Anita Desai's latest novel _Fasting, Feasting_ (1999) is again another variant of the East-West motif. Unlike _Bye-Bye Blackbird_ and _Baumgartner's Bombay_ which also centre around the East-West motif, this novel does not aim to show either cultural conflict or any negative emotion arising out of the meeting between the two different cultures. Rather, the main theme is concerned with the appeasement of human hungers, both emotional and physical in two different cultures - one Eastern - that is Indian and the other Western - that is, American.

While the locale may be different, human hungers everywhere are the same - especially emotional hunger. This emotional hunger for love and security is juxtaposed with the gastronomical hunger for food. The gastronomical appetite is thus used to represent symbolically the emotional appetite. The emotional need for love and security is shown in the relationships of the children with their parents in two families of two different cultures - the Eastern and the Western. Neglect and non-fulfilment of emotional needs leave scars on the psyche of the protagonists.
Uma is the main protagonist of the first part of the novel which is set in India. Forty-three year old Uma – plain, clumsy and a "perpetual child"(74) – is the eldest of three siblings. Unable to outgrow her home, Uma spends her days “serving”(23) her parents for about twenty years now.

Her parents are nameless and are referred to as having one identity – MamaPapa. Their having one identity implies their equal control over their family and now especially over Uma – the only child to be with them – by constantly ordering her to do their bidding and trying to supervise and control her actions. The combination of their over-bearing attitude and their constant need of her leaves Uma with no life to call her own. The good-natured Uma does not rebel against this parentel domination and pressure. However, at times, resentment with her surroundings does overcome her, making her then hunger for solitude – to be away from the prying, inquisitive looks of her parents.

The few occasions on which the parents leave the house are treasured by Uma as, being able to be alone then, Uma can be herself or indulge in such activities that give her pleasure – like looking through her precious card-collection or reading a slightly soiled volume of poems. Her need to be alone also makes her at times become unresponsive to the calls of her parents.

Smothered by the continuous demands of her parents, Uma has no social life of her own. Hence, an invitation from Mrs. O’Henry to
Uma for a coffee party fills her with delight. As expected, the parents view
such an invitation to Uma alone with suspicion and displeasure. This
makes a tearful Uma defiant and to show her rage and determination, Uma
bangs her door and afterwards attends the party. But later, when Mrs.
O'Henry arranges for Arun to stay with her sister during the summer in
Massachusetts, Papa views the arrangement very favourably. This brings
out the double standards adopted by the father towards Uma.

Again, in spite of Uma's obvious enthusiasm over Dr. Dutt's
offer of a job, the parents refuse immediately. This again indicates the
neglect of the parents of Uma's feelings. Although she is ready to work,
Mama takes recourse to subterfuge to desist the doctor from pursuing the
offer.

In fact, so restricted a life is led by Uma, that she is even
denied the making of a phone call by her father. In spite of working hard
all day looking after her parents, her phone call to Dr. Dutt assumes the
dimension of a "crime" and she is "in disgrace"(146) with her father's
harsh words echoing all around her.

This neglect and insensitiveness to Uma's feelings is evident
right from her childhood. In spite of her great enthusiasm and love for
school and her preference for school life over the "trivialities"(21) of her
home, Uma unfortunately is an "abject scholar" and consequently a
"failure"(21). Thus, with the birth of her brother Arun, Uma is taken away
from school to give "proper attention"(30) to the baby boy. When Uma
points out to Mama that the *ayah* had been quite sufficient in her and her sister's case, "Mama's expression made it clear that it was quite a different matter now ..."(30). This is an instance of the neglect faced by girls in preference to the upbringing of the boys prevalent in many Indian families.

As Uma has neither any special qualities nor expertise in any field nor any charming beauty, the parents depend on their offer of dowry to arrange her marriage and Uma waits "patiently to be disposed"(85). The first time, their dowry is cheated out of them without any marriage taking place. The second time, the groom's family dupes them by arranging the marriage with their married son in order to secure the dowry to revive his ailing business. Uma's response to the scene that takes place when Papa comes to take her back home is one of a valiant attempt to blot it out of her life forever. Her father's insensitiveness to her feelings and neglect of her emotions is evident once again on their journey home. This time in a compartment full of strangers, Papa so loses control of himself that everyone along the way knows of Uma's "humiliation and her ruin"(94). It is worth noting that the father is concerned primarily about the loss of the dowry and the wedding expenses and Uma's feelings are totally ignored.

However, Papa becomes his normal self on arrival home as he fears betraying his gullibility to his acquaintances. This greatly relieves Uma for she had been pained at the "disintegration of Papa's
personal[ty]" (95). Unlike her father, Uma — inspite of her failed marriage and her father’s harsh rantings — is still full of concern for him.

The consequence of such a farcical marriage is that while Uma remains uncertain about her marriage and divorce, her parents deem her unlucky for marriage:

Having cost her parents two dowries, without a marriage to show in return, Uma was considered ill-fated by all and no more attempts were made to marry her off (96).

In comparison to Uma is her sister Aruna who has both beauty and brains. Choosing the most handsome and rich man from amongst her many suitors, she has a splendid marriage in the Carlton Hotel unlike Uma, Prior to the reception, the “chic” and “untraditional” cocktail party hosted to welcome the groom is “spoilt” considerably by Uma’s “appalling tendency” of “throwing fits” (101). Although the situation is handled efficiently by Dr. Dutt so that it goes unnoticed by many, an unsympathetic Aruna lashes out angrily at Uma accusing her of spoiling the party Dr. Dutt’s concern for Uma the next day is viewed as something akin to bad manners and Uma is relegated to the level of being totally irrelevant. Yet when Aruna has her children, she expects Uma to look after them on her visits home.

Again, when Mama tells Aruna about the optician’s suggestion that Uma have her eyes examined in Bombay by a specialist,
her appalled and horrified look makes Uma reassure her about her not going to Bombay at all.

Thus, it is seen that Uma who – inspite of her imperfections – has to be the giver always in her relationships with her family members.

As has already been mentioned, Uma generally makes no protest. But at times, when these demands come incessantly, she becomes irritable and thinks of writing a letter – a “private message of despair, dissatisfaction, yearning”(134) – but knows that would be useless as she has no friends.

When Uma hears of their neighbour’s daughter pursuing a career, Uma wonders what a ‘career’ implies. Whenever she is idle, thoughts of leaving her home with its suffocating atmosphere enter her mind but as she does not know what a career implied she could not visualise escape in the form of a career.

The only time Uma had been unsupervised and “perfectly happy”(57) was when she had once accompanied a sick Mira-masi to her ashram. This stay at the ashram had been an “escape, a refuge”(131) for Uma as she had remaind there unnoticed by anyone.

At the ashram Uma discovers that her life had been “full of barks, howls, messages and now – silence”(61). These barks, howls and messages had come from her perpetually scowling Papa and scolding Mama. Uma, on being alone at the ashram is finally able to be just herself – an individual in her own right. Unfortunately, she loses this chance to be
herself when she has a fit and thereafter becomes an object of interest to the other ashramites.

Uma listens enraptured to Mira-masi’s vivid narration of the ancient myths of Hinduism as these stories conjure a different world for her:

... here was someone who could pierce through the dreary outer world to an inner world, tantalizing in its colour and romance. If only it could replace this, Uma thought hungrily.

The drab monotony of her everyday life is broken up by her vision of another world – more enticing than the present one – to which she hungered. In order to be able to perhaps make this visionary world real and thereby appease her hunger, Uma makes valiant attempts to follow Mira-masi through the day’s rituals. But although Uma senses the presence of a different world of which she might be a member by gaining acceptance on her own yet she cannot really decipher what that world might be.

Uma shares an affinity with her cousin Ramu because, like her, he too is a failure when compared to his beautiful talented sister, Anamika. While Uma is heavily myopic, Ramu has a club-foot and wears an orthopaedic boot to steady him. These commonalities help to establish an easy rapport between the two which is missing from Uma’s other relationships. Once on a visit, inspite of the alarm, outrage and protests of the parents, he takes Uma out to dinner. But when Uma tries to convey her
pleasure over the evening to an enraged Mama, she is angrily asked to keep quiet. In fact, her mother terms her as an “idiot”, “hussy” and a “disgrace” to the family(52-53). This again brings out the neglect of a lonely individual’s feelings when the parents are more concerned about their reputation being tarnished than by appreciating their daughter’s rare chance of being able to enjoy herself. On an earlier occasion however, the parents had sought Ramu out to bring back Uma from Mira-masi’s ashram. This again exposes the double standards of the parents. When it is to their advantage, they use Ramu, but when it comes to Uma, they disapprove of his company.

The day Uma helps Mrs. O’Henry at the Christmas Bazaar to sell cards is a special day in her life. This is because, her act of help makes her feel that she is also an individual – not just MamaPapa’s ever-serving daughter – doing what she likes alone, away from the prying gaze of her parents.

In spite of her circumstances or may be because of them, Uma is quite perceptive. For instance, seeing Mama’s subtle change after the birth of Arun, Uma is filled with disgusted wonder at the mother, “Was this love? … Was this romance?”(31). Again, seeing Aruna’s constant attempts at achieving perfection and consequently being always on tenterhooks after her marriage, Uma feels pity for her for she perceives that Aruna is always discontented and displeased.
Again, after Anamika’s death, Uma enquires about the letter informing Anamika’s winning of the scholarship to Oxford. Uma perhaps grasps intuitively that had Anamika been sent to Oxford instead of being married off, she might have survived. Looking at the earthen jar containing Anamika’s ashes, Uma too, feels like “ash – cold, colourless, motionless ash”(152). This is again because Uma perhaps feels that Anamika, who had been perfect in all ways, had been sacrificed in marriage by her parents. Again, Uma probably realizes that like her, Anamika’s emotional hunger had remained neglected in spite of marriage.

Yet Uma – despite all odds and the tedium of her life – is a survivor. Although her emotional hungers are often neglected, her life is not totally devoid of parental love. Had her father not brought her back from her disastrous marriage, she might have suffered a fate similar to Anamika. Again, it is perhaps over-protection on the part of her parents that makes them reject Dr. Dutt’s offer of a job. Of course, it is also true that their concern is primarily about their reputation – as Uma working might make people talk – as well as about themselves – if Uma doesn’t work at home, who would. Even then, her mother’s words to Uma reflect her affection also. This is evident during the time Anamika’s ashes are immersed. A tear-stained Mama seeks the comfort of Uma by clasping her hand tightly. This makes Uma realize that they at least “are together still, they have the comfort of each other”(155).
In contrast to Uma is Anamika – beautiful, good, talented and loved by all for her “moderation, good sense”(68). Yet, her parents fail to value her as such a talented individual. All her talents are paraded forth as a necessary qualification for marriage as she was a “prize”(69) of the family. Anamika is equally docile – never defiant like Uma – for she never attempted to contradict her parents or “bring herself to … cause them grief”(69).

Thus, she is married to a man who was “too occupied with maintaining his superiority” and who is “totally impervious to Anamika’s beauty and grace and distinction”(70). Anamika has no value in her husband’s life for he is totally subservient to his mother. He marries Anamika as her degrees and her earning of the scholarship to Oxford – which she is not allowed to avail – would enhance his superiority in front of other men. Thus, after marriage Anamika no longer remains an individual in her own right but becomes the ill-treated daughter-in-law. She is regularly beaten till she suffers a miscarriage and becomes incapable of childbearing, scrubbing, cooking, massaging her mother-in-law’s feet or tidying and folding her clothes. In other words, Anamika is no better than an ill-treated servant. After twenty-five years of such ill-treatment, Anamika dies. Her mother-in-law claims that Anamika committed suicide by setting herself on fire while the neighbours say that the mother-in-law in collusion with her son had set Anamika on fire.
Nevertheless, Anamika is a victim of her emotional hunger unlike Uma. Had Anamika protested before her marriage, she might have been spared such a horrifying death. But she subdues her own emotional needs to that of her parents’ reputation and surrenders to marriage. Again, if the parents had taken note of the stories surrounding Anamika’s marriage, she might have been saved. But they too, were concerned more about their reputation, than about Anamika’s feelings. Therefore, their reaction to her death is passive resignation—“it was fate, God had willed it and it was Anamika’s destiny”(151).

Anamika’s character has not been developed fully in this novel. Even then, her death here echoes Monisha’s death in Voices in the City. Both had possessed an intellectual bent of mind yet remained unrecognised as individuals. Both did not protest their circumstances. Both therefore die—Monisha sets herself on fire and Anamika too, dies by fire.

The unusual reaction of Papa—of jumping like a boy playing leap-frog—to the birth of Arun indicates the high worth of a son in the traditional Indian family. Unfortunately, the son here is not treated as an individual with his own peculiarities but is taken to be “an object of pride”(31) that has to be dutifully fed and brought up.

While the girls were being raised for marriage, education loomed large over Arun’s childhood. The rigorous regimentation of his life by his parents leaves Arun with no will or emotion to call his own.
After the completion of his school examinations, his father arranges "another phase of his existence" (121) – that is, of going abroad for higher studies. Seeing Papa’s frenzied efforts, Uma wonders if Papa was trying to fulfil his own unfulfilled ambitions or hungers through Arun.

Arun’s life – always so vigilantly watched over by his parents – completely drains him of all emotions. His life consequently becomes a “deep well of greyness” (122). Thus, like Uma who has no will or life to call her own, Arun too, is reduced to such a similar state. Seeing his habitually reactionless blank look, Uma is at times deeply troubled and longs to “stir up that viscous greyness, to bring to life some evidence of colour ...” (122). Even when Arun reads his letter of acceptance, his face is devoid of any expression. This blank look is the result of the stifling of all his emotions by the smothering presence of his parents. His letters home from America are also equally devoid of any substance.

Although the setting is very different in America – “where there is both license and plenty” (214) – human beings and their emotional hungers are the same. Mrs. Patton, like Arun’s mother, plays the role of a parent but whereas Mama performs her role with aplomb, Mrs. Patton is not so successful.

When Mrs. Patton discovers Arun to be a vegetarian she is thrilled. Believing her duty done if she keeps the freezer full, she takes Arun along on her shopping sprees. She stands beaming after providing
him with most unpalatable vegetarian food. This makes Arun feel that although in a different culture, he is still entrapped.

That the same atmosphere of simmering discontent is prevalent in this western culture also is brought home forcefully to Arun by Melanie – the adolescent daughter of the Patton family. Melanie rejects any kind of food but tries to assuage her hunger by stuffing herself with salted peanuts, ice-cream and candy. After which, she forces herself to be sick in the bathroom. Much to Arun’s shock, her parents are unaware of her neurotic behaviour while her brother dismisses it as her attempts to turn into a “slim chick”(204). The real reason behind Melanie’s behaviour is her lack of love, understanding as well as the emotional neglect that she suffers from her parents. This is brought out by her words to her mother accusing her of not being understanding to her needs.

Again, when Arun sees Mrs. Patton sunbathing with only her bikini on, he is scandalised. However, as he cannot give vent to his turbulent feelings, he strains hard to contain them. He finds Melanie too voicing her disapproval in front of him. The expression on Melanie’s face however, reminds him of a similar expression that he had encountered in India – that of the expression on an enraged Uma’s face. These similar expressions make him realise the hurt aroused in them through their emotional deprivation as well as remaining unrecognized as separate individuals. Yet both fail to make any effective protest over their
“neglect... misunderstanding... inattention” to their “unique and singular” beings and its “hungers” (214).

In spite of this neglect Melanie too, like Uma, is a survivor. Although she is sent to an institution to adequately treat her neurosis, she slowly improves while undergoing the treatment.

Thus, Arun discovers through his experience with the Pattons that human hungers arising from human relationships bear a lot in common irrespective of the cultures. Parents may be over-zealous in their duties and roles as parents or may be not so mindful – in both cases, there are sufferers. So long as children are not recognised as individuals with each having his/her own uniqueness or singularities, they will continue to suffer emotionally. In other words, neglect of them as singular individuals will make them suffer emotional hunger.

This is the reason why Arun wishes to remain isolated from all company in Massachusetts. It is his hope that he would always be able to stay in “anonymity” (172) during his entire stay in the U.S. This is because, he feels that by remaining in anonymity, he would be able to assuage his own emotional hunger – that of finding his own individuality finally as “Arun” and not a son, Arun.

As Arun prepares to leave the Patton’s house, the parcel containing the packet of tea and a brown wool shawl arrives from his home. Lacking any extra space in his suitcase, he presents them to Mrs. Patton. As he arranges the shawl carefully on her shoulders:
An aroma arises from it, of another land: muddy, grassy, smoky, ashen. It swamps him, like a river, or like a fire (228).

This aroma is that of India — of his home. His over-caring parents had sent these carefully chosen gifts to “help” (226) him through the coming winter. This aroma is suggestive of the close-knit atmosphere of the Indian household and therefore “swamps” Arun as he had felt stifled at home. But his act of presenting them to Mrs. Patton gives her a whiff of this aroma. In other words, she gets a glimpse of the closeness of the Indian family. That is why, her face changes its expression of incomprehension to a “flush of wonder” (228) on sniffing at its folds. The affinity that Mrs. Patton had felt with Arun initially — both being vegetarians — and which was missing from her relationships with her children is now brought out. Arun’s gesture of giving her these gifts is his way of expressing his appreciation for her care of him. This is not what he would normally have done in India. However, his act here appeases somewhat Mrs. Patton’s emotional hunger to feel loved and wanted. With Rod winning a football scholarship, Melanie away at the institution and Mr. Patton taking on a night job to pay the bills for Melanie’s treatment, Mrs. Patton is alone and emotionally spent. Her aversion to the light and even the outdoors, the drastic depletion of the kitchen, her change of dress, her cleaning of Melanie’s room by herself on her knees, her talks of taking a
course in yoga or astrology – all suggest an emotional vacuum in her life. This is brought forth symbolically:

... she sits on the porch, quite still ... staring ... through the wire screen, at the yard which is empty except for the cat carefully stalking a moth in a bed of dead and wilted flowers. Everything in that scene looks fatigued, spent or faded (127-128).

Thus, Arun’s act – the first time he has not accepted something from his family – helps bring consolation to another individual in another culture:

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 and puts her hands to her neck to hold ... the shawl together (228).

Anita Desai has as usual used the technique of omniscient narration in this novel. However, the narrator to a great extent projects the events through Uma’s perspective – the impact that these events have on her feelings and her impressions about them – in the first part. Again, in the second part, the Patton family is mainly projected through Arun’s point-of-view by the omniscient narrator. It is only in a few instances that the narrator intrudes by voicing his/her own opinion. Otherwise, the
narrator is generally not intrusive but delineates events and thought-processes in his/her own voice. For instance:

Every now and then they catch sight of Papa ... Then Mama’s lashes flutter lightly in recognition.

Admiration, too? Pride? Uma can never tell (13).

Here, the omniscient narrator narrates the walk taken up by Papa. But the impression it leaves on Mama is narrated from Uma’s perspective. Again, the narrator’s voice:

True, there was one uncomfortable fact that could not be denied: inspite of her raging enthusiasm, she was an abject scholar. Why? It was so unfair ... Uma rubbed and rubbed ... She wept with shame and frustration (21).

Here, the first sentence is the narrator’s while the second reflects Uma’s feelings as it is in keeping with the latter part which depicts Uma’s actions and feelings.

An instance of the omniscient narrator intruding upon the narrative is the following which has been made in reference to Anamika’s marriage. It is indicative of the later tragedy of Anamika:

Then why, at that moment, when triumph should have reached its apogee, did everything change? And all good fortune veer around and plunge shockingly downwards? (69).
An instance of Arun’s impressions about Rod’s jogging and the other joggers is narrated by the narrator’s voice but reflects Arun’s perspective:

But he will jog and jog – like Rod … as they struggle to leave behind … to free themselves and find … through strain and suffering, that open space, that unfettered vacuum where the undiscovered America still lies (200).

Again, another instance of the intermingling of the narrator’s voice and Arun’s perspective is when he sees Mrs. Patton sunbathing:

He does not even want to glance in her direction … when he glances, as he must, he cannot help staring at her limp breasts … or at the creases and wrinkles …

Mrs. Patton, why? (213).

One noteworthy feature of Anita Desai’s fictional technique here, is the note of irony used in the novel especially in Part I where the setting is in India. For instance, the narrator adopts an ironical tone in reference to the Indian family’s preference for sons:

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 … she looked around her to make sure everyone saw and noticed. She might have been wearing a medal (31).
The narrator again adopts an ironical tone in reference to Arun becoming a vegetarian and his father’s reaction to it:

A meat diet had been one of the revolutionary changes brought ... by their education ... their eyes had been opened to the benefits of meat along with ... cricket and the English language ... they had even succeeded in convincing the wives ... of this novel concept of progress ... (32).

Characters are mainly delineated through the narrator’s voice. Uma’s thoughts and point-of-view as well as Arun’s also help in reflecting character. Unlike in many of the other novels, where imagery is also used to delineate character, here that element is largely missing except for one or two instances.

However, the other common technical device shared with the other novels is the fluid handling of time. In Part I, especially, each chapter begins in the present but then goes back into the past thereby revealing the life of the three siblings from childhood to the present time when the narrative unfolds. But this revelation of the past does not take place chronologically. Certain important incidents are narrated through flash-back to convey not only a picture of the life of the characters but the impact of these incidents on the psyche and feelings of the characters. For instance, the flash-back pertaining to Mama’s pregnancy also shows its effects on Mama, Papa and the two girls – Uma and Aruna.
Part II, however, which deals with Arun’s stay in America is mostly in linear time. It is worth noting that the novel begins by Uma preparing a parcel to be sent to Arun. The novel ends with Arun receiving the parcel. The entire action of the novel is concentrated within this linear time frame. But within it, due to the fluid handling of time in the form of flashbacks and at times Uma’s memory, the emotional life of the protagonists is revealed.

As for the structure of the novel, Anita Desai has taken recourse to the modernist technique of using leitmotif to lend a pattern to the novel. The constant repetition of the images of food convey a symbolic pattern of psychological states namely, that of human hungers and their appeasement. While in India, there is a surfeit of eating – suggesting the close-knit Indian household – in the West, there is hardly any cooking or eating done – suggesting the lack of closeness in the western family.

Gastronomical hunger exists in each person which, if not appeased, will lead to many ailments. But man has an emotional side also to his unique being. This leads to emotional hungers in each individual – the need to love, to be loved, to have emotional security, to have emotional confidence. This is present in all beings irrespective of the culture they are in. If these emotional hungers are not assuaged, then emotional breakdowns may occur leading to neurotic behaviour or even death. For instance, Melanie’s feelings of emotional neglect make her stuff herself with sweets and ice-cream which she vomits later. Seeing a
retching Melanie, Arun is shocked and bewildered, “this is a real pain and a real hunger. But what hunger does a person so sated feel?”(224). This is evidence of the psychological state of comfort eating.

Again, after Anamika’s death and the immersion of her ashes – as has already been mentioned – a tear-faced Mama finds comfort in the presence of Uma. This is brought out by Uma comforting her mother with the thought of cook making puri-alu for them back home. *Puri-alu* was something reserved for special occasions in their family. Hence, Uma’s asking the cook to have it ready for them is her way of suggesting or offering comfort to her mother. Mama realises this instinctively – “it is a bond”(156).

Similarly, Ramu’s arrival is a special event for Uma as she shares an affinity with him. Hence, her decision to have puris for his visit. Since the parents disapprove of Ramu, Papa views this decision with horror. Uma also shares a special relationship with Mira-masi. Hence, the image of mouth-watering ladoos is associated with her by Uma.

Arun’s staunch preference for vegetarianism is also suggestive of his silent desire to be different from Papa as well as to free himself from Papa’s dominating yoke.

Similarly, Mrs. Patton’s excessive shopping reveals her psychological state. As she believes her duty is confined to keeping the freezer full, hence, while shopping she is “assured and accomplished”(183). Her later feelings of an emotional vacuum is
suggested by the "drastically depleted"(227) kitchen while she no longer offers to go shopping for food.

This juxtaposition of gastronomical hunger with emotional hunger is the major symbol used in the novel and which successfully helps to establish the structure.

The novelist has also used a few other symbols to further the theme. For instance, Uma’s collection of cards is suggestive of her yearning for a different world – more alive and friendly than her present one. To Uma, these cards are the “tokens of a fairy tale existence elsewhere”(117) and hence, their collection and the act of looking through them gives her immense pleasure. Again, these cards are a symbolic token of “goodwill and friendship”(99) which Uma feels is lacking in her life. Hence, her substitution of this hunger by collecting cards.

Again, Aran’s past time instead of being spent in games is used up in being lost in the comic world of “Superman” and “Captain Marvel”. Since, Aran’s own life is tragically dull and regimented, his choice of books is symbolic of his yearning for another world and life.

The setting for the wedding of Uma and Aruna is also symbolic. Uma’s drab life before and after her marriage is symbolised by the “drab, cut-rate affair”(101) which was her marriage. Unlike Uma, Aruna – whose life is not so drab and who aims to have a “fantastic” life(103) after marriage has indeed a “splendid”(101) wedding.
The combination of the two words “Mama” and “Papa” into one “MamaPapa” is symbolic of their having one “entity” (13).

When compared to the previous novels, the use of imagery is very limited pointing to the presence of more external action taking place. Apart from those connected with food, there are not many more of much significance. The most noteworthy of these are the images connected with violence. They occur before the news of Anamika’s death. With the electricity gone, Uma gives a “blood-curdling” (149) yell for mali. When he comes, she talks of “thieves and murderers” lurking around in the dark. This image of “murderers” prefigures Anamika’s death – her suicide or possible murder.

The image of the parents swinging constantly on the swing everyday suggests the monotony of their lives.

The images that are conjured by Uma and Aruna respectively in connection with Mama’s pregnancy are suggestive of their characters. Uma is naive and still “like a child of six” (74) and so has a vision of a “frantic pig ... wriggling to escape from the butcher” and a memory of hearing “whines and cries of mating dogs” (15). Aruna’s vision is more “domestic” – “petticoats and sari lifted, legs thrashing, naked legs, in the night under the mosquito net” (15). This shows that Aruna – even as a young girl is more acquainted with the facts of life and more worldly than Uma who is – even though elder – more simple and less worldly. There are a few animal images used. Papa’s enthusiasm over
Arun’s birth is so great that he leaps like a “frog”(17). A retching Melanie’s face is as white as the “flesh of a fish fillet” while the dark rings under her eyes make her resemble “frighteningly” the “raccoon” at the garbage can(189).

When Ramu wants to take Uma out to dinner, the parents protest “as furiously as a band of mynahs in the thick of disagreement”(49). The old mali, crawling out from his “cave” like house is like “some misshapen, bow-legged insect” who “bumbles” through the dark like an “aged glow-worm”(149). In contrast, Anamika was like a “flower” – “lovely, soft, petal-skinned, bumblebee eyed, pink-lipped” while her laughter is equally soft – “bubbling dove-like laughter”(67).

The lack of close familial ties in the West is reflected in the setting of the place:

There are so many objects, so rarely any people …

There seems 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 … (160).

Arun studies the exterior in order to have an idea of the occupants of the houses. He also studies the “mailboxes that line the drive”(160) noting the ones that have names and those that have numbers. The whole setting bereft of people makes it appear unreal to Arun and gives it an air of theatricality:
... the big picture windows are lit, and the rooms empty, like stage sets before the play begins; is there or is there not to be a play? (161).

This setting of Massachusetts in America brings to mind the almost similar setting of Laurel Lane in *Bye-Bye Blackbird's* London where Devinds that "lives lived in Laurel Lane are indoor lives\(^2\).

Finally, Anita Desai's felicitous use of language is once again reflected in describing the Western landscape:

... the booths of flowers and vegetables ... the garages ... give way to fields of wildflowers – streaks of yellow, crimson, orange, hot vivid colours woven in with grasses – and of corn, ripe and glittering a gun-metal blue ... she parks ... and leads the way into the Babylon of plastic plants ... (208).

Again, the description of summer:

Summer is beating at them, out of a sky so blue that it threatens to spill and flood the green land. The horizon blurs, watery (212).

In contrast, is this apt description of the woodland wildness:

The woods thrumming with cicadas: they shrill and shrill as if the sun is playing on their sinews, as if they were small harps suspended in the tree. A bird shrieks hoarsely ... that ugly, jarring note ... But
there are no birds ... nor animals. It is as if they are in hiding ... (219).

Notes
