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Food, Body Practices and Masculinity: A Study of Anita Desai's *Fasting Feasting*

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“Eating is our earliest metaphor, preceding our consciousness of gender difference, race, nationality and language. We eat before we talk.”

(Atwood 1987, 53)

This significant novel *Fasting Feasting* is divided into two parts, using food in metaphorical and literal ways. The constant theme is the purchasing, preparation and consumption, of food. Through different methods of consumption, Anita Desai underscores the contradiction, inequalities working under the very structure of transnational world. She also demonstrates how the women's body 'feeds' identity and how consumption habits affects her a woman's corporeal and cultural experience. The bifurcated title, itself, suggests multiple intended meanings, including the contrast between the Indian and American eating habits, the contrast between modes of treatment between genders, and even the representation of the bingeing and purging of the character Melanie.

By presenting binaries or dyad of fasting and feasting, hunger and plenty, and fasting and bulimia, Desai try to consider the variety of ways in which preparation and consumption shape individual's identities and how in turn, they seem to be shaped by eating habits and food choices. Through dichotomous narrative structure, Desai seems to bring out the good and bad of both the cultures- Indian and American by taking recourse to the food imagery. The narrative is filled with food and eating images teeming with multiple layers of meaning that reflect on the characters' personal identities and carry the action forward. Being centered on food and eating, the power structure of the novel affects the gender issues and familial relationships. So, the novel talks about the human being's hungers and cravings on one hand and gratification overindulgence and surfeit on the other.

Food, Power and Masculinity:

By showing that the most banal of human activities can yield in excavating important insights about daily life, Desai unveils the most unintimidated and tragic aspects of the characters, especially women and their positions in the society. On the highest point of the power- structure pyramid, the father clenches the highest level and mama is the instrument or agent of his patriarchal power. Meat and English language becomes a symbol for the power and status to papa. The exertment of power is visible during the 'orange –peeling ceremony' when he enjoys all the juicy parts of the orange and she and Uma just left with the pith and peels rested on the plate.

“She picks out the largest orange in the bowl and hands it to Mama who peels it in stripe, then divides it in to separate segments. Each segment is then peeled and freed of pips and threads till only the perfect globules of juice are left, and then passed, one by one, to the Papa’s plate. One by one, he lifts them with the tips of his fingers and places them in his mouth. Everyone waits while he repeats the gesture, over and over. Mama’s lips are pursued with the care she gives her actions, and their importance” (Desai 23).

Cooking and eating has various but yet different connotations in the specific situations and ‘the relationships of gender and cooking are site of struggle and transformation in specific historical locations and power relations’ (Ashley et all 138-139). While hashing out Margaret Atwood’s fiction, Emma Parker states that ‘while literature is suffused with the scenes of men eating, there is a conspicuous absence of images of women engaged in the same activity.’...Parker concludes that ‘women are rarely depicted eating in literature because consumption embodies coded expressions of power’. True as this may be of Atwood’s fiction, where the powerful are characterized by their eating and the powerless by their non eating’ (qtd in *Modernity__Masculinity_and_Consumption_in_the_Indian_Family-libre.pdf*).

The structure of power and knowledge is linked to subjugation and control. Uma gets no chance of freedom but surveillance. The problem of agency arose in front of her father when she went to hang out with her cousin. Angelia Poon states in her article “In a Transnational World: Exploring Gendered Subjectivity, Mobility, and Consumption in Anita Desai’s *Fasting, Feasting*,” “Uma’s powerlessness and lack of status is signaled in relation to food in other scenes where we see her—in the manner typical of daughters raised in traditional Indian homes—having always to serve food to her father. She passes the food along, but must not partake of it”. The writer also used language tactics such as repetition and interruption as a vehicle to represent the exertion of power structure that is coded in food:

'We are having fritters for tea today. Will that be enough? Or do you want sweets as well?'"

'Yes, yes, yes-there must be sweets-must be sweets, too. Tell cook. Tell cook at once.

"Uma!Uma!

'E,Uma!' (Desai3).

So, Desai puts the gender on the table and shows the domestic servitude and subservient approach to women. She also envisages the passive, vulnerable and subordinate status of women. As a male figure, it the father and Arun who feast on power. They have the privilege of enjoying especial kinds of facilities. As a male, Papa enjoys the power which other members don't have:

“The figure bowl is placed before Papa. He dips his fingertips in and wipes them on the napkin. He is the only one in the family who is given a napkin and a finger bowl; they are emblem of his status” (Desai 24).

As Mama act as an agent of the Papa, she feels happy in serving him. “Her dark eyes flash with the brightness of her achievement and pride” (Desai 23) after the ceremony of serving him food. The male consumption over richness is given preference in many societies as Mama says that “in my days, girls in the family were not given sweets, nuts and good things to eat. If something special had been bought in the market, like sweets or nuts, it was given to the boys in the family”(Desai 5-6).

Arun, as the son of the family, is privileged with more power and utmost care by his parents than either Uma or Aruna. While Uma metaphorically fasts on education, consumption, and travel, she is forced by her parents to take care for her Arun and ordered to help Mama to feed Arun with the strict diet his father, has prescribed to encourage his nourishment and growth into a strong man. Desai describes Arun’s diet:

“A fixed quantity of milk was poured down his gullet whether he wanted it or not and, later, the prescribed boiled egg and meat broth. Then, when Papa returned from the office, he would demand to know how much his son had consumed and an answer had to be given . . .” (Desai 30).

He is also cherishes other privileges based on his gender and as a male, he got the opportunities of getting good education, traveling, and experiencing different cultures. But despite these opportunities which he enjoys also due to the increased mobility, he interestingly enough, does not cherish the diet arranged by his father and seems to stay small and sickly:

“They took it in turns to try – Mama, Uma, and the ayah – to spoon mouthfuls into him when he was not looking. . . . he averted his face at just the right moment, or else spat out what they had forced in” (Desai 32).

When they began to understand the fact that Arun is a vegetarian, Papa became perturbed and disappointed. The fasting-feasting binary may also be seen in the male characters, their relationship with meat, and the stereotypes conveyed by their decisions. Arun’s somewhat-progressive father feels strongly that meat is an important of the diet, as a “meat diet had been one of the revolutionary changes brought about in his life, and his brother’s, by their education. He sees (along with cricket and the English language) as true progression” (Desai 32). However, Arun shows his resistance to his father’s control and chooses to practice vegetarianism against his wishes. In the narrative related to Arun, food and the bodies are shown as the symbolic means by which Desai seem to map the young man’s cravings and sense of his own gender and cultural identity. In India, the strict regimen of study imposed on him by his father, is a form of forced feeding that has visible physical consequences. His vegetarianism can be seen his rebellion against the burden of expectation and the coercive methods used on him. Due to relentless study, Arun grows up thin and weak, with no inclination of sport or any other means of entertainment and only “the gait of a broken old man” (Desai 122). Here, food and its relation to

bodies seem to be related to power. Above all, it is his vegetarianism that constitutes the one visceral disposition and natural habit that no amount of applied force or hegemonic control can change. His disgust for meat baffles his father. Meat, together with cricket and the English language were “inextricably linked” and signaled, above all else, progress (Desai 32). Arun’s refusal of meat amounts to a devaluation of masculine identity, it is an inexplicable atavistic desire “to return to the ways of his forefathers, meek and puny men who had got nowhere in life” (Desai 33).

Men are more likely to become obsessed with exercise because muscular toned bodies are the hegemonic masculine ideal. Preoccupation or obsession with muscularity can also be seen in men that results in the use of taking anabolic steroids and growth hormones. Rod is very obsessed his body in getting and maintaining shape. He spends so much time in jogging as his mother says: Jogging, huh? Jogging. That boy spends so much time getting into shape he hasn’t time leftover to do anything with it (Desai 206).

Arun’s vegetarianism again surprises and causes anxiety in Mrs. Patton’s family. His diet cuts him off from the red-meat-eating and sports-mad world of Rod and his father. There is no question of Arun bonding with Rod, the young man whose phallic name under-scores his youthful masculinity and obsession with getting on the foot-ball team (Poon 44).

Food and eating habits again become a referent to show Uma's s American counterpart, the Pattons' bulimic daughter, Melanie. Her bulimia can be seen an attempt to fit her body in modern idea of ‘perfect and slim’ body. They have been seen as being ruled by their physical bodies and emotion in comparison to men. Because women’s bodies are seen only as the objects of beauty and desire, they spend a lot of money to attain ultra slim and perfect figure .Actually, it is the western depiction of ultra thin models that affect women worldwide and it create in them dissatisfaction. “Their body image, dissatisfactions and how they suffer from these disorders reflect larger societal pressures (Weltzin et al2005) (qtd. in Moore_Mycek-libre.pdf). Susan Bordo is right when she says “.....eating disorders as arising out of and reproducing normative feminine practices of our culture, practices which train the female body in docility and obedience to cultural demands while at the same time being experienced in terms of power and control”(Bordo 17). So, Desai tries to dismantle the culturally-encoded concepts of femininity and presents a critique of the notion of ideal body image of women in west which results in eating disorders. In order to come to terms with this ideal of feminine body image, Melanie becomes a bulimic. Her confused identity becomes visible in practicing bulimia. So, food as a symbol carries great significance in bulimic purging of it by Melanie. Her identity moves between spaces where she is and what she wants to be. Susan Bordo rightly says that body is framed by cultural practices. Shortly after Arun notices Melanie’s diet of junk food and peanuts, he sees that she is vomiting on a regular basis. He is confused and concerned—even more so than Rod appears to be when Arun approaches him about the situation, although he also knows of Melanie’s habit. Rod tells Arun:

“Man, she’s nuts, that kid, That’s all these girls are good for . . . Too lazy to get off their butts and go jogging or play a good hard ballgame. So they’ve got to sick it up” (Desai 204).

“Dislike, aversion and repugnance towards food might be caused by other factors, such as a fear of obesity. This fear is seen as striking matter brought up by food and the prevalence eating disorders. The fear of being conspicuously overweight is widespread in most of the countries. The reason might be an effect on health or the “undermining the socially attractive body-image” (Mennell 1987: 301). The media’s vast influence on the awareness of the majority of population has enormous consequences, one of which is eating disorders. These need due attention and treatment. Eating disorders such as bulimia, anorexia and binge eating are primarily rooted on psychological factors. people are excessively obsessed about their weight. They are concerned too much with calories contained in their food. They fallaciously suppose they will live better life if they lose weight (EatingDisorders2012). The risk factors include depression, being criticized for their body shape or weight, being excessively concerned with being slim, low self-esteem or being a perfectionist, particular experiences, such as sexual or emotional abuse or the death of someone close and stressful situations (Eating Disorders 2011)” (Diploma_thesis-Zuzana_Polisenska.pdf 36-37)

Meanwhile, Mrs. Patton hardly notices the decline in Melanie’s health, apparent to Arun by her physical appearance. She finally says to Melanie one day, “Daddy thinks you ought to go outdoors and play games, Melanie, . . . You have such a bad colour. You’re not sick, are you, dear?” (Desai 206). This shows how completely oblivious Mrs. Patton is to her daughter’s needs and to the extent of their relationship. Melanie lashes out at her mother when she fixes her scrambled eggs: “Why can’t you make me what I want? What do you think we all are – garbage bags you keep stuffing and stuffing? . . . Everything you cook is – poison!” (Desai 210). Mrs. Patton’s response is one of denial until she finds Melanie in her own vomit one day and begins to realize the seriousness of the situation.

Eating disorders should also be seen from the perspective of culture as many philosophers say. So Melanie’s binging and purging can be seen to represent her emotional reaction to her mother’s neglect and her own unhealthy lifestyle in the American culture. The author seems to imply the result of the excessiveness of American culture. She is an embodiment of real hunger, the pain of which only Arun recognizes. When he sees her in the agonizing throes of vomiting, he realizes that “this is no plastic mock-up, no cartoon representation such as he has been seeing all summer; this is a real pain and a real hunger” (Desai 224). He has an epiphany, noticing a connection between the two cultures that he thought were nothing alike. He sees:

“a resemblance to the contorted face of an enraged sister who, failing to express her outrage against neglect, against misunderstanding, against inattention to her unique and singular being and its hungers, merely spits and froths in ineffectual protest. How strange to encounter it here, Arun thinks, where so much is given, where there is both licence and plenty” (Desai 217).

Melanie’s character can be taken both as an example of fasting and feasting; she seems to be hungry for nourishment, love, and attention, but she tries to fill this gap with candy instead, only making herself sick to hide the pain and embarrassment afterwards. Her act of compulsive eating is seen to stem from despair, loneliness and neglect of parental love. The reader can assume Melanie also purges to keep from gaining weight after binging, in attempt to have an “ideal”

body figure such as represented in American media. Arun, then links the two cultures and finds similarity in two. Poon describes Uma's condition by saying "Uma's spiritual, intellectual, and emotional starvation finds its physical counterpart in the inexpressible hunger underlying Melanie's eating disorder. This is Arun's epiphany and the one tangible link between the two worlds and two different subjects" (46). By this realization, Arun experiences another culture and penetrates under the façade of American culture, and in the end, builds a genuine, comforting bond with Mrs. Patton.

Melanie's identity is re-appropriated through her return to food. She is sent in to an institution where neuroses in adolescent girls are treated. "She started eating cereal, bread, butter, milk and boiled carrots without throwing up; she drinks her chocolate at night" (Desai 229). Uma is overtaken by the periodic fits and fainting spells. This can be seen her desire to rebel or protest against hegemonic patriarchal control and oppressiveness. Her body tries to transgress the boundaries drawn by her dominant parents:

"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" (Desai 111).

Uma's hysteric fits takes her on another journey symbolically which she unconsciously wants. As Poon argues that "Momentary as they are, these fits and fainting spells are the only means by which Uma gets to transcend her body and situation; they transport her and allow her to travel to another place metaphorically while signaling her resistance against her life and expressing her inchoate and unarticulated, though no less deep, desires" (41). These fantasies of escape provide the author to throw light on the power relations that are encoded in the act of fasting and on women's condition in the society.

There are some desires inflicted upon women's bodies in the oppressive hegemonic society. When they fail to fulfill these expectations, they are reduced to nobody. Female space is not a place for women to fulfill their own, but a space created for women to fulfill the desires of men. Anamika also went through a miscarriage "...after a beating. It was said she could bearing no children. Now, Anamika was flawed, she was damaged goods. She was no longer perfect" (Desai 72). This also shows that women have been defined by their biological potentiality. Morgan and Scott say that "women have been defined by their 'biological potentiality', and the female reproductive system has worked to reduce women to the sum of their child-bearing parts" (qtd. in *The Female Body in Margaret Atwood's Edible Woman and Lady Oracle.pdf*).

The result comes out in her death as she was burnt alive. So female body becomes a site and means of oppression upon and by which patriarchy seems to exert control over women. Foucault is right when he says that individuals are "the product of a relation of power exercised over bodies" (qtd. in Robert J.C. Young). But the old lady who suffered from cancer and had going through chemotherapy, do not seem to confirm to this ideal of perfect body. She has power and agency and seems to blur the patriarchal strictures of looking perfect. She claims her body and shows her disregard to this norm by saying:

“My husband wants me to wear a wig, but I say what the hell, I don’t care about all that, looking glamorous and all such. What I care about is getting me an education’...she put her hand on her book bag with pride as if swearing an oath of allegiance.’(Desai 175).

Conclusion:

Food and eating habits can be gendered, sexualized and through the bifurcated notion of consumption, Desai brings out the practices of bodies that cause eating disorders in women and affects their identities. She also demonstrated that symbolic importance of food and the power invested in it affects women’s lives and bodies across cultures. Women’s body becomes either a site of disciplinary control or liberating desire. While through eating disorders, she criticized the attempt to regain slim and perfect bodies. The power food brings to those who consume, and control it, can be the issue of power and position. At the same time, she figures out the hegemonic ideals of masculinity through the power vested in eating habits and meat.

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