CHAPTER IV

FASTING FEASTING

Anita Desai is basically resolved to portray women, within households heavy with patriarchal oppression. She presents women who silently but effectively protest against the order and live on their own terms. Most of her women characters survive in severely pathetic state of self-chosen withdrawal yet what makes them fascinating and unique is the fortitude they reflect at several phases of stiff-faced existence. As Anita Ghosh maintains, Desai’s women want freedom within the community of men and women as it is the only way that will succeed in fulfilling them. However, it is interesting to note that Desai does not attempt to envision an ideal marriage based on gender equality as a way to construct braided synthesis of freedom and communal existence in her writings. In fact Desai’s model of an emancipated woman, Bimala, in the novel *Clear light of the Day*, is an unmarried woman. Her married women characters like Maya in *Cry, A Peacock*, Monisha in *Voices in the City*, Nanda in *Fire in the Mountain*, and Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer*, become depressed, violent or self-destructive. They either lose their sanity or kill others, or they kill or destroy themselves.¹

¹Anita 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 epitomising 'feasting.' The plot unfolds through the perceptions of Uma, in India, and of Arun, in America. Both of them are entrapped, irrespective of the culture and enveloping milieu, by oppressive bonds exercised by their own parents, MamaPapa. They are just MamaPapa or PapaMama but remain nameless throughout the novel. Yet, this namelessness does not indicate their anonymity but signifies their universality. They are the phototypical parents found everywhere in the middle-class families of India, who discuss, plant, plot, control, govern the activities of their children, be it marriage or going abroad for studies. And in their over-domineering concern, they tend to ignore the inadvertent possibility of entrapping their own offspring.²

Usha Rani observes, 'In many ways Fasting Feasting, is a continuation of her earlier theme such as: the pangs of loneliness, the silence pronouncing louder than speech, changing trends in filial ties and psychological concerns. But in certain other ways this novel presents a striking deviation from her earlier works both at thematic level and the structural level. For the first time in the fictional world of Anita Desai, the reader experiences the complete family atmosphere prevailing over the world of Fasting Feasting. In almost all her earlier novels, the protagonists had to suffer the limitations caused by only single parent; the other parent either being expired, or ailing or estranged or being totally ineffective. In
this novel the very influential presence of both the parents Mama-
Papa side-by-side makes a complete whole—not only physically but
mentally also. Throughout the pages of the novel, they remain
Mama Papa, always together. They are hardly addressed by their
names as if this is the only role in which they are living their lives.
They never talk of individuality or separate identity. They always
have similar views, identical expressions and their decisions too are
always the same whether aired by Mama or Papa -- they both from
a single identity.\textsuperscript{13}

\textit{Fasting Feasting} is a novel about Uma who is the elder
daughter of an orthodox Indian family. She is a responsible girl
who tries to fulfill each and every whim and demand of her
parents. Amarnath Prasad opines, 'Through this woman character,
Anita Desai wants to expose the hypocrisy and male chauvinisms
in a particular conservative family. She shows how Uma bears the
brunt of many insults and abuses flung by her own parents. Though
she is the most neglected child of the family, she is needed every
time. In the very opening scene of the book the author
connotatively presents the luxurious life of the parents through the
image of the 'swinging sofa.' The opening passage is so rich in
both matter and manner that it is enough to suggest the ensuing
events and the discriminating attitude of the parents to their
daughters.\textsuperscript{14}
Usha Rani assesses the underlying current of discomfort dissatisfaction and disharmony in the novel in the following words, ‘The parents and their three children namely, Uma, Aruna and Arun, their growth and development, their successes and failures, their attitudes and adjustments and their day to day activities cover most of the landscape in Fasting, Feasting. Some other characters too, such as, their relatives, friends, well wishers, neighbours, servants etc. also make their presence felt on the pages of this novel now and then. But the main focus of the narrator writer falls on the panorama of life lived at different levels by the members of this close-knit family only. The other personae of the novel also have their moments of glory and disgrace, but the amount of unjust and undeserved failure in Uma’s life really disturbs the sensitive reader and forces him to pause and think sometime with anguish and other time with pity and concern. Not once or twice but every time and in every field she tries to succeed, she has to face the disgrace and ignominy of total defeat."

The novel opens with a busy family scene. We are introduced to an unmarried woman, Uma, being forced to care for her demanding and ageing parents. The parents are simply referred as Mama Papa. She is being pestered whether she has given orders to the cook and also got the package for Arun ready. Uma is the eldest daughter in a highly conservative family wherein:
Mam and Papa are inseparable Mam and Papa. Mama Papa, Papa Mama. It was hard to believe that they had ever had separate existences that they had separate entities and not Mama Papa is one breath. Yet Mama had been born to a merchant family in the city of Kanpur and lived in the bosom of her enormous family till at sixteen she married Papa. Papa in Patna, the son of a tax inspector with one burning ambition, to give his son the best available education, had won prizes as a young man, trained for the bar and eventually built up a solid practice. This much the children learnt chiefly from old photographs, framed certificates, tarnished medals and the conversation of visiting relatives.

Every thing in the family is subject to their direct control. Mama and Papa seldom differ from each other. Despite being dissimilar temperamentally, they have little to do in the house except attending the clubs and frequenting the coffee centres. Both the girls in the house, Uma and Aruna, occasionally have chances to listen to certain familial anecdotes from them. Mama is quite fond of recalling her bygone times. Like a traditional mother, she is very particular about introducing her daughters to the approved norms of society:

‘In my days, girls in the family were not given sweets, nuts, good things to eat. If something special had been bought from the market like sweets or nuts, it was given to the boys in the family. But ours was not such an orthodox home that our mother and aunts did not slip us some thing on the sly’, she laughed, remembering that—sweets, sly.
Mama and Papa are inseparably one pertaining to all the matters. This indistinguishable likeness has provided them with immense confidence and authority. Both the daughters, Uma and Aruna, live under the constant watch and pressure of their overbearing parents:

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)

Even the last crumbs of love and affection are swept off from Uma’s share when her mother is unexpectedly pregnant for the third time. The detection of the third pregnancy causes a lot of embarrassment, discomfort, and anxiety within the household and relatives. Mama’s frequent weeping and Papa’s sudden scowls upset both the sisters. They fail to sense the reason behind these unexpected outbursts, and curiously attempt to correlate the event on the basis of their half-perceived and half-understood notions:

Like a blister with blood the air was thick with secrets. The girls felt their ears creep as they strained to hear what was being said. It was incomprehensible, in some way risqué, even lewd, but they failed to understand the language although they caught the tone, and even the meaning something grossly physical — sexual. The word squealed loudly in their throats and they pressed their lips together so it should not escape. Uma had a vision of a frantic pig she had once seen in the bazaar, wriggling to escape from the
butcher, and memory of the whines and cries of mating dogs behind the servants’ quarters, Papa’s orders to the Mali to drive them out with sticks. Aruna’s vision was more domestic—petticoats and saris lifted, legs thrashing, naked legs, in the night, under the mosquito net. They had heard sounds, muffled escaping involuntarily from behind curtains. No doors were ever shut in that household; close doors meant secrets, nasty secrets, impermissible. (15)

After much brooding over the issue Papa sets his jaws to accept the outcome:

They had two daughters yes, quite grown up as anyone could see, but there was no son. Would any man give up the chance of a son? (16)

When the due hour comes Mama is taken to Queen Mary’s Hospital for Women and Children. Fortune smiles upon them and Mama gives birth to a son. It seems as if God has abundantly recompensed her for months long suffering and tolerance:

Mama’s face, still tense from the difficult delivery, began to relax and broaden into long suffering pride. It struck Uma later that from that hour onwards this became her habitual expression (17).

Papa is enthralled at the news of a son’s birth. He is too full of joy to maintain his formidable self-control. The event transforms him forever:

Arriving home, however he sprang out of the car, raced into the house and shouted the news to whoever was there to hear. 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 arm flung up in the air and his hair flying. ‘A boy’ he screamed, ‘a bo-oy! Arun, Arun at last.’ It turned out that when a second daughter had been born, the name Arun had already been chosen in anticipation of a son. It had to be changed, in disappointment, to Aruna. (17)

Arun being a boy starts life with a natural advantage. Now onwards Arun becomes the cynosure of Mama Papa’s eye Uma being the eldest one is assigned the job of Arun’s care and comfort. Though she is not grown up enough to discharge maternal duties, Mama expects her to carry out Arun’s responsibility:

When Mama came home, weak, exhausted and short-tempered, she tried to teach Uma the correct way of folding nappies, of preparing water-milk, of rocking the screaming infant to sleep when he was covered with prickly heat or with a burn. (18)

With such assignments begin Uma’s neglect and discrimination, and she is made to feel her secondary status in the scheme of the family. Uma receives the first blow when she is forced to discontinue her studies. It is Mama who makes this decision:

we are not sending you back to school, Uma. You are staying at home to help with Arun. (18)
It is a merciless decision which leaves a permanent scar on Uma’s psyche. Uma had never been an outstanding student. But this untimely decision affects her adversely. Usha Rani paints the picture of Uma’s dominating parents. They condemn and curb her in various ways, ‘Uma like any other child has her own world of desires, dreams and ambitions. But at every step the parents try to suppress her desires and throttle her dreams. In spite of her best efforts and keen desire to succeed in life she proves to be a down right failure. And above all her parents’ matter of fact attitude, stern and stoic behaviour, gender biased treatment and their conservative outlook further afflicts her soul deeply. Be it education, marriage, profession or even few moments of privacy, always remain a distant dream for Uma.’

As a child Uma is fascinated by her school, the nuns and even their private quarters, but she never really manages to score good marks. Mama who is herself not highly educated views this as an excuse to prevent Uma from further studies. The arrival of baby Arun adds to Uma’s responsibilities. She seldom gets time for her homework. This neglect and frequent offs from school prove a major setback in her education:

Her record book was marked red for failure. The other girls, their own books marked healthily in green and blue for success and approval, looked at her with pity on the day the
record book was handed out. She wept with shame and frustration. (21)

Despite her poor performance and also because she is aware of her neglected status at home, Uma thinks that she must restart her academic life. Though Mama denigrates her for her hopeless results she approaches mother Agnes and implores her to enroll her again. Uma knows that she has been trusted upon certain responsibilities, which are far above her capacity to fulfill; she aims to go ahead in her studies. However, she is not allowed to pursue her academic carrier by Mama. The low educated Mama pays no head to her aspirations and instead of boosting her morale she discourages her in the words, which imply as if the home, hearth and wedlock were the best places for a woman:

You will be happier at home. You won’t need to do any lesson. You are a big girl now. We are trying to arrange a marriage for you. Till then you can help me to look after Arun. And learn to run the house. (22)

Papa typifies a frustrated male hypocrite. Though seemingly benign he could be very offensive at times. He always demands total submissiveness from others, and is in his habit to assert his authority through caustic jokes intended to embarrass others:

The success of his joke was measured according to the amount of discomfort it caused others. (9)
Papa is usually comfortable in his cocoon – unchallenged and safe. He executes his role as a typical Indian male with double standards. Though he himself plays tennis and acquires all the airs of a modern civilized and cultured gentleman, in matters relating to his daughters he is quite unsympathetic. The family setting of Mama and Papa is typically Indian. He has an upper hand in every matter. He has a say in everything and his every gesture is worth reverence for Mama. Even a routine activity like taking meals is no less than a ceremony:

The finger 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 emblems of his status. Mama sits back. The ceremony is over. She has performed it. Everyone is satisfied. (24)

After Arun’s birth Mama-Papa are further more bonded into one. Papa is quite attentive to his son’s rearing and care and so is Mama, whereas the daughters in the house long for their interest and attention. Like a traditional Hindu wife Mama feels proud to mother Papa’s only son. She discovers the new found respect for him:

More than ever now, she was Papa’s helpmeet, his consort. He had not only made her his wife, he had made her the mother of his son. What honour, what status. Mama’s chin lifted a little into the air, she looked around her to make sure
everyone saw and noticed. She might have been wearing a medal. (31)

All their attention is centred on Arun. Right from Arun's early days in the family every aspect of his growing years is supervised and crafted by Papa and Mama. 'Papa insisted he should eat meat' (32). 'He prescribed cod liver oil. Papa and Mama were to spoon it down his throat. Somehow.' (33)

Arun's academic and physical progress has become an obsession with Papa. Arun is sent to the best school and though an average sickly child, he is overburdened with tutors. So much attention and care and the compulsion to perform make Arun a nervous wreck.

On the other hand Uma's failures in the school are taken for granted and never dealt with seriously and Aruna is considered to be a hopeless non-existent individual whose longings and desires are rarely ever thought worth consideration.

Forlorn and frustrated Uma finds refuge in the company of Meera Masi, a widow. While entouring the various religious places in India, Meera Masi often visits their home. Uma is much delighted to see her come. Even simple joys of visiting a temple or the river are looked forward to. But Papa always forbids the children from visiting the river:
Mama and Papa themselves did not permit their children; saying it was too hot, too dangerous, too dusty, too diseased, too crowded – in every way inadvisable. (43)

The foreboding, however, has little impact on Uma. She enjoys her time with Mira Masi, and wants to make the most of their visit to the river:

She tucked her frock up into her knickers and waded in with such thoughtless abandon. (43)

Uma derives pleasures even from simple ordinary events and happenings in day-to-day routine. Mira Masi is enough to fill innocent Uma’s heart with joy. Her parents’ preoccupation with themselves has kept them aloof from the two sisters. Uma has suffered all the thorns and burrs of an isolated existence so far. It is her sense of alienation and unbecomingness that draw her to a similarly secluded figure like Mira Masi. Besides Mira Masi another character Ramu takes a privileged corner in her heart. He is her cousin who occasionally visits them, and is considered to be a black sheep in the family.

Even Ramu’s visits are a celebration for Uma. Mama Papa resent Ramu’s arrivals. Ramu, who leads a life of careless abandonment, is an unwanted guest. It is Ramu’s attitude which attracts Uma to him. Though there are rumours about him in the family, she doesn’t mind associating with him. She feels so
intensely about him that she joins him for dinner at the Carlton Hotel even though she is vehemently criticized by MamaPapa. MamaPapa receive a jolt from the blue when Uma announces that she wants to accompany Ramu to a restaurant. In the hotel she enjoys her moments like anything. It is pure bliss, pure abandon and pure ecstasy to be with him. Ramu is equally drowned in the joy of being an integral part of Uma’s life. Both are carried away to a distant sphere of limitless bliss and fun. Uma couldn’t help giggling all the way. They enjoy till late hours. Though Uma has so far been a shy and a modest person, experience emboldens her to tell her mother that she had had a drink and she had danced with Ramu. Listening to this:

Mama’s face glints like a knife in the dark, growing narrower and fiercer as it comes closer. (53)

Her outing with her cousin is taken as nothing but a disgrace and dishonour for the family. The resentment shown by Mama dampens Uma’s spirits and her evening is thus ruined, ‘You you disgrace to the family – nothing but disgrace, ever.’ (53)

Mira Masi is a lonely character who finds reconciliation in her devotion to Lord Krishna. She travels all the places of devotion in her quest for recognition and identity as a holy and devout person. Old age has slowed down her movements but she still is a follower of her Lord. She keeps the brass figure of Lord Krishna
with her, which is very piously precious to her. One day it happens that the brass figure of her Lord is stolen by someone. It disturbs Mira Masi and she resolves to make a search of it. She promises herself to get it back:

I will travel to every place of pilgrimage every temple and ashram till I find the one who stole it from me, and get it back. I won’t rest till I have my Lord back. (53).

Mira Masi has ever been on pilgrimages but now she is much more so. She is in deteriorating health, however her unflinching faith that her stolen Lord will be restored to her keeps up her vigour:

She seemed to storm through the country stomping along the pilgrim routes, her back bow’d, a staff in her hands, her large feet plodding grimly and determinedly the worn earth of those paths. (54)

Later her health slackens, she becomes feverish but her passion and devotion become an obsession. She still visits various places of worship and various ashrams. Uma thus gets an opportunity to accompany her to one such ashram. Even the long and tiresome journey in a trundling bus excites Uma. Mira Masi’s cries of ‘Har Har Mahadev!’ and her total elated state create strange sensations in Uma’s heart. She finds herself in an utterly unfamiliar situation, yet she revels in this new confounding world for the simple reason that it is free from Mama Papa’s close
scrutiny. In the bus people are packed like sacks. Total strangers sharing the same bus, same seats and the same suffocating air. Uma and Mira Masi suffer this discomfort in the hope of their pure and peaceful destination. The midday heat, Uma throwing up, the pollution, the unseemliness the harrowing experiences within the bus, the revolting crowd and the dusty roads—everything would be compensated for by the clean and rejuvenating ashram. When they reach the Ashram Uma notices that it is a simple abode, the rooms bare and the surrounding teeming with life. Silence pervaded except for:

the beating of cymbals and ringing of bells and a coming together of people on the temple precincts. (57)

Here Uma gets a chance to go unnoticed for days. She is happy to be away from her parents’ constant supervision and prying eyes. She only wants to be left alone: ‘She had never been more unsupervised or happier in her life.’ (57)

Uma experiences total bliss being so safely away from her nagging parents. But later she realizes that in reality she could not exactly free herself from the invisible shackles of her Mama Papa’s scorns and scowls. Her worries increase when attending the evening prayers she looks into the blazing eyes of the priest. She finds herself disturbed by those challenging eyes.
Uma is the youngest amongst all the devotees. The young priest in the temple is drawn to her and she is coy enough to sense the meaning of his desirous eyes peering into her. But how can she possibly let him disturb her? Mama, Papa's over-powering images lurk in her mind's eye, restraining and cautioning her. The episode is interpreted in mythological context by Alessandro Monti, 'Uma accompanies her devotee auntie Mira to a Shaiva Community; there she starts suffering from epileptic fits. These are considered to be the signs that the girl has been chosen by the God himself. The scene acquires immediately a tinge of sensuality, of which she is the reluctant recipient that culminates in the lusty and even lustful singing of devotional hymn. "The young priest who played the harmonium gazed directly at her when he sang, and his voice was no longer steady but quavered emotionally." We must however observe that the new 'erotic' identity assumed by Uma reflects the dual nature of Shiva, who appears to us in the roles both of the roaming and disheveled ascetic and of the mighty seducer.'

Uma likes to be left alone, to be forgotten and to be left by herself. Uma enjoys her stay at the ashram thoroughly. Meera Masi on the other hand cannot overcome her blind belief even bordering on insanity. She is possessed with the idea that Uma is the chosen one and she is the Lord's child. This is how Meera Masi clings to her Lord, finds comfort and care in the vast and viscous world
around, relate all the objects and events to Divinity and consider it as his manifestation:

Meera Masi whispered through dry lips, 'you are the Lord's child, the Lord has chosen you. You bear his mark.' (59)

The pangs of neglect and isolation raise their ugly head through psychotic upheavals like epilepsy, in her young mind. Uma shrieks and tosses her head, throws herself on the ground and begins to roll on the floor. Unaware of the world around, Uma's scared psyche and her hurt self-respect lead her into a rigmarole of neurotic instability.

But her extended stay at the ashram is curtailed by Ramu's sudden appearance. He and Arun are ordered by Mama Papa to bring her back to them. Ramu tells her that Mama Papa feared she might be, 'Stolen, Kidnapped, Ravished.' (62) Uma doesn't resist and comes back with them.

At home Mama Papa are anxious about her marriage as if it is the sole destiny of a girl.

There was a time, a season, when every girl in the big, far flung family seemed suddenly ready for marriage. It was as if their mothers had been tending them in their flowerpots. For just this moment when their cheeks would fill out and their lips take on a glisten and all the giggle and whispers would arrive at that one decision – marriage. (66)
Her photograph is circulated among all the relatives and then the wait begins for a perfect suitor. Rich clothes are bought, jewellery ordered and fineries selected. Uma, apprehensive in the new setup, dreams of a loving husband and his caring family. In the opinion of Sylvia Brownigg, ‘Uma resembles the good, frustrated woman in a Victorian novel, which is unsurprising given this family’s traditional structure. When Arun is born, the family’s resources are poured into his physical and intellectual nourishment. For the girls the sole future is marriage.’

It is interesting to observe how Uma is being groomed for a new role. Her parents are eager to see someone under the charms of their daughter. She is being dolled up into enticing apparel and adorned appropriately. When visitors come, the bedecked Uma serves them tea and delicacies. It is on this occasion that she realizes that the young man is in fact quite unenthusiastic about her. It is Aruna who stirs his passion and not she. Then Mrs. Joshi whispers this secret into Mamas’ ears:

‘He liked – he liked’ but who do you think he liked? She leant forward and murmured into Mama’s ears: ‘Aruna, he wanted Mrs. Syal to ask for Aruna, not Uma.’ (78)

Uma’s heart is broken and she feels miserable at such an outcome. She hurries away into her room in dismay. Mama feels cheated and scandalized. She is enraged at the Syal family for this
dishonour done. In her agitation Mama fails to notice Uma’s trauma. Mrs. Joshi suffers fiery outbursts. The incident leaves Mama sunk in mixed emotion:

At lunch Mama said nothing of the incident but kept a gloomy silence and threw significant looks at Aruna, partly in accusations and partly in reappraisal... Even if Mama was indignant in refusing she was impressed too, and – Uma saw – respectful of this display of her younger daughter’s power of attraction. (79)

Now more than ever Mama and Papa become insistent on searching a husband for Uma. What worries them is that most of the proposals come for Aruna:

Yet nothing could be done about them; it was imperative that Uma marry first. That was the only decent, the only respectable line of behaviour. (80)

In their haste they negotiate with the Goyal family – the wealthy merchants with an only son. Mama is swept off her feet by the sheer display of wealth, and goads Papa to settle the marriage with him. Mama thinks of fulfilling her own immaterialized longing for money and real estate through Uma’s marriage in the family:

but Mama was so delighted by the sight of prospective prosperity that she could not be restrained. They themselves owned no house. Papa had always refused to move out of their rented one with which he was perfectly content, leaving Mama with an enormous, unfulfilled desire for property.
Why should Uma not fulfill it if she could not? A negotiated sum was made over as dowry, and the engagement ceremony arranged simultaneously. (81)

The settlement doesn’t come easily. But the Goyal family fraudulently dupes MamaPapa of a handsome dowry by refusing to marry Uma in the near future on the pretext of sending the boy to Roorkee for higher education. MamaPapa come to know that the Goels are habitual frauds. They have already deceived the Gunga Mull family with the similar trick.

It is a serious blow to Uma’s sense of self-worth. The incident fills her with brooding pain and gloomy silence. She feels more forlorn than ever. What pinches her soul most is the inconsiderate attitude of her parents. Instead of consoling and assuring her they look down at her as if she is a hurdle in their life and discriminate her vicariously:

There were so many marriage proposals for Aruna that Uma’s unmarried state was not only an embarrassment but an obstruction – Uma did not know what was expected of her in this situation; she waited patiently to be disposed. (85)

The first two attempts at marrying Uma off end in disgrace. She becomes subject to Mama’s storms of temper. Mama’s behaviour assumes inscrutable dimensions:

But now a certain mockery was creeping into her behavior, a kind of goading, like that a sprightly little dog will subject a
large dull ox to when it wants a little action. Uma’s ears are already filled to saturation with Mama’s laments, and Aruna’s little yelps of laughter were additional barbs. (86)

Every one in the family, and in relation, is busy in finding a suitable match for Uma. But all of them are disappointed with the cold and conditional responses. Finally one person shows a little enthusiasm to marry Uma. He is not so young and is already married with no issue. He runs a pharmaceutical business:

Since it was clear Uma was not going to receive any other offer no matter what a good job the photographer had done with his unpromising material, Mama and Papa decided to proceed with the negotiation. (87)

The wedding is fixed, Mama Papa wish to make the ceremony eventful. Every thing is planned and chalked out with certain care. Uma is in a bit of a dilemma at this turn of events. When she garlands the bride-groom she realizes that her married life would not be as promising as she often thought of:

He looked at Uma glumly and without much interest. What he saw did not seem to make him change his attitude. He handed over his garland and Uma was made to drape hers over his head. She bit her lips as she did so; he seemed so reluctant to accept it. The man looked as old to her as Papa, nearly, and was grossly overweight too, while his face was pockmarked. (88)

Throughout the ritual Uma remains silent like a lamb. Relatives come and go thanking Uma’s stars and thus making her more
gloomy and self absorbed. She loses interest in everything. Moreover the indifference shown by the bridegroom shatters her thoroughly:

The ceremony wound on at its own ponderous pace. Finally the sullen bridegroom broke in and said curtly to the priest, ‘Cut it short, will you – that’s enough now.’ The priest looked offended, Uma was mortified. If he could not even tolerate the wedding ceremony, how would he tolerate their marriage? (89)

Uma’s premonitions are right. In her new home she is received like a low cost commodity. She receives love from no one in the family. She is compelled to execute all the household chores. Her diligence brings her no returns. With every passing hour she feels more and more wretched and suspects if she has been schemingly trapped. All the members pass crude remarks, ‘on her clumsiness on her awkwardness, her clothes and her looks.’ (92).

Uma coils within herself. She shrinks into the cocoon of solitariness. Her pain is symbolically revealed in the following lines:

She lay awake on the string cot the whole night. Listening to the kitchen tap drip – it was tied up with a rag and water ran from it constantly – and the stray dog in the lane outside whine, coughing and talk in the other rooms, and then, when at last it was gray with dawn and he had still not come, she got up and went into the kitchen in an anxiety that was like a choking of her throat, wanting to ask for news of him. (93)
Several nights pass but her husband does not turn up. For many weeks, Uma keeps communicating her parents that Harish is away at Meerut for some important work. Meanwhile Papa learns that:

Harish was married already, had a wife and four children in Meerut where he ran an ailing pharmaceutical factory to save which he had needed another dowry which had led him to marry again. (93)

The crude reality dawns upon Uma too that her husband has left her for good. The disclosure dishevels Mama and Papa. Papa decides to bring her back home. On her way back Uma senses that Papa was not aggrieved at her deserted state, but to her rude shock, at the loss of money spent on dowry. Papa voices his grief to fellow travellers:

The compartment was crowded this time with strangers, but Papa had so lost control of himself, was so beside himself, as not to behave normally or sanely: he beat his head with his fists, and moaned aloud about the dowry and the wedding expenses while every one, all of them strangers – women with babies and baskets of food, men reading papers or playing card or discussing business – turned to listen with the keenest of interest, throwing significant looks at Uma, who kept her head wrapped up in her sari in an effort to screen her shame. By the time they reached their own station, every one along the way knew of her humiliation and her ruin. (94)
At home Uma bleeds at Mama’s piercing remarks. Mama is too insensitive to her pain as if she were a stranger. No one around sympathises with Uma, the untouched bride.

In substance ‘Uma is alone’ (98) Mama, Papa, Arun and Aruna live their self-absorbed lives caring little for Uma. In her parental home she feels stunted, suffocated and under the shadows of some sinisterly looming fears. Mama Papa never try to settle her again. Uma feels pathetically unwanted. She keeps recollecting her past and present and wondering how the cruel miserliness of fate has robbed her of everything, every single pleasure of life. She fails to reconcile with the infamous status of a divorcée. A status which is thrust on her for no fault of hers. What’s even more shocking is that instead of getting into her troubled heart the household is anxious to know whether she was still a virgin. But how would her virgin state help in brightening up her life? Does it promise a better future?

Uma who is deceitfully robbed of the sexual aspect of her married life, now wonders how it would have felt had her husband ‘touched her’:

‘Did he touch you?’ Aruna had wanted to know. No, he had not, and sitting there in the dark, Uma tried to imagine what it would have been like if he had. (97)
A mortifying chaos creeps into her. She feels thrown out of both the worlds - the world of the dreaming would-be-brides and the world of the grave married ladies. Marriage has stained and scarred her. Everybody denounces her in clear terms leaving her more and more grim.

She tries to while away her hours in activities like reviewing the collection of greeting cards and her collection of glass bangles. But even these humble desires are seldom fulfilled. Even in her loneliness Uma is not allowed privacy. MamaPapa keep on interrupting her in numerous ways. They resent Uma’s going out of the four walls. They even fume at her shutting herself in her own room. They dislike the persons who show genuine concern for her. For example Mrs. O’ Henry earns their disavowal for the petty reason that she invites Uma for a cup of coffee. Mama objects ‘Coffee? Why coffee?’ (133) Her words enrage Uma. She calls Papa in exasperation but Papa doesn’t intervene at all:

Tchch Papa says disgustedly, turning his head away as if it is no use talking to some one as naive and as backward as his older, his old daughter. (114)

In fact MamaPapa both doubt Mrs. O’ Henry’s intentions. As Mrs. O’ Henry is a Christian they presume that on the pretext of a tea party, she might be conniving at converting Uma to Christianity. So stifling is their attitude that even they curtail her
outings to acquaintances. Mama Papa consider Uma foolhardy who might even change her religion if left alone. Mama screams at her:

'So now why are you running to Mrs. O’ Henry? These Christian missionaries – they really know how to entice simple people, and you don’t understand they want something from you in return.' (114)

They cannot bear to see Uma on her own. Mrs. O’ Henry or for that matter even her Christmas cards are held as a medium of her dreaded conversion to Christianity. But to Uma the Christmas cards are precious like anything:

Uma clutches a large envelope full of Mrs. O’ Henry’s failures, each pressed fern and violet and pastel paper frill to be added to her collection – token of a fairytale existence elsewhere elsewhere elsewhere elsewhere. (117)

There is nothing around in the world that Uma can call hers. Mama Papa’s presence casts shadows upon everything. Mama Papa are always at home but it is the inanimate cards that give comfort to her. She turns to these cards whenever she is alone in the house. All her dreams and desires are packed and put away along with the cards whenever she is interrupted. She knows that whatever few wishes she harbours in her little heart would never be granted.

Mama Papa remain so engrossed in their own life that they neglect Uma’s needs completely. Every activity of Uma draws a rebuff from them. When Uma complains of her hurting eyes Papa
degrades her by calling her old. He argues that even his eyes cause trouble:

‘Everyone’s eye sight grows weaker as they grow older, Papa declared, don’t you know that?’ ‘Yes, but you went to see the doctor and he gave you new glasses,’ Mama reminds him. He settled back in silence. (127)

Uma contemplates escape from her world of emptiness. She wants to be free and to disconnect herself from her dismal life, and because of that even thinks of pursuing:

A career, leaving home, living alone. These troubling secret possibilities now entered Uma’s mind – as Mama would have pointed out had she known – whenever Uma was idle. They were like seeds dropped on the stony, arid land that Uma inhabited. (131)

But fancy cannot cheat her well. She remains engulfed in the infinite darkness of her worthless life. She seeks to unburden her grief and share her feelings with someone, but finds no one whom she could call hers:

She could write a letter to a friend – a private message of despair, dissatisfaction, yearning; 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)

Besides Uma, Desai has delineated the lives of Anamika and Aruna in the novel. Anamika is the cousin of Uma and Aruna. She
is the only daughter of Bakul uncle who is an eminent lawyer in Bombay. Anamika is a girl with beauty and brains. She is liked by everyone:

Uncles and grandfathers liked to have Anamika near them, ask her about her school studies, for it was the astonishing truth that Anamika was not only pretty and good but an outstanding student as well. (68)

But even Anamika with all her charisma, beauty and intelligence could not escape the gender discriminating clutches of the society. Anamika has left her mark and proved herself in every possible field but she is still considered to be a daughter fit only for a marriage.

Naturally her parents would not countenance her actually going abroad to study – 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. (69)

Her academic achievements are displayed and bragged about only for acquiring the most qualified and impressive suitor. Such a husband is found very soon. He is a highly educated person possessing degrees, medals and certificates. Anamika’s parents are proud to have him as their son-in-law. During the wedding ceremony everyone is eager to have a glimpse of him and his much talked about personality. But when the right occasion comes
everyone is dismayed at his stiff looks and egoistic impressions.

Besides:

He was so much older than Anamika, so grim faced and conscious of his own superiority to everyone else present: those very degrees and medals had made him insufferably proud and kept everyone at a distance – the children saw that too – that she was marrying the one person who was totally impervious to Anamika’s beauty and grace and distinction. He was too occupied with maintaining his superiority. (69,70)

Anamika meets ill-luck the moment she enters her husband’s family. She has no identity in the household. Neither her mother-in-law nor her husband shows any gesture of generosity to her. She lives like a caged bird and survives the worst of situations. Anamika has been married for a show case significance only:

Anamika was simply an interloper someone brought in because it was the custom and because she would by marrying him enhance his superiority to other men. (70)

Her husband is completely under the thumb of his mother and inflicts successive tortures on her. Even the wishy washy husband plays the role of a mute spectator.

Anamika discharges her wifely duties with unquestioning submissiveness, diligent servitude, unruffled endurance and undemanding sincerity. As per the custom the food is served to the male members, then to the children, and finally to women.
Anamika is always the last to eat whatever is left. She has no free time and space for herself. She is either in the kitchen scouring the pots and pan or she is tending to the mother-in-law:

When Anamika was not scrubbing or cooking. She was in her mother-in-law’s room, either massaging that lady’s feet or folding and tidying her clothes. She never went out of the house except to the temple with other women. Anamika had never once been out alone with her husband. (71)

Anamika falls a victim to the callous in-laws. Their routine bouts of cruelty result in a miscarriage rendering her incapable of conceiving ever. Anamika, then, becomes a flawed and damaged thing for them, a woman of no use anymore. Even her own parents after knowing the facts show negligible concern for her. Mama too sniffs at the idea of Anamika’s comeback to her parent’s home ‘How can she be happy if she is sent home? What will they think?’ (71) Thus Anamika’s parents refuse to accept her back in their home. Since her childhood they had tutored and trained Anamika to accept her fate after marriage with no complaints and grudges. And this is what she does. She tolerates all the traumas and turmoil with rare forbearance and fortitude.

Eventually Anamika dies in suspicious circumstances. Her death is projected as a suicide but it is not definitely so. Neighbours have an altogether different version to narrate:
What some of the neighbours said was that the mother-in-law herself, possibly in collusion with her son, had dragged Anamika out on the veranda at that hour when it was still dark—possibly before four O’clock—and that they had tied her up in a nylon sari, poured kerosene on her and set her on fire. (151)

As illustrated throughout the novel, and the regular atrocities meted out to Anamika, it can easily be concluded that it is a clear case of bride burning, which is the most popular evil in Indian society. What is more painful is that Anamika’s parents quite conveniently overlook the whole heart-rending tragedy. To them it was ‘Fate, god had willed it and it was Anamika’s destiny.’ (151)

Unlike Uma and Anamika, Aruna is a comparatively bold and carefree person. She is Uma’s younger sister. From her early adolescence she has been conspicuous of her looks and appearance. MamaPapa consider her to be more promising than Uma. She is allowed requisite freedom in the house:

Mama was inclined to indulge Aruna and perhaps realized, instinctively, that if she did, there would be rewards to reap. So Aruna fluttered about in flowered silk, and the hair ribbons were replaced with little shiny plastic clips and clasps and flowers that she picked from the dusty shrubs and hedges. (80)

Christopher Rollason observes, ‘Here, if Uma, the female protagonist of the novel’s Indian part, is unable to get out of the dull mediocrity of her existence as an unmarried daughter—and if
the fate of her cousin Anamika, who could have gone to study at Oxford but ends up a victim of the epidemic of bride-burning, is even worse – Uma’s sister Aruna appears by contrast as the representative of a different type of Indian woman, the “socialite” who succeeds in imposing her personality by the skillful pulling of social strings.⁹

Aruna is a pleasant looking girl. Self-assertion is a dominating feature of her personality. She is not cowed down easily by Mama Papa and Uma. She is never interested in any household work. She is selfish, self-centred and insensitive to Uma’s griefs and sufferings and doesn’t abstain from passing biting remarks:

when Aruna said to her laughing ‘Uma, why don’t you cut your hair short? Like Leela Aunty? It will suit you, you know’, Uma retorted ‘tehh! What silly ideas you have?’ And was not only annoyed but hurt as well; she had caught the mockery in Aruna’s tone. (85)

Aruna has always been more assertive and practical. Even while voicing her assent for marriage she is choosy and farsighted. Among the eager suitors she wisely chooses the richest and the best. She is never pressed with compromises. So adamant is she that even Mama Papa, though apprehensive, relent. And as is expected Aruna’s wedding reception is so elegant and classy that it leaves the relatives profoundly awed. The fineries, her sarees and
the lavish display of delicacies at the Carlton Hotel are enough to impress the guests. Aruna has her way in everything.

Once again Uma experiences one of her dementing bouts during the cocktail party thrown to welcome Arvind and his family the day before the wedding:

She fell heavily at the guests’ feet, managing to strike her head against the tin tray so that it was cut open dramatically, and when they ran to help her, she began to roll on the ground, just as she had done at the ashram, her eyes fixed, her teeth clenched, jerking her shoulders and drumming her heels uncontrollably. (101)

She cannot understand her situation. She writhes and moans incoherently. But instead of showing any sympathy and concern for Uma, Aruna lashes at her in virulence:

flailing her with accusations. She had spoilt the party, the cocktail party. What would Arvind’s family think of them, of Aruna who had a sister who was an idiot, and hysterical? She should be put away, locked up, Aruna sobbed. ‘I should be locked up’, Uma moaned, along with her. ‘Lock me up, Mama lock me up’! (102)

It further disorganises Uma’s mind. And so Aruna enters into wedlock on her own conditions. Bombay was a city where her dreams would come true. Her visits to her parents’ trickle down gradually as she adopts a fancy for her cosmopolitan lifestyle. She is changed to such an extent that even her parents’ home seems too
small, too unclean, too inconvenient and above all too unsophisticated to her. She finds faults in everything her family was concerned with – their crumbling unpainted old house, the tablecloths, the salads, the driver’s uniform and so on. Even Arun’s sloppy appearance does not escape her eyes. She, very candidly, denounces Uma’s simple and unfashionable ways comparing her directly to a washerwoman.

Aruna always keeps her distance and has nothing to do with Uma even in times of need:

Mama told her about the optician’s suggestion that Uma have her eyes examined by a specialist in Bombay: “A specialist-in Bombay!” Aruna gave a shriek. “Do you know what that would cost?” She seemed so horrified by the idea that Uma felt bound to reassure her and say she was sure Dr. Tandon was really quite good enough. “Of course he is!” Aruna exclaimed. (110)

She shows no consideration for her nearsighted sister, and she scorns at the idea of taking Uma to Bombay for treatment. Constant taunts and neglect turn Uma into a person with no self-esteem. She becomes hussy, touchy and irritable. There is no one around to tackle the issues that bear on her status, rights and potential. Life seems unproductive and wasteful. She loathes it.

When Aruna’s in-laws and relatives visit the river, Uma too is taken along. Uma enjoys the trip to the river in a boat. She is so
thrilled that half-mindedly she dives into the water as if water would exorcise her fright and defeatism:

What it was, was that when she had plunged into the dark water and let it close quickly and tightly over her, the flow of the river, the current, drew her along, clasping her and dragging her with it. It was not fear she felt, or danger or rather, these were only what edged something much darker, wilder, more thrilling a kind of exultation — it was exactly what she had always wanted, she realized. Then they had saved her. The saving was what made her shudder and cry, there on the sandbar, soaking wet, while the morning sun leapt up in the hazy, sand coloured sky and struck the boat, the brass pots that the women held, and their white drifting garments in the water. (111)

It is the presence of mind shown by others that saves Uma. Her pitiable condition reminds us of how poignant is the suffering and loss that a broken marriage occasions. She is enveloped in darkness. There would be no day, only interminable night. Circumstances have altered the very meaning of life. From now on it is not dying she fears but living. Loneliness pervades her thinking, controls her behaviour, administers her movements, infiltrates her dreams, and buries deep in the base of her brain.

Mira Masi has by now grown old but what is cheering for Uma is that Masi’s idol of Lord is restored to her. Uma is abundantly pleased:
Only at night the idea that there was someone who had won what he desired would come winging through the dark, rustling her awake sweeping across her and making her sit up so she could see its shadowy passage and watch it fade into the paleness of daybreak. (140)

MamaPapa’s dual morality standards and gender bias is exposed once again when they discourage Uma from working with Dr. Dutt. She is a respected lady, who offers Uma the post of a matron in a medical institute:

So you see, I thought of Uma. A young woman with no employment, who has been running the house for her parents so long. I feel sure you would be right for the job. (142)

Dr. Dutt tries to plead and placate Mama Papa in every way. Though Uma has no formal education Dr. Dutt has confidence in her home management. She trusts Uma. She implors Mama Papa and reasons out with them, ‘Although perpetually cheated of opportunities – a benign doctor’s attempt to give Uma a single job is swiftly quashed by Mama Papa.’

MamaPapa’s frowns and outrage adversely affect Uma’s psyche. The biased parents do not encourage Uma in developing her talents and flout every argument of Dr. Dutt’s. Mama even goes to the extent of lying about her ill health just to prevent Uma from working. This exploitative and unjust stance taken by Mama, acts as the last straw on the camel’s back. When Mama’s cunning
is exposed, Uma stumbles upon the facts and is shocked, but cannot muster enough courage to question her dominating mother. Mama makes her accept that this restraint is a natural thing for her. MamaPapa are so numbed by habit that the redundancy of Uma’s life convey no offence. MamaPapa wear masks within masks and reinvent themselves all the time. They demand patience, devotion, and submission from her. The whole episode is examined by Usha Rani in the following words, ‘Uma wants to do something and live a meaningful life. But her cry is a cry in wilderness. Partly as bad luck would have it and partly the family environment spoils her life. The biased and rigid attitude of parents, Papa always scowling and Mama scolding leave no room for Uma to fulfil any of her desires and dreams. Even a few moments of peace and tranquility in her room are denied to her. Not only at the physical level but in the inner world of her heart and soul also she fails miserably.’

Arun being the only son in the family is the most favourite of Mama Papa. He is the one who brought glory and light in the family. Being a male child he enjoys all the privileges conferred onto him by male hegemony and patriarchy. He is the masculine gender in the true sense of the term. The chauvinist Papa nurtures high plans for him. Papa’s sole attention is riveted on Arun’s plentiful present and prospective future. His mantra for his son is – education:
Although this was not what loomed large in the lives of his sisters—who were after all, being raised for marriage by Mama, competently enough or at least as well as she could manage considering the material at hand— if there was one thing Papa insisted on in the realm of home and family, then it was education for his son the best, the most, the highest. (118)

MamaPapa are overpossessive and overprotective of Arun. They are resolved to provide him the best of everything— health, wealth and life. He is given books, which would delight as well as instruct him. He is suggested to play cricket and badminton. Papa himself is at vigil during his exams. It is his decision that Arun must be sent abroad for higher studies. It was as if Papa was fulfilling, through Arun, a dream that he had cherished while studying under the streetlight and while working in shabby district courts. So Arun is sent to America to improve his prospects:

With Arun gone, Papa retired, life was more confined than ever to the veranda, the swing, the intermittent exchanges, the gaps between them longer and longer. (122)

Arun’s aerogrammes somehow assure Papa that he is enjoying his studies and this adds glow to his dismayed days. Arun’s usual complaint is ‘The food is not very good.’ (123) In America Arun feels like a lost child. Everything there impinges on his psyche, but contrarily to his own culture and upbringing:
There are so many objects, so rarely any people --- there seem to be more happening in the darkened rooms where the uncertain light of television sets flickers. Here he might see undefined shapes huddled upon a couch, sprawled on the floor. And there is the multicoloured life of the screen, jiggling and jumping with a mechanical animation that has no natural equivalent. (160)

Arun has grown up as Papa Mama’s boy – a man of no individuality. He has always been dependent on others. It is difficult for him to voice his views. It is tough for him to exist without someone’s support and assistance. His first impulse is to evade situations and escape involvements with others. America appalls him:

No he had not escaped. He had traveled and he had stumbled into what was like a plastic representation of what he had known, not the real thing – which was plain, unbeautiful, misshapen, fraught and compromised – but the unreal thing – clean, bright, gleaming, without taste, savour or nourishment. (185)

He is disillusioned by the city. He is pinched by its cold indifference. Confused by its gaudiness, he is forced to analyse and reanalyze himself. He is reminded of the hopelessness of home and his own nebulous presence. He feels like a nowhere man. He is blank. He feels unanchored. Despite all this he tries to pull on his days in America. At times he feels that it is very relaxing to have no identity at all:
It was the first time in his life away from home, away from Mama, Papa, his sisters, the neighbourhoods of old bungalows the only town he had ever known, he had at last experienced the total freedom of anonymity, the total absence of relation, of demands, needs, requests, ties, responsibilities, commitments. He was Arun. He had no past, no family and no country. (172)

Arun has grown up in a conservative Indian middle class setup. In The States he confronts totally strange and unfamiliar environment. At home there had been little interaction between the mother and son. Arun knew very little about his mother's fondness for him. Whenever Mrs. Patton is over caring towards him he shrinks away from further intimacy. Mrs. Patton is too pressing for him to get on comfortably. 'So much kindness, so much goodness.' (178) Mrs. Patton frightens him to the level that he just wants to get away from there. Sometimes he wonders and questions himself:

Will she never learn to leave alone? She does not seem to have his mother's well-developed instincts for survival through evasion. (167)

He compares her to his mother and infers that Mrs. Patton is more difficult than his mother. Mrs. Patton is a character introduced with a certain purpose. She is the sister of Mrs. O’Henry. She is an American in manners; however she has definite fascination for Indian culture and people. She receives Arun openheartedly for two reasons. First he is referred to her by Mrs.
O’Henry, her India-based sister and secondly Arun’s modest manners leave an impression on Mrs. Patton’s heart. Unlike American lads he is unaccustomed to the artificialities and vices of life. His down to earth manners appeal to her and she feels like pouring all her affection and care onto him. Her caring and sharing nature wins Arun’s attention:

Somehow he has found the one person in the land who is in the same position as he, that makes for comradeship, there is no denying that, but it does not necessarily improve anything. (160)

Mrs. Patton is an exile within her own family. Her husband Mr. Patton, her son Rod, and her daughter Melanie – all are absorbed in their own private worlds. Mr. Patton seldom spends any loving moments with her, and similar is the case with Rod and Melanie. Rod is obsessed with his body-building and Melanie is lost in her teenage trauma. The following words describe Melanie’s indecipherable manners:

She sits in the gloom of the unlit staircase, munching the nuts with a mulish obstinacy regarding him with eyes that are slits of pink rimmed green. Has she been crying? She looks sullen rather tearful. It is her habitual expression. Arun reflects that he has not once seen it change. (164)

Arun makes feeble attempts to interact with her, though every move of his is rebuffed with perversed arrogance.
Melanie is a discriminated character as well. Being the youngest in the family she must have expected ultimate attention of her parents and elder brother. But she is deprived of it. This sustained neglect results in depression and withdrawal symptoms in Melanie. She falls prey to aberrations like bulimia and anorexia – a disorder in which over eating alternates with self – induced vomiting, fasting, etc. Her bulimia, and her mother’s frenzy for buying food items to fill the freezer, signify the consumerist society that she hails from, where excess becomes the malady.12

In the true sense, like Uma and Anamika, though nurtured and groomed in a different world, Melanie is a thoroughly pitiable figure. In her case the malicious force is the grossly materialistic and individualistic culture of her country.

Arun lives like a recluse in Patton household, but he is not a stranger to the underlying disquietude and unrest, which is so much akin to his own people at home. He often associates himself with the agony of Mrs. Patton. Even in commonplace affairs like eating she has to comply with her husband’s and son’s dietary preferences. As she discloses to Arun she has never liked meat but could not avoid it just because others in the family had a propensity for it. Vegetarian food is thus a treat for her. Arun’s arrival is no less than a heaven sent opportunity for her to conceptualize her so far unfulfilled and overlooked choices. To her, Arun’s stay with her
is a sort of assurance and emotional support. She is so happy in his company that she forgets the rest. Every moment with Arun is a moment of celebration – be it purchasing, conversing or cooking:

then she turns around with a cloudless smile, inviting him to cook an Indian dinner for himself. ‘That’s what you must be missing.’ She says, and begins to line up the bottles and packets of spice, the jars and boxes of lentils and rice that she has so painstakingly collected for him. (192)

Arun too feels it hard to disobey or hurt her. Moreover Mrs. Patton has a guiding presence in his life. It is she who enables him to decipher the hidden aspects of a foreign place and culture. Arun’s visits to food marts with Mrs. Patton become a routine. This simple activity fills them with a sense of belongingness. Though Arun is apprehensive of involvements right from the beginning, it is Mrs. Patton’s unseen fabrics of intense care and affection, which keep him tied to the family for considerable days.

In the Patton family the members are over-indulgent in their respective interests. Their whims often seem to transgress the figures of normalcy and insanity. For example Mr. Patton is excessively fond of bar-be-cue, Rod is obsessed with body-building and jogs for hours together, Melanie binges on candies. Mrs. Patton has different obsessions at different times – when with Arun it is vegetarianism and then it is daylong sun bathing and so on. All these extremities in the household further bewilder Arun.
The Pattons represent excess, ‘The father barbecues great slabs of meat, the mother overfills vast shopping carts and the miserable daughter binges on endless candy bars. Arun is comically appalled by these physical and emotional hungers.’

A casual outing to lake Wyola with Arun marks a turning phase in the Pattons’ life. Melanie, who has been so far rashly scornful of Arun and her own parents, is rescued from her prolonged sickness. It so happens that on that fateful day Arun discovers her:

lying in her vomit, her hair streaked with it, her face turned to one side, and it is still leaking from her mouth. (223)

Arun helps Melanie to come to senses. She tries to keeps him off her. Arun looks pathetically at her and himself. It is a moment of realization and revelation:

They are not the stuff of dreams or even cinema: he is not the hero nor she heroine, and what she is crying for he can’t tell. This is no plastic mock up, no cartoon representation such as he has been seeing all summer; this is a real pain and real hunger. But what hunger does a person so sated feel? (224)

It is now clear to Arun that the Patton family, though like his own family, is in the acute want of company, care, association and above all love.
After the incident Melanie is taken to an institution in the Berkshires. She is treated for her neurotic symptoms. With her recuperation comes peace and order into the family. It is truly heartening to see Melanie in cheerful spirits and enjoy life like any other enthusiastic teenager. Mrs. Patton now takes interest in traditional medicines, yoga and astrology. These interests add a new spark to her life. She no longer broods or wastes her life in any way. She decides to lead a meaningful life.

The novelist has with sure deft touch described the parting moments. Arun’s vacation is over so he goes quietly up to Mrs. Patton to tell her that he will have to leave. The words startle her. Arun offers her the gifts – a box of tea and a brown shawl:

He shakes out the folds, and then arranges it carefully about her shoulders. An aroma arises from it of another land: muddy, grassy, smoky, ashen. It swamps him, like a river, or like a fire. She looks at him, then at the wool stuff on her shoulders, in incomprehension. She picks at a fold of it, and sniffs. Slowly her face spreads into a flush of wonder. ‘Why, Ahroon’, she stammers, this is just beautiful. Thank you, thank you’, she repeats. (228)

Arun leaves Mrs. Patton with mixed feelings:

leaving her sitting on the porch with the box of tea on her knees and the shawl around her shoulders. (228)

In a word *Fasting Feasting* is a notable novel teeming with elegiac pathos and bleak comedy. ‘From the overpowering warmth
of Indian culture to the cool centre of the American family, it captures the physical – and emotional – fasting and feasting that define two distinct cultures. Beneath its trappings of foreign customs and cultures, ‘what distinguishes Desai’s novel from countless other depictions of airless and repressive households is the subtle and original way in which she makes us understand how much of our lives is encoded in – and determined by – tiny, repetitive, deceptively trivial, decisions, about what we will and won’t eat – As in her previous novels, Desai employs a rich and subtle palette to convey her crisp, unsentimental view of character and behaviour. Fasting, Feasting, makes Uma, Arun and their family seem as universal, as vital and familiar as the food on our plates.’

A keen observer of men, manners and cultures Anita Desai explores the climates of feminine sensibility in Fasting Feasting. The novel reveals her quest to liberate women from dominance and dictates of men. Her focus on the psychological complexities of the female characters provides her a chance to assess gender as the ideological scheme for an analysis of Eastern and Western society. In her own words, ‘it is a novel very much about the life of women, specially those women who are confined to home and family, also the solitude from which a person can suffer even if living within a big family or surrounded by crowds.’
In conclusion it can be said that though *Fasting Feasting* is comparatively moderate in tone than Desai’s previous novels, it is equally poignant in revealing women’s struggle for self-hood which is weakened by the patriarchal cultural pattern which circumscribes women in rigid social roles and subjects them to worse kinds of physical, emotional and sexual domination. It is the terrible isolation and alienation of women across the globe which is at the root of the novel. All the female characters are presented entrapped in an environment which is adversely hostile to their self-esteem and individuality.
References:


