CHAPTER V

FASTING, FEASTING:
"ALIENATION AND ACCOMMODATION"
The novel deals with the family life in two different cultures - an apparently close-knit family living in a provincial town and a plastic representation of it in the suburbs of Massachusetts. The book is divided into two parts. The first part portrays the life of an Indian middle class family. It is “a mix of western influence and the strange-hold of tradition, a world predating television when perfumes like ‘Evening in Paris’ were in vogue, and where the relatively successful were members of slowly decaying ‘British’ clubs in which bridge was played listlessly on table of fading green beige and houses were still called bungalows and divided from each other by hedges maintained by full time malis.” Uma, the most subdued member of the Indian family makes the most powerful impact. Her parents, Mama and Papa, lead a “Siamese twin existence” on a sofa-swinging on the verandah overlooking the garden, the drive, and the gate, rhythmically swinging back and forth.

MAMANDPAPA. Mama Papa. Papa Mama. It was hard to believe they had ever had separate existences, that they had seen

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separate entities and not Mama Papa in 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 at school meanwhile, played tennis as a young man, trained for the bar and eventually built up a solid practice. ... Mama Papa themselves rarely spoke of a time when they were not one. The few anecdotes they related separately acquired great significance because of their rarity, their singularity.  

Mama keeps ordering the cook through Uma from her swing-throne. For Mama Papa life is either ordering Uma for one or the other job or attending get-togethers and club-meetings. No one in the family is supposed to question Papa or his decisions. His wife, like a loyal Indian woman, follows him weakly. The character of Papa is more of a magistrate than of a loving father bossing all the time in the house. Mama once recalls her past days when she was a child in her parents' house. She remembers: "In
my day, girls in the family were not given sweets, nuts, 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” (6).

Having fused into one, Mama and Papa have gained so much in substance, in stature, in authority, that they loom large enough as it is; they do not need separate histories and backgrounds to make them even more immense. There are arguments also between them. These occur everyday, at the time of ordering meals for the day. But it is Mama who stands her ground. When Mama wants to terminate her late pregnancy, Papa sets his jaws. He wants a son so the pregnancy has to be accepted.

Uma is the most neglected, yet the most needed child of her parents. It is she who is supposed to do/get everything done by the servants. Since she is not very good at studies, her schooling is stopped. She keeps dropping and breaking things. She loves school, but unfortunately she fails in all her exams. The birth of Arun changes the course of Uma’s life forever. After Arun is born, Mama tries to teach Uma the correct way of folding nappies, of preparing watered milk, of rocking the screaming infant to sleep. Uma struggles to work out her sums, to remember
dates, to spell 'Constantinople' and over and over again she fails. So Mama says her to stay at home and look after Arun: "What is the use of going back to school if you keep failing, Uma? ... You will be happier at home. You won't need to do any lessons. You are a big girl now. We are trying to arrange a marriage for you..."

(22). Uma tries to protest when the orders begin to come thick and fast and says, "ayah can do this – ayah can do that" – but this makes Mama look stern and she says severely: 'you know we can't leave the baby to the servant' (30). Now Uma needs more than ever for having 'proper attention' to Arun. Arun appears to be the glue that held Mama and Papa together even more inextricably.

He (papa) 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 ... was this love? Uma wondered disgustedly, was this romance? (31)
Uma’s imprisoned soul yearns for a space of its own. She wants to escape into her own spiritual or mental world of abandonment: “Annihilating all that’s made to a green thought, in a green shade.”³ She faces terrible humiliation in the sphere of her marriage too. The first negotiation fails because the boy selects Aruna, her younger sister, and not Uma. The second one goes through with an engagement, but breaks it off and refuses to return the dowry. Mrs. Joshi says after listening to Mama about the cheating of the Goyals;

If you had come to see me before you went into this, I would have warned you. That Goyal family - everyone knows they have played the trick before. Did they not do the same to the Gunga Mull family? How do you think they bought that land in Khusinagar? And started building such a posh house? The Gunga Mulls too handed over a dowry, and then the engagement was broken off. Such wicked, unscrupulous people - who in this town does not know that? (83).

At the third attempt, Uma marries, only to find out later, that he is already married. So she returns home in permanent disgrace,
with another dowry lost. No more attempts are made to marry off ill-fated Uma who feels that she is “an out cast from the world of marriage” (96). And hereafter, her existence is confined to the verandah, bedroom and kitchen of her parents’ home. Dr. Dutt offers Uma the job of supervising the nurse’s hostel (dorm) which she runs. Uma’s father believes that it is undignified for a daughter to work. Instead of him, the mother speaks on his behalf as usual:

\begin{quote}
It was Mama, who spoke, however. As usual, for Papa, Very clearly and decisively. “Our daughter does not need to go out to work, Dr. Dutt,” she said. “As long as we are here to provide for her, she will never need to go to work.” “But she works all the time!” Dr. Dutt exclaimed on a rather sharp note. “At home, Now you must give her a chance to work outside – “There is no need,” Papa supported Mama’s view. In double strength, it grew formidable. “Where is the need?” (143).
\end{quote}

“In the world of people like Uma’s father, the woman’s wish does not exist. She is treated as a non-entity.”"
Mama and Papa make Uma's life miserable. It is when Miramasi or Ramubhai come, Uma is happy. They treat her as an individual, as an equal, as one of them and not like Mama Papa who treat her like a slave. Miramasi is very dear to Uma. Miramasi's rituals, routine, food habits, laddoos, and her stories - all enliven her at the visits of Miramasi. Once Uma accompanies Miramasi on her pilgrimage. Uma feels free for the first time in her life. “She had never been more unsupervised or happier in her life” (57). Uma is free to do what she wants to do. After a month, Ramu and Arun are sent to bring Uma back. Ramu tells Uma, “I've come to take you back. Couldn’t you find a better time to run away than in the middle of the summer?” (62).

Ramu’s visits are not welcomed by Mamapapa. If there is one person with whom Uma shares mutual liking, it is Ramu Bhai. Once Ramu wants to take Uma out to dinner, but her parents are not interested to send Uma with Ramu and Mama says, “Dinner has been prepared at home” (49). Ramu replies,

'Can’t I take my cousin out for dinner?  
Didn’t you once send me to fetch her the time she ran away?’ he reminds them of an
This behaviour infuriates Mamapapa. After coming from the restaurant Uma tries to tell her mother what they both did in the restaurant, Mama says: “Quiet, you hussy? Not another word from you, you idiot child! … You, you disgrace to the family - nothing but disgrace, ever!” (52-53). Uma is the unfortunate one of the family “now definitely and finally Salao, which is the worst form of unlucky.”

Uma dedicates all her life dancing to the tune of her parents. Uma’s life goes routinely – only breaks twice, when she leaves for her in-laws’ place and the other when she escorts
Miramasi. Miramasi considers Uma as Lord's child: "She is blessed by the Lord. The Lord has rejected the men you chose for her because He has chosen for Himself" (96). The death of Anamika at the hands of her husband and in-laws disturbs Uma. Her strength may have been derived from her own spiritual experience. The spiritual strength, the perception about life and her age and maturity contribute to her acquiring the ability to withstand, bear up with grace her desolate life, though it is worse than Melanie, the daughter of Mrs. Patton who gives accommodation to Arun in Massachusetts.

Uma's sister Aruna, who develops a determined self-assertion. She has a happier fate as she is bold and assertive and even sly, should the occasion demand. There are so many marriage proposals for Aruna that Uma's unmarried state is not only an embarrassment but an obstruction. Aruna is visibly ripening on the branch, asking to be plucked: "no one had to teach her how to make samosas or help her to dress for an occasion. Instinctively she knew" (85). Mamapapa are more considerate of and happy with Aruna. She is more beautiful and lucky to attract a number of suitors and brings off "the marriage
that Uma had dismally failed to make. She is more successful as she gets a husband of her choice.

As was to be expected, she took her time, showed a reluctance to decide, played choosy, but soon enough made the wisest, most expedient choice - the handsomest, the richest, the most exciting of the suitors who presented themselves. So exciting were his dark, saturnine looks, the curl of his lips and the way his sideburns grew right down to the line of his jaws, and so lavish the future predicted for him, that Mampapa were actually a little perturbed. Prudently, they wished for some one a little less handsome, a little less showy (they were neither, after all), and bade caution, suggested waiting to see who else might turn up. But when Aruna had made up her mind, then no one could stop her, and she had her way (100-101).

She has a splendid wedding ceremony and leads a happy life with Arvind in Bombay. The flat in Bombay faces the beach, and Aruna says it is 'like a dream'. "... such words, such use of them did seem to raise Aruna to another level - distant and airy as Uma imagined must be her flat overlooking the sea" (103).
Contrary to Uma’s stagnant provincial life, hers is a life of an endless quest for an illusive perfect world “in which all of them – her own family as well as Arvind’s – were flaws she was constantly uncovering and correcting” (189). Aruna is vexed to the point of tears over trivial matters so Uma feels pity for her and reflects:

... was this the realm of ease and comfort for which Aruna had always pined and that some might say she had attained? Certainly it brought her no pleasure: there was always a crease of discontent between her eyebrows and an agitation that made her eyelids flutter, disturbing Uma who noticed it” (109).

Aruna even rejects the proposal to get Uma examined by a specialist in Bombay and says: “Do you know what that would cost?”

Uma’s cousin Anamika is a talented and beautiful girl. She is a victim of the patriarchal family system. She seems the blessed one of her generation from her birth onwards. Anamika, “simply lovely as a flower is lovely, soft, petal-skinned, bumble bee-eyed,
pink-lipped, always on the verge of bubbling dove-like daughter, loving smiles, and with a good nature like a radiance about her. Wherever she was, there was peace, contentment, well being” (67). She is not only pretty, and good, but an outstanding student as well and wins a scholarship for further studies at Oxford. But her parents do not even think of sending her to Oxford and the novelist calls it natural: “Naturally her parents would not countenance her actually going abroad.”6 The Oxford letter is used just to procure a husband for her. The parents want to give the hand of their daughter to only that man who has qualifications equal to her.

Anamika is married to a man, much older than her. He is totally impervious to her beauty and grace and distinction. He is conscious of his own superiority to everyone else: “Those very degrees and medals had made him insufferably proud and kept everyone at a distance” (69) All the scholarship, distinction, beauty, and good behaviour of Anamika fall flat when she goes to the house of her husband. She is regularly beaten and illtreated by her mother-in-law. Her life becomes a trauma because of her husband’s tacit support to his mother and the apathetic attitude
of her parents. The family is so big that meals are eaten in shifts - "first the men, then the children, finally the women" (70). She has to cook for the whole family. The family members never permitted her even to attend any family gatherings. This piteous state of Anamika amazes Aruna and she wonders: "What Anamika did with all the fine clothes and jewellery she had been given at her wedding" (71). Mama, in a typical Indian woman's vein, feels: "How can she be happy if she is sent home? What will people say? What will they think?" (71). This fallacy, widely spread in society, proves to be the undoing factor for Anamika who meets a violent death. Anamika's parents come to Mamapapa's place for the immersion of her ashes in the sacred river. Mamapapa try to make Anamika's parents eat, and rest, and talk, but they sit motionlessly:

*Bakul uncle who always strode with his head held high and an air of invincible superiority, now seems almost invisible: he has retreated into a grey shroud of sorrow, while papa recovers his authority and individuality, and shows that he can command. Lila Aunty, who had always awed them by her urban sophistication, her*
elegance and — it had to be said — her snobbishness, has collapsed into a heap of rags in a corner, and it is Mama who is incharge, active, concerned, showing both sympathy and care .... Uma, clasping her knees, can feel that she is still flesh, not ashes. But she feels like ash-cold, colourless, motionless ash (152).

"Anamika — without appearing in person — remains as much a living and haunting presence for the readers as she is for Uma."

Arun, the youngest in the house and his birth brings a lot of elation and pride to the family. He is the darling of the family. The parents named Arun even before the Second child is born but a female child is born so she is named Arana. Papa bursts with enthusiasm at the birth of a son:

*Arriving home, 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, ... "a boy?" he screamed, "a bo-oy? Arun, Arun at last!" (18).*
The son, thus, proves to be a higher substitute for the swing of enjoyment for the parents. In fact, Uma’s attitude to the new born male child is no less exalted:

When Arun was concerned, she and Papa became one again ... more than ever now, she was Papa’s help-meet, 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 might have been wearing a medal (131).

Mama and Papa take great care of him as he grows up. Tutors are appointed for him. He is a pure vegetarian but father wants him to eat meat. The second part of the novel centres round the life of Arun in the United States of America. Arun gets admission in a university in the states and shares a room with “a silent student from Louisiana on the fifth floor of a fourteen storey block at the edge of the campus” (169). Aruna likes to remain uninvolved with his class-mates. In fact he is an alien by choice both to the Americans and to his own countrymen. This is because it is

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the first time he is away from home, away from Mamapapa, his sisters ... he has at last the experience of the total freedom of anonymity, the total absence of relations, of demands, needs, requests, ties, responsibilities, commitments. He was Arun. He had no past, no family and no country (172).

The students are asked to vacate their dormitories in the summer break. His father has arranged his accommodation at Mrs. Patton’s house in the suburbs of Massachusetts. This family is again a strange one. Arun becomes the link between the Indian family of Mamapapa and the American family of Pattons. Arun has been referred to Mrs. Patton by her sister, and as such, she tries to make Arun as comfortable as she possibly can. All members of this family seem to be going their separate ways. In place of a close knit patriarchal family in India, the young Arun encounters a family where everyone is free and there is none to dictate. All this makes the shy young Indian adolescent, far from home, terrified. He is made out a terror stricken squirrel: “he stood watching as a squirrel with a long tail emerged, sat on the
sloping lawn, seeming to listen to or watch something happening in the woods” (176).

Living under the same roof there is little interaction among the members of the family. “The family of the Pattons is the window through which we see American life as it is lived.” Mrs. Patton seems to have a passion for shopping and once she has packed the refrigerator with purchases from the market, she thinks that her job is done. Mr. Patton loves preparing and eating meat. Melanie is an adolescent girl of the family who munches on nuts only, day in and day out and Rod is the grown-up boy who devotes most of his time to jogging and body building. Mrs. Patton whole-heartedly joins Arun in his vegetarianism. Mrs. Patton is so kind and so good. Arun is suffocated by the kindness and concern of her: “So much kindness, so much goodness, how was he to defend himself?” (178).

Mrs. Patton feels proud of the relationship she has established with this young Indian boy – the bond between woman and child. Arun’s reaction is different.
No, he had not escaped. He had traveled and he had stumbled into what was like a plastic representation of what he had known at home; 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).

In Mr. Patton Arun sees a reflection of his own father: “he reacted by not reacting, as if he had simply not heard, or understood” (185). What is most nauseating in the family is the food they eat. Arun is a devout vegetarian while they cook and eat meat everyday. Once when he tries to cook ‘dhal’ it turns out to be a bad one for he does not know how to cook. Mr. Patton’s cool response to his wife when she informs him of her vegetarian pursuit reminds Arun of “his father’s very expression, walking off denying any opposition, any challenge to his authority” and “once again its grey, vaporous chill crept into his life like asthama” (186). Melanie suffers the pangs of jealousy for her mother pays much attention to Arun. Just as his parents were impervious to his feelings, so too, are the Pattons towards Melanie. Her bulimia and withdrawal never troubles them,
though it alarms Arun. He observes her face "looks like blotting paper that has soaked up as much water as it can hold: it is blotchy and discolored; it sags. Does Mrs. Patton not see?" (206). Melanie is as desperate as the pathetically incompetent Uma. Arun sees in her

... 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 hungers, merely spits and froths in ineffectual protest (214).

Uma's subjugated existence is unravelled through her own point of view as well as through the point of view of other characters interacting with her, whereas Melanie's mental disintegration is unravelled through Arun's consciousness. Arun recognizes in Melanie, the same sense of frustration the same hunger he has observed back home in his sister Uma. Melanie's frustration and defiance become apparent when she shouts at her mother: I hate scrambled eggs. Why don't you ask me what I want? What do you think we all are garbage bags you keep stuffing and stuffing" (207). Melanie spoils herself and finally she is sent to a
psychiatrist where she recovers. Melanie is the western form of Uma who feels the same unwantedness and agonizing loneliness.

The novel is a memorable one and the depiction is so real that one almost feels that Anita Desai’s “principal instrument in writing the book was a knife. With that knife she carves out two separate slices of nostalgia, reveling in minutiae and the odd but illuminating detail, the trivia of sound and colour and noise, which finally constitutes for most of us, the substance of our lives.” The novel, thus, depicts a conflict between tradition and modernity, between old and new values. Gerald Kaufman, the chairman of the Booker Prize 1999 writes: “Anita Desai’s Fasting, Feasting is a most beautiful novel, very moving, very funny, terribly illustrative of what happens to women in different parts of the world.”

A few prevailing feminist theories can now be placed against the fictionalized situations portrayed by Desai in the novel. Simone de Beauvoir in her book The Second Sex (1953) explicates how woman is looked upon as ‘the other sex,’ ‘the inessential other.’
The descriptions of the characters and situations in the novel substantiate some of the findings discovered and propagated by the feminist theorists: like looking down the women with the burden of matrimony and motherhood, giving undue importance to the male children, showing negligence towards the female children etc. The novel provides a stark reality of modern middle class family in India and America, drawn without any tinge of surrealism. There are some characters in the novel who are feasting and enjoying and some other characters who are meant for fasting only – both physically and spiritually. The daughters, Uma and Aruna are seldom given affection and proper care. On the other hand, Mama and Papa are feasting and enjoying the zenith of peace and happiness. Arun feasts on Mama and Papa and also on Uma. In the second part of the book, Melanie is devoid of parental care and sympathy. Thus the novel *Fasting, Feasting* is truly a veritable "literary feast to whet your imagination."\(^{12}\)

But, though, Uma feels "herself drawn by an undercurrent into a secret depth," (133) and thus experiences a metaphorical darkness many a time in her life in her parents’ and sister’s
treatment of her which alienates her from the others in her family. Her constant confrontations with darkness, in a way, strengthen her and enable her to transcend her disabilities and constraints unlike in case of Melanie, who despite the freedom she enjoys falls victim to neglect and misunderstanding. Just like “the murky water (that) catches the blaze of the sun and flashes fire” (156). Uma manages to accommodate herself in the midst of the coldness of the society and even becomes a comforter, consoling her mother thinking, “they are together still, they have the comfort of each other.” (155)
REFERENCES


3. Andrew Marvell, "Thoughts in a Garden."


