

ROLE, CUSTOMS AND TRADITIONS TO ANITA DESAI'S FASTING, FEASTING: A FEMINIST STUDY

GANGESHWARAN RAJ¹, Dr.S.CHELLIAH²

¹Reg No: MKU22PFOL10567, Ph.D Research Scholar in English (PT), Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai-625019, (T.N) India.

²M.A., Ph.D., D.Litt. Guide & Supervisor, Professor, Head & Chairperson, School of English & Foreign Languages, Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai-625019, (T.N) India.

Abstract:

The purpose of the research paper is to use a feminist viewpoint to demonstrate the roles and traditions in Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting*. Uma and her younger sister Aruna are growing up in a traditional Indian home in a tiny Indian village in the late 1970s. Their parents are simply referred to as *Mama and Papa*, and they attempt to influence their daughters' futures by teaching them conventional feminine domestic skills. Despite her poor academic performance, Uma enjoys going to her convent school and has little interest in marriage and housework. Uma receives little tolerance from Mama and Papa. Papa, a middle-government magistrate with a fragile ego dominates his family life by dictating the family's daily activities and everyone's futures. Priding herself as the wife of an important man, Mama cooperates with Papa on almost every issue.

Keywords: Customs, roles, marriage, discrimination, destiny, parental love.

Introduction:

This research paper looks at how power politics in Anita Desai's *Fasting and Feasting* cause identity to be subjugated, which in turn disrupts the protagonist's and other characters' experiences. The characters in the book use their relationship with food as a way to communicate their emotional states. Therefore, by examining a character's eating habits, we can deduce the complex relationships and internal suffering that the character has experienced. The dichotomy of plenty and hunger is explored in the book, and characters like Uma, Arun, and Melanie all reflect this idea. In order to analyze the politics of food and gender, the researcher has identified and investigated the food behavioral patterns of these characters. From Arun's obtrusive feasting to Uma's forced fasting, the novel is a testament to how consumption patterns reflect an individual's socio-cultural struggles. The author in the novel demonstrates how food consumption is gendered and culturally rationalized. In the research paper, food and food consumption will serve as a lens to the social, cultural, and psychological needs of the characters.

ROLE, CUSTOMS AND TRADITIONS TO ANITA DESAI'S FASTING, FEASTING:

Fasting, Feasting, Anita Desai's tenth novel, explores themes of wealth, deprivation, and being caught up in societal conventions. Additionally, it discusses the roles of men and women in two very different cultures—American and Indian. The title of the book gives away the contrast that exists inside it. Nearly every character in the book experiences deprivation when it comes

to needs or desires that are not influenced by gender or gender-related characteristics. This is the novel's "fasting" aspect. For example, Arun is denied his freedom of choice, while Uma is denied attention. There are abundances of different issues in the story despite its extreme lack and hardship. This is the "feasting" section of the book, and the excesses and extravagance of the American lifestyle that Arun was experiencing can serve as a fair illustration of it.

Despite the two families in the novel initially seemed to be totally distinct from each other, we realize that the end that both of them truly are solely two sides of one currency, despite the diversity of the two cultures. Men and women in Uma's family are quite distinct from one another. Even though Uma claims that "they have the comfort of each other" because of her parents' unbreakable bond, Indian society places varying degrees of distinction between male and female roles in weddings. "It was hard to believe they had ever had separate existences, that they had been separate entities and not Mama Papa in one breath," Uma says in the novel while referring to her parents, using the phrase "Mama and Papa". Tragically, there is an enormous class disparity among couples. Papa is always made to feel at ease by Mama, and she expects her daughters to do the same. Understanding his influence over his family, Papa waits for them to comply with his command. There's no need for him to request a peeled orange. When Uma places a fruit bowl in front of him and Mama peels oranges for him, he simply waits silently.

Women are particularly invested in food, but we contend that even women who care little about food construct their identities in a social context where idealized feminities are linked to skilled food work and successful body projects (509).

Mama and Papa insist that Uma drop out of school to take care of her younger brother after Arun is born. Uma flees to the convent school, where she unsuccessfully pleads with Mother Agnes to persuade Mama Papa to allow her to return. Mother Agnes says she cannot help Uma, so she has her first seizure on the convent floor. Anamika, Uma's lovely cousin, has the chance to attend Oxford University, but her parents, Bakul Uncle and Lily Aunty, forbid her from doing so. Rather, they marry her off to the most educated and wealthy man they can locate. Uma and her parents soon learn that Anamika is abused and treated like a servant by her mother-in-law and husband.

The concepts of food and gender are dealt with in Anita Desai's *Fasting and Feasting*. Through the characters' gendered interactions with food across the book, it emphasizes the subject of food and appetite. Uma, the female protagonist of the first section, is the focus of the main argument in this two-part story. One of the story's downtrodden characters is Uma, the oldest of her siblings. Despite facing significant challenges in her schooling, Uma was a joyful and enthusiastic learner as a child. This is evident when in the novel we observe "Uma was at school before any other child, and every day she searched for an excuse to stay on. (Desai 21). She honestly eagerly anticipated the commencement of the summer vacation and going back of school. Despite Uma's genuine enthusiasm, she finds it hard and demanding to succeed in exams.

She rubbed and rubbed at her exercise books with an increasingly black and stumpy eraser, struggled to work out her sums, to remember dates, to spell 'Constantinople'; and over and

over again she failed. Her record books are marked red for failure... She wept with shame and frustration”(Desai 21). Uma experienced failure not only in her studies but “There was not a thing Uma put her hand to that did not turn to failure (Desai 21).

The family learns one evening that Anamika was discovered dead on her doorstep, having been burned to death. It’s uncertain if it’s murder or suicide. Bakul Uncle and Lily Aunty come to the holy river to scatter Anamika’s ashes. The focus of the book now shifts to Arun. Arun receives a scholarship to study in America after putting in a lot of effort. He withdraws drained upon arriving in Massachusetts and attends school alone for the first year. Reluctantly, Arun spends the next summer with Mr. and Mrs. Patton, along with their kids Rod and Melanie, who are from the United States. Arun is greeted cordially by Mrs. Patton, but he quickly observes how she battles her ungrateful husband’s strong will. The athletic, self-centered Rod and Mr. Patton disregard Mrs. Patton and Melanie in favor of their jobs, workouts, and sports.

Mrs. Patton insists that Arun teach her how to be vegetarian when she takes him shopping. Arun, meantime, grows repelled through American excess. He quickly learns that the daughter, Melanie, suffers from bulimia and frantically looks for a means to inform unfamiliar Mrs. Patton of the situation. In the meantime, Mrs. Patton is informed by a cashier that she appears to be pregnant one day at the grocery store. Mrs. Patton neglects her kid even more as she develops an obsession with sun tanning. Mrs. Patton takes Arun and Melanie to a pond at the conclusion of the summer.

Arun, Uma’s brother who seems to have more privilege, narrates the second part of the book. During his first year at college, Arun lives with an American family, exposing the reader to an intriguing examination and critique on traditional American culture from the perspective of a privileged, foreign young man. The reader is specifically made aware of the existence of “claustrophobic domesticity” in both cultures. Overall, the narrative is dominated by themes about the rigidity of cultural customs, particularly those pertaining to food, as the novel’s title suggests.

Although Uma and Arun suffer from different forms of parental oppression, they are both unable to grow into fully formed human beings. They display this conflict between attempting to assert a certain amount of individuality and resisting the controlling and domineering tendencies of their parents (and, in Uma’s case, the patriarchy). Arun’s chance to study in America and experience the traditions of a new family and a new nation does help him gain a better understanding of who he is, where he came from, and what the subtleties in his family’s relationships mean for him and his sister, but Uma in particular does not make significant progress regarding self-actualization.

Uma pursues education so passionately because it offers her opportunity, independence, and progress. Despite her mediocre academic performance, she prefers going to school and studying. Despite Arun possesses conflicting feelings about school, it and his gender are his means of traveling from India to the United States. Unfortunately for Uma, since boys will be pursuing a job, education is considered as the domain of boys. Women’s education is viewed as a waste, and the concepts taught in schools are harmful. The common mistrust of educated

women is demonstrated by Uma's parents' rejection of Dr. Dutt, an unmarried professional, and the standing of Mrs. Joshi's daughter, who is also single and employed (P 8).

Despite taking place in post-independence India, the story is abundant with remnants of British colonialism. There is the missionary couple, the O'Henrys, who reside close to Uma, and the convent school, which is run by nuns. Papa berates his kid for becoming a vegetarian while praising cricket, English, and the consumption of meat. Additionally, he transfers Arun overseas rather than allowing him to remain in India because he is adamant about the superiority of a foreign degree versus an Indian one. Therefore, the association with European culture is seen by upper-middle-class Indians as having cultural cache; this is a kind of colonial-era brainwashing remnant that said there was a hierarchy and that European culture was at the top.

Both Uma and Melanie need a relationship with their mothers but are essentially neglected by them. In Uma's section, we see her seeking out several mother figures—Mrs. Joshi, Mrs. O'Henry, Mira-masi, and Mother Agnes—all in the hopes of having one of them understand and validate her. Desai suggests that a supportive and loving relationship between mothers and daughters can do a great deal of good, especially for daughters trying to figure out who they are in an intensely patriarchal society (P 88).

Desai does not privilege Hinduism or Christianity in the novel, describing them both as restrictive for women and avoiding suggesting that there is a religious hierarchy (though she alludes to Christianity's negative role in colonizing India). She accomplishes this, among other things, by having Uma, a Hindu, show interest in both religions for non-doctrinal reasons, such as the order and reason of the convent school and the vibrant tales of Hindu gods and goddesses. Uma looks to religion not for its own sake but rather for its ability to help her transcend her constrained situation.

In rural India, and thus in Uma and Arun's family, customs and traditions are extremely significant. Girls are fostered to be good mothers and wives primarily because arranged marriages are anticipated. An example of an arranged marriage that appears to be more of a business than a romantic union is that of Mama and Papa. They each fulfill their assigned duties, and Uma is still unaware of their separate lives before meeting. Uma, on the other hand, annoys and disappoints Mama and Papa since she wants to stay in school at the convent and shows confusion when it comes time for her to get married.

Women are conditioned to be housewives, and parents raise their girls to be good wives for men rather than educated individuals. For instance, Uma questions their servant Ayah about her daughter Lakshmi in chapter four. Ayah bemoans Lakshmi and alleges that she strikes her because she fled to start a life of her own selecting, even though she married the man her mother chose for her. The way that Ayah treated her own daughter demonstrates that both men and women in Indian society recognize that a woman's duality can only be to her family and home. The character that feels stuck in the wills of society is Uma. Patriarchy has harmed her.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, Anita Desai's *Fasting and Feasting* highlights the relationship between gender and food as well as the pain that women endure under patriarchal systems. Through their obsession with eating, the ladies in the book display the anguish of their identity dilemma. In the book, women express their anger and aggression by hurting themselves. For example, Anamika burns herself after years of being tormented, and Melanie indulges in obsessive eating as a way to vent her hatred. From Mr. Patton in America to Uma's father in India, both male chauvinists serve as the family's decision-makers, marginalizing the women in the household. This is a true example of patriarchal oppression in the book. The novel examines the conflicting themes of identity and anonymity in addition to the difficulties faced by women in defining who they are. In the same way that female characters like Uma, Anamika, and Melanie struggle with their identities, Arun aspires to be free and anonymous from the identity that his parents have forced upon him.

Reference:**Primary Source:**

Desai, Anita. *Fasting Feasting*. Penguin Books, 1999.

Secondary Sources:

Keel, Pamela K., "Introduction: What Are Eating Disorders?" *Eating Disorders*, Oxford University Press, 2017, pp.5

Garner, David. "Body Image in America: Survey Results" *Psychology Today*, February 1, 1997,

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/intl/articles/199702/body-image-in-america-survey-results>.

Rossella, Daniela. "Meat & Flesh: A reading of Anita Desai's *Fasting and Feasting*." *A WORLD OF NOURISHMENT REFLECTIONS ON FOOD IN INDIAN CULTURE*, edited by Cinzia Pieruccini and Paola M Rossi., Ledizioni, 2016, pp. 319-28.

Meadow, Rosalyn M. "Eat and Be Thin." *Women's Conflict About Eating and Sexuality*, Routledge, 2012, pp. 26

Bhari, Deepika. "Postcolonial Hunger." *Food and Literature*, edited by Gitanjali G. Shahani, Cambridge University Press, 2018, pp. 335-51.

Eagleton, Terry. "Edible Ecriture." *Times Higher Education*, October 24, 1997.