Food Metaphor In Anita Desai’s Novel “Fasting Feasting”

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ABSTRACT

The postcolonial novel “Fasting Feasting” (1999) by Anita Desai reflects the various pictures of Indian society. The title “Fasting Feasting” itself can be easily associated with food. The book has two parts, the first part deals with India which has sharp contrast with the second part i.e. United States. The events in the book are often in the midst of food—the abundance of it or the lack of it. The novel deals with various themes like family and cultural traditions, sexism, patriarchy, suppression, oppression and many more. But this paper focuses on a particular subject of “Food and Literature”, how Desai has used the food metaphorically in Indian society as well as in United States. In one culture food is used to express “isolation” in the other food is used as a vehicle to express “communication”. This paper also focuses its light on how Desai uses the “food metaphor” to represent the legacies of the oppression and patriarchal subjugation of women in both societies.

INTRODUCTION

Anita Desai is an Indian novelist and short story writer. She is known for her sensitive portrayal of the inner feelings of her female characters. Many of Desai’s novels explore tensions between family members and the alienation of middle-class women. She is considered the writer who introduced the psychological novel in the tradition of Virginia Woolf to India. Included in this, is her pioneer status of writing of feminist issue. She digs into men inner psych and goes beyond the skin and the flesh. The suppression and oppression of Indian women are the subject of her first novel, Cry, The Peacock (1963) and later novel, Where Shall We Go This Summer? (1975). She used poetic symbolism and use of sounds in Fire On The Mountain (1979) and other notable works rich in imagery, gesture, dialogue and reflection are Baumgartner’s Bombay (1988), In Custody (1984), etc.

The novel “Fasting Feasting (1999)” takes as its subject the connections and gaps between Indian and American culture, with its simple language and an uncomplicated structure but at the same time addresses some big issues and make a point. The book is structurally divided into two halves. The first half centres around Uma, living with Mama Papa in India while the second part follows her brother Arun, who has gone to study in America. The power structure of the novel revolves around a gastronomical centre; and parents through repressive familial norms exert power. It concludes with observation that taking the novel as a dichotomous study of two cultures, the one Indian, on account of its spiritual dimension representing ‘fasting’, and the other American due to its plenty signifying ‘feasting’, would result in a myopic reading. The words “fasting” and
“feasting” can stand for the two parts of the novel respectively: India, the country of fasting which refers not only to the religiously aspect, but also to an unwilling fasting of the many poor of the country and the second in the United States, the country of feasting, abundance.

From the very first scene, Desai explores her women centric theme—a woman’s lack of place outside the combines of marriage. In order to convey her theme, the novelist judiciously uses character, situations, dialogues and other elements in relation to the plot. “The complexity of human relationship”, a major theme of most of her novels, also runs through this novel quite predominantly.

ANALYSIS

In the novel “Fasting Feasting”, Desai juxtaposes the life of the plain and ageing Uma in provincial India with the experience of her younger brother Arun, an undergraduate in the United States, who spends his summer vacation with the American Patton family. The sense of a dichotomous society between those who are allowed to accumulate cultural and social capital and those who are not overwhelmingly obvious. In India, “fasting” or “lack” can be represented through Uma or other female members and “feasting” or “abundance” can be represented through Arun and other male members, not only in terms of food but also in various circumstances of life. Uma is made to abandon her convent education so that she can take care of Arun, the long awaited son, as he is carefully groomed for a bride future. Anamika also had to abandon her dreams and desires to fulfill the desires of her parents and also to cope up with the societal norms. The result comes out in her death as she was burnt alive. Uma metaphorically fasts on education, consumption, travel, liberty and dream.

The structure of power and knowledge is linked to subjugation and control. Uma’s powerlessness and lack of status is signaled in relation to food in other scenes where we see her in the manner typical of daughters raised in traditional Indian homes having always to serve food to her father. As a male figure, it is the father and Arun who feast on power. They have the privilege of enjoying special kinds of facilities. As a male, Papa enjoys the power which other members don’t have “The figure bowl is placed before Papa. He dips his fingertips in and wipes them on the napkin. He is the only one in the family who is given a napkin and a finger bowl; they are emblem of his status”. The exertment of power is visible during the ‘orange – peeling ceremony’ when he enjoys all the juicy parts of the orange and she and Uma just left with the pith and peels rested on the plate.

“She picks out the largest orange in the bowl and hands it to Mama who peels it in stripe, then divides it in to separate segments. Each segment is then peeled and freed of pips and threads till only the perfect globules of juice are left, and then passed, one by one, to the Papa’s plate. One by one, he lifts them with the tips of his fingers and places them in his mouth. Everyone waits while he repeats the gesture, over and over. Mama’s lips are pursed with the care she gives her actions, and their importance”.

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The narrative is filled with food and eating images teeming with multiple layers of meaning that reflect on the characters’ personal identities and carry the action forward. Being centered on food and eating, the power structure of the novel affects the gender issues and familial relationships. The male consumption over richness is given preference in many societies as Mama says that “in my days, 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 boys in the family”. One day when the family went to market when Uma “pretending not to notice the peanut and the ice cream vendors thrusting their wares between the bars and calling to customers-Uma gets saliva gathering at the corners of her mouth at the smell of her spiced, roasted gram but decides to say nothing”.

In contrast to Uma, Arun, as only son of the family, is given twin privileges of a formal education and the best physical nourishment. Having being pampered and raised on a strict diet from a young age, Arun’s rebelliousness finds an expression in his vegetarianism, which stands in the novel as a form of passive self-assertion against the meat eating version of hypermasculinity extolled by the father and the male members of the Patotn family in the united states. Arun’s refusal of meat amounts to a devaluation of masculine identity.

Uma is forced by her parents to take care for her Arun and ordered to help Mama to feed Arun with the strict diet his father, has prescribed to encourage his nourishment and growth into a strong man. Desai describes Arun’s diet: “A fixed quantity of milk was poured down his gullet whether he wanted it or not and, later, the prescribed boiled egg and meat broth. Then, when Papa returned from the office, he would demand to know how much his son had consumed and an answer had to be given . . .”

He is also cherishes other privileges based on his gender and as a male, he got the opportunities of getting good education, traveling, and experiencing different cultures.

Food and eating habits again become a referent to show Uma's American counterpart, the Patons' bulimic daughter, Melanie. Her bulimia can be seen an attempt to fit her body in modern idea of ‘perfect and slim’ body. In order to come to terms with this ideal of feminine body image, Melanie becomes a bulimic. So, food as a symbol carries great significance in bulimic purging of it by Melanie. Melanie’s diet of junk food and peanuts. Melanie’s binging and purging can be seen to represent her emotional reaction to her mother’s neglect and her own unhealthy lifestyle in the American culture. Arun sees that she is vomiting on a regular basis. She is an embodiment of real hunger, the pain of which only Arun recognizes.

Melanie’s character can be taken both as an example of fasting and feasting; she seems to be hungry for nourishment, love, and attention, but she tries to fill this gap with candy instead, only making herself sick to hide the pain and embarrassment afterwards. Her act of compulsive eating seen to stems from despair, loneliness and neglect of parental love. Mrs. Patton hardly notices the decline in Melanie’s health. The reader can assume Melanie also purges to keep from gaining
weight after binging, in attempt to have an “ideal” body figure such as represented in American media. Arun, then links the two cultures and finds similarity in two.

CONCLUSION

The bifurcated and bifocal narrative structure of the novel’s transitional politics, shows us two fairly circumscribed word where there is little room for border-crossing, seepage and hybrid identities. Desai continuously uses the metaphor of food for emotional sustenance. Food and eating habits is gendered, sexualized and through the bifurcated notion of consumption. She also demonstrated that symbolic importance of food and the power invested in it affects women’s lives and bodies across cultures. The power food brings to those who consume, and control it, can be the issue of power and position. At the same time, she figures out the hegemonic ideals of masculinity through the power vested in eating habits and meat. The title suggests that the contrast between "home" and "foreign" but also marks out the continuity of one in the other.

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