



## Multiculturalism in Anita Desai's *Fasting and Feasting*

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### Abstract

India is a multicultural country. In India several cultures exist simultaneously and multicultural traditions are a part of our historical heritage, cultural fabric, and an ethos of a peaceful and sometimes not so peaceful co-existence. Apart from being an integral part of our everyday life and culture since centuries; multiculturalism, identity and homeland are interwoven or fused in such a manner in our country that it's difficult to tell one from the other.

Multicultural traditions have been a part of India's historical heritage and cultural ethos since centuries. Culture, migration, and assimilation form a major part of identity and homeland, as they are characterized by many forms of multicultural concern. The central question addressed in this paper is that how a vast multicultural, multi-ethnic country like India has thrived and survived despite many differences. The Indian diversity, postcolonialism, plurality and the concept of homeland is discussed in terms of their relevance in the modern world, and in context of Anita Desai's novel *Fasting, Feasting*, where they are applicable not only outside India, amongst the diasporas, but also within India as a multicultural nation.

*Key words: multiculturalism, migration, emancipation, sacrifice, submissiveness.*

Anita Desai is recognized as the first Indian author writing in English who addresses feminist themes seriously, focusing on the condition of women in India. Unlike Nayantara Sahgal and Kamala Markandeya, for example, who respond primarily to the external social and political circumstances of their female characters, Desai concentrates on the exploration of the psychological condition of the oppressed heroines who, at first, are entirely passive. Anita Desai is post independent feminist writer who occupies a unique place in the history of Indian English fiction. She has been immensely successful in creating new images in her works from a feminist perspective. The transformative power of Anita Desai's novel lies in her taking up the task of revealing the process of self-awareness at work in feminine psyches. She has

been honoured with many national and international prestigious rewards. Thrice, she has been nominated for Booker Prize for her novels which are *Clear Light of Day* (1980), *In Custody* (1984) and *Fasting, Feasting* (1999). The novel *Fasting, Feasting* focuses on a sense of deep rooted pathos over the plight of mankind and particularly women. The novel deals with a very sensitive story depicting the human values through her characters, namely, Uma, Aruna, Arun and the Patton family. Anita Desai presents woman as an embodiment of sacrifice, silent suffering, humility, faith and knowledge. In *Fasting, Feasting* from a feminist perspective. *Fasting, Feasting* (2000), is, above all, a work whose main concern is the condition of women in India and is related to women in general. This paper focuses on the culture based oppression of

women in contemporary Indian society and relates it to the psychological suffering of women in American society and concludes that women are being considered as domesticated secondary beings with little scope to open up themselves in society as well in family based on the portrayal of the characters Uma, Melanie and her mother, Mrs Patton; resulting in ideological condition signifying how patriarchy is all encompassing irrespective of culture or place.

Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting*, as it is implied in the title itself, 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.'

*Fasting and Feasting* deals with male and female roles in two completely different cultures, Indian and American cultures. The contrast in the novel can be understood from the novel's title. When it comes to needs or wishes without looking to the gender and qualities of gender, almost every character of the novel suffers from deprivation. This is the 'fasting' side of the novel. For instance, Uma is deprived of attention while Arun is deprived of his freedom of choice. Despite the great absence and deprivation in the novel there are plenitudes of various subjects. Excesses and opulence in the American lifestyle to which Arun exposed can be a good example to that and it is the 'feasting' side of the novel. Two families in the novel seems very different from each other in the first place but until the end of the novel -despite the variety of two cultures- we can see these families are just two sides of a coin. In Uma's family, there is sharp discrepancy between women and men. Even Uma says "they have the comfort of each other" for her parents' inseparable unity, society of India divides female and male figures in marriages to different levels. In the novel while Uma mentions her parents she uses 'Mama Papa' phrase and she goes on saying "It was hard to believe they had ever had separate existences, that they had been separate entities and not Mama Papa in one breath." They seems like they don't have individual wishes. Unfortunately, there is great class distinction between wife and husband. Mama

always tries to make comfortable Papa and she demands from her daughters to do the same. Papa is aware of his power on his family and waits from his family to do whatever he demands from them to do. He doesn't even need to ask for peeled orange. He just waits in silence when Uma puts fruit bowl in front him and Mama peels oranges for him. In Indian society service to father or husband makes women proud. Because while men works and focus on their education, women learns how to be proud when they accomplished their tasks which given by men. On the other hand, American family of the novel seems more liberated. They live in the comfort and richness of America. They have access to freedom and good life. But in the end Arun realizes Potter family is just a different version of his own family. Just like Papa, Mr. Potter ignores his family's needs. He is totally unaware of his wife's or his daughter's condition. Mrs. Potter is obsessed with filling the refrigerator. This habit becomes only goal in her life and it is very similar to Mama's struggle to find a good husband to her daughters. They both tries to complete their duties with these goals. The daughters of these two families also have similarities. Melanie's eating disorder can be associated with Uma's jumping to river for salvation.

The story is about two families, one in India and the other in the United States. The protagonist is Uma, who is raised in a traditional authority family. Uma has two siblings; Aruna and Arun. Arun is a boy child, and his father gives him the privilege to ensure that he secures a placement at an American university. However, Uma is compelled to leave school and take care of Arun. Uma fails in almost everything she attempts. Her parents do not like her. However, the circumstances force them to spend the rest of their life with her.

The families of women characters in this book arrange for their marriages. Parents prefer marriage to education. For instance, Anamika works hard and gets a scholarship to Oxford University. However, her parents decide to marry her off rather than taking her to university. The families are entrenched in the traditional way of life. Despite Uma's father being educated, culture and traditions force him to deny his girls their right to education.

The family of Uma is embedded and restricted by tradition and cultural values. Uma is denied her right to education to take care of her younger brother. As well, her cousin, Anamika, is married off despite securing a placement at a prestigious Oxford University. Later, her husband subjects her to domestic violence until she dies. Women have no control over their lives. The families depicted in this book do not value women. Male characters are figurative dictators who control everything in their families.

In *Fasting, Feasting* the two distinctive cultures of the East and the West are portrayed in the most profound manner by Desai. The predicament and cultural conditioning of Arun is captured and expressed brilliantly. Although he is clearly distraught at home but nonetheless starts missing it on encountering so many vivid pleasant and unpleasant experiences, half way around the world in Massachusetts where he experiences real life in an American suburb. It is a cultural shock and Arun is terrified as well as perplexed at first. Both the cultures have been magnificently presented by Desai who uses subjective experiences to portray the pains and pleasures of her characters. There is a constant question of 'belonging', 'identity' and 'homeland' along with how globalization has been destroying multiculturalism and cultural and social identities of so many indigenous groups in India and all over the world, by bringing a homogeneous culture everywhere. In *Fasting, Feasting* Desai presents these relevant and contemporary issues both inside India as well as outside, as a part of this novel is based in India and the other in United States of America, where Desai currently lives. The difference between India and the United States is depicted in a subtle manner and several problems relating to cultural differences are brought forth successfully in an objective but sympathetic manner. For instance the cultural differences between the United States and India are highlighted by Desai very poignantly, when she describes the feelings of freedom felt by Arun for the first time when he is away from home

The plight of Uma, the spinster sister of Arun who considers herself a miserable failure in life, because she was not allowed by her parents to be well-educated, or her failure to bring in a good

match, unlike her sister Aruna, is intensely depicted. Her parents' disappointment in her saddens and shakes her to the core. The various aspects of the eastern and western thoughts are profoundly brought out by Desai in her vivid portrayals of all her characters, and especially in *Fasting, Feasting* which is psychologically as well as socially important, in the ever-changing yet static concepts of 'self' as well as the 'other'. Desai depicts how a man's love for his parents, friends, family and social environment regenerates in a foreign land after a constant denial of reality in that part of the world which is not only 'alien' but also a challenge to his 'Indian' sensibilities. Uma's plight is the plight of many dreamy-eyed Indian girls who are neglected by their parents, their right to freedom of choice, snatched cruelly away from them. These girls are not encouraged to study as that would be a major problem in finding a 'suitable' match for them. Desai expresses poignantly and realistically the fraud, and humiliation that many women have to go through in India, in order to be married, and their confidence is shaken badly, because their identities are solely attached to the fact, that whether they are able to find good matches or not. Desai tells one such tragic story of Uma and the greed for dowry that the family of the groom generally have in India, the man to which Uma is engaged turns out to be a fraud, a petty criminal, whose family is in the 'business' of cheating people in the name of marriage. There are countless examples of people getting duped in this manner in India, where women's lives are stigmatized for no fault of theirs. Desai describes the various evils in the traditional system of marriages in India: "While Mama searched energetically for a husband for Uma, families were already 'making enquiries' about Aruna. Yet nothing could be done about them; it was imperative that Uma marry first. That was only decent, the only respectable line of behaviour." (80) Thus Uma represent to a large extent, the common Indian womanhood, which has no say in the making of its own future, and is treated like a commodity that is transferred from one owner to another. Desai tells of the various ills that negatively influence a woman's psychology and identity in India, to a great extent due to her various cultural conditionings'. Uma as a protagonist in the

novel. Uma lives in the family who still have traditional values; girls are to be married and boys are to become as educated as possible. And Uma is portrayed unattractive, unintelligent and clumsy which makes her unlikely to get married. Although Uma is persistent to get educated and has a job, she is limited by her parents' value so she cannot do much in her life. In the end she becomes submissive, reticent and stressful. There is unfairness for a woman in India who lives with the family who still holds traditional values and whose family's point of view strongly influences the women's characteristics. It can be seen through the change of their characteristics in facing the problems in their life.

After reading and analyzing novel *Fasting, Feasting* by Anita Desai I get the same culture of knowledge of emancipation that a woman also has the right to develop her potential and nobody, even her family, can entrapped a woman's life with their traditional point of view. Desai's feminist stance—that education is necessary for the woman's emancipation and liberation. Melanie has privileges that Uma is denied. Her second class status is emphasized in Mama's submission: "in my day, girls in the family were not given sweets, nuts, and good things to eat. If something special had been bought in the market like sweets or nuts, it was given to the boy in the family" (Desai, 1999, p.8). This sentence is made to abort Uma's desire for education. However, a new universalism can be seen through the American Melanie who is more privileged and enjoys more rights.

#### **Works Cited**

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