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Patriarchy and the Lacanian Symbolic: Condition of Women in Anita Desai's Fasting Feasting

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Abstract

Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting* offers a compelling critique of patriarchal structures and cultural ideologies that shape individual subjectivities in both Indian and American societies. Through a psychoanalytic and feminist lens, this study examines how the novel portrays gender oppression, familial control, and cultural contradictions. The novel juxtaposes two worlds—India, where women are confined within rigid societal expectations, and the United States, where excessive individualism imposes its own forms of constraints. The protagonist Uma's struggle against the oppressive Indian symbolic order, alongside Arun's alienation in an unfamiliar American setting, highlights the universality of ideological conditioning. Using Lacanian theory, the analysis explores the symbolic as a repressive system that normalizes gender hierarchies and expectations. *Fasting, Feasting* ultimately exposes how cultural norms dictate human experiences across different geographies, reinforcing power structures that limit true freedom, particularly for women. Through her protagonist Uma, Desai urges readers to question the hidden mechanisms of power that shape identity, agency, and liberation in both patriarchal and consumerist societies.

Keywords: *The Symbolic, Patriarchy in India, Indian Novel, Anita Desai.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Fasting, Feasting is a story of the children of a conservative, upper-middle-class Indian family of the 1970s. The novel is in two parts. The first part explores the life of Uma, a daughter in a strict and authoritarian household in a provincial town southwest of Bombay, India. Desai in this part of the novel demonstrates patriarchy and gender inequality, among other things, in conservative Indian society. Set in a cold and separate household in the Massachusetts suburbs, Part II of the novel illustrates the cultural contrast of the two worlds for Arun who is somehow caught amid the differences of the world where he has come from and the one, he is struggling to adapt to. The significance of food, among other things, is marked in the novel "through its evocation of the dichotomy between those who do not have and those who have" (Amo, 2007, p. 134). Fasting as a fundamental character may be attributed to Indian society where Part I of the novel is set and feasting as an essential character may be associated with American society in Part II. The novel "drives home [Desai's] critique of the hunger for social status, and a rapacious appetite for consumption which define the bourgeois family that overarches the locational distance of India and the United States" (Ho, 2011, p. 86).

Life in Indian society in the first part of the novel is all about prohibitions, inhibitions, restrictions, repressions, etc., which somehow implies that the underlying belief that governs life in India is all about discipline and reticence. Life in this sense is not an end in itself but a test for achieving something else which is more worthy and sacred than this life. The belief is that succeeding in these tests and living up to challenges would be rewarded in terms of

Volume 64 | Issue 03 | March 2025
DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.15050766

something that is much more valuable than the enjoyment and pleasure that the phenomenal and mundane world offers. For Lacan, every prohibition increases the jouissance for the subject, which is the reason why subjects are easily interpellated by ideologies (Lacan, 1977). Subjectivation in one sense is the internalizing of repressions/prohibitions.

Fasting as a metaphor is a source of jouissance in the Indian context. Fasting is the total repressive/prohibitive outlook of the Indian society which leads to a vast world of fantasy for the subjects and therefore offers more possibilities of jouissance. Feasting, in a way, conveys a sense of embracing the mortal life and its pleasures to the full. Life in American society in Part II of the novel is all about pleasures and enjoyment. Every day of life is a blessing which must be embraced with enthusiasm. The American family in this part of the novel lives life as if every day is precious. The underlying belief appears to be that there is only one life that must be enjoyed to its fullest. There are very few prohibitions on what to eat and what not to, what to wear and what not, where to go and where not to, and so on. The only criterion for not doing anything is if that thing is harmful to living in some way. The two words in the title, therefore, describe the fundamental character of the two parts of the novel.

2. THE SYMBOLIC, PATRIARCHY AND THE WOMEN

In the first part of the novel, Desai reveals several aspects of the repressive nature of the symbolic, particularly towards women. The way it constitutes and subsequently assigns value to the categories of male and female is inherently unequal. The whole symbolic that we come across in the first part of the novel is intrinsically patriarchal. Being the fundamental ideology/signifying structure, the symbolic masks its unjust nature towards women. It establishes and glorifies the superiority of men and makes it appear as if the world exists as it must.

Papa is true authority and Mama is just an extension of it. In almost all matters, Papa's will is final. Mama has just been reduced to someone who would always support what is Papa's will. Mama's decision was valid only in deciding things like what they would have for dinner. Along with men, the inherently patriarchal symbolic is also supported and promoted by Mama and other women in the society. As Lacan states, the child is first introduced to the authority of the father/name-of-the-father through the mOther's discourse, which implies that the patriarchal symbolic operates through men and women alike (Lacan, 1977).

Ludmila Volna argues that "the mother, a well-trained instrument of his [father's] 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" (Volna, 2013, p. 4). As Jackson also states, "Desai has often emphasized women's role in maintaining patriarchy. In another context, she has insisted that 'women are as responsible as men are for all those orthodoxies and traditions having been kept alive through the generations'" (Jackson, 2005, p. 169). It is Mama who often instructs Uma to be aware of Papa's needs. She keeps reminding her of the authority of Papa over everything and everyone. She demonstrates that all women in the house, including her, are subservient to Papa. Women along with men, argues Johnson, participate in a patriarchal society (Johnson, 1997). Being socialized through a patriarchal setup, the women often defend it. The oppression of Indian women, as Nabar puts it, is part of the tradition of the collective unconscious and to question such oppression, one has to disregard the Indian tradition (Nabar, 1995).

Volume 64 | Issue 03 | March 2025
DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.15050766

The novel, among other things, reveals how the normative binary sex/gender structure of the symbolic is fundamentally lopsided. The novel in certain instances discloses the fact that woman in Indian society is not considered human with dignity. The final destiny of a woman appears to be marriage. "Woman is created only to enable man to continue his species through sons and gods" (Mies, 1986, p. 41). Woman as an ideological construct/category is not thought of as anything beyond an object of marriage for a man. The novel demonstrates how a woman is considered subservient to a man and is perceived through her role in a man's life. Her goal is to be pativrata. For Brihaspati (a law-giver, 300-500 A.D.), writes Nabar, pativrata "is someone whose state of mind reflects that of her husband. She shares his distress, his delight, grows sickly and dresses unattractively in his absence, and dies when he does" (Nabar, 1995, p. 43). A woman is perceived in terms of her ideologically constructed social roles as a mother, a wife, a sister, and a daughter all of which exist prior to her as a real being. All these roles are loaded with the demands of the symbolic. Beyond these roles, she has no existence in the sense that she could be treated as a being with desires and aspirations. A woman in India "lives for the sake of others, namely for the sake of her husband" (Volna, 2019, p. 5).

3. THE SYMBOLIC AND MARRIAGE

Marriage, as has been portrayed in the novel, is an oppressive institution. It is discriminatory in the sense that it is man-centred. Anamika, Aruna, and Uma were prepared and presented as marriageable objects before their would-be in-laws. Anamika and Aruna were beautiful, intelligent, and mature enough to be considered marriageable. Uma on the contrary proved to be unmarriageable because she was neither beautiful as per the accepted notions of beauty in the symbolic/culture nor has she been able to outgrow her childhood. Anamika and Aruna were easy to marry because they were easy to be presented as objects of desire. As expected, Anamika was the first to be picked for marriage, for she was blessed with everything that made her marriageable.

She "was simply lovely as a flower is lovely, soft, petal-skinned, bumblebee-eyed, pink-lipped, always on the verge of bubbling dovelike laughter, loving smiles, and with a good nature like a radiance about her" (Desai, 1999, p. 68). She carried with her "peace, contentment, wellbeing" (Desai, 1999, p. 68) because she had nothing rebellious against the Other. Like Anamika, "Aruna was pretty too, and in her case, it was also evident quite early that her future would be bright" (Desai, 1999, p. 67). In contrast to Anamika and Aruna, Uma's marriage became difficult because it was hard to present her as an object of desire. However, her Mama did everything to make her look beautiful on occasion whenever people would visit them to consider Uma for marriage. She would lend "one of her own saris to Uma for the occasion — a cream georgette with little sprigs of pink and blue roses embroidered all along the border" (Desai, 1999, p. 76), but all of this was useless because Uma didn't possess required attributes to be fit into the ideologically constructed category 'marriageable'.

Uma is not seen as who she is but as who she is not. The ideologically created reality of what is marriageable and what is not is prior to actual reality. Uma at times was even accused of being unfit to the ideological categorization by her MamaPapa as well as Aruna. The narrative voice also affirms that "it was imperative that Uma marry first" (Desai, 1999, p. 81) because "that was the only decent, the only respectable line of behaviour" (Desai, 1999, p. 81). By calling something only decent and respectable behaviour, the symbolic maintains its effective control on the minds of its subjects.

Volume 64 | Issue 03 | March 2025
DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.15050766

Uma's married life was the same as that of Anamika. She too was instructed about what to do and what not to, but the end of their married life, nevertheless, was different. Her husband, Harish "was married already, had a wife and four children in Meerut where he ran an ailing pharmaceutical factory" (Desai, 1999, p. 96). He married Uma for dowry to save his factory. Her Papa could do nothing about it because the patriarchal symbolic/master-signifier has its own mechanism to provide impunity to men. Uma's Papa had an option to approach court but approaching court for such matters would only mean shame and defamation for her daughter. He could do nothing but take her daughter back home.

Anamika was a brilliant woman who "did so brilliantly in her final school exams, that she won a scholarship to Oxford" where "privileged sons could ever hope to go" (Desai, 1999, p. 69), but despite that her parents didn't even think of sending her to Oxford leave aside allowing her to fulfil her dreams. It was "just when she was of an age to marry, everyone understood that, and agreed, and so the letter of acceptance from Oxford was locked in a steel cupboard in their flat on Marine Drive in Bombay, and whenever visitors came, it would be taken out and shown around with pride" (Desai, 1999, p. 69). Her scholarship didn't mean anything of what it would have meant for a son. It was just a "qualifications they were able to offer when they started searching for a husband for her, and it was what won her a husband who was considered an equal to this prize of the family" (Desai, 1999, p. 70).

Anamika did not express any desire to pursue a career at Oxford. All her desires have melted to a single desire of fulfilling the Other's demand which is why "she could never bring herself to contradict her parents or cause them grief" (Desai, 1999, p. 70). Anamika was finally offered to a suitable man as a wife with a dowry. The concept of dowry itself implies that a woman is perceived as a responsibility passing from one family to another.

Dowry is the compensation offered by the family that is relieved of responsibility. Elizabeth Jackson maintains that "Indian feminists have developed several interpretations of the significance of dowry but all agree that at the least, it positions daughters as financial liabilities—and sons as financial assets—to their natal families" (Jackson, 2018, p. 163). Some events in the novel reveal that marriage is just a way to earn wealth through dowry for men. The woman who is brought home in marriage is not important at all. After consuming the dowry/compensation, "Anamika was beaten regularly by her mother-in-law while her husband stood by and approved" (Desai, 1999, p. 71). No matter how brilliant and able a woman is, her destiny is decided. Her world after marriage is to serve her husband and her in-laws. She is made not to aspire beyond that. Anamika, in spite of being so good in studies, "spent her entire time in the kitchen, cooking for his family which was large so that meals were eaten in shifts - first the men, then the children, finally the women" (Desai, 1999, p. 71). She would eat "the remains in the pots before scouring them" (Desai, 1999, p. 71).

There are several ways to get rid of a woman/responsibility after one consumes her compensation/dowry. Death by fire was finally chosen for Anamika. She suffered a miscarriage after she was beaten by her in-laws. She died as an unimportant thing that had to be disposed of. She became an example of sacrifice for upholding the repressive symbolic. Her death was interpreted as something that was her fate. The symbolic that empowers husbands and in-laws to do so is still not being questioned.

The significant thing to note in all this discussion is that everybody appears to accept and propound things as they are. People including women do not question the unjust nature of the symbolic/ideology that determines the way we interpret as well as order our world. The reason

Volume 64 | Issue 03 | March 2025
DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.15050766

for this is that the symbolic is inherently unjust and all the people who are being talked about are subjects of the same symbolic. Their meaning fixation occurs through the same master signifier. Anamika, as we see, fits in the ideological category 'woman' and in doing so she abandoned everything that did not fit into being woman. Even her parents accepted her death as her fate and something that "God had willed" (Desai, 1999, p. 154) as if they already knew it as a part of her womanhood.

Any aspiration of woman other than household chores appears unusual and unnatural. A career or a profession appears to be a privilege for men only. At one instance in the novel, there is a description of Mrs. Joshi's house and children. About boys, it is said that they "won prizes at school, got jobs, moved to the big cities" and "the daughters were married off, one after the other, and were now bringing up their own children, teaching in nursery schools, painting or block-printing on textiles, giving or taking music lessons, and leading lives that seemed as easy and light as the flight of sparrows" (Desai, 1999, p. 133). There was one among the daughters, Moyna, the youngest of all who "had inexplicably developed a desire to be different, to have a career" (Desai, 1999, pp. 133-134). Though they have allowed and sent her off to Delhi to pursue her career they laughed at what they regarded as her foolishness and were waiting for her return. They were somehow sure that she would return to take up her natural/usual role. They believed in the symbolic/ideological idea of the woman more than her reality.

4. THE SYMBOLIC AND THE MALE CHILD PREFERENCE

The second aspect of the symbolic is demonstrated by Desai in several events that unveil the underlying preference and importance of male children in comparison to a female child in Indian society. Different people, irrespective of gender, prefer male offspring. A male child appears to be a blessing in comparison to a female one. The preference for a male child is not an individual choice but something that is embedded in the collective unconscious of a society governed by a collective symbolic. While exploring the social and historical situation of Indian culture in her book *Caste as Woman,* Vrinda Nabar (1995) writes that the preference given to boys over girls in certain domains like education is not peculiar to India "[b]ut the extent of the insistence on such discrimination as being historically and traditionally prescribed and therefore indisputable even in the present day" (Nabar, 1995, p. 81). It is the symbolic that assigns value to a male in comparison to a female child. Any symbolically valuable object becomes the source of happiness for its subjects. The parents, being the subjects of the same symbolic, respond to the demand of the symbolic. As already discussed, any symbolically valuable entity is projected as the demand of the Other for the subject, and the latter, to prove his/her love for the Other/symbolic, accepts and fulfills every demand of it.

In Part I of the novel, we witness MamaPapa's inestimable happiness upon the birth of a son, even though the pregnancy had initially been an embarrassment for them. MamaPapa "had two daughters, yes, quite grown-up as anyone could see, but there was no son" (Desai, 1999, p. 16), which, in other words, means that a family is incomplete without a son. Everyone was happy, but Papa's happiness was unusual. He was not so expressive generally but could not hide his overwhelming happiness after hearing the news of the birth of a son. The significance of having a son in the governing symbolic/ideology was great. The source of happiness was not the son but ideology. This is revealed by the fact that Papa didn't feel an urge to look at his baby boy. He actually "had looked away, as if that puny physical presence were irrelevant to the moment, and might even disappoint" (Desai, 1999, p. 17). It is the ideological form/notion of the son existing prior to the real son that was more significant.

Volume 64 | Issue 03 | March 2025
DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.15050766

He didn't look towards his son because he wanted to take pleasure in only the symbolic significance of having a son. For him, it was a sign that he would receive the Other's love and approval. The significant aspect of having a son was the fulfillment of desire/lack. His fulfillment was quite visible when he called everyone after reaching home and announced his achievement. Everyone at home—servants, elderly relatives—"all gathered at the door, and then saw the most astounding sight of their lives —Papa, in his elation, 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" (Desai, 1999, p. 17). It was an act of presenting himself as a fulfilled/satisfied man.

MamaPapa had anticipated a son at the time of their second daughter. They had even selected a name, which they had then changed to Aruna from Arun. It implies that the desire was always there. A daughter can never satisfy the desire for a son. Soon after the birth of a son, the daughters, particularly Uma, the elder one, had to pay the price of being a female by having to give up on her education. She was instructed to "learn to run the house" (Desai, 1999, p. 22). It is the symbolic that demands girls to learn household chores.

If Arun's childhood, claims the narrator, could be summed up into one word, it would be education. There is a striking difference between the importance of education for a man and a woman in the eyes of the symbolic/Other/parents. For Papa, the most important concern "was education for his son: the best, the most, the highest" (Desai, 1999, p. 121). The daughters, on the contrary, were "raised for marriage" (Desai, 1999, p. 121). Papa's approach and interest in Arun's education were altogether different from what he thought about his daughter.

The repressive nature of the symbolic is illustrated in some other events in the novel also. The symbolic—in the form of MamaPapa—coerces Uma to obey at the cost of her wishes and aspirations. MamaPapa remain nameless all along, which does not indicate their anonymity but symbolizes their omnipresence and universality in every Indian family. Along with the demonstration of repressive symbolic, Desai exhibits Uma's revolts against it. Uma, despite being the subject of the same symbolic, shows a constant desire to get rid of its chains.

It is because of the same ideological structure of MamaPapa and Uma that the latter is never able to justify the basis of her revolt against what MamaPapa asks Uma to do and not to do. In the process of subject formation, as Althusser (1971) puts it, a concrete human being is interpellated/transformed into a subject. Subjectivation is a lifelong process. MamaPapa, as symbolic, is a constant presence for Uma. "Living under the demanding rule of MamaPapa," maintains Ravichandran, "Uma is repressed, suppressed and is imprisoned at home" (Ravichandran, 2008, p. 2).

5. THE WOMEN AND THE POSSIBILITY OF REBELLION/EMANCIPATION

Although Uma consistently makes an effort to fulfill all the implicit and explicit demands of MamaPapa/Other, her repressed/Real from time to time erupts as her desire. When a human being is subjectivated through symbolic/ideology, all else, including the opposite symbolic/ideologies, are repressed or are rendered as that which we are not. As Uma is subjectivated through a traditional conservative symbolic/ideology, she desires individual freedom—leaving home and living alone appear as her desire/wish. The repressed forms the 'negative core' of an ideology whose mere expression constitutes the rebellion against it. Uma, like other protagonists of Desai, as Panigrahi (2018) maintains, exhibits a conflict "between reason and instinct, the will and reality, involvement and detachment" (Panigrahi, 2018, p. 73).

Volume 64 | Issue 03 | March 2025
DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.15050766

Uma's significant rebellion against the Other/symbolic is her refusal to become an adult woman. She refuses to outgrow her childhood. As Mrs. Joshi tells her widowed aunt that Uma is "still like a child of six" (Desai, 1999, p. 76), it is how she defies the notion of woman by refusing to fit into womanhood. By not completely submitting to the symbolic, Uma has been a nuisance for MamaPapa. She didn't accept easily what they wanted her to be. At the outset, she had refused to discontinue her school and look after her brother. Initially, she hoped her Papa would support her in continuing with her education, but her hopes melted down when he didn't. At last, Uma had no way but to accept their decision.

The convent school itself was nothing less than a repressive ideological structure "with strict rules of the morning assembly to which girls were not admitted unless they had been examined at the door to see if their shoes were polished, their fingernails short and without paint, the ribbons on their hair white and not coloured" (Desai, 1999, p. 19). Though it is quite difficult to point out Uma's attraction to her school, she is desperate to go back. It was possibly the order of everything and rationality of the whole system that had particularly been pleasing to her. She confessed her love for education by admitting "how it satisfied her that every question was answered, every doubt dealt with" (Desai, 1999, p. 19).

Apart from education, there was something else that attracted Uma to school. She had somehow been exposed to something that Žižek (2006) would describe as the inherent negative/filthy core of the institution. As we understand, "the outer plainness and regularity of this convent world contained within it secret chambers dark with mystery, streaked with golden promise" (Desai, 1999, p. 20).

Uma "knew that something secret went on in the small chapel where the children were not allowed, where one could only catch a glimpse, occasionally, of a nun in prayer, kneeling before an altar where a streak of gilt showed in the shadows" (Desai, 1999, p. 20). The confession room is something that recognizes the human propensity to err, which, in other words, means the recognition of human desire. Uma could feel that the chapel somehow "was in some manner linked to the subterranean feelings stirred within her by the words intoned during prayers" (Desai, 1999, p. 20).

To understand this better, we may recall how desire and the law are inseparable. Fantasizing transgression of the law is the source of pleasure. Desire forms the inherent negative core of the law itself that sustains the latter. The subterranean feelings stirred in Uma during prayer are nothing different. She unconsciously fantasizes about the subversion of the sanctity of the prayer, which is the source of jouissance.

After a point in her life, Uma would find pleasure in acting subversively against the demands of MamaPapa/symbolic. Whenever they would not be at home, she would find pleasure in doing things that she would not be allowed to do in their presence. There are instances in the novel when Uma openly defied the authority of MamaPapa. She once stared "into their faces with open defiance" (Desai, 1999, p. 136). When she heard that Mrs. Joshi's daughter, Moyna, had gone to Delhi alone to pursue a career and explore freedom, she developed a troubling desire for freedom. These possibilities for her "were like seeds dropped on the stony, arid land that Uma inhabited" (Desai, 1999, p. 134). The desire to escape from the authority of MamaPapa/symbolic emerges as the desire to escape like Moyna to "a huge and ancient banyan tree with streaming grey air roots, leafy branches in which monkeys and parrots feasted on berries" (Desai, 1999, p. 134). For her, the banyan tree is the world beyond the authority of the symbolic.

Volume 64 | Issue 03 | March 2025
DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.15050766

Uma's desire for freedom had been there always. Her periodic fits symbolize her desire to escape as well as her resistance to her immobility and spiritual starvation (Poon, 2006, p. 36). She only recognized and understood it after she heard about Moyna. When she was with Mira Masi at the ashram, she "was perfectly happy not to be noticed" and "had never been more unsupervised or happier in her life" (Desai, 1999, p. 58). Happiness as a symptom would appear, but it was the freedom from the suppressive symbolic/MamaPapa that would reflect happiness.

Uma exhibits two striking attributes that make her somewhat different from other women. One, she appears to have the least interest in men or marriage, which suggests her weak desire for what Lacan calls 'phallic jouissance.' Second, she is fascinated with Mira Masi's life, her pilgrimages, and her symbolic search for God. While discussing feminine sexuality, Lacan (1998) in *Seminar XX* accounts for two forms of jouissance in women. One is derived from the desire to be an object of desire for men. It is referred to as phallic jouissance. Lacan (1977) recognizes another form of jouissance specific to women. The second form of jouissance is somehow enigmatic. Lacan describes it as S($\bar{A}$), which he elsewhere defines as a "signifier of a lack in the Other" (Lacan, 1977, p. 693). A woman derives this jouissance by offering herself to fill the lack in the Other (God, Religion, Society, Art). This jouissance may turn to "the divine, the ecstatic, and remains mute and outside language, like Saint Teresa" (Easthope, 1999, p. 107).

Uma is moved precisely by Mira Masi's determination to find Lord Krishna, which is an indication of her desire for something beyond the phallus. Mira Masi's claim that she "will not stop traveling, from one city to another from temple to temple, ashram to ashram" (Desai, 1999, p. 142) till she finds Him has an appeal for Uma. This second form of desire is an enigma that she attempts to understand through Mira Masi. "The burning desire to understand this enigma, which is also called the enigma of Vishnu's Maya, can be fulfilled only to a certain extent, and even that is a result of an incessant striving" (Volna, 2013, p. 5). Uma's inquisitiveness about her passion to find Lord Krishna is itself an indication of her desire. Uma is particularly moved by her identification with Mira Masi. She fantasizes about being in her place as someone who has offered herself in devotion to Lord Krishna. Mira Masi's desire to find her Lord is her desire to be loved/recognized by the Lord/Other in return.

After she failed in marriage, Mira Masi told Uma that she was the Lord's child. She tells her that the Lord has chosen Uma for Himself, which is why He rejected the man she chose. In the ashram, too, everyone was very respectful of Uma after she suffered convulsions. All these events lead her toward the desire for the second form of *jouissance*. Marriage, as Mies (1980) states, is a sacrament for Hindus and the only way for women to gain spiritual salvation. The unmarried Uma has no other way but to escape from becoming an evil spirit after death. Consequently, she develops the urge to escape without knowing where and for what purpose. She finds the answer to her inner thirst in Mira Masi and her Hindu legends. She visualized her inner enigma through stories that "show the dual character of the woman's fate: one of the heroines is a victim, dies after having been abandoned by her husband; the other is a poetess, independent, struggling for recognition" (Volna, 2013, p. 6).

Uma's desire is expressed through her interest and subsequent investment in poetry. In the absence of MamaPapa, she would "read a poem or two, and find the pleasure they deny her" (Desai, 1999, p. 138). While reading, "her toes twiddle with delight, and she thumps her knees to the rhythm" (Desai, 1999, p. 138).

Volume 64 | Issue 03 | March 2025
DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.15050766

She enjoyed the lines as if she was fantasizing about the experience that the poetic persona of the poem was describing:

'You are wasting your life in that dull, dark room

O'er the casement lean but a little, my queen,

And see what the great world holds.

Here the wonderful blue of your matchless hue

Cheapen both sky and sea –

You are far too bright to be hidden from sight

Come fly with me, darling - fly' (Desai, 1999, p. 138).

While identifying with the poetic persona of the poem, the reader fantasizes about freedom and self-worth. This becomes a source of pleasure for the reader. Uma's pleasure also exudes from her fantasy of being the poetic persona who seeks freedom and self-love.

6. THE WOMEN ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE WORLD

Arun, the protagonist in part two of the novel, finds life in the States too extravagant. He is unable to cope with its speed, freedom, noise, openness, confidence, and the like. The difference between the two worlds—one where he has come from and the other where he is—is too striking for him to overlook. He could feel that the music and the voices around "were like voices shouting out of another world, another civilization" (Desai, 1999, p. 174). His embodied symbolic did not allow him to feast even in America. The inhibitions and prohibitions are part of a subject of Indian symbolic. Arun's first encounter with an elderly lady in the restaurant was shocking. She had cancer and told him about it with professional pride, narrating everything with such ease as if it were just another event in her life. Cancer is something that would dent any person's determination. There were other things that Arun's perception had to negotiate. He had to understand Americans' preference for non-vegetarian foods and the embarrassment that his own vegetarianism caused him. The contrast between the two cultures/symbolics demonstrates "a binary of disgust and pleasure, whereby food that is disgusting to one group may be another group's central dish" (Amo, 2019, p. 136). On the one hand, he wasn't able to eat any non-vegetarian food, and on the other, he was embarrassed for not being able to do so. On seeing Arun's lentil dinner, Melanie surprisingly asks, "What's that?" (Desai, 1999, p. 188). She was unable to digest the idea that lentils could be somebody's dinner. This difference in perception stems from their respective symbolic/signifying structures.

The novel exhibits the fact that "as much as cuisine induces an imaginary solidarity among members of a community, it stratifies us also in that our food practices and taste buds render us acquiescent to divisions along the lines of culture, region, race/ethnicity, religion, gender, age, class, and sexuality—a hegemony that is exercised via appetite and desire" (Xu, 2018, p. 4). To the disgust of his father, Arun had consciously chosen to be a vegetarian. Non-vegetarian food did not constitute food for him. He was unable "to tell Mrs. Patton that these were not the foods that figured in his culture" and "his digestive system did not know how to turn them into nourishment" (Desai, 1999, p. 188). As Amo (2019) states, "Arun's active avoidance of meat deeply wounds his father's pride and functions as an affront to his masculinity" (p. 144). Angelia Poon (2006) argues that Arun's vegetarianism "stands in the

Volume 64 | Issue 03 | March 2025
DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.15050766

novel as a form of passive self-assertion against the meat-eating version of hypermasculinity extolled by his father and the male members of the Patton family" (p. 36). Non-vegetarianism in Hindus, associated with masculinity, writes Parama Roy (2010), "would nourish, in the most literal sense, a newly muscular Hinduism [that] could challenge and match a muscular Christianity or a muscular Englishness on its own terms" (pp. 80-81). There were striking differences in the way people from the two worlds perceive themselves as subjects. People in the United States perceive themselves as free individuals who have the right to express their opinions and reject or accept things that come their way. They believe that they own their minds and bodies, which is why they are free to think and act, as well as free to show or hide their bodies. In contrast, Arun comes from a world where people believe that they are a part of society, which is supreme and more significant than its members. The individual—both mind and body—is subservient to society. In other words, the difference in the quilting of signifiers in these two societies is responsible for the different meanings associated with things, shaping how people perceive the world and how their ideals and values are formed.

Despite these differences, *Fasting, Feasting* reveals that the United States is not a paradise for women either. Though there are superficial contrasts, Arun witnesses a familiar struggle. He observes "a resemblance to something he knows: a resemblance to the contorted face of an enraged sister who, failing to express her outrage against neglect, against misunderstanding, against inattention to her unique and singular being and its hunger, merely spits and froths in ineffectual protest" (Desai, 1999, p. 217). As Elizabeth Jackson (2018) notes, "Melanie suffers from bulimia, an eating disorder associated with pressure in the West—and increasingly, throughout the world—for women to be thin" (p. 169). She further argues that, in contrast to societies where women's clothing "is scrutinized for conformity to ideological constructions of female modesty," there are others where "women's bodies are relentlessly scrutinized [...] for conformity to media images of ideal female beauty and desirability" (Jackson, 2018, p. 169). In both cases, women are instrumentalized, merely in different ways. Despite the differences in symbolic signification, the oppression persists.

7. CONCLUSION

Anita Desai's Fasting, Feasting offers a profound critique of patriarchal structures and cultural ideologies that shape individual subjectivities across different societies. Through the experiences of Uma and Arun, the novel illustrates how oppression takes varied forms in different cultural settings—whether through the rigid gender norms and familial control in India or the pressures of consumerism and self-presentation in the United States. While India's symbolic order enforces discipline, repression, and sacrifice, the American symbolic, though seemingly more liberating, imposes its own expectations through excessive individualism and materialism. By employing feminist and psychoanalytic perspectives, this study has demonstrated that both societies, despite their contrasts, sustain power structures that limit personal agency, particularly for women. Uma's struggle against patriarchal norms and Arun's alienation in a foreign cultural landscape highlight the pervasive influence of ideological conditioning on the human experience. The novel's title itself—Fasting, Feasting—functions as a metaphor for these opposing yet interconnected forces of deprivation and excess, both of which ultimately hinder true freedom. In revealing the universality of oppression, Desai challenges readers to question deeply ingrained societal norms and consider the complexities of cultural identity, gender roles, and personal liberation. The novel's enduring relevance lies in its ability to expose the hidden mechanisms of power that shape lives across different geographies, making it a significant work in postcolonial feminist literature

Volume 64 | Issue 03 | March 2025
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