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Consumption and Eviction: Resistance, Complicity, Gender and Power through Food in Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting*

Meghal Karki
Independent Researcher.

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Abstract:

Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting* holds the distinguished honour of being the only novel to be announced as the runner up for the Booker Prize. The title of the novel cements its place in anthropologies surrounding food. Food is not simply what we consume to stay alive, but it is polity, and symptomatic of class, caste, religious and cultural identity. The paper will be divided into three sections, and each section will be used to study how food is utilised in the novel as a site for the cementing and contestation of power relations and gender politics, and how food and the body is used as a medium of resistance and complicity.

Keywords: food, gender, power, space, resistance, body politics.

When the word food is uttered, read or heard, a flood of memories flit in one's brain; of hunger, festivals, feasting and fun, of tasty and disgusting food, of meals shared with family and friends, of situations in which food was the center and human relationships clustered around it. The fact that food is a biological necessity does not run through one's mind immediately, for the affective ties that accompany food become primary. Food is central to social life, and like all social processes, food is a prism that absorbs and reflects a host of cultural phenomena, and influences the shaping of community, personality and family (Counihan, 6). While food can act as a common denominator in many cases, it is more often than not a signifier of distinction, of class, caste and religious difference, an arbiter of 'taste', and a way of wielding power. This is because food is not viewed in isolation as an object, as it is a part of the process of consumption, and is deeply entangled with the processes of production, reproduction and distribution. The study of food and eating, thus, is not only a matter of physiological needs, but also of its aesthetic, affective, performative and psychological aspects. Consequently, food has been used richly by authors in literature to represent a wide variety of emotions, actions, explanations, social processes, psychological states and so on. Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting*, published in 1999, is one of the many works of literature that explore the position food occupies in life, and the very title of the novel is a

testament to her awareness of the semiotics of food, and her rich use of food to reveal the multiple contradictions that exist within individuals is masterful to say the least. Anita Desai's psychological exploration of her characters lends her a unique position in the history of Indian Writing in English and marks the beginning of a new epoch. As the title suggests, the novel is about food and the practises of the body and how relationships, identity, desire, greed, power, control and subversion can be expressed through the mechanisms of consumption and eviction. Divided into two novellas, a superficial reading may lead to a reductive division of the novel according to the title, as feasting and fasting have powerful associations with generosity and asceticism (Appadurai, 495). Labelling India as the land of fasting and America as the land of feasting and stamping the characters with the same labels becomes the obvious choice, and has been researched upon extensively, but a closer reading will reveal the numerous nuances that accompany this seeming binary. It is this very binarism and reductionism that Desai wanted to counter, for she shows how the ideas of fasting and feasting are not oppositional, and merge and blend instead, into a myriad shades and situations, and that perhaps such labels aren't really necessary. In this paper, I will analyse how resistance and complicity, gender and power relations are manifested in the novel through practises of the body, specifically the acts of consumption and eviction of food.

The Gendered Politics of Food Across Borders

In his essay *Gastro-Politics in Hindu South Asia* (Appadurai, 496), Arjun Appadurai argues that food in South Asia can serve two diametrically opposed semiotic functions, to indicate and construct social relations characterized by equality, intimacy, or solidarity; or serve to sustain relations characterized by rank, distance, or segmentation. *Fasting, Feasting* uses both these functions but employs the latter more frequently than the former.

One of the most significant domains of meaning embodied in food is gender, for consumption has repeatedly been linked to copulation for "eating and intercourse both involve passage across body boundaries of external substances that are later incorporated into the body. Both are essential to life and growth, and the instinctive drives for food and sex are similar, and they often take on overlapping symbolic associations" (Counihan, 9). Consequently, the desire to consume is often seen as an expression of sexuality, an open expression and articulation of which is not permitted by patriarchal discourse, for women. Uma, one of the protagonists of Desai's novel, is not usually seen to be consuming food but rather serving it to her family, usually her father and brother, highlighting her marginal position and life bound in

servitude to her family. She does express her desire to consume in several instances in the initial part of the novel, but is sharply reprimanded by her family members and called “greedy” (Desai, 38) and gradually learns to repress the desire within herself (Desai, 12).

In the novel, we see how food is fractured along the lines of gender, and this phenomenon has been observed across the globe, with researchers citing gender as “one of the most significant” cultural and ideological factors that shape consumer demand (Felski, 61). Arun is forcibly fed milk, boiled egg, meat and cod liver oil, without consideration for his vegetarian inclination. Meat and dairy have been deemed signifiers of masculinity and strength for years, for the consumption of the flesh, and its accompanying products, is intertwined with hunting, virility and strength, the gatekeepers of masculinity and sites of their superiority. Additionally, one sees how the nutritional composition of meat and dairy are touted to be essential for a growing boy’s physical and mental development to justify force feeding against his wishes. Papa believes meat to be a signifier of progress (along with cricket and the English language), brought along with his education and refers to the generations that did not consume meat to be “puny and meek” (Desai, 32).

Across oceans, we see how these correlations persist through Rod Patton and his father, whose robust consumption of meat is a marker of their masculinity. Mr. Patton chooses to disregard Mrs. Patton and Arun’s vegetarian nature and preference and continues to bring home “bleeding carcasses” (Desai, 202) and reacts to the reiteration of the aforementioned facts by not reacting at all. Arun finds a reflection of his own father’s expression of denying any opposition and challenge to his authority (Desai, 190). As Rana Dasgupta points out:

"Her Indian and American fathers share an equal paranoia about the intrusion of alien elements to the home, turning them into bleached-out zones. The women who dwell in its small circle suffer from claustrophobic tics, and they sustain themselves with impossible fantasies of transcendence: conviviality, travel and death." (Introduction, Desai, x)

Food, and the process of consumption, take on a different vein of thought, expression and critical contestation when it comes to women, and Desai skilfully depicts the contradictions and blurring binaries in this relationship. The act of consumption, and expressing the desire to consume food, makes women desiring subjects rather than fetishized objects bound in servitude in the traditional patriarchal set up. Through various instances in the novel, and through different categories of food, Desai explores this complex relationship and reveals its varied tenors and manifestations and pays significant attention to the spatial dynamics of the same. Space plays a critical role in consumption, for the public and private sphere, with their vastly

different compositions, exert varying demands on women and occupy different socio-cultural contexts. Women and sweets (of any form) share a deeply intertwined relationship in representation, but this relationship is conceived and nurtured on the sly, within the private sphere of rooms and hidden corners. As Mama in the novel specifies, women and girls weren't given sweets and nuts to eat, for the nourishment and affective qualities that these food items generated were restricted to men, but adds that her mothers and aunts nevertheless slipped them some (Desai, 6), thus forging lasting ties through food. Apart from the refusal of nourishment and the resultant need for secrecy, the tendency to consume sugar in the private space to derive pleasure might be a way to escape the drudgeries of their lives and indulge in, quite literally, a sweeter alternative world and access their sexuality, or perhaps the only way women can be desiring subjects in a patriarchal economy is when they are hidden. Mrs Joshi is seen to sharply critique her daughter-in-law's greed for consuming milk and sugar (Desai, 132), while Uma is sharply reprimanded by her mother in the same manner when she voices her desire to consume the delicious *laddos* made by Mira masi (Desai, 38). Mama's singular stories also revolved around sweets. (Desai, 6). Melanie rejects a home-cooked meal in favour of endless Hershey's bars and ice cream that she "attacks" (Desai, 216), two food items conventionally linked with femininity. Maggie Andrews and Mary Talbot's description of consumption, a sphere where femininity is performed, where versions of femininity are legitimated and negotiated, or contested (Andrews and Talbot, 1), seems tailor made for these incidents.

Melanie's relentless consumption of Hershey's candy bars, her rejection of nutritious food and her bulimia are all linked with the socially constructed images of femininity. The 'ideal' body for a female is defined as slender and reinforced aggressively by media, but it is often an impossible task for a large number of women, and the social pressure surrounding the body leads to the development of low self-esteem, bulimia and anorexia in a significant number of teenage girls. In *Beyond Cravings: Gender and Class Desires in Chocolate Marketing*, Jamal Fahim analyses the advertisements of various brands of chocolates such as Hershey's, Lindor, Cadbury, and Ferrero Rocher, and concludes that they are all targeted exclusively at women and that sexual gratification always finds a place in them. Through bulimia, Melanie is able to actualize the satisfaction of her sexual and consumerist desires and the socially mediated feminine body through the bodily processes of consumption and eviction. Paromita Chakrabarti observes that Melanie's subsistence on chocolate quite clearly reveals the extent of her dependence on such stereotypes of the feminine that regulate appetite and mark desire (Chakrabarti, 233)

However, one must read between the lines of consumption and eviction of food, and analyse *how* the food is consumed. In all the scenes that Melanie is seen to be consuming food, she is seen to eat in manners that violate gender norms; she “gorges” (Desai, 169), “attacks” (Desai, 216) food with a “ferocity” (Desai, 217), eats “sturdily” (Desai, 191) rather than ‘daintily’, she “dives” (Desai, 218) and bites at her food “angrily” (Desai, 224). Melanie’s attitude towards consumption, as we can see, is aggressive, she goes against gender norms by angrily eating, rather than daintily and in small portions, various kinds of junk food, which are desserts, snacks and sweets, and one can certainly argue that her anger stems from the expectations from the female body. Melanie is aware of her condition, but is unable to stop it, and it is only in her own private space that she evicts the food that she has consumed angrily, at night when all are asleep (Desai, 193), with music blasting in her room and the water tap running (Desai, 207) and in isolated paths in the woods (Desai, 226). Like consumption, eviction is also shrouded in secrecy, for the body of the woman and all its functions are heavily sexualised and stringently regulated, and the act of rejecting food and sustenance exposes the fault lines in patriarchal societies, and the many contradictions that are inherent in its foundations and structures. Certain theorists argue that “the act of consumption is analogous to penetration”, and “by refusing bodily penetration through food, anorexic women can be seen to achieve autonomy, control, and power ”(Counhian, 62), but refuse to romanticise eating disorders like anorexia and bulimia (as they have been for centuries) by adding that these radical attempts at definition often end in annihilation of the self through death (Counhian, 75).

Through the above discussion, one can see how, through food, the socio-cultural standards of gender are constructed, negotiated, promoted, performed, and of course, resisted.

Consumption and Eviction: Complicity and Resistance and the Body

The human body has been theorized upon extensively and is among the many means through which identity is constructed. Patriarchal discourse involves having hegemonic control over the body, especially its functions and appearance, and becomes the primary locus of oppression, dominance and social control. It is the site where complicity and submission are gained, but is also the ground where resistance is witnessed, be it intentional or unintentional. Resistance can be on the surface of the body, through piercings, tattoos, extreme haircuts and colouring, or it can be performed visibly through bodily functions. The characters of Uma, Melanie and Arun, demonstrate the same throughout the novel in numerous ways. Melanie’s complicity to the standards of stereotypical femininity through an eviction of whatever she

consumes has been explored in the above section and demonstrates how cultural hegemony perpetrates our consciousness and bodily practices. Uma's myopia and declining vision depict how her body has accepted the narrow course her life will take, confined within her parents' house where her father reigns supreme.

Despite their position of privilege, men, especially young boys, aren't treated exempted from patriarchal control, for patriarchy operates in a manner that is only interested in its own perpetuation, and relentlessly crushes men as well. In the novel, Arun does not possess an ounce of control over his future as everything has already been decided by Papa. Throughout the novel, we see how his greatest desire is to become invisible and retreat into the background, because of the excessive attention lavished upon him throughout his life. What distinguishes Arun from his family members is his vegetarian inclination, something that manifested in his childhood. As the females in the family attempted to shove cod liver oil, milk, meat broth and boiled eggs down his throat, they were met with active resistance from the young boy, in the form of clenching his teeth, turning his face away and spitting out whatever managed to work its way into his mouth. Arun's refusal to adhere to the masculine standards of consumption is where he manages to wrest control of his life from the seizing hands of his father and transfers it upon himself through this form of passive resistance.

Experiences of oppression can manifest through a disconnection to the body, as is evident from the mysterious case of Uma's fits in the novel. Uma's existence is entirely about her family and has no room for an exploration of her individuality. Uma's resistance to authority can be seen through small, almost invisible gestures of her body, such as twisting her shoulders in impatience (Desai, 4). However, it is only through her unconscious and symbolically telling epilepsy that Uma, assured of a lifetime of confinement in her parental home, manages to experience a liberation from her body when she is overtaken by periodic fits and fainting spells which non-verbally express her protest against the oppressiveness of her family and her victimization by patriarchal Indian society.

Another example that illustrates the disassociation of the body as a form of resistance is seen when Uma's sister Aruna's family come to visit her family at their home. On a visit to the river for a ritual bath, they hire a boat, which garners much excitement, and Uma, infected by the state of pleasurable panic that was circulating through the women in the boat, jumps off the prow in the depth of the water, and as she emerged, she responded to Aruna's warning cries of "Uma, don't! Don't you dare, Uma-" (Desai, 114) with a calm reassurance that

she was not having a fit and jumped back in. As she plunged back into the depths of the water and felt the current dragging her away, she did not feel a sense of danger or fear, but was “much darker, wilder, much more thrilling, a kind of exultation and it was exactly what she needed” (Desai, 114). This experience of the body plunging away from patriarchal control is a form of resistance from all the discourses that surround her and any danger that is associated with the act of drowning is dispelled, lost in the experience of the sublime and unrestrained possibility.

Mama’s acts of resistance are few and isolated and always involve gastronomical delights and an escape from the control over feminine appetite. Papa forbids Mama to consume betel nuts, an Indian mouth freshener conventionally linked to lower class men with the tendency to spit out the mashed up remains and staining any surface red, along with playing cards, another sleazy activity that is considered inappropriate for someone of their class. Pierre Bourdieu efficiently sums it up in the following lines, “the denial of lower, coarse, vulgar, venal, servile—in a word, natural—enjoyment, which constitutes the sacred sphere of culture, implies an affirmation of the superiority of those who can be satisfied with the sublimated, refined, disinterested, gratuitous, distinguished pleasures forever closed to the profane” (Introduction, 7).

However, Mama continues to indulge in these activities, withholding them from her husband, as it becomes a medium of escape from domestic drudgery and permits her to detach herself from their blended identity as MamaPapa. She “flutters her eyelashes coquettishly” and “laughed apparently without any thought of propriety” (Desai, 7) Her expression undergoes a metamorphosis as they return to their own house to “the familiar one of guarded restraint, censure and a tired decorum”. The house looms heavy with Papa’s patriarchal presence and becomes a form of constant surveillance. Arun’s birth coincides with the end of these playful and gastronomic eccentricities, for with the birth of Arun, her status as a mother and a wife is consolidated and cannot behave like a ‘little girl’ anymore.

Power over Food and Food of Power

Food is power in a most basic, tangible and inescapable form (Arnold, 3), for a human being is dependent on food for his/her existence and those who control the means of production (food, in this case) have more power and privilege while those who are denied access to resources have more duties and fewer rights. Power relations within the family, like those within any institution, can be analysed in terms of the rights, privileges, and obligations of its members: those privileged by it can maintain their differential status because their resources of

control and of sanction match their rights, while those who have few power resources have more duties than rights (Therborn, 2). This analysis of power will be adapted to, and commented upon, in the following section.

The novel opens with a scene where Mama Papa sit on the swing and discuss what to have for tea and Mama summons Uma to convey the message to the servants. The hierarchy of power, Papa-Mama-Uma-Servants, is immediately established and Uma's function as a mere mediator between her parents and the servants is revealed. She does not possess the power to decide, convey or cook, an act of resistance in itself, and can only run from one agent of power to another. The hierarchy of power is more firmly established through 'the orange ceremony', as Ludmila Volná calls it. The father stands at the top of the pyramid and does not even have to voice his desires as the mother knows it instinctively, the next rung in the pyramid. She then passes on the instructions to Uma, the lowest echelon of power (in that scene). Both Uma and her mother do not consume the orange themselves, as it is a signifier of power, something only the father has access to. By peeling and threading the orange and ensuring that it is ready for the father's consumption, the mother thus functions as an agent of patriarchal power, and the role of women in maintaining patriarchy is something Desai has repeatedly emphasized upon. At the end of the ceremony of the consumption of power, Desai makes a barely veiled ironic comment, "everyone is satisfied" (Desai, 24), alluding to the necessity of upholding farcical situations to cement patriarchal dominance.

The power relations around food mirror the power of sexes. While the patriarch consumes the food items that are appropriate for their status and position in the power hierarchy, women act as the 'nutritional gatekeepers' of the household through meal planning and distribution, a term developed by Kurt Lewis. Mama reigns over the kitchen, as it is her socially constructed gendered domain, and rarely allows her husband to overrule her choices in food. However, this power comes with its limitations, and cannot be confused with control (McIntosh and Zey, 321) and is evident from the scene in the Patton household where it may be Mrs. Patton's task may be to keep the kitchen stocked, but Mr. Patton's toxic masculinity and power find their way in through the various cuts of meats he regularly consumes and pushes the family to do the same.

Uma, as the eldest daughter of the house, who has been married twice but both of them have ended in failure, has virtually no power at all. Her role in the household has revolved around being Arun's nanny and companion to being a general overseer of the servants, but it is a role of a mediator, not a decision maker. However, power is not a static, negative force but

rather a diffusive and persuasive one, and is deeply intertwined with knowledge. Uma takes over the process of decision making and seizes power twice in the novel, both the incidents involve *puri-alu*, a dish that is associated with special occasions. The first incident is when Ramu, her cousin with whom she shares a good relationship, visits them and she decides to welcome him by having puris for breakfast. Papa's stunned reaction, "*Puris for breakfast? Puris? Puris? Did you say puris?*" (Desai, 47), depicts his surprise at her daughter's audacity to relegate a dish that is reserved for special occasions for a guest who is the black sheep of the family and also taking the power of decision making out of his, and her mother's hands. The second incident is a sombre one, post Uma's cousin Anamika's last rites. As both mother and daughter stood with tears in their eyes, Uma takes her mother's hand in hers and consoles her by saying that she asked the cook to prepare *puri-alu* for breakfast and this comforting moment is the only time the two share an intimate connection, validating Bourdieu's idea that consumption is a stage in a process of communication. In both cases, the knowledge that *puri-alu* is a source of comfort and the marker of a special occasion gives Uma the power, and the courage, to take the decision in her own hands, in accordance with Michel Foucault's theory of power.

The above analysis shows the number of variables involved in a character's social position and psychological state. As a result, ascribing one character, or one country, with the label of 'fasting' and another with 'feasting' becomes reductive, and ignores the subjectivity of experience and individuality and negates fluidity. "To eat is a behaviour that develops beyond its own ends, replacing, summing up and signaling other behaviours", Barthes says, and through my analysis, I have attempted to demonstrate how the process of consumption is something significantly broader than mere sustenance and is in fact a multi-splendored thing that is the centre of social reality. The act, process and manner of consumption, and eviction, in Desai's novel is telling in multiple ways and lends one a deeper insight into social expectations, gender boundaries, power relations and resistance that operate within cultural landscapes and how patriarchy operates as a decisive factor in cementing these ideologies. It provides a greater insight into how the actions of our everyday carry more weight than we think, and how every action is symptomatic of our layered identities that shift consistently. Desai's use of a comma in the title, rather than a conjunction can be read as an attempt to communicate that an individual life is a multiplicity, and one cannot be ascribed the label of 'fasting' or 'feasting' to sum life up. Fasting and feasting in life shift and blend, and aren't continuous singularities, but rather shifting modalities. *Fasting, Feasting* is a novel about two households in two different continents with distinct cultural backgrounds, but repression and

neglect, all though they take different forms, remain consistent. Desai narrates how Uma and Melanie are both victims of neglect, patriarchal repression and gender roles, in different, yet similar ways, and conveys the message that while humans across the globe may be different culturally, there is something that unites us all, and it isn't necessarily pleasant.

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