanation of the "orange ceremony." The patriarch on the top of the hierarchy pyramid, the one for whose enjoyment everything has to be arranged, does not even have to utter a word. The mother, a well-trained instrument of his power, reinforces the awareness of this power in the consciousness of the subject member by performing a ritual, which, for this purpose, has to be repeated regularly: "She taps Uma on the elbow. 'Orange,' she instructs her. Uma can no longer pretend to be ignorant of Papa's needs, Papa's ways. After all, she has been serving them for some twenty years. She picks out the largest orange in the bowl and hands it to Mama who peels it in carpet, then divides it into separate segments. Each segment is then peeled and freed of pips and threads till only the perfect globules of juice are left, and then passed, one by one to the edge of Papa's plate. ... Mama sits back. The ceremony is over. She has performed it. Everyone is satisfied" (23,24).

**Fasting and Feasting** become symbolic of excesses that reduce citizens to dysfunctional subjects imprisoning them within the discourses of patriarchy. The title suggests that the contrast between "home" and "foreign" but also marks out the continuity of one in the other. In the final analysis, Desai is indicating how fasting and feasting are not two different ways of dealing with utilization but mirror one another paradoxically, in similarity' and difference, both equally enervating, both equally addictive. To undermine the culinary determinism of fasting and feasting and to escape from the forms of predation that accompanies the process of expenditure, Desai hints that the subject has to deal with the violence that is present in the act of eating/not-eating and contest the power that is exercised on her through the alimentary.

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