

THE ROLE OF FOOD AS AN IDENTITY MARKER IN ANITA DESAI'S *FASTING FEASTING*

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ABSTRACT

Food Studies is witnessing an unprecedented rise, offering avenues to explore socio-cultural and political dimensions of literature. Anita Desai's Fasting, Feasting (1999) serves as a fertile ground for such an exploration. Through the lens of food and foodways, this paper examines the intersectionality of gender, identity, and consumption in both Indian and Western contexts as depicted in the novel. Highlighting themes of marginalization, gender roles, and transnational identity, it reveals how food functions as a medium for control and resistance. The dichotomy of "fasting" and "feasting" encapsulates not only cultural contrasts but also the disparities in autonomy and agency, especially along gendered lines.

Keywords: *Food Studies, Identity, Gender, Intersectionality, Marginalisation.*

Introduction

Food is singularly a personal experience and adds a specific identity through choices of cuisine. The profound influence of food on individual life specifically in terms of habitation and social status is characteristically a feature of prevalent food culture and nutritional needs. In addition, gender appears as a focal point in all societies to pinpoint how food choices vary between males and females. Such distinctive habits pertaining to food reflect broad beliefs like what to eat and when to eat during fasting. Further the food preferences of gender like males strongly project food-related behaviour of dominance. Barthes has rightly stated: Food... is a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behaviour (Towards a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption, 24). The taste and texture are indeed strong objective correlatives and function as one of the novel's central tropes.

Anita Desai, an Indian novelist and short story writer, is renowned for her nuanced depiction of the inner lives of her female characters. Her works often delve into the conflicts within families and the alienation experienced by middle-class women. Desai is credited with introducing the psychological novel genre to India, following in the tradition of Virginia Woolf, and she has been a trailblazer in addressing feminist issues. Her *Fasting, Feasting* presents a poignant portrayal of identity and agency through its

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dual narrative structure—one rooted in India and the other in the United States. The titular binary, *Fasting* and *Feasting*, encapsulates both physical and metaphorical dimensions of consumption and deprivation. As Desai succinctly observes through the character of Uma, “Her life seemed to have turned into a long, meandering fast” (Desai, 1999, p. 122), signaling the chronic deprivation of agency faced by women within patriarchal constraints.

Her exploration of male psychology goes deeper than mere appearances, as seen in her early novels such as *Cry*, *The Peacock* (1963) and *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975), which tackles the themes of the suppression and oppression of Indian women. In *Fire on the Mountain* (1979), she employs poetic symbolism and sound, while other significant works like *Baumgartner’s Bombay* (1988) and *In Custody* (1984) are rich in imagery, gesture, dialogue, and reflection. The novel *Fasting, Feasting* (1999) examines the contrasts and connections between Indian and American cultures. Its direct language and simple structure nonetheless address significant issues effectively. The book is divided into two sections: the first follows Uma living with her parents in India, while the second tracks her brother Arun’s experiences studying in America. The novel’s contextual web is framed around food, with the parents exercising control through repressive family norms. It suggests that interpreting the novel as a binary contrast between Indian ‘fasting’—symbolizing not only religious abstinence but also the poverty endured by many—and American ‘feasting,’ which signifies abundance, offers a limited perspective. From the outset, Desai highlights the theme of women’s restricted roles outside of marriage. Through careful use of characters, situations, and dialogues, she conveys this theme, along with the complex nature of human relationships, which is a recurring motif in her work.

Anita Desai’s *Fasting, Feasting* (1999) has also generated significant critical attention due to its exploration of themes such as diasporic alienation, gender roles, and psychological oppression. Desai’s narrative offers a fertile ground for discussions about these themes, reflecting the complex interplay of identity within a literary framework. This paper particularly engages with the novel through the emerging field of Food Studies, which has recently expanded into literary criticism, offering innovative perspectives on how food functions symbolically in literature. Food Studies has brought a nuanced understanding to literary analysis, emphasizing that food is not merely a source of sustenance but a symbol of cultural, social, and political dynamics. This approach aligns with postcolonial and post-liberal perspectives, which highlight how material culture, including food, reflects broader socio-political contexts and identities. As Carole Counihan notes, food is “endlessly meaningful” and serves as a marker of ethnic identity, influencing and reflecting various facets of identity, including gender, class, and nationality. Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw’s concept of intersectionality further enriches this analysis by examining how overlapping social categories, such as race, gender, and class, shape individual experiences.

In *Fasting, Feasting*, food practices reveal significant social distinctions and gender dynamics, particularly in the context of India and the United States. The novel’s title, referencing both fasting and feasting, encapsulates the disparity in consumption patterns and their implications for character interactions and identities. This paper will explore these themes, focusing on how food acts as a conduit for understanding identity, marginalization, and intersectionality within the narrative.

Feasting and Fasting: The Gendering of Consumption

The dichotomy of fasting and feasting is most evident in the gendered power dynamics within the Indian household. Mama and Papa embody rigid patriarchal archetypes, with food becoming a tool of control. Mama’s dominance in the kitchen is superficial, as decisions about what and how much is consumed remain Papa’s prerogative. As Uma reflects, “There was nothing Mama could do but comply, as if she too were one of the children” (Desai, 1999, p. 45). Sherry Ortner’s argument that women are symbolically aligned with nature and men with culture reinforces this disparity (Ortner, 1974). The domestic space, particularly the kitchen, becomes a site of subjugation rather than empowerment. Women like Uma are relegated to the role of caregivers, expected to serve food but rarely partake in its enjoyment. Counihan’s observation that “women often eat last, least, and worst” is particularly resonant here (Counihan, 1998, p. 4).

Rana Dasgupta’s introduction to *Fasting, Feasting* highlights the novel’s portrayal of how societal norms, particularly concerning food practices, control individuals, especially women. Carole Counihan’s research underscores the significance of food in shaping gender relations and identities across cultures. In Desai’s novel, food practices reflect the gendered dynamics of power and control, reinforcing traditional roles and hierarchies. Food preparation and consumption are central to the portrayal of gender roles in the novel. For instance, the character of Mama (the mother) exercises control over the kitchen and its operations, but this control is symbolic rather than substantive. Although she

oversees the cooking, her authority is overshadowed by Papa (the father), who holds ultimate control and dictates the family's dining norms. This dynamic illustrates how food practices reinforce patriarchal structures, with women's roles being constrained to service and sacrifice. Sherry Ortner added a new dimension to the gender-role divide when she added that "...men are nature, and men are culture...the male world is made, it is a world invented, produced rendered and controlled...an artificial environment, configured to confer status and expression of power." ("Is Male to Female as Nature is to Culture?")

The depiction of the dining table in the novel as a "fertile ground for discussion and debate" reveals how food-related decisions are gendered. Despite Mama's apparent authority in the kitchen, her influence is limited by Papa's overarching control. This reflects a broader societal trend where women's roles in food preparation are often undervalued compared to men's roles in decision-making and consumption. The novel also portrays the gendered nature of food consumption. The ideal woman in Desai's narrative provides and serves food without consuming it herself. This aligns with Counihan's observation that men often eat first, best, and most, while women are expected to forgo their desires to cater to others. This gendered disparity in food access and consumption highlights how food practices reinforce social hierarchies and gender inequalities.

The portrayal of food practices in *Fasting, Feasting* reflects broader societal norms that dictate gender roles. For instance, the mother's recollections of her own experiences with restricted access to certain foods underscore the gendered expectations placed upon women. These experiences are mirrored in the present, where women's access to food remains constrained by traditional norms. The character of Uma exemplifies the impact of these gendered food practices on individual identity. Her role as a provider of food and her forced compliance with familial expectations highlight the limited autonomy afforded to women in the narrative. Uma's experiences underscore the broader theme of gendered marginalization, where women's roles are relegated to service and sacrifice.

The Far-off Land of Aroma

In the second part of the novel, Arun's experiences in the United States provide a contrast to the gendered food practices observed in India. Arun's stay with the Patton family exposes him to a different cultural context, yet the gendered dynamics of food consumption persist. The Patton family's food practices reflect stereotypical gender roles, with Mr. Patton engaging in masculine culinary activities such as grilling meat, while Mrs. Patton avoids meat consumption through her interactions with Arun.

Arun's dissatisfaction with Pattons' food practices highlights his discomfort with the gendered expectations imposed on him. His aversion to the "pervasive odor" of meat and the "grease and blood" associated with it underscores his disconnection from the dominant food practices of his host culture. This experience mirrors his alienation from both his Indian heritage and his current environment. Mrs. Patton's experience of food-related control further reflects gendered dynamics. Her inability to assert her food preferences and her reliance on Arun's vegetarianism to avoid meat highlight her marginalization within her household. Her situation parallels the experiences of women in India, illustrating how gendered food practices transcend cultural boundaries. Arun's interactions with Mrs. Patton and his observations of her situation evoke a sense of familiarity and discomfort. He sees a reflection of his mother's experiences in Mrs. Patton's forced compliance with patriarchal norms. This connection underscores the persistence of gendered food practices across different cultural contexts.

The notion of food as a metaphor for identity and cultural negotiation is evident in Arun's experiences. His preference for impersonal food sources, such as cafeteria meals, reflects his desire to distance himself from his past and the cultural expectations associated with it. Arun's avoidance of cooking and his reluctance to engage with his Indian heritage highlight his struggle with identity and belonging. Arun's experiences in the United States reveal the complexities of negotiating identity within a transnational context. His interactions with the Patton family and his subsequent avoidance of cultural practices underscore his struggle to reconcile his past with his present. This negotiation of identity through food practices reflects broader themes of assimilation and resistance in the context of globalization.

Rich Food, Poor Food: The Spread of Hyphenation

Desai's female characters-Uma, Anamika, and Mira-Masi-experience profound marginalization that is reflected in their interactions with food. Anamika's forced marriage and eventual demise symbolize the extreme consequences of patriarchal oppression. Her inability to enjoy food becomes a metaphor for her suppressed autonomy: "Anamika never asked for anything, as if her appetite too had been beaten out of her" (Desai, 1999, p. 87). Similarly, Mira-masi's ascetic lifestyle underscores her marginalization as

a widow. Despite her devotion, she exists on the periphery of familial and societal structures. Her abstinence from certain foods serves as both a spiritual practice and a societal expectation, reinforcing the gendered dynamics of control and deprivation.

Uma's plight is particularly telling. As a single woman in a patriarchal society, her life revolves around servitude. The recurring motif of her being denied simple pleasures, such as sweets, exemplifies the broader denial of agency: "The gulab jamun was taken away just as quickly as it was served" (Desai, 1999, p. 62). This deprivation mirrors the systemic disempowerment of women in her household. Ramu's character, despite his physical disability, holds a position of relative privilege due to his gender. His role as a protector for Uma highlights the gendered dynamics of power and control. However, his status as a disabled man also reflects the complex interplay of disability and gender in shaping social hierarchies.

Anamika's experiences highlight the trauma and abuse associated with forced social practices. Her marriage and subsequent treatment by her husband and mother-in-law illustrate the impact of societal expectations on individual identity. Anamika's transition from a promising student to a marginalized servant reflects the broader theme of identity erosion through societal constraints. These characters' interactions with food and their respective social roles provide a nuanced understanding of how identity is shaped by societal norms and marginalization. The novel's depiction of food practices reveals the complexities of identity formation within a context of gendered and social hierarchies.

Transnational Encounters: The Patton Family

Arun's journey to the United States introduces a starkly different, yet equally fraught, relationship with food. The Patton family's culinary practices reveal Western anxieties about gender roles and consumption. Mr. Patton's obsession with grilling meat—a quintessentially masculine activity—contrasts with Mrs. Patton's reliance on frozen meals and her fascination with Arun's vegetarianism. Mrs. Patton's marginalization within her household parallels the experiences of Indian women like Mama and Uma. Her inability to assert her dietary preferences reflects the universality of gendered food dynamics. Arun observes, "She nibbled at the salad but seemed uninterested, her gaze flitting anxiously toward the empty plates of her family" (Desai, 1999, p. 198). Arun's alienation is heightened by his aversion to the Patton family's consumption habits. His preference for impersonal, bland cafeteria meals underscores his detachment from both his Indian heritage and the American lifestyle. As Desai poignantly writes, "Food seemed to Arun an unbridgeable chasm between him and the rest of the world" (Desai, 1999, p. 203).

Conclusion

Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting* masterfully uses food as a lens to explore identity, agency, and marginalization. The dichotomy of fasting and feasting transcends cultural boundaries, highlighting the universal nature of gendered and social hierarchies. Through its nuanced portrayal of food practices, the novel offers profound insights into the complexities of identity formation in a globalized world. By examining how food functions as a medium of control, resistance, and negotiation, this study contributes to the growing field of Food Studies within literary criticism. As Desai's characters navigate their culinary landscapes, they reveal the enduring intersections of gender, culture, and power. The novel's examination of gendered food practices underscores how societal norms and expectations shape individual experiences. By exploring the characters' interactions with food, Desai highlights the complexities of identity formation within a context of marginalization and social hierarchies. The transnational experiences of characters like Arun further illustrate the negotiation of identity in a globalized world. Overall, *Fasting, Feasting* provides a nuanced depiction of how food functions as a symbol of identity and social dynamics. The novel's rich portrayal of food practices and their implications for character interactions offers valuable insights into the intersectionality of identity, revealing the intricate ways in which food shapes and reflects the complexities of human experience.

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