CHAPTER III

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Anita Desai's novel *Fasting, Feasting* hailed as "unsparing, yet tender and funny" is rich in the sensuous atmosphere, elegiac pathos and bleak comedy at which the author excels. *Dashini Ann Jeyathurai* says, "This novel examines a surfeit of feasting and Indian family life and the self-denial and starving of affluent American women in the land of plenty." Though seemingly fantastical in nature, Readers will be gripped by the storyline though the English may seem somewhat stilted and artificial to the American reader. It tells the apparently spare story of one Indian family and the varying fates of its two daughters and single son. In the words of *Sylvia Brownrigg*, "It is only on the novel's final, quiet page that Desai's intricate structure becomes clear and the complexity of her emotional insight makes itself felt." 

Literature often seeks to define 'the human condition'. Anita Desai boldly epitomizes this phrase in her work depicting the effects of tradition on individuals in two totally

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93 Jeyathurai, *Delves into the Inner Sanctum*.

94 Sylvia Brownrigg, (salon.com, February 17, 2000).
different cultures. Her stark contrast between two worlds in *Fasting, Feasting*, invokes a much needed realization of various flaws in society. From the traditional home in a small village in India to the typical American home in Massachusetts, Desai flawlessly paints a picture of difference between an under-privileged Indian girl and her much-loved brother, laden with countless privileges.

As Desai's title implies, the novel is divided into two parts. Desai has written a beautiful story of two siblings, two countries, two moods and one family. *Mary Rawson* in her article "Desai's *Fasting, Feasting* is all feast, no Famine" says, "This two-part novel set in India and America is a delicate, moving tale of love and family. It tells the worlds-apart stories of a brother and sister separated by what their parents ordain and the world imposes." In what ways do the two terms of the title—"fasting" and "feasting"—apply to family life and society in general in India and the United States? What differences and similarities are there between the Indian and American families, between corresponding members of the two families, and between their communities? As *Times Literary Supplement* comments, "From the overpowering warmth of Indian culture to the cool center of

95 Mary Rawson, "Desai's *Fasting, Feasting* is all feast, no famine" (Sunday, February 27, 2000).
the American family, Desai captures the physical and emotional fasting and feasting that define two distinct cultures.\textsuperscript{96}

\textit{Amrit Anand} says, "The structure of the novel is interesting and I think, takes off from the title. Fasting seems to refer to the first part and feasting to the second -- fasting synonymous with Indian society and feasting with the American."\textsuperscript{97} Desai's stunning new novel...looks gently but without sentimentality at an Indian family...she has much to say in this graceful, supple novel about the inability of the families in either culture to nurture their children.\textsuperscript{98}

The more detailed "Indian half" deals with an orthodox family in a small provincial town - a partly successful, proud father who goes through life with set patterns and no passion, a mother who goes along with her husband, doing what is supposedly right and expected of her, curbing and killing all her innate desires, three children, the eldest, Uma, clumsy and "Forrest Gumpish", the middle daughter Aruna, pretty, ambitious and smart, but eventually also a victim of her choices and the last a son, Arun, on whom the parents put all

\textsuperscript{96} Times Literary Supplement.

\textsuperscript{97} Amrit Anand, "Anita Desai: Sense of the Fabulous in Her Novels".

\textsuperscript{98} Publishers Weekly Starred Review.
their dreams and energies. All of them along with members of their extended family go through some form of deprivation - of will, of fun, of passion and of love.

The first is the rural Indian village on the Ganges where Uma cannot escape her lowly position in a staunchly patriarchal family. Therefore, resigning herself to the role of spinster daughter, she becomes the caretaker of her aging parents collectively known as "MamaPapa".

How does Desai establish Mama and Papa's identities as separate persons and, at the same time, as the single, and singular, MamaPapa? In what ways do "they have the comfort of each other," as Uma later realizes? Their parents are so much of one mind that they are thought of as a single being—MamaPapa. “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 (p. 6).

The novel starts off very masterfully and alluringly. Desai, at times, has an excellent prose style that is really more poetic than prosaic. The opening chapter with the initial characterization of MamaPapa and insect imagery and the cadences of her porch-swing description and metaphor are all very promising and well worth an English major's explication. “I was reeled in by this first chapter like few other times I have ever read a novel. I found myself disappointed in terms of her actual verbal display throughout
the novel.” But Desai doesn't sustain this throughout the novel. There are flashes of brilliance, certainly, but all-in-all her prose-style and narrative-weaving are uneven. The structure of the novel is rather simple. Simply put, the chapters I and II which comprises over 2/3 of the novel and centers around the elder daughter Uma, ends with a somewhat inaccessible image of Uma standing in a river. Immediately, Desai shifts from India to the U.S. where Uma's younger son, Arun, has come to study at college. From there, we only have about a 60 pages or so read which was nice and thoughtful, but would have been better with more development.

It seems as though Mama is always trying to please Papa; she constantly fusses over his afternoon tea time snack and accompanies him to all parties. On the other hand, Desai portrays Papa as a stable, cold, unemotional, strict, and, most of all, strong man: "Papa gives the driver orders all the way home. 'Turn here. Take this turning, not that one. Faster now - stop! Don’t you see the bus in front of you? All right now, quick. Faster. Oof, so slow, so slow!'" (p. 13). The fact that Papa is ordering around a man who drives for a living shows his need to be in control at all times. Also, Papa is often times referred to either on his way to or from the office showing his workaholic type state of mind.

Uma still dreams of being "elsewhere, elsewhere, elsewhere." Unfortunately, that place is inhabited by her brother, Arun, who is afforded an education at a private
university in suburban Massachusetts and lives with a foster family who are mercilessly caricatured by Desai.

At the heart of Part One, set in India, is Uma, the overprotected daughter who finds herself starved for a life. Plain, myopic and perhaps dim, Uma gives up school and marriage, finding herself in her 40s looking after her demanding if well-meaning parents. Uma's younger, prettier sister marries quickly to escape the same fate, but seems dissatisfied. Although the family is "quite capable of putting on a progressive, Westernized front," it is clear that privileges are still reserved for boys. When her brother Arun is born, the family's resources are poured into his physical and intellectual nourishment. Uma is expected to abandon her education at the convent school to take care of him. She is pulled from the convent school in the early grades to help at home when the long-desired boy child Arun arrives. Her parents make education a birthright for brother Arun, but the girl's sole future is only marriage. Arun is portrayed as the most lucky and perfect in his parent's eyes: "What honor, 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" (p. 31).

Though "Papa was 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", and "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" (p. 5). This much the children learnt chiefly from old photographs, framed certificates, tarnished medals and the conversation of visiting relatives. After their marriage they became Papamama and Mamapapa, as if they had incarnated to make Uma's life as miserable as any Indian girl's could ever be. Uma is not allowed to attend music lessons after school. She is treated with neglectful impatience by her parents and with some condescension by her smart and pretty younger sister, Aruna.

Well, the question in which age this all happens is perhaps irrelevant here because one will never stop asking that kind of questions. The fiction writer and critic Aamer Hussein sees Desai's subject as "the changing fortunes of the Indian middle classes - from western-educated to struggling lower-middle-class - and the western encounter with India."

Desai opens her story with a busy domestic scene, as the parents - who have such a fused authority that they are often referred to simply as MamaPapa - fussily ask whether daughter Uma has given orders to the cook and prepared a package for son Arun, who is studying in America. In the novel's present tense, Uma is a gray-haired spinster living under MamaPapa's demanding rule. In flashbacks scattered

99 Hussein, The Novels of Anita Desai.
through the novel's first part, we gradually see how Uma arrived at this imprisoned state.

The story in itself is told from the perspective of Uma, who starts out as a wide-eyed child at a convent who has an enthusiasm for education and an awe of the enigmatic nuns who seem to glide through the school grounds. Unlike her younger sister Aruna, Uma does not have the privilege of having "books marked healthily in green and blue for success and approval." Then the time shifts to the past when Papa was in service and then in the next chapter the reader is told that Mama is pregnant. "With Uma a grown woman - by some standards, at least - and Aruna newly discovering what it was to have periods, Mama it was who found herself pregnant" (p.15). The premium on sons in Indian society, even as the world marches into a new millennium, is very high. This is faithfully portrayed by Desai. The daughters are teenagers, grown up by Indian standards, Mama wants the pregnancy terminated, but Papa questions, "Would any man give up the chance of a son?" (p.16). Mama has to accept the pregnancy, has to lay supine, feels sick most of the time and finally at the end of nine months delivers what everyone is waiting for - a son! This is Papa's reaction "'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" (p.17).
Uma is made to give up her schooling to help Mama look after Arun. Girls have to learn how to look after babies and that is more important than education in the opinion of this Indian family. When Uma protests and says that there is an ayah to help and points out that they were looked after by the ayah, "Mama's expression made it clear it was quite a different matter now and she repeated threateningly: 'Proper attention.' (p. 30). After all, the attention the daughters got would not be enough for a son! The teenage Uma questions this sexism when she points out that an ayah had looked after both Aruna and herself as children. Why wasn't the ayah's care sufficient for a male child? Instead, with the birth of her brother Arun, Uma takes on the role of nanny. Here, one encounters the distinct preference her parents have for the male child - a practice that was not uncommon at the time.

A Reviewer says, "The first thing about this book is you can't place these characters and when exactly did this happen? The setting, where the mother actually gets a girl to drop out from school when the baby brother is born. Sending the boy abroad is not exactly a small town aspiration and that too to MIT, no less!!"\(^{100}\)

Uma is not jealous of her siblings, exactly. When Arun receives his longed-for acceptance from an American university, Uma notices her brother's blank joylessness: "All

\(^{100}\) A Reviewer, "Soul-less" (May 12, 2004).
the years of scholarly toil had worn down any distinguishing features Arun's face might once have had." (p.121). With a deft touch, Desai shows us that MamaPapa's ambitions for Arun are as stifling as their lack of ambition for Uma, and that Uma's brief spiritual ecstasies have given her moments of self-expression that Arun has yet to enjoy.

Desai next explores the conventional belief that tied a woman's worth to her physical appearance. A woman who lacked beauty was often rushed into the first marital offer she received, only to pay a heavy price later on. Desai shows the challenges a single woman faces regardless of how successful she is. By contrast, Uma's cousin is portrayed as the ultimate success because she is able to marry well because of her looks. One wonders how happy she truly was, however, when she eventually takes her own life. The character of Uma was gently tragic in her failed attempts to get a husband whilst the supposedly lucky and beautiful cousin's fate was far more extreme. Uma, neither beautiful nor charming, has just her dowry to attract prospects. It does, leading to two unhappy matches. The arranged marriages produce their own painful comedy when Uma proves difficult to pair off: "Mama worked hard at trying to dispose of Uma, sent her photograph around to everyone who advertised ... but it was always returned with the comment 'We are looking for someone taller/fairer/more educated, for Sanju/Pinku/Dimpu.'" (p. 86). One prospective bridegroom skedaddles after turning her
dowry into a brick house for his unscrupulous family, and the other, hoping to pay off some debts, neglects to mention that he already has a wife. What is to become of her? Twice the family is duped into handing over a dowry as part of an unsuccessful engagement - a shame that clings to Uma forever after, though she is blameless in both situations.

_Uma Mahadevan Dasgupta_ says, "Really, what is it that bothers me about this book that is overflowing with stereotypes and clichés? It is not that I do not like to read books which show the misery of human existence. It is that no place is made here for the opening of at least one window, if only as wide as a crack, through which rays of hope can steal in. It is that this book totally neglects human dignity, the fire that burns - however feebly - in almost every person. Let me borrow here the words of Makarand Paranjape. He says in his review of _Fasting, Feasting_ (Indian Review of Books, October 1999), "I do not pretend that these - and worse - things don't happen in India. It's only that the manner in which they happen in this novel are far from convincing." ¹⁰¹

Contrary to Uma, there is her younger sister, Aruna, "visibly ripening on the branch, asking to be plucked" (p. 85). Aruna is portrayed as beautiful and intelligent young woman:

“No one was surprised but everyone was gratified

¹⁰¹ Uma Mahadevan Dasgupta, Anita Desai’s Fasting, Feasting (October 9, 1999).
when Aruna brought off the marriage that Uma had dismally failed to make. As was to be expected, she took her time, showed a reluctance to decided, played choosy, but soon enough made the wisest, most expedient choice...and Aruna was whisked away to a life that she had said would be ‘fantastic’ and was...But 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” (p.100).

Uma is a clumsy, uncoordinated woman who finds it difficult to succeed in almost everything she does - she fails in school, can't cook, spills food and drink and can't find anyone worthwhile to get married to. Two attempts at getting her married end in disaster - in the first, a family cons her father into giving dowry and then breaks off the engagement, keeping the money. In the second, she actually gets married, but to an already married man - when her father realizes this later, he brings her back and gets her divorced.

Which parents - Indian parents - would get their daughter married without finding out about the would be son-in-law? That too when they had already burnt their hands once, by giving heavy dowry to a prospective father-in-law who had taken the money simply to finance the house he was building, whose son had no idea of marrying. Well, there is really no point in asking such questions. Uma is at least brought back home by her father when the fact comes out that she is not a legal wife to her husband! She returns home to
live with her parents, fetching them sweets and tea from the kitchen. She was not happy with her life, but she didn't want to do anything about it. So the story just stayed in one place, never moving, never changing course.

All along, the last thing Uma desires is a man. As empty as her life is there, she escapes the tragedy of her beautiful and talented cousin Anamika, honoured by her family only to the extent that they frame the scholarship letter from Oxford but do not let her go. Instead, they make a match and give Anamika away to a husband and his family who make her their slave. She is familiar with the fate of her beautiful cousin Anamika who even after winning a scholarship to Oxford, was married off to an old curmudgeon. This is not the fate Uma wishes for. Rather, she hungers for a world without men and seeks companionship with other women, like her widowed aunt, Mira-masi. She seems to be an appropriate role model for Uma. She too is an outsider. Her grand holy pilgrimages, Hindu chants, and frequent ashram sojourns make her the family outcast. However, like other socially different female role models Uma looks to, Mira-masi turns out to be so self-centered that she ultimately fails to give Uma the attention she thirsts for.

_Jenni Valjento_ says, "Does this all sound complicated, and unbelievable? Well, that is how it is. Desai returns to a world which is already disappearing and a milieu of which
she remains the peerless chronicler." As commented by *Independent*, "This is a compelling, mature work by Indian's finest writer in English." Marit Haahr says, "Providing insight but not answers, Desai handles the complexities of family dynamics with a unique blend of grace, wit and irony ... Uma imagines those who have found the freedom she craves, are grounded in the sadness of reality.... Throughout the novel, Desai uses great subtlety and humor to tell her tale, always reminding us of the ironies inherent in love that stifles and escape routes that lead nowhere."

Although perpetually cheated of opportunities - a benign doctor's attempt to give Uma a simple job is swiftly quashed by MamaPapa When she has an offer to work in a local hospital, her parents refuse to let her even consider the offer. Aruna, Uma's younger sister is a pretty and ambitious woman, who eventually gets married to a "prize-catch" and migrates to Bombay, apparently moving up in life. But she too is unhappy, with the need to constantly keep up with appearances and the "Joneses", at the same time neurotically


103 Independent Online Edition.

104 Marit Haahr, Chronicle Book Review (San Francisco, February 27, 2000).
obsessed with the need to keep her husband and children under her control at all times. Meena Shirwadkar said the image of traditional woman, the Sita Savitri type, was at once, easy and popular. In India, with its strong bent for tradition, woman was expected mainly to live for others than for herself because "others" controlled and moulded the social structure. Even woman in life and literature herself voluntarily surrendered to the ideal of self-sacrifice.105

Uma resembles the good, frustrated woman in a Victorian novel, which is unsurprising given this family's traditional structure. Uma is an eager, thwarted character of genuine pathos. In Uma, the aging, oppressed daughter, Desai has created a marvel. Uma is growing old on the veranda with MamaPapa. Bullied by her parents, her eyes failing and her hair graying, Uma finds pleasure in small things - a hoard of old Christmas cards she treasures for their garish decorations, banal tea parties at the home of a Baptist missionary, volunteer work at a convent school she attended before her parents hoping to marry her off, yanked her out. Moments of unexpected visits from two relatives, her odd and exuberant cousin Ramu, who takes her out to dinner and gets her tipsy and an older relative, Mira-masi, a perpetual pilgrim who lugs icons around the countryside.

105 Meena Shirwadkar, Image of Woman.
Her search for beauty and freedom leads her to a convent school, her aunt's ashram, a sacred river. The closest Uma gets to true contentment is when she accompanies Mira-Masi to the ashram. Indeed, she would stay there forever, but her parents send her brother and cousin to bring her home. About the only time Uma feels liberated is when she is under water, unable to swim but somehow sprung loose in the black depths: "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."(p.111). Her greatest happiness occurs in these moments of near oblivion, as when she succumbs to a fit in an ashram to which her pious Aunt Mira-Masi has taken her, or when she nearly drowns in the Ganges during a religious ritual but is saved, much to her dismay, by scolding relatives.

"The tightly knit fabric of family that had seemed so stifling and confining now revealed holes and gaps that were frightening -- perhaps the fabric would not hold, perhaps it would not protect at all." (p. 20). Parents, family, siblings, country - these are all ties that come to us with our births, not by choice, but there is surely always some way out of unhappiness and darkness into a cheering, sunlit world. Parents and children cannot communicate, but where's the compassion, the generosity on both sides? But Dora Sales Salvador says, "Anita Desai's exploration of family
relationships is warm and compassionate and the novel is cut through with the painful truth that families can be both stifling and bewildering.\textsuperscript{106}

MamaPapa dominate Uma's life, take all the minor and major decisions of her life without the slightest consideration for her wishes. Her parents sabotage her every move for independence. Uma is made to give up her education when her brother is born so that she can help her mother look after him full time. This is despite the fact that she has a great fascination for the convent school that she goes to and for her teachers. Once she comes of age her marriage is arranged, which sadly comes to a disastrous end. She is forced to return to her claustrophobic existence with her parents and resigns herself to a desultory life, attending to their whims and fancies.

The first two-thirds of Desai's novel concentrates on Uma's life through painful flashbacks. Her yearnings and inherent goodness transcend the boundaries of any culture. Uma's character is a masterful creation on the part of Desai. Uma is not the conventional heroine of stories set in this culture. She is unattractive, naïve to the point of detriment and twice married to scoundrels who took advantage of the family's desperation to have her gone. At the same time Uma

\textsuperscript{106} Dora Sales Salvador, \textit{Fasting, Feasting} by Anita Desai (Christopher Rollason).
is imaginative, patient and full of the world's most precious commodity, hope.

There are lots of Uma's in India today and all they need is a little encouragement with education and exposure to the outside world and she could definitely be a very strong woman. Liz Sam says, "I loved this character of Uma in the book because she was both willing to take a chance with life and at the same time dedicated to her family. And she took all that happened to her life with such grace that she did not give me a chance to cry for her. That's her inner strength." 107

Anita Desai's detached unemotional style of narration serves to heighten the reader's emotional reaction to Uma's travails. Why doesn't Uma stand up for herself, why doesn't she attempt to build a life of her own choice - are the questions which keep bothering the involved reader. Ruth Waterton feels, "Uma is a hard character to keep sympathy with - her passivity, though culturally conditioned, is infuriating. But Desai builds up a compelling picture of the way that the treatment she suffers at the hands of her parents is sanctioned and backed up by an entire culture - whilst the extreme traditionalism of her parents may be no longer typical of Indian family life, the importance placed on extended family relationships and the submissiveness of

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107 Liz Sam, A view of two different cultures (Chennai, December 29, 1999).
women are still deeply ingrained.” Desai leaves no resolutions, only more of the social inequalities she has left her readers to ponder for over 35 years.

Fasting, the first section of the novel is about Uma's rather pathetic life and the occasional glimpses of hope that flash through it. The tale follows a typical path - reverence for the son, total disregard for the daughter. After a few tragicomic attempts to marry her off, her eternally disapproving parents give up and concentrate on Arun and prettier younger sister, Aruna. Feasting, the second section of the novel is about Arun, who is afforded a privileged Western education in suburban Massachusetts. Arun, is the ostensibly privileged son, smothered by his father's expectations. His life again is one of fulfilling his parents' expectations which lie heavy on his shoulders. Unhappy Indian families are unhappy in their own way. In contrast to the spare elegance of Fasting, Feasting bursts with life. The quiet, almost mute Arun is sent to college in Massachusetts. Desai's sudden flood of sights and sounds hits the reader with almost as much culture shock as it does Arun.

Bernard says, “I think Anita Desai is a very good writer in the sense that the book was so beautifully written. I

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love her similes and descriptions. The plot is interesting in a sad sort of way. I personally liked the feasting part better. I think it was because it gave more background information and had more stories. The ties between the two parts are tenuous and quite forced.”

Using a subtle irony, Desai moves into the second part, contrasting the sights and sounds of India with Arun’s experiences in suburban America. From the heart of a close-knit Indian household to the cool centre of an American family, this novel examines a surfeit of feasting and Indian family life, and the self-denial and starving of affluent American women in the land of plenty.

As Julie says, “Desai demonstrates the thin line between fasting and feasting in this novel. Rather than divide the book between two ‘halves’, she combines both and contrasts the hording mentality of Arun’s host mother with the obsessive weight control programs by his host siblings.”

For some reason, about half through the book, Uma is suddenly abandoned and attention is turned to Arun. It is the part devoted to feasting. Uma's story ends abruptly and inconclusively even as Arun’s American sojourn begins and the readers initial confusion is how do these two narratives

109 Bernard, “A little empty music” (Singapore, October 26, 2000).
110 Julie, “The Thin Line between Feasting and Fasting” (Milwaukee: WI United States, June 19, 2002).
relate to each other. The common thread that runs through both the stories is perhaps the inability of both the Indian and American familial and societal norms to nurture the children in the family. In one family, the parents try to smother the children with an excessive amount of attention and desire to control every aspect of their life and in the other it is the parents non-interference and lack of strong family ties and support that create problems. "Written in an easy, flowing, deceptively simple style, this novel exacts an emotional toll on the reader."\(^{111}\)

Arun takes center stage several chapters into the book as he begins his studies in America. Arun finds his way to the US, on a scholarship, having being forced by his father to "mug" his way through school and college. There, he finds solitude to be his best friend. Even this desire to be alone, does not get fulfilled to the extent he wants. Unlike life in India, in the US he finds a world of excesses - of food, of body and of non-interference, both parental and otherwise. Here he meets the dysfunctional Patton family. Through his eyes we see the Patton family - a "barbecuing", disappointed father, a nervous, uncertain, vegetarian mother, a body-obsessed, jock son and a bulimic, neurotic daughter. All of them go through some form of corruption - of will, of fun, of passion and of love. Desai manages to present the

\(^{111}\) Powell's.com (17, 2000).
stereotypical suburban Patton family with enough humor to make the characters real and the emotions they evoke believable.

When the story moved to the US it lost a little of its direction. The second part deals with the Patton family in the US the link with Part 1 being Arun who spends his summer break with this family. Most of this section is written in the present tense. The family is made up of Mr and Mrs Patton, who stand in direct contrast to MamaPapa, their physical-fitness-loving son Rod and their bulimic and anorexic daughter Melanie. Arun is exposed to this American family and is bewildered by the contrasts in culture, where the woman of the house is not compelled to cook and where each member of the family has an individual existence.

The summer after his freshman year at the University of Massachusetts, Arun stays with the Pattons, an only-too-recognizable American family. "While Desai paints a nuanced and delicate portrait of Uma's family, here the writer broadens her brush strokes, starkly contrasting the Pattons' surfeit of food and material comforts with the domestic routine of the Indian household."112 The American father, an ethnocentric rube with a backyard barbecue grill, serves up large chunks of red meat to his horrified guest every night. His wife, when not transfixed by the latest holistic

112 Editorial Reviews, Publishers Weekly.
gimmickry, lives in a tanning bed. Melanie, their only daughter is an anxiety-ridden bulimic, the unfortunate result of parental neglect and years of failed therapy. As one can imagine, an excessive western lifestyle and strict Hindu beliefs can clash quite frequently.

Across the world, Arun is bewildered by American college life, especially by the ways of the Pattons, with whom he spends the summer. Mr. Patton's devotion to red meat, Mrs. Patton's commitment to a well-stocked kitchen, their son Rod's dedication to physical fitness, and daughter Melanie's bulimia confuse and frighten Arun and move him to reassess everything he has ever taken for granted. Arun, in college in Massachusetts, is none too happily spending the summer with the Pattons in the suburbs. Their refrigerator and freezer is packed with meat that no one eats and Mrs. Patton is desperate to be a vegetarian, like Ar. But what he most wants is to be ignored, invisible. "Her words make Arun wince. Will she never learn to leave well alone? She does not seem to have his mother's well-developed instincts for survival through evasion. After a bit of pushing about slices of tomatoes and leaves of lettuce—in his time in America he has developed a hearty abhorrence for the raw foods everyone here thinks the natural diet of a vegetarian—he dares to glance at Mr. Patton" (p. 167).

Anita Desai's lyrical yet pointed prose powerfully draws the portrait of a woman who can never blossom into
her own in such an arid social landscape. Unfortunately, Desai's sudden shift in the last chapters from Uma's Gangetic plains to her brother Arun's experiences in suburban Boston takes away from an otherwise heartfelt, sobering story. In Boston, Desai haphazardly sketches encounters with an ineffectual cardboard cut-out, taciturn Mr. Patton, a weight-obsessed, nagging Mrs. Patton, and a bulimic daughter, Melanie. Perhaps a little more complex fleshing-out of Uma would have proved a more subtle and effective way to infuse the story with human breadth and universal appeal.

Indeed, Desai is so adept at portraying Americans through Indian eyes that the Pattons remain as inscrutable to the reader as they are to Arun. But Arun himself, as he picks his way through a minefield of puzzling American customs, becomes a more sympathetic character and his final act in the novel suggests both how far he has come and how much he has lost. "Although Desai takes a risk in shifting from the endearing Uma to Arun, she has much to say in this graceful, supple novel about the inability of the families in either culture to nurture their children."113

Arun is faced with unlimited freedom and grapples with an alien culture in which his landlord's daughter periodically vomits after meals and Ms. Patton is almost a

113 Publisher’s Weekly, Barnes.com, (Cahners Business Information, 1999).
non-entity in the family. In the land of plenty, and a stocked freezer, daughter Melanie has an easily recognizable eating disorder. Her brother, however, also works out incessantly to keep himself in shape:

"It was the first time in his life away from home, away from Mamatapapa, his sisters; he had at last experienced the total freedom of anonymity, the total absence of relations, of demands, needs, requests, responsibilities, commitments" (p. 172). Arun takes up jogging, having recognized the American joggers' struggle "to free themselves and find, through endeavor most primitive, through strain and suffering, that open space, that unfettered vacuum where the undiscovered America still lies ..." (p. 191). Why does Arun partake of this American struggle? Caught, in the house he is living in for the summer, between a fitness-obsessed son and a bulimic daughter, Arun wonders, "One can't tell what is more dangerous in this country, the pursuit of health or of sickness" (p. 205). Arun, however, winds up living with a foster family whose value-free lifestyle clashes with his strict Hindu background.

Desai chooses to convey Melanie as a pretty, modern, stuck up and over-confident young girl: "Eeeuuuh, you call that food?" Melanie asks furiously, as if outraged by the very idea. 'I call that shit!'" (p. 194). Like Uma, essentially her Indian counterpart, Melanie is also a spinster in waiting, a prospective candidate for prescription medication, physical
abuse or worse. In one dark moment, Arun recognizes in the Pattons' bulimic daughter a version of his own unhappy sister Uma, and the shock provokes a reflection on these two frustrated women, "But what is plenty? What is not? Can one tell the difference?"

Her brother, Rod, is the typical, handsome, athletic, all-America boy who is constantly exercising and playing football: "From the size, the bulk, and the clothing, he sees it is Rod. Rod has returned. His hair is still held back by the luminous band he wears while jogging. He is wearing shorts but no shirt, and his chest is wet and gleams, greasily" (p.188). Anita Desai characterizes all the personalities and portrays them as what they appear to be. By presenting the reader with these outer facades, Desai is later able to juxtapose them with the true inner feelings of her characters.

In the Patton family, the women have the freedom to do as they like, but are they really happy? Mrs. Patton seems to find her happiness in the supermarket, where buying frozen foods for her family seems to act as a mood-elevator for her. Likewise, Melanie takes comfort in her bulimia, which seems to give her a kind of relief from the strains of her life. It takes a rehab center to sort out Melanie's problem. Was she crying out for attention that she never got? The tea and the shawl that Arun's parents send for him, Arun gives to Mrs. Patton. Mrs. Patton is thrilled by this gesture, even though the gift is small, and "Slowly, her face spreads into a flush of
wonder."(p. 227). Is Desai trying to debunk the impersonal nature of American society? In the words of Uma Mahadevan Dasgupta even Arun's gentle, confused gesture at the end, thrusting the shawl and the box of tea into Mrs Pattons' hands before leaving - even this remains merely a gesture.\textsuperscript{114}

In the view of Liz Sam the second part of the book deals with the dilemma of Arun in a world which he could not have imagined.\textsuperscript{115} The most beautiful part of the book is its literature. So well written and with accurate details, its definitely a joyful read. Dashini Ann Jeyathurai says, "I would almost like the Feasting part developed and nurtured a little and published on its own. Fasting is easily forgettable - its banality of themes and its treatment is quite unacceptable from a writer of Desai's ability."\textsuperscript{116} The Feasting part was interesting. It had its moments of promise - but ended rather quickly without the characters having any time to develop. Maybe this was deliberate and reflective of the lack of communication amongst the family members of the Mass suburbia.

Prakash V. Kulkarni in his article "delightful reading though confusing message" says, "Arun would have been

\textsuperscript{114} Uma Mahadevan, The Novels of Anita Desai.

\textsuperscript{115} Liz Sam, A view of two different cultures.

\textsuperscript{116} Dashini, Delves into the Inner Sanctum.
more human if he would have felt occasional pangs of homesickness and brooded over few pleasant memories of his childhood."\textsuperscript{117} Arun is shown trying to come to terms with life in the U.S. He is particularly troubled when he goes to live with the Pattons during his summer break. Arun visits a supermarket with Mrs. Patton and this is how his thought process is revealed:

"He had travelled 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." (p. 185). When Arun is bunking with an American family, it is an overwhelming experience. But if America is a feast in the bounty displayed in the supermarkets and on the suburban grills, Arun cannot partake. Arun's well-meaning hostess, Mrs. Patton, ignores her meat-loving husband and daughter and focuses on Arun, swamping him with raw vegetables and dry lentils. Arun is baffled by the abundant world he has fallen into, confused by the deep neglect in this place of plenty.

\textsuperscript{117} Prakash V Kulkarni, "Delightful reading though confusing message" (Voorhees: NJ United States, October 27, 2002).
As for the chapters set in India, Desai allows feminism to drive her narrative, with predictable results. "Is the way she incorporates dowry death into her story any less of a cliche in India than the way she utilizes the bulimic girl who has no other distinguishing characteristics in order to describe American excess?" Unfortunately, American readers of Anglophone Indian fiction are so often overwhelmed by the exoticism of these stories that they fail to separate the wheat from the chaff. 118 "The American home where dad defines his role by cooking barbecues nobody wants and then getting mad at them, where the mother aimlessly cruises the supermarket aisles whilst her teenage daughter's bulimia goes unnoticed, and the family never eats together - as a parent I recognized much of this portrait with a squirm of unease" (p. 176).

_Fasting, Feasting_ takes place in two very different worlds, both physically and metaphorically. Rob Stout says, "In the adept counter-pointing of these two worlds, a rather tragic reality is posed for the author's largely female readership. Which world poses the bleakest of alternatives? To be so aimlessly alienated you attempt to starve yourself to death? Or to be at the whim of a society in which status and birthright are determined strictly by male heritage?"119 As

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118 Divakaruni, "Heavy-handed, Tone-deaf, and Moralistic".

119 Rob Stout, "Anita Desai's 12th novel returns to familiar
Chris Barsanti pointed out although basically two separate stories, the tales of Uma and Arun meet and mingle in subtle, sublime ways.¹²⁰

Throughout, Desai perfectly matches form and content. The details are few, the focus narrow, emotions and needs given no place. Uma, as daughter and female, expects nothing. Arun, as son and male, is lost under the weight of expectation. Now in her 40s, Uma is at home. Attempts at arranged marriages having ended in humiliation and disaster she is at MamaPapa's beck and call, with only her collection of bracelets and old Christmas cards for consolation. "Uma flounces off, her grey hair frazzled, her myopic eyes glaring behind her spectacles, muttering under her breath. The parents, momentarily agitated upon their swing by the sudden invasion of ideas--sweets, parcel, letters--settle back to their slow, rhythmic swinging. They look out upon the shimmering heat of the afternoon as if the tray with tea, with sweets, with fritters will materialize and come swimming out of it to their rescue. With increasing impatience, they swing and swing." (p. 5).

In this novel Anita Desai takes on a task that many Indian and expatriate authors have deemed Herculean in

¹²⁰ Chris Barsanti, Publisher (Library Journal).
nature, a task that involves delving into the inner sanctum of an orthodox Indian family in India. Many who have attempted this challenge failed and came out looking ignorant and insensitive of certain aspects of the culture. Few have succeeded, and among them is Anita Desai.

The reader is faced with several poignant issues played upon in a middle-class family attempting to deal with modernization, such as, 'What instances and images of imprisonment and entrapment occur in the novel's two parts? To what extent is entrapment of one kind or another envisioned as an inescapable fact of life? What are the purposes of the various rituals, ceremonies, traditions, and routines—personal, social, and religious—that are observed in the novel's two parts? What are the consequences of ignoring tradition and custom and of disrupting established routine?' But they ultimately realize that life is meant to be lived in their society. A society with a veritable amount of prejudices weaved into its complex tapestry of customs and beliefs.

In the first part of the book, which is set in India, food takes a back burner and emotions take the front. In the second half, which is set in US, it is just the opposite. It is a story about how neurotic behaviour is absorbed by different cultures. The Indian family clings to traditions, while in America consumers constantly seek the newest and the fastest. Food and reaction to food is a unifying theme.
America is obsessed with its barbecue grills and packaged food. In India ancient customs preserve delectable concoctions like lodoos, puris, samosas, accompanied with warm cups of tea and the fragrance of jasmine.

The *Feasting* part had its moments of promise - but ended rather quickly without the characters having any time to develop. May be this was deliberate and reflective of the lack of communication amongst the family members of the Mass suburbia.

Desai exposes the depth or lack of Indian and American society and does so artfully. This book is not fast-paced or plot-centered but is rather crafty, reflective and telling. The first half of the book deals with life in a small, slow town in India, with rigid parents and well-drafted routines while the other half deals with 'rule-less' life in suburban US. But Ruth Petrie says, “Desai's counter-pointing of India and America is a little forced, but her focus on the daily round, whether in the Ganges or in New England, finely delineates the unspoken dramas in both cultures. And her characters, capable of their own small rebellions, give *Fasting, Feasting* its sharp bite.”

Arun's shocking experience in the US is entertaining to readers due to the strong contrast from life in India. Desai’s  

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Ruth Petrie, *Places are Not What they Seem*, (January 26, 2001) Amazon.com
meticulous and fluent description of the American and Indian culture are painfully realistic but unfortunately provides a much too stereotypical point of view. Nonetheless, Desai makes the two extremes intriguing which hooks the reader to a disappointing end that fails to make a satisfying connection between the two differently oriented parts of the book but overall, *Fasting, Feasting* is a good read.

*Marilyn Fernandes* says, "On a lighter note, this book is highly recommended as a remedy for those suffering from culture shock since it creates a medium for tolerance."[122]

There was no way out, to find joy and liberation and redemption. Desai leaves no way out for her characters, and this is what makes the novel so cold in spite of its craft.

Desai doesn't judge – it is an exercise in compare and contrast. We are left to draw our own conclusions. Part I opens with Uma packing a parcel, containing tea and a shawl, to send to Arun who is in the U.S. Part II ends with Arun giving the parcel containing tea and a shawl to Ms. Patton. Part I and II were tied together with a shawl and tea and a customer wonders, "It left me thinking that perhaps I had read two different stories instead of a novel and just not realized it! A shawl and tea – beautiful words and an empty story!" The

122 Marilyn Fernandes, *A Window to Culture* (marilyn_f7@hotmail.com, a bookworm, October 16, 2002).
final scene completes the circle, as we see Arun's American surrogate mother on the porch swing in a scene reminiscent of the opening of the book, flanked by the unwanted family gifts that Arun has offloaded onto her, their intended meaning lost in translation. The solutions differ - the difficulties are strikingly similar.

The story is seen primarily through Uma and Arun's eyes, allowing the make-up of their family to become obvious only as they reach personal realizations. The family and the world they describe are rapidly disappearing, the family through the aging of their parents and the world through the aging of cultures. Though they would like to be free of both family and world, neither Uma nor Arun is comfortable alone. Prastavna Sinha reviews, "I had difficulty understanding what message she is trying to send through her novel. For one, life is miserable whether one lives in India or USA, which is a pathetic outlook in spite of different living conditions people behave basically the same way to situations in life. There is no strong story here. Just description of characters and small incidences to enhance characterization." But Anita Desai uses her words perfectly to convey exactly what she feels. She uses commonly used

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Prastavna Sinha, A Dual and Honest View (Virginia: USA, May 2, 2000).
words, nothing flashy, to keep the reader engrossed in her characters, makes one turn page after page.

Desai explores the different qualities of life offered by examples of both typically Indian life and typically American life. Through the acquiescence of Uma to her very cut-out and preordained life in India and Arun's coolly observant and internalized reaction to American suburbia, the reader can well imagine that such a superior American or a inferior Indian dichotomy is far from applicable. Instead, one can see through the fates and actions of Uma and Arun very real tensions between different value systems and appreciate the differences between them. Like Uma, essentially her Indian counterpart, Melanie is also a spinster in waiting, a prospective candidate for prescription medication, physical abuse or worse. In the words of Chandra, "Still, in spite of the novel's half-baked denouement, Fasting, Feasting remains an exquisitely told, powerfully tragic story of the Umas, and the Melanies, of the world who are born gasping for air in a gender-unbalanced social order."124

We have diverse opinions on this novel. The problem with the book is its dry, clinical approach in chronicling the

lives of its characters. The book is obviously well written with hardly a word or phrase out of place. Yet the book lacks passion. As Luciano Lupini says, “In this novel, very well written, may be Desai’s best, we find a brother and a sister, America and India. The former, represented through the exploration of freedom and the latter by the weight of tradition within the Indian family. With the usual precision and character sensibility, the author describes in depth a universe of contrasts, a duality of visions between two cultures, encompassing both the historical structures that give birth to different values and the permanent lightness of human dreams, which seems to be universal.”

“I was always on the outside, a mildly interested voyeur, looking into the lives of uninteresting people. The book offers no chance of getting involved with the characters,” Shankar Sengupta says, “Make sure this is not the first Anita Desai novel you read. This is so unlike her previous works, it makes you wonder who the author really is. The language is different - much lighter and easier to read. Some parts of it remind you of Roy or Desai Jr.” We can read the book over ten days without even remotely feeling the

126 Shankar Sengupta, “Is this really Desai?” (Atlanta, GA: USA, February 21, 2000).
compulsion to finish it quickly. But, as happens with such books, it will eventually get a whole bunch of awards and will probably become prescribed reading in university literature courses.

Rob Stout feels, "Many who read "Fasting, Feasting" as their introduction to Desai will walk away frustrated. She offers no resolutions, creates philosophical dilemmas on the level of George Santayana, and introduces characters who seem to disappear without a trace of meaning to the text."127 Roopali "rgupta" feels there is 'definitely more Fasting than Feasting.' There was no story in this book, just snap shots of life. Nothing really happened, it was like a smooth flow of water, undisturbed and undeterred. He says, "If I thought that this book would give me an insight into an Indian family, I was not satisfied. The characters in Uma's family seemed to be stereotyped, following a well defined path and so was Uma."128 Arun was even more of a mystery. We never really got to know him. He just floated around without any anchor and without purpose. He felt that unlike other books written by Indian writers, this book was written well. There were no long winding descriptions and horrendously constructed sentences.

127 Rob Stout, "Anita Desai's 12th Novel."

128 Roopali, "More Fasting than Feasting" (Montreal: Canada).
Bernard says, "Despite the critical acclaim and Booker Prize nomination, this book is an uninspired attempt to contrast the social ills of two very different societies."

The theme is perhaps noble and difficult, but Desai fails to pull it off. Neither of the main characters, Uma and Arun, are portrayed in more than one dimension and are hardly worth caring for. One learns less about them than how they are perceived by others. The events that pepper Uma's life in India are nothing more than disjointed vignettes and Arun's little window into a dysfunctional suburban American family left an empty feeling. Desai deserves credit for her skills in human and social observation but the entire novel is only that and never once engages the reader's heart and mind in the story-telling. There was really no conclusion or even climax to the book.

On the other hand Morgan Ann Adams says "Any first time readers of Anita Desai will become lifelong fans after perusing Fasting, Feasting. Set in modern India, yet steeped in traditional Indian customs and traditions, Desai unveils a culture full of magic and inconsistency." He found some of the negative comments of others surprising since he felt this to be the most compelling of Desai's books. He thought

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129 Bernard, "A Little Empty Music".

that it is deceptively simple and quite profound in parts. Unlike many other novels, this one does not gloss over or pretend to hide the obvious flaws and irrationality of either the Indian or American culture. Instead, it delivers a poignant, often startling and ultimately positive view of acceptance—of one's life, of one's family and of one's culture. As far as the ending is concerned, it is wholly truthful. What aspect of life ends with any real sense of closure?"

_Fay Weldon_ is all praise for Desai: "What a pleasure! She is really one of the most accomplished novelists writing today-- the book flows like water, it comes like a gift to the parched. Heart-rending, yes of course, being about how rescue never comes, but so alive in its appreciation of life's consolations as to be quite magical."¹³¹

_William B. Noel_ says, "The more I reflect on the novel, the more I am impressed with her insight and intelligence. This is the first novel I've ever read by an Indian Author, so I have no frame of reference within which to compare this novel. Desai certainly has her own merits as a writer and her own opinions as a viewer of the world, but her effort comes out a little uneven and undisciplined."¹³² The story is

¹³¹ Fay Weldon, qtd., by Rob Stout in _Anita Desai_.

¹³² William B. Noel, "Places are Not What they Seem" (Fort Myers: FL United States, January 26, 2001).
beautifully written, full of poignancy as well as humour and the passage of time is handled with consummate skill. And yet, the novel is like a silent movie. The images flicker and interact with each other, but without sound one cannot hear, sense of even feel involved. I refer these feelings in relation to the book of course. It does have the "grainy" and sepia tinted tone of yesteryear though. On the surface the families radiate wholesome values, but below it they are blinkered to the desires and aspirations of their own members.

"The story raises questions of nationality versus human nature, the loneliness of the human soul, and the search for affection in a world devoid of love. While the story itself may have worked, it is written in a boring, almost expository manner. Desai doesn't spend time developing her characters and they come across as flat. They seem puppets in a play rather than people. The novel is extremely plot driven and jam packed with too many issues and too little exploration. That's why Divya feels, "I would rather have a simple story and a world of breathing, true to life characters than a story filled with issues and characters that don't emote. This book gave me a good look at how not to write prose."134

In the words of Kasia Boddy, "Undoubtedly Fasting, Feasting was an excellent novel with strong narrative, interesting characters and discussions on unignorable human

134 Divya "luckydivya", “Terrible” (USA, January 12, 2001).
issues.” Its intricacies and vivid images resonate from one culture across an ocean to another, leaving the reader unsettled but more aware of a rich fabric of feeling behind the veil of ordinary life. Mary Rawson says it is a delicate and moving story about the “sticky web of family conflict and she hopes, “I am sure that soon enough, this magician of words will weave another enticing web.”

Ultimately, Anita Desai has established herself as one of India’s finest fiction writers. “To me, great authors are the ones who can make you keep turning the pages, eager to read the next line although there may be more pressing matters at hand - and Desai fulfills that description.” Elaine Showalter says, “This is a bland, flat tale from an otherwise brilliant novelist. And yet, the novel is like a silent movie. The images flicker & interact with each other, but without sound one cannot hear, sense of even feel involved. I refer these feelings in relation to the book of course. It does have the "grainy" and sepia tinted tone of yesteryear though.” Julie says, “The ending left me wondering if somebody

135 Kasia Boddy, Mining for Silver.
136 Mary Rawson, “Desai’s Fasting, Feasting is all feast, no famine”.
forgot to bind the final chapter into the book - strange but acceptable.”

139 Julie, “The Thin Line between Feasting and Fasting"