
Anita Desai's *Fasting and Feasting* as A Metaphor for Cross-cultural Tensions

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Paper Received on 15-05-2023, Accepted on 18-06-2023,
Published on 19-06-23; DOI: 10.36993/ RJOE.2023.8.181

Abstract

Traditional and liberal values, individualism and collectivism, and the motif of food as a symbol of cultural differences are all examined in the novel *Fasting, Feasting* (1999) by Anita Desai. Following two families from different cultural backgrounds, the novel offers a nuanced look at the contrasts and intersections between these themes. While the liberal British family emphasizes individualism and progressivism, the traditional Indian family places a greater emphasis on community, collectivism, and tradition. The author uses the theme of food to show how the cultural differences between the two families are both a point of contention and a way to bring them closer together. The novel demonstrates how traditional and liberal values can coexist and even strengthen one another and how food can be a potent symbol of the cultural differences that shape our lives.

Keywords: Fasting and Feasting, Individualism, Collectivism, Liberal Values, Cultural Differences.

Introduction

There are many instances where cultural confrontation is represented to a great extent in Indian novels through the characters' emotions, dialogues and various kinds of challenges they face during their course of life (Tiwari 9). When two cultures meet and clash, they mix their ideas, beliefs, values, and ways of life. This is called cultural confrontation. Many Indian novels deal with the idea of clashing cultures. They often show how Western and Indian cultures meet, their differences and similarities, their pros and cons, and how they affect and change each other.

Anita Desai is an Indian writer and novelist known for her deep and moving works that explore the complicated nature of human relationships, identity, and the search for oneself (Patel 196). Family, tradition, and cultural conflict are common themes in her novels, and her writing style is often described as lyrical, evocative, and reflective. *Clear Light of Day*, *In Custody*, and *Fasting, Feasting* are some of her most well-known works. Through her novels, Desai gives readers a look into the world of modern India. She explores the complexities of Indian society, culture, and tradition and

the problems people face as they try to figure out how their personal identities fit with their cultural ones. With her insightful prose and thought-provoking storytelling, Anita Desai remains one of India's most respected and influential authors, and her works continue to inspire and captivate audiences worldwide.

In *Fasting, Feasting*, Anita Desai looks at how India and the U.S. clash culturally through the different lives of two members of an Indian family. This article explores the novel's cultural conflict through different themes and motifs. In *Fasting, Feasting*, one of the main themes of cultural clash is the difference between traditional Indian values and the more liberal, individualistic values of the West (Sofa 9). For example, the novel compares the strict and rigid gender roles in India, where women are expected to be subservient to men, to the more equal gender relationships in the West. This clash of cultures is shown through the character of Uma, who has trouble finding her place in India but feels free and independent in the United States. The following lines talk about Uma's uneasiness while in the Ashram:

Uma tried not to look into the priest's face, or listen to the words of the hymn either: there was an air of abandonment about them that made her feel uneasily as if Mama Papa, those enemies of abandon, were standing behind her and watching

her and all of them, with scorn. (Desai 58)

Uma has trouble letting herself be entirely absorbed in the religious event even though she is far from her family and entrenched within the Ashram's nightly prayers. Her parents, who embody the absolute, unwavering authority known as "Mama Papa," are devoted to presenting a stolid public persona at all times. This strict discipline ensures that they never give in to any outward manifestations of sentiment or piety. A self-conscious worry and unpleasant recollection of her parents' habitual judgement and disdain for everything outside their realm of comprehension and view of the world prevent her from losing herself entirely in the hymns like the rest of the pilgrims.

The tension between individualism and collectivism is another theme of *Fasting, Feasting* that shows how different cultures clash. In India, family and community are essential. In the West, however, individualism and self-expression are more important. This clash of cultures is shown in the character of Arun, who feels suffocated by his family's strict rules in India but finds freedom and self-expression in the United States.

Food is also observed as a symbol of clashing cultures in the novel. Food is a big part of family and community life in India, and people often get together to share and enjoy it. In the West, on the other hand, food is seen as more of an individual and personal experience, with less emphasis on sharing

with others. This clash of cultures is shown through the character of Uma, who finds the shared meals in India suffocating but enjoys eating on her own in the United States. Despite the cultural clash with regard to food, humans, and possibly all living creatures, are united by their shared need for food (Whitt 3).

Thus, the main theme of *Fasting, Feasting* is the clash of cultures, shown through the different experiences of two members of an Indian family. This article explores the cultural confrontation in the novel through themes like the clash between traditional and liberal values, the tension between individualism and collectivism, and the motif of food as a symbol of cultural differences. Through these themes and motifs, Desai shows how complicated cultural clashes and finding one's own identity can be.

Traditional and liberal values

In *Fasting, Feasting*, Uma and Arun, two members of the same Indian family, each have different experiences as they try to reconcile their upbringing with traditional Indian values and the more liberal, individualistic values of the West. The novel focuses on people's challenges when attempting to reconcile these opposite values.

Traditional Indian culture emphasizes obedience to authority figures, duty to one's family, and respect for one's elders. Uma, for instance, is expected to be completely submissive to her family and to carry out her

roles as a daughter, wife, and mother without question or complaint. Individuals like Uma, who feel trapped and unable to express their individuality due to the strict adherence to traditional values, may experience a sense of suffocation and restriction. The following lines tell how Uma lives and is expected to live in her home:

Uma can no longer pretend to be ignorant of Papa's needs, Papa's ways... She picks out the largest orange in the bowl and hands it to Mama, who peels it into strips, then divides it into 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 edge of Papa's plate. One by one, he lifts them with the tips of his fingers and places them into his mouth. (Desai23)

This ritual, in a way, summarizes the social order of the home. A lowly Uma is tasked with picking out the orange, which is then lovingly prepared by Mama and eaten by Papa. The women are relegated to roles of labour and observation, and not even that includes a taste of the orange. Since he is the leader of the family, the patriarch's fickle desires should be accommodated. Volná

believes that women may only be liberated from patriarchal constraints by combining female and male awareness and action (2). The family is an institution that bridges the gap between individuals and their larger communities. Still, the patriarchy rules the family unit (Sonawat 180).

Western values tend to be more liberal and individualistic (Parker et.al., 2009), emphasizing a person's right to pursue happiness through their means. Uma is awed by the independence and freedom she experiences after moving to the United States to be with her husband's family. She is free to pursue her passions and aspirations and discover herself on her terms. She has developed a strong sense of self-reliance and individuality in contrast to the rigid adherence to traditional values she encountered in her native India. Here, it is essential to recognize that a woman is a relatable individual who desires to live a life of her own (Ponzanesi158).

On the other hand, Arun is having trouble living up to the high standards his Indian relatives have set for him. Gender stereotypes and the pressure to provide for his family have left him feeling trapped. He can express himself freely and fully in the United States, something he lacked in India. He is free to follow his passions, realize his goals, and shape his life in any way he sees fit.

Having complete autonomy comes with its own set of responsibilities and difficulties, though. When Arun first arrives

in the West, he experiences an identity crisis as he tries to reconcile his Indian heritage with his newfound freedom. He is conflicted between two opposing value systems and can't commit entirely to either.

Uma discovers the same thing; costs and sacrifices are associated with gaining independence and individuality. She longs for the company of her family and friends back in India, and she finds herself increasingly lonely and isolated in the United States. She has difficulty reconciling her newfound independence and individuality with her Indian cultural identity.

Overall, *Fasting, Feasting* sheds light on the challenges people face when attempting to balance the competing ideals of traditional Indian values and the more liberal, individualistic ideals of the West. The novel delves into Uma and Arun's experiences as they deal with these cultural differences, highlighting their struggles in their search for identity and belonging in a dynamic and ever-evolving world. The following lines portray how Arun encounters American culture:

She might have been on display in the Foodmart, a special offer for the summer, gleaming with invitation. Almost, one feels, one might see a discount sign above it. (Desai213)

These lines express Arun's uncomfortable observations while he looks at Mrs. Patton sunbathing. The gratuitous show of flesh bothers him, not because he's prudish, but because it brings to mind another aspect of American culture that makes him uneasy: the frequent barbecues held by Mr. Patton and other suburbanites. *Fasting, Feasting* is a thought-provoking and insightful look at the complexities of human relationships, cultural identity, and the quest for self-discovery through its exploration of cultural confrontation and the nuances of personal identity.

Individualism and Collectivism

Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting* delves into the tension between individualism and collectivism via the divergent experiences of two members of the same Indian family, Uma and Arun, as they adjust to life in the United States and India.

There is a strong emphasis on family, community, and duty in Indian society, reflecting a strong collectivist tradition (Suchday 146). Individuals' obligations to their families and communities, which are often seen as more important than one's own needs and wants, reflect the importance that people place on their families and communities. Uma's deference to her parents and the rigid gender roles she is expected to play are clear examples of this.

In contrast, American culture values individualism over collectivism, with freedom of thought and speech being particularly cherished. Arun is able to

express himself freely and fully in the United States in a way he never could in India. He has the liberty to go after what excites him and fulfil his own personal goals.

Having complete autonomy comes with its own set of responsibilities and difficulties, though. When Arun first arrives in the West, he experiences a crisis of identity as he tries to reconcile his Indian heritage with his newfound freedom. Uma, too, learns the hard way that embracing her unique self has its own drawbacks and costs. She longs for the company of her family and friends back in India, and she finds herself increasingly lonely and isolated in the United States.

Finally, *Fasting, Feasting* examines the struggle between individualism and collectivism through Uma and Arun's divergent life experiences. The novel emphasizes the struggles and costs of pursuing personal freedom and self-expression and the tensions between collectivism and individualism. Uma has strived for autonomy by making her own choices in life. Uma's life experiences, however, were not conducive to her developing into the kind of person that finds fulfilment in their daily lives. Her life was ruined, and she was left with nothing but regret because of it. Among these instances is when her parents make the expensive choice to prevent her from attending school. This happened when Uma's younger brother was born, her education was suddenly unavailable. The family expects Uma to care for the new baby Arun, who becomes their

favourite. Uma never excelled in school and nobody helped her develop. She never passes any exams. Uma never succeeds easily. She must talk to Mother Agnes, the school's principal, to keep studying. Mother Agnes was a kind woman who advocated for her and her parents. She reacts badly:

Uma hurled herself at Mother Agnes, threw her arms around her waist, hid her face in the starched white cotton skirts, and howled aloud. She was a messy weeper: her face was wet, her hair distraught. Her mouth was twisted and her eyes and nose ran. She knotted her hands in Mother's skirts and girdle. All the time she howled. 'Mother, oh Mother,' she wailed, and when mother tried to pluck her off her skirts and hold her aside, she flung herself at the nun's sandalled feet and lay on the floor, abjectly wailing. (Desai 27)

The human condition is examined in *Fasting, Feasting* through the lens of cultural conflict and the complexities of individual identity.

Motif of food as a symbol of cultural differences

Food is used as a metaphor in *Fasting, Feasting* to represent the gulf between Indian and American culture. Each culture's values, beliefs, and attitudes can be seen in how food is prepared, consumed, and shared.

In India, sharing a meal with a guest is a way to show kindness, generosity, and

solidarity. Elaborately prepared and eaten together as a group, meals are a central part of social gatherings and celebrations. Maintaining the rigid gender roles and responsibilities within the Indian family is a central part of the traditional Indian value system. One way this is done is through the preparation and sharing of food.

On the other hand, food is often seen as a source of happiness and contentment in American culture. There is less of a focus on formality at meals here than there is in India. The United States' preference for individualism is reflected in its eating habits, which place a premium on freedom of choice and convenience.

Uma and Arun's experiences navigating cultural differences between India and the United States highlight the stark contrast between the two countries' perspectives on food. For instance, while Uma feels suffocated by the communal nature of meals in India, Arun enjoys the freedom of preparing and eating food on his own in the United States. On the other hand, Uma is not given an opportunity to enjoy food of her choice in India. The following lines explain how Uma is stopped from tasting fried peanuts:

Mama gives an annoyed little snort and tells Uma they will continue their walk by themselves and not try to keep up with Papa. Sedately, they circle the park, keeping to

a path between the railing and the canna beds and pretending not to notice the peanut and ice cream vendors thrusting their wares between the bars and calling to customers. Uma finds saliva gathering at the corners of her mouth at the smell of the spiced, roasted gram but decides to say nothing. (Desai 12)

After deciding that Mama and Uma should go for a walk, Papa took them to the park. Mama and Uma stroll gently around the park with Mama setting the pace for Uma to follow, while Papa walks around the park on his own a few times. Uma scents the roasted nuts and fried gram (garbanzo bean flour) and enjoys watching the throng with fascination as her mother scolds people for their undignified clothes and behaviour.

It would appear that women find it extremely offensive to even glance at the sweet things for sale in the marketplace. Both Mama and Uma are unlucky females rather than males. They are forbidden to even look at them, let alone try to eat them. They pretended not to see them because it was easier. This depiction of mediaeval civilization is worse than the Dark Age practise of burying female children alive.

Fasting, Feasting uses the theme of food to represent the differences in culture between United States and India. The main

aim is to emphasize the contradictory ideals and outlooks of the people belonging to these societies. The writer explores the tinges of cultural identity and the experiences the characters face through the examination of food.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *Fasting, feasting* by Anita Desai is a thought-provoking and insightful exploration of the cultural differences between India and the United States. The novel provides a nuanced and complex look at the human experience by comparing conservative and progressive ideals, individualism and collectivism, and the motif of food as a symbol of cultural differences. Desai skillfully depicts the struggle between individualism and collectivism and the inherent value conflicts between the two. The struggles Uma and Arun encountered while adjusting to life in the United States shed light on the challenges of bridging the gap between Indian and American culture and the costs of seeking individuality. In addition, the novel makes excellent use of the motif of food as a symbol of cultural differences to highlight the disparities between Indian and American society. Desai's depiction of food and its role in both cultures sheds light on the underlying cultural attitudes and values and provides insight into the nuances of cultural identification. The novel provides a compelling and thought-provoking exploration of the human experience by examining traditional and liberal values, individualism and collectivism, and the

motif of food as a symbol of cultural differences.

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How to cite this article?

1. R.Madhan and Dr. K.Ramachandran " Anita Desai's Fasting and Feasting as A Metaphor for Cross-cultural Tensions" Research Journal Of English (RJOE)8(2), PP:174-181-2023, DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2023.8.2.181