

ANITA DESAI'S FASTING, FEASTING: THROUGH THE LENS OF POST- COLONIALISM

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ABSTRACT

*One of the most exciting features of English literature today is the explosion of post-colonial literature—literature written in English in formerly colonized societies. Post-colonialism is an umbrella term inclusive of all discourses that challenge the dominance of all kinds of hegemony in all walks of human life. When two cultures sharing unequal power confront each other, the weaker culture seeks different alternatives to meet the situation. Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting* is a novel of contrast between two cultures, the one, Indian, known for its pious and longstanding customs representing 'fasting,' and the other, American, a country of opulence and sumptuousness epitomizing 'feasting.' The paper shows how authentically the writer represents the deplorable status of women in Indian society.*

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The term 'Postcolonial' came after the term 'colonial', which was based on the theory of the superiority of Imperial or European culture and the suitability of the empire. Colonial literature means the literature written by the native people, including the writings by Creoles and indigenous writers during the colonial eras. Post-colonial literature denotes the literature written after the withdrawal of the imperial power from the territory of the native people. After gaining freedom from colonial rule, the Post-colonial people's quest for their identity began. Their themes focus on the issues like identity, national and cultural heritage, hybridity, partition, contemporary reality, human relationships and emotions etc. Therefore, they raised their voice against the past exploitations and oppressions and attempted to establish their own identity.

Post-colonial studies are heavily dependent also on Derrida to deconstruct these distinctions. Derrida has described western metaphysics as the white mythology which reassembles and reflects the culture of the west. He put into question the basic metaphysical assumptions of western philosophy since Plato. The notion of the structure has always presupposed a centre of the meaning of sorts. People

desire a centre because it guarantees to be as present. Human beings think of all mental and physical life centred on 'I'. The personality principle of unity underlies the structure of all that goes on in space. Freud's theories completely undermine this metaphysical certainty by revealing a division in the self between the conscious and the unconscious. Suppose we try to undo the centring concept of the conscious by asserting the disruptive counterforce of the unconscious. In that case, we introduce a new centre because we cannot do away with the conceptual system (conscious/unconscious) that we are trying to dislodge. The only course left to us is to let neither side of the method, good/bad, male/female, white/black, occident/orient, colonizer / colonized, East / West, become the centre or guarantor of meaning.

Feminist critiques have been directed against patriarchal power plays which intend to keep the status quo with the male as the centre. This symbolic order centre was seen as male and white in post-colonial theory. Models of Western thought derived from Aristotle, Descartes, Kant and Marx and the Literature of Homer, Dante, and T.S. Eliot have dominated the world culture. This has resulted in marginalizing or excluding non-western traditional and cultural

expressions. Edward Said's path-breaking work, *Orientalism* (1978), had a tremendous impact on the post-colonial theory. According to him, Orientalism depends on a culturally constructed distinction between the Occident and the Orient. Orientalism hinges on three broad concepts: first of all, its 4000-year history of the cultural relations between Europe and Asia; secondly, the scientific discipline producing specialists in oriental languages and culture from the early nineteenth century; thirdly, the long-term images, stereotypes and ideology about the Orient, which produce myths of laziness, deceit and irrationality of Orientals as well as their reproduction and rebuttal in debates on the Islamic world and the United States.

In the post-colonial era, the lives of ordinary people and their culture have been widely discussed in *Indian English Fiction* and *Indian English Poetry* by the different perceptions of different writers and poets of other cultures. In *Indian English Fiction*, Bhabani Bhattacharya, Manohar Malgonkar, Kushwant Singh and Arun Joshi focus on specific socio-political problems placing the country' whereas the novelists like Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal, and Anita Desai view feminist perspectives, socio-political as well as personal problems.

Anita Desai is the precursor of the twentieth century and occupies a prominent and distinguished place in Indian English literature. Her literary works are instilled with various themes: her concern for social structure and her feminist status is not entirely new. Still, it is merely a projection of her philosophy and inner being. Her perception and style of writing in *Fasting, Feasting* is hugely different from the style of her earlier artistic creations. Her earlier fiction, *Cry, the Peacock*, *Voices in the City*, *Fire on the Mountain*, *Clear Light of Day*, and *Where Shall We Go This Summer*, is contrived solely on individual characters.

Short-listed for the 1999 Booker Prize, Desai's stunning Novel *Fasting, Feasting* looks gently but without sentimentality at an Indian family that, despite Western influence, is bound by Eastern traditions. It offers an exciting text for post-colonial analysis. The title indicates the dialectic nature of the book, which mediates between India and the United States. Structurally also, the book is organized into two culturally diverse parts. The first relates to the situation of an Indian family, and the second span the United States through the migration of Arun. Desai

presents the anomalies of family life and culture in both sections.

In this novel, Desai vociferously articulates the gender discrimination prevalent in society. She has also tried to unravel the victim's psyche of gender discrimination. Her marvellous fiction has shown that constant neglect and discrimination result in loss of personality. Through *Fasting, Feasting*, she has propagated her latest message that all of us should fight against gender discrimination as this is the most significant social evil with dangerous repercussions that are threatening the very notion of equality and social justice.

Fasting, Feasting is a powerful representation of a patriarchal society governed by its dual value system. The characters represent a society where daughters are kept at the periphery, and life revolves around the son. Primarily, it highlights sexual discrimination meted out to a girl child. Anita Desai skilfully and dexterously opens the seam of the tightly knit fabric of society and introduces the readers to gruesome, detestable treatment done to women. It is a narrative saga of the fate of daughters and sisters, married and forgotten without even the most minor care about their future. It is that sickening society where the birth of a son is associated with pride and felicity and considered a great boon, while daughters are treated as a lifelong burden. The Novel depicts Anita Desai's concern for women's cause and delineates the system's drawbacks and loopholes, which puts the entire society to shame. *Fasting, Feasting* is a tale narrated through a simple divorcee girl, Uma, who becomes the victim of social cruelty due to her parents' conventional and overbearing attitude.

Uma, the protagonist and narrator, was a grown-up woman when her mother found herself pregnant and wished to get it terminated because of her illness. However, Uma's father always wanted to have a son in the family; the late pregnancy of his wife tempts him to take a chance of fathering a son. Though there were two grown-up daughters in the family, Papa's desire to have a son was almost irresistible. Anita Desai mocks the Indian mentality of giving undue importance to sons: "Would any man give up the chance of a son?" (p.16) The significance imparted to the son results in negligence and humiliation toward the girl child. Apathy towards Uma is a depiction of this social reality. During the mother's pregnancy, the father provided every care to her, and ultimately, she

delivered a son. His birth remains a memorable event for Uma and her younger sister, Aruna. Throughout their life, they had perceived different behaviour from their father. But the overwhelming father's reaction pricks their conscience on their brother's birth.

Arriving home, however, father sprang out of the car, raced into the house and shouted the news to whoever was there to hear. Servants, and elderly relatives, all gathered at the door and then saw the most astounding sight of their lives-Papa, in his joy, 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!'. Uma and Aruna, in the portico, looking in, drew together, awestruck." (p.17)

This vulgar display of joy at the birth of a son reflects a typical attitude of a male member in a patriarchal society. However, this show before two grown-up daughters, who by this age understand the process of pregnancy and birth, is shameful, mainly if their father makes the display. At the time of the second pregnancy, they were expecting a male child and the father even selected the name 'Arun' for his child, but when his wife delivered a girl, they named her Aruna. Now with the birth of a son, he happily named him 'Arun.'

This is not an individual's response to the circumstances; the father represents the whole class of male members, rather the whole society. After the birth of her brother, Uma had to assist her mother in rearing Arun. Though Uma is an abject student, she has an extraordinary zeal for study. Her failure in examination provides an excuse for her parents, who withdraw her from school without even the most care about her future. The sarcastic comments of her mother reveal her attitude regarding the future of her girl child, Uma. She says,

"What is the use of going back to school if you keep failing, Uma?... You will be happier at home. You won't need to do any lessons. You are a big girl now. We are trying to arrange a marriage for you... Till then, you can help me look after Arun. And learn to run the house." (p.22)

In childhood, instead of providing any help in her study, Uma's mother taught her "the correct way of folding nappies, of preparing watered milk, of rocking the screaming infant to sleep when he was covered with prickly heat as with a burn." (pp.17-18)

Uma's mother can still be excused for neglecting her daughter's studies. However, even as an educated person and a barrister, the father never made any effort to educate his daughter or to provide her training in any other skill or creative work that might have improved her personality.

Despite providing tuition facilities, the father gives his tacit consent to his wife's decision to withdraw Uma from school. Though Uma assures them to succeed in the exam and pleads with Mother Agnes to persuade her pa to allow her to continue her education, their decision remains the same. "The joint control exercised by Mama Papa is equally destructive and life-denying. Rituals become meaningless after some time, fears become obsessive, and channels of communication are disrupted." (p.39)

The mother expresses her desire to "dispose of Uma" (p.86) which shows the objectification of Uma and reveals that she has been treated as a mere burden, a broken piece of furniture or some outdated decoration, no more required by the owners. Anita Desai's use of the word '*dispose of*' indicates that her mother is least concerned about her future and has no emotional involvement with Uma. In a hurry, she fixes her marriage.

Their neighbour Ms Joshi also criticizes them for taking such hurried decisions about Uma's marriage. She humiliates Uma's mother by saying:

"if parents will not take the time to make proper enquiries, what terrible fates their daughters may have! Be grateful that Uma was not married into a family that could have burnt her to death in order to procure another dowry!" (p.83)

Her parents did not pay any attention to such advice, nor did they feel guilty about their error of judgment that ruined Uma's life. Ultimately, Uma gets married and immediately after her marriage, she confronts reality and comes to know that her husband was already married and needed money to improve the deteriorated condition of his pharmaceutical factory, which made him marry Uma. Such incidents in the life of Uma expose the horrible reality of the patriarchal system and her parents' negligent attitude toward her future. Her father often grumbles about the monetary expenses incurred on the dowry given at her marriage. However, it would be a meagre amount compared to the money spent on Arun's education abroad. But the

father never complained about it. Gender discrimination is discernible in this attitude.

Uma works out another opposition in the book: this time between the married and the wretchedness of the unmarried woman in closed Third world culture. Paradoxically she combines both the states in her being. She is married but is discarded by her husband soon after. Standing at the marital crossroad, she gets this vision among a crowd of woman sympathizers:

'She had not had their experiences-that; hers was the other; that of an outcast from the world of marriage, the world which, all the murmuring and muttering implied, was all that mattered. (p.172)

Uma makes at least four desperate efforts to ordain her life and break free of the constricting milieu. Her running away to the nuns, the pilgrimage with Mira Masi; the doomed marriage; her career as a Doctor's assistant are all thwarted.

Besides Uma, there is another character Anamika whose life explicitly shows the atrocities of the patriarchal system. She is the perfect amalgamation of mind and beauty, "even the adults looked at her glossy head, thick dark braids and big dreamy eyes and smiled, sometimes sadly, as if thinking how their daughters and daughters-in-law could never measure up to this blessed one." (p.68)

Anamika's versatile personality seems brighter when she wins the scholarship to study at Oxford. However, being a girl child, that certificate is only a testimony of her intelligence and is used as a showpiece to find a suitable groom for her. Ultimately an equally qualified suitor is found for her. Anamika gets married to him but is insensitive to his wife. It seems he was a proud representative of a society where women are not considered individuals but subservient to men. The end of their life is to provide comfort to their husband and in-laws.

Her life is sacrificed at the altar of marriage, where she is regarded as an interloper and ill-treated by her in-laws. After twenty years of marriage, ultimately, she is burnt to ashes, but her in-laws give the form of suicide to her murder. Despite committing such a heinous crime, her in-laws are not punished because Anamika's parents do not even file an FIR against them. They console themselves by saying: "God had willed it, and it was Anamika's destiny." (p.151)

Anita Desai mocks the uncaring attitude of parents who think that all their responsibilities are over the day their daughter is married off while the son is treated as a life-long asset. Besides Uma and Anamika, there is another significant character, Aruna, the younger sister of Uma. Though Uma and Aruna are reared in the same environment, her instincts and capabilities of Aruna protect her against her family environment. As the family's eldest child, Uma had to undertake the family responsibilities, but even then, in all aspects of life, Aruna is brighter than Uma. She learns everything instinctively. The most vital factor that has created a vast difference between the two sisters is education.' Aruna is educated, while Uma has not even completed primary education. Thus, being an educated woman, Aruna is more confident and vibrant. She regards her sister, Uma, as an object of shame, and her attitude towards her reflects resentment. Relations are not the priority of Aruna's life, but she is more conscious of maintaining her image. Thus, she believes in leading a life of pomp and show. Aruna's perception of such life seems shallow to Uma, who feels pity for her and muses, "Was this the realm of ease and comfort for which Aruna had always pined and that some might say she had attained?" (p.109)

Besides being educated, another aspect of Aruna's personality that turns her not only into a successful person but also makes her a mouthpiece of Anita Desai. Though both Anamika and Aruna are educated, Anamika fails to lead a successful life and does not even protest against the injustice practised by her in-laws. Ultimately, her submissive nature becomes fatal, and she is burnt alive. However, Aruna is bold, courageous, ambitious and desirous to achieve her goal in life.

One essential feature of post-colonial studies is privileging the voices of the subalterns in history and culture. By allowing Uma the Novel's perspective, Desai has fulfilled a crucial post-colonial mission. As Raman Selden puts it, post-colonial studies aim to "assert and affirm a denied or alienated subjectively."

In the second part of the Novel, the vision is passed on to Arun, who, despite his privileged position, displays symptoms of alienation. His cross-over from India to the United States in pursuit of higher studies is an intrinsic part of the post-colonial experience. Ania Loomba writes, "Post-colonial studies have been preoccupied with issues of hybridity, creolization, in-betweenness, diaspora and

liminality, the mobility and cross-over of ideas and identities generated by colonialism" (173). She also cites the example of Macaulay's educational policy, which intended to create "a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinion, in morals and intellect."

The underlying premise is that Indians could mimic but never exactly reproduce English values and that their recognition of the perpetual gap between themselves and the real thing would ensure their subjection. In practice, however, this doctrine did not work as anti-colonial movements have drawn upon western ideas and vocabularies to challenge colonial rule. Arun also superimposes his consciousness on his experience with the American culture, which develops into a unique, cohesive perspective by the end of the book.

At the beginning of his American sojourn, Arun savours the freedom that stretches before him. There is an uncanny resemblance to a newly decolonized territory which revels in the removal of the colonial burden :

Arun's entire life had been spent resisting parental attention. The struggle against the colonizer was based on the same urge for freedom, of the necessity of preventing the parent/colonizer from plotting and planning their lives. However, this freedom is illusory for Arun when he finds himself in another family imbroglio.

Fasting, Feasting addresses another primary post-colonial concern related to the recasting of Third world cultures and the spread of consumer capital. Consumerism is confronted by Arun when Mrs Patton, his landlady, takes him on an expedition to the Supermarket. He is bewildered by the paraphernalia he sees in cars parked there. Used to viewing cars as mere transport vehicles, he realizes that the Third World utilitarian concepts are overwhelmed here. From what makes America click, "Guns, Guts and God, Make America great."

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Desai tacitly establishes a connection between attitude to food and emotional states throughout the book, whose title is *Fasting, Feasting*. Uma finally bonds with her mother on the boat ride for immersion of Anamika's ashes through conservation about breakfast as she finds the thought of puri-aloo comforting; it is a bond. The fissures in the Patton family as well are indicated through food. While Mr Patton relishes barbequing mutton chops for the family, which only his son will eat, his wife confesses her vegetarianism to Arun. He had confounded his parents in childhood with his vegetarianism as, in their minds, the benefit of English, cricket and meat were inextricably linked.

In the land of *Fasting and self-indulgence*, Desai places the trenchant figure of Melanie Patton, the eater of junk food and antagonistic behaviour. Arun grows tense and finds his throat muscles contracting, tight with anxiety over spending so much, having so much.

Few lines from the book in which Arun is startled by the similarity of the situation of Melanie and Uma in diverse cultures spanning the globe. That Arun does see a resemblance to something, he knows a resemblance to the contorted face of an engaged sister. She fails to express her outrage against attention to her unique and singular being and its hunger and froths in ineffectual protest.

Uma and Melanie suffer from nervous disorders, and Arun feels his otherness both in India and United States. There is Mira Masi, a widow who is ostracised from society, and her otherness is symbolically depicted in cooking her food outside the house. Then, there is Ramu, the insouciant black sheep who scandalizes and infuriates Uma's parents with his provoking behaviour. Desai's book is full of the polyphony of these voices. This is one of the main gains of post-colonial critique. Ran Greenstein points out, "in recent years, the insurrection of subjugated voices in the fields of feminism, black, gay and post-colonial studies has been led by members of marginalized groups."

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