

Mapping the Quagmire of Singlehood: Uma as Focal Point in Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting*

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Abstract

Fasting, Feasting is a novel by Anita Desai in two parts with the first part set in a typical temple town in India and the second in the suburbs of Massachusetts in the US. Uma is at the centre of the novel, overtly in the first half and subtly in the second. Through the portrayal of 'not-so intelligent' and 'unattractive' female protagonist Uma, Anita Desai gives a first-hand account of Uma's life under the demanding rule of her parents. Through the fate of Uma, Desai also throws light on how the single woman who lacks financial security becomes a victim of the social system in India. Uma is imprisoned and deprived of the basic rights and simple pleasures. It is shameful the way she is treated, quite like a domestic servant. She becomes an object of universal derision and a figure of fun. Though Uma is able to see things in their correct perspective, she rebels inwardly and is not able to transform this rebellion into outward protest. There is something lacking in her, a will and courage to come out of the web that her strict and conventional parents have woven around her. She lacks the inner strength to break free. Since the parents consider Uma a burden, they desperately try to get her married off. Anxious to eradicate the implied dishonour in a broken alliance, Mama Papa soon find and settle on a man who is not young and has already been married. The marriage does not work and a divorce is arranged for her by her parents in due course of time as was her marriage, without her consent. The parents stop thinking of Uma's marriage and she is condemned to wait on her parents and run the house for them for the rest of her life. Eventually, Uma takes charge of the home and finally assumes the role of a succour and support to her parents, in tenderness and not under duress. Thus, from being an abject victim and a visible embarrassment Uma imperceptibly dons the mantle of the anchor and sustainer.

Keywords: Single, Derision, Burden, Dishonour, Victim, Anchor.

Fasting, Feasting is a novel by Indian English novelist, Anita Desai. A writer of novels and short stories, Desai has been active on the literary scene for almost three decades. The novel, *Fasting, Feasting* is in two parts, with the first part set in a typical temple town in India and the second, in the suburbs of Massachusetts in the US. The title is ironical with its binary implications. In Indian culture, the birth of a son is always feasted upon while a daughter spells misery as she is to be married off with a dowry. Such are the implications of fasting 'and 'feasting'; "The novel underscores the dialectical relationship between 'fasting' and 'feasting' and the entangled politics of gender and cultural inequality" (Rahman 81). Uma is at the centre of the novel, overtly in the first half and subtly in the second. Manju Jaidka in her article, "A Plain Tale, but Pause to Think" opines, "The author fixes most of her attention on Uma, the bespectacled, plain, slow-witted daughter who is a hapless victim of the patriarchal set-up". Through the portrayal of 'not-so intelligent' and 'unattractive' female protagonist Uma, Anita Desai gives a first-hand account of Uma's life under the demanding rule of her parents. Through the fate of Uma, Desai also throws light on how the single woman who lacks financial security in India becomes a victim of the social system. Uma is, thus, not only denied definition within her family and subsequently, without.

In a series of flashbacks the writer depicts how Uma becomes a victim to the entrapment at home. Uma's story is one of perpetual deprivation beginning with her adolescence, "The novel is the story of Uma and captures her dreams and desires as well as her frustrations and despairs" (Aggarwal 66). Born as the first child to the inseparable Mama Papa, Uma is not able to show improvement in her studies, nor is she able to maintain class with her successful younger sister, Aruna, or her cousin, Anamika. She keeps failing in her exams and is detained in the same grade. She is not given any remedial or tuition, unlike Arun, her younger brother. Her repeated failures at school give her parents decision not to send her to school any more, some justification, "So now Mama was able to say, 'You know you failed your exams again. You're not being moved up. What's the use of going back to school? Stay at home and look after your baby brother'" (Desai 21). All her attempts to re-join school go in vain. When Arun is born, Uma, in her teens, is asked to withdraw from studies to look after the boy because the boy, as Mamma says, needs "Proper attention" (30). Thus, she is reduced to a baby-sitter and motherhood is forced upon her at an early stage. Indeed, the birth of Arun marks a turning point in the life of Uma. Before Arun's arrival, she was able to do what she wanted to some extent. She was free to move anywhere as she pleased. Arun's birth turns Uma's world upside down as her life changes drastically forever. Uma is ordered around the house to change nappies, order the menu to the cook, help Mama with her chores and run errands to the neighbour, Mrs. Joshi.

Uma deeply loved her school despite her utter lack of any gift for learning, "Uma was at school before any other child, and every day she searched for an excuse to stay on" (Desai 20-21). It was the order, the discipline, the rationality of the convent that pleased her. She loved the mystery of the convent prayers. She sung prayers louder than any other child in the class. It was hard for her to stay away from school. She hated vacations most of all. "There was the wretched weekends when she was plucked into the trivialities of her home, which seemed a denial, a negation of life as it ought to be, sombre and splendid, and then the endless summer vacations when the heat reduced even that pointless existence to further vacuity" (21). To

her, school was also a means of escape from the stifling ambience of her home, to be herself, to be free. However, Uma's love for school was not directly proportional to her understanding of the subjects or her performance in exams, "...in spite of her raging enthusiasm, she was an abject scholar" (21). She failed in every single test, be it English, Hindi, history, geography or arithmetic. There was not a thing Uma put her hand to that did not turn to failure. No doubt she tried hard but never got rewards. The result was "shame and frustration." (21)

Sadly enough, the parents do not try to investigate the reasons why Uma fails in every subject despite her love for school and studies. The mother takes no interest in Uma's schoolwork and tells her to learn other things, things which she considers more important for a girl, "Mama had never taken seriously the need to do any school work, not having gone to school herself" (18). She tries to teach Uma the correct way of folding nappies, of preparing watered milk, of rocking the screaming infant, Arun, to sleep. However, all this teaching does not make Uma perfect in the sphere chosen for her by her mother. She remains her "clumsy, undependable self, dropping and breaking things, frightenedly pulling away from her much too small, too precious, and too fragile brother" (18). All this symbolises Uma's handicapped, limited selfhood. Uma is imprisoned and deprived of basic rights and simple pleasures. It is shameful the way she is treated, quite like a domestic servant. She becomes an object of universal derision and a figure of fun. Her sister Aruna also pokes fun at her and says unkind things about her. She is treated abominably. The novel opens with harassed, home-bound Uma serving her parents' every last whim. The parents, always referred to as Mama and Papa or, blurred as MamaPapa, are discussing what to have with their afternoon tea. Having decided on sweets along with fritters, they summon their daughter Uma to inform the cook. It becomes apparent in the very opening scene that Uma exists or is permitted to exist chiefly to ensure her parents' comfort, "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, letter, sweets—settle back to their slow, rhythmic swinging..." (5). Thus, Uma, tied to the household and tending to her parents' every extravagant demand appears to be a pathetic creature without any individuality of her own.

Myopic, prematurely grey, unbeautiful, lacking any particular charm or grace, Uma is seen to be doomed from birth by less intelligence and unappealing appearance; by the bad luck of having been born into a culture in which a plain middle-class woman has little hope of making an advantageous marriage; and by the additional misfortune of having parents who cannot see her as an individual, entitled to freedom and happiness, but only as a sort of unpaid menial who can be counted on to help raise her younger brother, Arun, and deal with family celebrations and crises. Throughout the first and the longer of the two sections, the failure of Uma's pathetically tentative efforts to leave home and establish her individuality is witnessed, "Uma, the eldest daughter, is a dismal failure in whatever she puts her hands to" (Oliver 249). The novel reflects different sides of a home in male dominated societies where family becomes source of terror instead of comfort. The father is only concerned about Arun, the only son of the family. He frequently criticises and neglects Uma, because of which Uma feels abandoned, lonely and depressed. Mama, who is expected to

perform her role as the protector of children, unexpectedly appears as the extension of the father who goes along with her husband, doing what is supposedly right and expected of her, exhibiting no solidarity and compassion towards Uma. Mother as a principal caretaker in childhood is instrumental in bringing about inner coherence and integration, “Whether the infant will emerge from this phase feeling that the outside world is benevolently disposed and basically trustworthy, whether a reassuring sense of inner continuity and wholeness will predominate over a sense of falling to pieces and life for ever lived in disparate segments” (Kakkar 53). On the contrary, Uma’s mother appears to have positioned herself as a combatant strengthening Papa’s dominance in the family and so Uma is deprived of that coherence and integration.

Uma is able to see that whereas her parents denied education to her, it was forced upon Arun in excess, “It is a great irony of the conservative Indian society that compels Uma to discontinue her study owing to her brother’s wellbeing, on the contrary Arun is sent to America for higher education” (Mishra 112). She frets about the way Arun is subjected to rigorous study all the time, “If one word could sum up Arun's childhood—or at least Uma's abiding expression of it—that word was 'education'(Desai 118). As soon as he comes back from school, Tutors come in a regular sequence. He is given tuition in almost every subject, “...Uma often peeped into Papa's office room which was given over, in the afternoons, to Arun's education. There he sat, at Papa's desk, squirming, chewing his pencils down to the lead, his erasers to mousy shreds of rubber, while the tutors leant back in Papa's armchair...”(119). All this toil brings a letter of acceptance to go abroad for higher studies as reward. However, by the time Arun is so drained of energy and emotions that he does not react at all, “There was... not the hint of a smile, frown, laugh or anything: these had all been ground down till they had disappeared” (121). Uma is greatly disappointed to notice this depletion and lassitude in Arun. She is hurt to see her brother's life ruined by the parents as much as hers has been, “She could have expected no more. It was the expression with which he had gone through several hundred comic books in his childhood... allowing them to flood into his mind and drown there in a deep well of greyness that was his actual existence. Uma could gaze into the well...” (121-22)

Though, Uma is able to see things in their correct perspective, she rebels inwardly and is not able to transform this rebellion into outward protest. There is something lacking in her, a will and courage, to come out of the web that her strict and conventional parents have woven around her. She lacks the inner strength to break free. It is not that Uma does not possess an eager and inquisitive instinct; she shows eagerness to break grounds into a new territory she has never explored earlier. The convent chapel had absorbed her attention and she hoped to be allowed to enter its premises someday, “The nuns at St. Mary’s had allowed her as far as its portals—the assembly room, the hymn-singing— but she had never been admitted into their chapel, and that was where she had wanted to go...” (42- 43). On yet another occasion of religious bathing, Mira masi takes her along with her siblings down to the river. Aruna and Arun avoid being close to the river whereas Uma fearlessly jumps into the river in search of thrill and a new experience without considering the fact that she did not know how to swim, “ It had not occurred to her that she needed to know how to swim, she had been certain the river would sustain her”(43). For Uma, the river symbolises her desire to submerge herself in the mysteries and ecstasy of spirituality, at the same time it also represents a momentary escape

from her life with Mama and Papa. What everyone perceives as “ridiculous and crazy behaviour”(44), is in reality Uma’s vehement attempt to break free and explore new horizons, without caring for what others might think of her, though such instances are rare rather than usual.

Since the parents considered Uma a burden, they desperately tried to get her married off. They began to make a concerted effort to find a suitable bridegroom for her but the proposals did not come up to their expectations and Uma was rejected by one boy after another. Thus, there was no demand for Uma in the marriage market, “Mama worked hard at trying to dispose of Uma, sent her photograph around to everyone who advertised in the matrimonial columns... but it was always returned with the comment ‘We are looking for someone taller/fairer/more educated’...” (86). All their efforts ended in failure and so the parents soon grew weary. However, they continued their pursuit; went through the matrimonial columns in the newspapers regularly and sent the photograph of Uma to their various relatives. They felt hopeful that they would find a suitable bridegroom very soon. Finally, one family came to see her but the prospective bridegroom, from the beginning itself, was indifferent to her and he was disinclined and reluctant to accept her. The Syal family owned no house of their own, so to make them comfortable a negotiated sum was handed over as dowry and the engagement ceremony arranged simultaneously. The family left their house on the pretext that they would inform them later, “But, unfortunately, none came, and they heard no more from the Syals. The weeks went by with decreasing hope and finally Mama relinquished it altogether as painfully as Uma had the ring drawn from her finger” (77-78). Thereafter, no further development took place and the engagement had to be broken eventually.

The parents were left broken-hearted and they again tried hard to find a match for Uma, though against her wishes. Anxious to eradicate the implied dishonour in a broken alliance, Mama Papa soon found and settled on a man who was not young and had already been married. The result was disaster, as mentioned by Francine Prose in a newspaper article “... the family's attempts to find a husband for their naive, compliant daughter result in heartbreak, humiliation and financial disaster.” The marriage took place and it was discovered that the man had not divorced his former wife and was a father of four children. He had only married Uma so that the dowry thus gained could save his ailing pharmaceutical factory in Meerut. Deceived and shattered, Uma underwent great humiliation at her in-laws. No one communicated with her. Abandoned by the man who had married her, she was made to do all household chores squatting on the floor. She felt very uncomfortable as she was not used to do things this way. Derision and harshness was heaped upon her until Uma was ultimately brought back by her father.

A divorce was arranged for her by her parents in due course of time as was her marriage, “The marriage was somehow annulled. Uma was never told of the legal proceedings involved. It was assumed she would not understand, and was never quite certain if she had never actually married or if she was now divorced” (95). The whole incident caused untold damage to Uma. Her parents looked at her with hatred. Uma was vexed in spirit, inwardly. She was filled with a sense of loss and was emotionally inhibited. Significantly, her father was not worried about her feelings or humiliations but more concerned about the money he had lost on the wedding, “... he beat his head with his fists, and moaned aloud about the dowry and the wedding expenses...” (94). The mother also behaved in a similar manner. She did not sympathise at

all with Uma but was only worried about 'material' loss, "At home Mama opened every one of the trunks Papa had insisted Uma pack and bring with her, and checked every item in them ...there was a great deal, Mama lamented, that was lost" (95). The parents bemoan the loss of items but not the loss of a vital part of Uma. Material losses are given much importance over human feelings like love and sympathy.

The parents talk of marrying Uma off no more, "After being cheated twice they finally reconcile to keeping her at home but her status is little better than a servant" (Jaidka). Uma is condemned to wait on her parents and run the house for them for the rest of her life. "Having cost her parents two dowries, without a marriage to show in return" (Desai 96), she is seen as an albatross and a bringer of dishonour. She is considered ill-fated and is, henceforth, allowed only to live on her parents' terms, "She has to bear the additional burden of the two lost dowries which increases the 'proprietary rights' of her parents over her" (Rahman 81). Thus she remains single, being deserted by her husband and finally divorced, facing all the predicaments, "A married woman has always someone to fall back on but a single woman is invariably at the receiving end. She has no support and all her protestations are suppressed" (Bahmbhani 165). There is no one to restore or rehabilitate Uma to a normal life. Her parents and siblings are indifferent and uninterested in her. For her, life is completely meaningless. Staying single makes Uma an outcast, "Hindu marriage is a sacrament—for the husband, one among many, but for the wife the only one through which she can acquire spiritual gains....If a grown up woman dies without this sacrament she roams about after her death as an evil spirit" (Mies 50). So, while Aruna moves on to become a worldly, assured woman, Uma stays where she was, in the custody of her parents. She finds herself in the clutches of her insensitive parents who are reluctant to let her go and explore a life of her own.

Uma's epileptic fits are also part of this feeble protest. She gets the first fit as a little girl when she goes to meet Mother Agnes to plead for letting her be a part of the convent. She is sure that Mother will convince her parents that she should be allowed to study further. She tells Mother Agnes that her mother wants her to leave school and, instead, look after her newly-born brother. Quite contrary to her expectations, Mother retorts, "Girls have to learn these things too..." (28). Uma is thunderstruck. It is the last thing she has ever expected Mother Agnes to say. She is unable to cope with the shock that from now onwards she will never be able to come to school, which she loved so dearly. The shock is so great that she suffers an epileptic fit, "...Uma suddenly went limp and crumpled.... Nor had she simply fainted—she was writhing, frothing a little at the mouth and moaning, banging her head to one side, then the other" (29). Uma has another fit when she is at the ashram with Mira-masi. She comes back late one evening after having enjoyed the wilderness and fears that Mira-masi will punish her for staying out so long. Afraid and wanting to escape Mira-masi's expected reprimands, she suffers a violent fit, "Perhaps Mira-masi's stare was hypnotic . . . she [Uma] knelt, gazing back into Mira-masi's eyes, held down her shoulders, and began to tremble She clenched her teeth together and bit her tongue . . . she began to roll on the floor" (59). Ironically, no one realises Uma's agony. The priests at the ashram as well as Mira-masi think that she is possessed. They fail to understand that Uma is having a seizure and needs medical treatment. Not only is medical treatment denied to her, the members of her family also accuse her for creating awkward scenes.

Uma necessarily grows into a clumsy, uncoordinated woman who finds it difficult to succeed in almost everything she does. She fails to win the admiration of her parents and siblings despite the fact that she has given her entire life for her family, unwillingly but definitely. She is made to feel guilty for enjoying even the little things that seem to be of no consequence normally, “She feels outcast as her independency is always wavered off at the cost of her parents’ dominance over her”(Radhakrishnan 109). She is not allowed to use a telephone, and if she does when no one is around, she feels that she has committed a crime. The full pathos of her situation is brought out in the incident when “Uma was in disgrace: she had forgotten to lock up the telephone in its box and Papa had returned from the club to find the evidence of her crime...” (146). Uma dreams of running away from this life exhibiting, “how women have to lead a life of suffocation and undeserved suffering—both physical and mental in a male dominated society; how a girl-child craves for parental affection but in the end gets nothing but frustration, isolation and unhomey treatment which lead her on the verge of neurosis.”(Mishra 111)

Resigning herself to the role of single daughter and sister, she, nonetheless, dreams of being elsewhere, perhaps, the place that is inhabited by her brother, Arun who is afforded an education at a private university in suburban Massachusetts by her parents. Uma is certainly not an emancipated woman, rather, an abject victim of patriarchy where sons are preferred to daughters, “Parents justify their preference for sons on several grounds, one of them being that sons are of symbolic significance. They carry the family name and give oblations to parents which ensures safe spiritual journey. On the other hand, girls belong to someone else” (Dhruvarajan 35-36). The doors of education are shut in her face and she is confined to the boundaries of the household, “She is being shuttled between her desires to be what she wants to be and her parents’ decision to see what they want her to be”(Radhakrishnan 107). She is an alienated person, not accepted by the members of her family who are otherwise supposed to love and protect her in the teeth of adversities. She has no friend with whom she can share her distress, “She could write a letter to a friend—a private message of despair, dissatisfaction, yearning...but who is the friend?”(Desai132)

Her parents and siblings fail to see the good in her which could make them proud of her. Rather, they only find faults and weaknesses in her. Uma feels the same suffocation back at home which her brother suffers from in America. It appears, then, that Uma's life is made up of inconclusive recurrences. Uma struggles to assert her desire for individuality and freedom, needs that are continuously snuffed out by Mama and Papa in the name of family tradition as “They expect her to have no other needs, desires, or priorities other than meeting their needs. It's as if they see their daughter as an extension of themselves and their will, rather than as her own person” (Haque 2). Her fascination with the people in her life who have carved an independent path for themselves shows how much she yearns for such a life with no hope of fulfilling it. Characters such as Mira-masi, Ramu, and Dr.Dutt all serve as alternative models for Uma, yet she is frustrated because she knows she can never live the kind of life she wants to live.

However, at the end, she is seen as a 'keeper' of her parents, obliged and capable of looking after them as long as they live. Mama Papa's co-dependency extends to her as they scream her name for every

little thing. This assumption of a relatively strong capacity becomes clear in the episode when Uma, her parents, Anamika's parents and other relatives go for the last rites of Anamika. Mama feels weak and looks toward Uma for support, "Uma suddenly finds a hand clasping hers tightly. It is Mama's.... Mama's eyes are closed and there are tears on her cheeks. 'Mama,' she whispers, and squeezes the hand back.... Consolingly, she whispers..." (155-56). Thus, Uma takes charge of the home and finally assumes the role of a succour and support to her parents, in tenderness and not under duress. She realises the necessity of her being within the parental home, "Yet in spite of all this dullness in her life, Uma displays an astuteness and understanding that none of the other characters is capable of" (Oliver 249). Although, tradition has accorded her no specific space and her parents and the larger society have treated her accordingly so far, yet in the light of Anamika's ruin, Mira-masi's privation, Aruna's dissatisfaction and Arun's lonely and confused longing, Uma's situation is fairly stable. Circumstances have made her central to the family. From being an abject victim and a visible embarrassment, Uma imperceptibly dons the mantle of the anchor and sustainer.

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