

FEASTING, FASTING

Anita Desai

(Desai, 1999)

Story

Feasting, Fasting, Desai's penultimate novel, which was shortlisted for the Booker Prize, explores family relationships, gender differences and attitudes to various forms of excess in India and America. For this reason, the story is divided into two parts. The first begins in a market town in India, probably in the late 1970s or early 1980s, and describes an upper-middle-class, traditional family. The father (papa) is a judge, the mother (mama) is a housewife, and they have two daughters, Uma and Aruna. Soon a son, Arun, is born and the parents want their older daughter, Uma, to leave school and look after him. But Uma loves her convent school (although she is not a good student) and is hopeless with chores at home. In despair, she has the first of her many seizures. Uma grows up and the parents think of marrying her off, but young men show interest in her younger sister, Aruna, the pretty one. A cousin, Anamika, wins a scholarship to Oxford but she is married off to a wealthy man, after which rumours circulate that she is beaten by her husband and mother-in-law.

The attempts to find a husband for Uma fail on three occasions. One prospective groom falls in love with Aruna, the second spends the dowry and then calls off the wedding, and the third, who actually marries Uma, turns out to be a bigamist. Aruna, who has been attracting many marriage proposals, chooses a wealthy man and after a lavish ceremony, leaves for a new life in Bombay. Meanwhile, the boy, Arun, is given expensive tutors and supervision by his father. Their only disappointment with him is that he has chosen to be a vegetarian, which they view as old-fashioned and unhealthy. Unhappy and lonely, Uma slips away and spends a month in an ashram with her aunt, Mira-masi. But Papa brings her back home, where she is neglected. News then reaches the family that the cousin, Anamika, has been found dead, burned in her house, whether murder or accident is unknown.

Part Two shifts the focus from Uma to her little brother, Arun, who wins a scholarship to a college in America. There, he becomes friends with an American family, the Pattons and spends a summer with them. He gets close to Mrs Patton but views the tyrannical father, narcissistic son and bulimic daughter with distaste. Arun also becomes disenchanted with American excess, attempts to teach Mrs Patton how to be a vegetarian and eventually withdraws from her, too, because she is self-centred and neglects her daughter's medical condition.

The final scene occurs at the end of summer, when Arun is readying to return to university. He receives a package from his sister Uma in India, who has thoughtfully send him a shawl ('Arun will be cold in America,' she thinks). Arun looks at it and promptly gives it to Mrs Patton, suggesting that Uma remains neglected.

Themes

Individuality The main theme running through the lives of these several characters is the search for personal freedom, or individuality. In the Indian setting, this desire is pitted against the 'family' and its culturally defined norms. Uma is the sad victim of this struggle for individual expression. She feels happiest in her convent school, away from her family, and especially her father, who treats her like a servant. Her parents have only one goal for her—marriage—which is the social institution that effectively merges a woman's sense of self into a larger unit. It is not surprising, then, that Uma finds solace with her widowed aunt, who lives in an ashram. On the other hand, her younger sister, Aruna, uses marriage to break away from the stifling atmosphere of her family. And the younger brother, Arun, who is shy and unassertive, escapes altogether, by going to America for university. Even in America, he sticks to himself, avoiding groups and organisations, with the exception of the Patton family. In this American setting, in contrast to India, individualism gets the better of family unity, with

each member isolated. The boisterous Mr Patton has rapport with no one, Mrs Patton uses 'retail therapy,' her disturbed daughter Melanie suffers from bulimia and her narcissistic son builds up his body for sports.

Gender Although the balance between individual and family needs is shown to differ in the two cultural contexts, American and Indian families and societies are equally patriarchal. There is little difference, for example, between the households dominated by papa and Mr Patton. Each plays the role of the patriarch, although, in keeping with the lack of individualism in India, papa has no name. Papa takes pleasure in ordering his driver around, for no apparent reason, just as Mr Patton treats his wife as little more than a servant. Papa focuses on his son, and Mr Patton does the same. In India, Uma is taken out of school to care for her little brother, who then receives excessive tutorial and parental supervision to succeed in school. In America, Mr Patton has little to say to his daughter but talks at length to his 'sporty' son, especially while they tend the barbecue and eye the sizzling steaks. One cannot miss the obvious similarity of the two daughters, Uma and Melanie, both neglected and disturbed. The wives, mama and Mrs Patton, are similarly second-class citizens of their own families, though perhaps Mama enjoys herself more, with her secret store of betel nut leaves and card-playing.

Feasting and Fasting The novel shows similar problems in the family set-up of the two cultures, but there is a difference in their manifestations. This is what Desai is pointing at with her title, 'feasting and fasting.' Again, the most explicit contrast is between Uma and Melanie. Although similar in many ways, Uma is starved, while Melanie gorges herself. Each daughter, however, suffers physical and mental ill-health: Uma has seizures and Melanie vomits. In America, Arun, who is a vegetarian, is shocked by the excess in the shops, on the dinner tables and at the weekend barbecues. It would appear that, in brief, India fasts and America feasts. However, Desai complicates this simple dichotomy by exploring 'excess' and 'want.' Feeding someone in India is an expression of love, or at least, affection. Papa, who craves attention, demands that he is served fruit in the morning, and his coffee and biscuits in the afternoon. This Indian excess is sometimes contrasted with American want. There is plenty of food in America, especially in the refrigerator, but it is eaten in isolation. People open the 'fridge' and snack. Even the excessive American barbecue displays the loneliness of the individual.

Characters

Uma Uma, the older daughter, is the central character of the first part. Unattractive, clumsy and a poor student, she is neglected by her parents, who try to marry her off. All attempts fail and she lives out her life as a spinster, with her only true friend being her widowed aunt, who lives in an ashram.

Aruna Aruna is the pretty, younger sister, who is good in school but takes no interest in education. Ambitious and assertive, she chooses an affluent husband to take her away from her family. In Bombay, she lives the life of a westernised socialite and only rarely visits her family, whom she treats as unsophisticated provincials.

Papa Papa, who is given no name, is something of a stereotype. He worked hard to climb out of poverty, get an education and become a magistrate. Now retired, he rules his family like a petty king, is threatened by change, especially women's liberation, and lavishes time and money on making sure his son becomes a success.

Mama Mama is another generic character, with no specific name. She is the submissive wife, who rarely expresses her opinion and is proud of her successful husband. She wants to terminate her late-in-life pregnancy (which produces Arun), but her husband refuses. At times, however, she does speak up for Uma.

Arun Arun is the young brother, upon whom the parents build all their hopes. But he is shy, almost introverted and becomes a vegetarian. Ironically, he fulfils his parents' expectations by winning a scholarship to a university in America, which means that he leaves them.

Mrs Patton Mrs Patton is the mother and wife in an American family whom Arun stays with over the summer. She submits to the will of her overbearing husband, largely in order to maintain family harmony. She is fascinated by 'Eastern' culture but spends most of her time shopping and making lists for the things she wants to buy. She is too busy trying to get a sun-tan to notice that her daughter is seriously ill.

UMA

(Neglected)

Character Uma, the older sister, is the main character in this novel, which, despite its wide-ranging settings and themes, focuses on the oppressive status of women in Indian families and marriages. Uma is a problem for her parents: she is not a good student, she is clumsy at housework and, worst of all, she is not attractive. The problem is exacerbated because, in Indian tradition, the older sister must be married first and the parents cannot find a husband for Uma, which delays marriage for her attractive younger sister, Aruna. Trapped by her gender and the conventions of her society, Uma does have a rich inner life, which is revealed through poetry, the solace of her convent school, her walks and her escape to an ashram. But she cannot escape reality. Although she suffers seizures and bad eye-sight, her father will not countenance any special medical care for her because of the costs. As the novel progresses, Uma does receive some comfort from her mother and she does show flashes of insight, but she ends up a neglected spinster.

Activities Uma spends as many hours as possible at her convent school. She is not a good student, but it is a refuge from the servile status she endures at home. She tries to study at home but is constantly told to 'stop that' and undertake household chores. When her younger brother is born, she is taken out of school and made to act like his nurse. She escapes for a while to an ashram, and she sometimes goes on an hour-long wander away from the house. She also reads poetry, which she doesn't really understand except that it takes her away from herself. Another pastime is looking through her Christmas cards, mostly from students and teachers at the convent school.

Illustrative moments

Servile Uma's role in the household is illustrated at the beginning of chapter three. The family (Uma, Aruna, Mama and Papa) have just finished dinner. There is a heavy silence. Then Mama tells Uma to pass the fruit bowl to her father. Uma does this, rather clumsily, placing the bowl down in front of her scowling father with a thump. The bowl contains oranges, apples and bananas. All for Papa, but he ignores them and looks, sphinx-like, beyond them. Mama taps Uma's elbow and says, 'Orange.' Uma knows his preference. She has been serving her father for twenty years, but she has chosen to pretend not to know. Now she hands her father an orange. This is Uma's role in the family—to serve her father's needs, to help feed him and clean up after him. She is a second wife to him. They have a cook but no servant, so they use Uma. And, yet, what is interesting in this scene is that Desai hints at a tiny ripple of rebellion in Uma when she writes that she 'pretended' not to know her father's preference for an orange. Uma is submissive but not in her own mind.

Imaginative Despite her oppression, Uma has a strong imagination and responds to natural beauty. This quality is illustrated in a chapter, about one-third into the story, when her widowed aunt manages to trick Mama into allowing Uma to accompany her to an ashram in the mountains. Once there, Uma is ecstatic. She revels in the natural beauty of the mountains, the forests and the nearby river. She has a seizure, but in the ashram the inmates believe it is a sign that she is blessed by the god Shiva. Her rural idyll ends when her brother and cousin arrive and 'kidnap' her. Riding in a cart, Uma thinks they are going for a tour of the beautiful mountains, until she realises that they are taking her back home. It is a long way, but she refuses to talk and eat the whole time.

Resigned Back home, Uma tries to exert her self-will, but she is defeated by the demands of her family. This reluctant resignation to her fate as an unmarried daughter who becomes a servant is illustrated in chapter 12. When her parents begin to order her about, to do this task and complete that chore, she becomes angry (for once) and locks herself in her room. In that private space, she reads her book of poetry, weeping at the description of a 'rose that once waltzed and is now wilted.' Soon, however, her mother bangs on her door and orders her to serve her father his coffee and biscuits. Throwing the book away, she obeys, although as she serves her father, she mutters some more lines about a young girl who flies away to join her lover. Unmarried and forty-three years old, we know, and Uma knows, that she will not be able to fly away.

ARUNA

(Haughty)

Character Aruna is the younger daughter and the polar opposite to her older sister, Uma. While Uma is clumsy, unattractive and a poor student, Aruna is accomplished, pretty and an excellent student. In their childhood, the two sisters get along, but as Uma's failure to marry thwarts her own marital plans (the younger daughter does not marry until the older one does), tension builds between them. When Aruna does finally choose a husband from among her many suitors, he is a rather bland but affluent man from Bombay. In this way, she utilises her attractive qualities (not just physical ones) to escape from the conventional family in a small town and live a more glamorous life in Bombay. Her attitudes harden, rather than soften, as the novel progresses, so that when she visits her family she is haughty and distant. Breezing about the house, she refers to her parents as 'villagers' who cannot keep the house clean and criticises her older sister's unmarried and lonely life. She cuts her hair in the modern style and is constantly applying make-up. Even her husband is not exempt from her superior airs and is mocked for spilling his tea and not wearing a matching tie and shirt. In this way, Aruna, for all her affluence and sophistication, is trapped in an endless pursuit of perfection. She lives in a world of external excess but suffers from an inner emptiness.

Activities The young Aruna, who is said to 'be visibly ripening on a branch, ready to be plucked,' spends her time trying on new clothes and jewellery. She is brainy and does not need to concentrate on her studies, freeing herself up for lighter pursuits, such as music and dance. After she escapes to Bombay, she spends time 'networking' with the urban elite in that buzzing city, eating in expensive restaurants overlooking the beach and forever clutching her make-up kit [a common female accessory in those days].

Illustrative moments

Independent Although Aruna is presented as a superficial, materialistic and insensitive character, she is not without her redeeming qualities. One of these is her independent mind, a by-product of her self-confidence, which ultimately derives from her beauty and intelligence. She is the only woman in this novel of many female characters who has the courage to reject traditional attitudes, to choose her own husband and set up a successful life in a context removed from that of her birth. This independence of thought is illustrated in a scene, when she and her mother are discussing the fate of her cousin, Anamika, who appears to be suffering from an abusive husband. Aruna says that Anamika's parents should bring her back into their home, but Aruna's mother disagrees. 'What will people say if they do that? What will they think? It would be humiliating for them.' To which, Aruna responds in an angry voice, 'Who cares what other think or say? You should always do what you think is right.'

Insensitive Aruna's desire to better herself and move into a different world, while often admired in a boy or man, seems to turn her into an insensitive woman. This callous attitude is brutally illustrated in a scene that takes place on the day before her wedding. Her parents, as is traditional, are hosting a 'function', where members of the two families meet and share food. Everyone is dressed in their finest, the brother is stuffed into a suit and tie, and even poor Uma is swathed in a gold-braided sari. However, in the middle of the ceremony, Uma has one of her fits and everything stops. Staring at her sister writhing in agony on the floor, Aruna thinks, 'She should be locked up. Locked up and put away. Never to cross my path again.' We can understand that Aruna's embarrassment is acute—it is, after all, a sort of engagement party—but her lack of compassion and her punitive attitude are still shocking.

ARUN

(Introverted)

Character Arun is the pampered young son of the family. His arrival in a household with two daughters is greeted by shouts of 'It's a boy! It's a boy!' Now Papa (and Mama, too) have a child upon whom they can pin all their hopes of worldly success and respect. However, the boy does not grow up to meet his father's enthusiastic expectations. Papa is desperate that he should eat meat to become strong and athletic, but Arun becomes a vegetarian, is exhausted by sports and prefers to stay in his room and read comics. The favoured son (who will bring in a dowry with his marriage) seems to be more feminine than masculine. At least, the boy succeeds at school, especially after his father hires tutors and supervises his lessons himself like a drill sergeant. Reacting to this regime, Arun becomes even more of a recluse. The pressure seems to reduce him to a physical wreck, so that he 'incessantly chews on his pencils and turns the erasures into bits of wet mould.' Eventually, the family's dream is fulfilled and Arun wins a scholarship to a university in America, where he, once more, withdraws into himself and avoids the public eye. Although at first disoriented by the differences in culture, especially the excess and isolation of American society, Arun gains insight into people. Having escaped from the weight of his father's expectations and his mother's fears, he begins to find his feet in the world.

Activities In order to escape from the energy-draining, militaristic regimen of his father's tutoring, Arun likes to lay in his bed and cover himself with comic books. He might read them or he might just imagine what they show—a world far from the one that drills Sanskrit, English and maths into his brain. In America, he spends time with Mrs Patton, going to the supermarket with her, teaching her how to cook vegetarian meals and discussing her not-very-deep understanding of Indian spiritualism. He also takes up jogging, his only physical activity, probably because he sees that it is a solo-sport.

Illustrative moments

Withdrawn Arun is a loner. He avoids groups, crowds and unnecessary public exposure, in part because he is brow-beaten by his father to become an educational success. In order to escape from the torture of his lessons, Arun loves to read comic books. This withdrawal into an interior world is described in an early section of the novel. Arun has just suffered through another hour of having 'sums and sentences drummed into his head.' He wearily drags himself into his room, lies down and covers his body with 'hundreds of comic books.' Lying there, he gets lost 'in tales of adventure, wizardry, crime, passion, daring and hilarity'—in other words, all the things he does not experience in the real world. His mind is filled with all the 'coloured pages of wondrous images' that float above him, oblivious to the tensions and ambitions that drive him crazy.

Unfettered Although Arun is not oppressed like his sister Uma, and although he is not ensnared in the pursuit of perfection, like his sister Aruna, he is nevertheless smothered by the expectations of his parents. Those gendered conceptions (that the boy should increase the family's reputation in society) prove every bit as debilitating as those that weigh so heavily on Uma. The irony is that when he is sent to America to fulfil those expectations, he realises how onerous the family has been and how much he enjoys being absent from it. Desai describes it this way: 'It was the first time in his life away from home, away from Mama and Papa, his sisters; he had at last experienced the total freedom of anonymity, the total absence of relations, of demands, needs, requests, responsibilities, commitments.' In this newly unfettered environment Arun even takes up jogging, which is a truly American and yet a solo sport.

Revelation Arun's time in America is filled with confusion, cultural alienation and disorientation. He is put off by the showy consumerism and public machoism, not to mention the cars that mar the visual landscape and the endless summer barbecues that create a meat-smelling fog of smoke above the backyards. He is said to be 'venturing across borders' and must 'make his way slowly,' lest he get totally lost. Then he has a revelation—he sees something very different that is then very familiar. It is the suffering of the Patton's daughter, Melanie, who has bulimia. He comes across her sprawled out on the kitchen floor, drenched in her own vomit. Her contorted face is immediately recognisable, for it is the same pained expression he has seen on the face of his own sister, on Uma's face back in India. Desai puts it like this: 'It is the enraged face of his sister, who failing to express her outrage against neglect, merely spits and froths in ineffectual protest. 'How strange,' Arun thinks, 'to encounter that here, where so much is given, where there is both licence and plenty. But what is plenty? And what is want? Can one tell the difference?'