



Two Culures Metaphorised : A Discussion of Fasting Feasting

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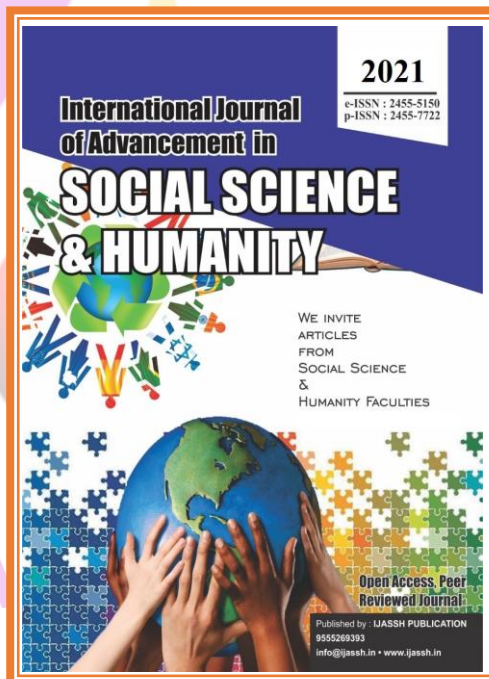
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“I feel about India as an Indian, but I suppose I think about it as an outsider”. Anita Desai.

ABSTRACT

Anita Desai portrays two cultures in terms of Fasting and Feasting. These two cultures are apparently two contrary cultures. But the novelist aims at that their unity rather than their diversity. Her novel unfolds the story of Uma who symbolizes the culture of India. Fasting finds her bonded oppressively by her parents, MamaPapa. What Uma reveals is that her nameless parents plot, plan and govern the lives of the siblings – hers in India and Arun’s in America among others. Living under the parental dispensation, they are unable to fulfil their aspirations. The novelist’s emphasis is that familial entrapment is ubiquitous. All the same entrapment is inevitable.

Key Words: *Fasting, Feasting, Entrapment*



Anita Desai of Indo-German parentage portrays a contrast of two cultures in *Fasting Feasting*. The first is the Indian culture which is marked by customs of religious person's feeling and the other is the America representing "affluence and dazzling variety. The narrative arises out of the perceptions of two important characters - Uma in India and Arun in the U.S. Both of them feel and remain trapped where they are because of their oppressive treatment given by their own parents whom the novelist does not refer to or address by their names. They represent the typical parents in the middle class families in India. They are ubiquitous. They have the final say in matters relating to marriage, or going abroad for higher studies of their offsprings.

Fasting Feasting opens with Mama Papa in a rumination. "The parents sit, rhythmically swinging, back and forth. They could be asleep, dozing- their eyes are hooded – but sometimes they speak.¹ Living under their dispensation, the children are really suppressed, repressed and victimized beyond measure. In the first part of the novel we see Uma, who seems to be at the beck and call of her parents. She is never unwilling to do their biddings. But the parents want her to ask the cook to prepare sweets for her father. Failure in compliance can incur the wrath of her parents. Anita Desai describes Uma's sad plight and predicament in graphic details." All

mornings MamaPapa have found things for Uma to do. It is as if Papa's retirement is to be spent in this manner- sitting on the red swing in the veranda with Mama, rocking, and finding ways to keep Uma occupied". (133) Arun, Uma's brother who goes abroad for higher studies is also under constraint and pain and is unable to fulfil his mission. Even the higher education in the U.S. comes as no relief to him. In fact, both Uma and Arun find their parental home too oppressive where they are. To Uma both the parents are like a "Siamese twin". They are not any different from each other. Here is the novelist in her own words. " Having fused into one , they had gained so much in substance, in stature, in authority, that they loomed large enough as it was; they did not need separate histories and backgrounds to make them even more immense" (6) Papa's " scowling" and " Mama's scolding" mean the same. They affect the kids quite alike.

Uma and Arun want to have a brief trip for fun usually as a group. But their demands seem to be often met with angry denials from their parents. In short no outings were allowed to woman. As to themselves meaning the parents they move about the house as long as they wanted and further they would also enjoy park walking when they wanted. The parents are always finding faults with Uma. She works as a drudge in the house. Privacy is not meant for both the children and the grown up. This further

means that they cannot even shut the doors which might mean nasty secrets. Examples multiply The manner in which Uma is being nourished, nurtured, in fact groomed by her parents seems to bring tears in the eyes of a discerning reader. “Uma finds saliva gathering at the corners of her mouth at the smell of the spiced, roasted gram but decides to say nothing”. The mother is dictatorial .Let Uma’s loss appetite for grams.

PapaMama are the arbiters who take the decision for everything, be it education. Uma is able to escape from the “claustrophobic conditions” at home when she goes to her convent school “streaked with golden promise” for her future. The weekends at home were dull and dirty. “There were the wretched weekends when she was plucked back into the trivialities of her home, which seemed a denial , a negation of life as it ought to be, sombre and splendid, and then the endless summer vacation when the heat reduced even that pointless existence to further vacuity” (21).Dreadful .S

Uma is not allowed to go to school when her mother gives birth to a child. She would never disagree with her mother and she is not constrained to abide by her Mama’s direction. “But ayah can do this- ayah can do that- Uma tried to protest when the orders began to come thick and fast. This

made Mama look stern again. “You know we can’t leave the baby to the servant,’. She said severely. ‘he needs attention’. When Uma pointed out that ayah had looked after her and Aruna as babies, Mama’s expressions made it clear it was quite a different matter now, and she repeated threateningly: ‘Proper attention.” (31).

Uma receives an invitation from Mrs. O Henry for a coffee party. But MamaPapa do not allow her to join the party for the fear she might be tricked and converted into a Christian nun. Uma has to console herself with being a baby sitter at home and an unpaid menial for her self-enclosed parents for the whole of her life. She is badly trapped. Rarely though she has respite when she feels happy and free. The occasion is the one when she goes with her ailing aunt, Mira-Masi on her pilgrimage, At the Ashram she hears the bark and howls of dogs at the night. This makes her feel that her condition is no better than the barks and howls of the dog. “At night she lay quietly on her mat, listening to the ashram dog bark. Then the other dogs in distant villages, out along the riverbed and over in the pampas grass or in wayside shacks and hovels by the highway- barked back. They howled long messages to each other. Their messages travelled back and forth through the night darkness which was total, absolute. Gradually the barks sank into it and drowned. Then it was silent. That was what

Uma felt her own life to have been – full of barks, howls, messages and now-silence.(61)” The vividness of Anita Desai’s imaginative account of Uma’s ordeal in *Fasting and Feasting* seems to be intended both to shock and inform her readers.

Anita Desai seems deeply involved with her characters and imparts a distinction but not unexpected description as given above. The novelist finds Objective Co relative for Uma’s life of pain in terms of ‘barks and howls of dog’s. The literary device of the novelist reminds the reader of Anita Desai’s *Maya in Cry the Peacock* where her loneliness and feelings of her isolation seem to merge with the cry of the Peacock. Uma has stabs of loneliness and aloneness even when she is at home with Mami Papa. When utterly confused, she would address a letter to a friend who might share her grief.

“yearning; she has a packet of notepaper, pale violet with a pink rose embossed in the corner- but who is the friend? Mrs. Joshi? But since she lives next door, she would be surprised. Aruna? But Aruna would pay no attention, she is too busy. Cousin Ramu? Where was he? Had his farm swallowed him up? And Anamika – had marriage devoured her? (134). It is to be noted that the novelist does not attribute unattractiveness, clumsiness and dullness as the sole causes of her being trapped inside her house. What about Anamika? Her polar opposite. She has

won scholarship to Oxford. Yet living in a patriarchal society, she cannot think of higher education for women. Their sole prerogative is marriage. Anamika’s parents seem to be worried over the fact that the person she is going to marry is senior to her in terms of age. He is “totally impervious to Anamika’s beauty and grace and distinction” (70). He is a husband with a difference, a ‘typical Mama’s boy’. He seems to be reluctant to interfere in matters relating to mami papa. It does not matter if his wife is soundly thrashed by his mother on regular intervals. No one in her family shares her domestic chores. Anamika handles them herself despite the fact she is going on scholarship to Oxford. The novelist’s voice seems to be heavy with irony when she says how Anamika rations her time in cooking. “First the men, then the children, finally the women.” (70) What fate does befall her? She has a miscarriage. She is subject to merciless beating. She is finally burnt to death after she is tied to a Nylon sari and Kerosine is poured over her. Anamika could dare not more children.

Anita Desai also gives another picture of unburnt brides and well-contented ness. Uma’s smart younger sister is to be congratulated upon for marrying “the wisest.... The handsomest, the richest, the most exciting of the suitors who presented themselves” (101). In fact, her marriage has become a standard against which all future

marriages of the middle class Indian families seem to be judged. She is settled comfortably in a house in Juhu adjacent to beach, Bombay. For fairly a very long stretch of time people with whom she is acquainted have not seen her new hairstyle with the haircut to neck length all around her head. It is quite a transformation. She appears to be slim and sophisticated. She is in a way the personification of culture and refinement. Her newly adopted sophisticated tastes and lavish life style seem to have set her apart from her siblings. . She is no longer interested in visiting her ancestral house. She even addresses her sisters and mother as ‘villagers’. Strange it might sound she would not spare her husband even. Does not Anamika scold her husband for splitting tea in his saucer and assert that his shirt does not match with her trousers.

Uma’s entrapment is not identical with Aruna’s. Anamika has emancipated herself from domestic home roles that bind other characters of the novel like Uma and Aruna. In breaking free from the constraining codes of custom and family, she is known for being somewhat of a perfectionist. How can Uma not feel pity for Aruna’s entrapment. Here is Uma:

Seeing Aruna vexed to the point of tears because the cook’s pudding had sunk and spread instead of remaining upright and solid, or because Arvind had come to dinner

in his bed room slippers, or Papa was wearing a T-shirt with a hole under the arm, Uma felt pity for her: was this the realm of ease and comfort for which Aruna had always pined and that some might say she had attained? Certainly it brought her no pleasure: there was always a crease of discontent between her eyebrows and an agitation that made her eyelids flutter, disturbing Uma who noticed it. (109)

In *Fasting, Feasting* the two versions of entrapment are quite conspicuous the male version as represented through Arun has no leaning towards the food for the family which upholds traditional values. He is for the vegetarian food much to the dismay of his Papa. “Papa was always scornful of their relatives who came to visit and insisted on clinging to their cereal- and- vegetable – eating ways, shying away from the meat dishes Papa insisted on having cooked for dinner. Now his own son, displayed this completely baffling desire to return to the ways of his forefathers, meek and puny men who had got nowhere in his life. Papa was deeply vexed”. (32-33).

Arun’s attitude to education is not any different at any time. In fact, his education entraps him equally. Papa’s plan is to provide Arun with the “best, the most the highest” (119) education. So he is pursuing his educational arrangement right from Arun’s childhood. The holidays after the

examination are not any time for enjoyment for him. So he is not allowed to proceed to Bombay. Contrarily he has to prepare for the entrance examination and to send application to go abroad for higher studies. In fact, the father sees an opportunity of fulfilling his own unfulfilled dream which he wanted to impose on his son. Even when the letter of acceptance for his admission comes from Massachusetts, he is not excited at all about his admission.” Uma watched Arun too when he read the fateful letter. She watched and searched for an expression, of relief, of joy, doubt, fear, anything at all. But there was none... there was nothing else – not the hint of a smile, frown, laugh or anything these had been ground down till they had disappeared. This blank face now stared at the letter and faced another phase of his existence arranged for him by Papa”. (121)

A critic remarks,” With a deft touch, Desai shows us that MamaPapa’s ambitions for Arun are as stifling as their lack of ambition for Uma². Arun’s letter shows that he was just surviving and enduring in America. His messages are diluted. “The most personal note he struck was a poignant, frequently repeated complaint: The food is not very good”. (23) Arun fails to assert his identity as an individual in a country where individuality is of the highest value. Being so much inured in his family habits, he is unable to love the alien food. More than this

he is also unable to establish a sense of belonging there. He is alienated from Mrs. Patton’s family that has sheltered him during the vacation.

To conclude Anita Desai gives different versions of entrapment. With Uma it is her unattractiveness among others which is a source of entrapment. Her lack of education may lead her to her entrapment but what Anamika? Her higher education ends in her killing Home-no home, even the U.S. has its own gesture of entrapment. Mrs Desai’s; conclusion is that familial entrapment is ubiquitous. This is a recurring motif in her novels. In one of her interviews she says, “Specially in my earlier work I have found myself addressing the same things over and over again: very much about the life of women, who are confined to make home and family, also the solitude from which a person can suffer even if living within a big family or surrounded by crowds. But after several years and several books I began to feel suffocated myself by the confinement of these subjects. I felt I was limiting the territory to such an extent that it created a kind of suffocation even for me. So I deliberately opened the doors, to widen the canvas, and started writing more about male characters and their lives, because I felt they had a wider experience of the world, and I could address a greater variety of experiences.

This means the novelist does not seem to be interested any longer in portraying the inner recess of Indian woman in the manner she has done in *Fasting Feasting*, *Cry the Peacock* to name a few among them. By ‘confining herself’ to themes as diverse as ‘home, family and solitude’, she does not seem to have done justice to herself. It is high time she depicted ‘male characters and their lives’. Given her experiences, described variously as positive, extensive, ‘wide’ and of ‘a greater variety’, Anita Desai seems to have embarked on a new journey. Readers find in her another Ulysses who seems to be destined to ‘strike, to seek, to find and not to yield’. The novelist is on a mission. She seems to have a

message for budding writers for whom she is clearly a model. They are keen to emulate her literary career spanning five decades. For vision and style they can tune in her. Like Ulysses she seems to be addressing her readers and fledgling authors in endearing terms, “come, my friends, ‘T’is not too late to seek a newer world”⁴ and that too beyond the sunset’. Anita Desai has come a long way despite heavy odds. Herself a novelist the octogenarian is sustained by her sense of commitment to art, ‘Never give up writing’. This was a noble suggestion made by a Nobel Laureate as distinguished as William Faulkner in his Nobel Award Acceptance speech as early as 1949.

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