

Entrapments at Home and Abroad in Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting*

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Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting*, as it is implied in the title itself, is a novel of contrast between two cultures, the one, Indian, known for its pious and longstanding customs representing 'fasting,' and the other, American, a country of opulence and sumptuousness epitomising 'feasting.' The plot unveils through the perceptions of Uma, in India, and of Arun, in America. Both of them are entrapped, irrespective of the culture and enveloping milieu, by oppressive bonds exercised by their own parents, MamaPapa. They are just MamaPapa or PapaMama but remain nameless throughout the novel. Yet, this namelessness does not indicate their anonymity but signifies their universality. They are the prototypical parents found everywhere in the middle-class families of India, who discuss, plan, plot, control, govern the activities of their children, be it marriage or going abroad for studies. And in their over-domineering concern, they tend to ignore the inadvertent possibility of entrapping their own offspring. Thus, they do not give contingency to the fact that perhaps their children too can have a life to call their own. May be even their own preoccupations, their own priorities, maybe an agenda for themselves that goes beyond what they actually want for their children.

The novel begins with a snapshot of MamaPapa in a contemplative mood: "The parents sit, rhythmically swinging, back and forth. They could be asleep, dozing—their eyes are hooded—but sometimes they speak."¹ That is when a sudden deluge of ideas hit them and they order their eldest daughter, Uma, to carry out them without delay. Uma is asked first to inform the cook to prepare sweets for her father, with neglectful impatience that she has been already asked to pack a parcel to be sent to her brother Arun in America. While she comes literally running on her toes, she is entrusted with an additional job of writing a letter to their son. Somewhere in the middle of the novel, the reader understands that it is the usual scene that goes on in the household of MamaPapa. "All morning MamaPapa have found things for Uma to do. It is as if Papa's retirement is to be spent in this manner—sitting on the red swing in the veranda with Mama, rocking,

and finding ways to keep Uma occupied. As long as they can do that, they themselves feel busy and occupied”(133). In this manner, living under the demanding rule of MamaPapa, Uma is repressed, suppressed and is imprisoned at home. The first part of the novel tells us in a flashback as how she became a reluctant victim of entrapment at home. The second part of the novel shows how her brother Arun, who leaves his home for higher studies, but feels trapped by the very education that is meant to liberate him.

Usually, at home, it would be an oppressive atmosphere even if one of the parents is overpowering. With regard to Uma, both of her parents appear to have merged into a single identity MamaPapa/PapaMama, as if they have a “Siamese twin existence”(6). Hence, whenever MamaPapa say something, and whoever says it, it comes with double the intensity and power that it cannot be defied at all. “Having fused into one, they had gained so much in substance, in stature, in authority, that they loomed large enough as it was; they did not need separate histories and backgrounds to make them even more immense”(6). Despite a slight variation in the roles they have chosen to play, Papa’s of “scowling” and “Mama’s scolding”(10), in terms of opinion, they never differed from each other. Therefore, if one refused there would not be any “point in appealing to the other parent for a different verdict: none was expected, or given”(14).

Further more, the women are not allowed for outings usually, but when Papa feels that the women laze around the house too much, then they would be taken to the park for walk. On one such occasion, Uma gets easily distracted and fails to keep pace with her Papa. Though Papa is far away, and she is left in the company of Mama, she would not dare attempt to buy some eatables on her wish though it is highly tempting: “Uma finds saliva gathering at the corners of her mouth at the smell of the spiced, roasted gram but decides to say nothing”(12-13). In the end, Uma is blamed for being “slow” when all the while Uma could not reconcile herself as why they are hurrying just to go back home. Likewise, the children are not allowed to have any sense of privacy even when they have grown-up. They are not allowed to shut any doors in the household. For this meant secrets, especially nasty secrets, which are impermissible: “It meant authority would come stalking in and make a search to seize upon the nastiness, the unclean blot”(15).

MamaPapa also decide which of their children should have education and how much of it. As far as Uma is concerned, a pleasant escape from her claustrophobic conditions at home is her school-going. The convent school for her is “streaked with golden promise”(20). Hence, she always goes early to the school and later finds some excuse to linger there for longer time. Conversely, she feels deprived during dull weekends when she is left at home: “There were the wretched weekends when she was plucked back into the trivialities of her home, which seemed *a denial, a negation of life* as it ought to be, somber and splendid, and then the endless summer vacation when the heat reduced even that pointless existence to further *vacuity*”(21) (emphases added). Regardless of Uma’s verve for convent education, she is forced to stop going to school when Mama gives birth to the third baby, Arun. Even as Uma shows disagreement, she is coaxed, cajoled and finally threatened to accept her Mama’s decision:

‘But ayah can do this—ayah can do that—’ Uma tried to protest when the orders began to come thick and fast. This made Mama look stern again. ‘You know we can’t leave the baby to the servant,’ she said severely. ‘He needs proper attention.’ When Uma pointed out that ayah had looked after her and Aruna as babies, Mama’s expression made it clear it was quite a different matter now, and she repeated threateningly: ‘Proper attention’ (31).

Later, Uma looks forward towards her marriage to give her the much-needed relief, yet, unfortunately, she returns home frustrated after a deceitful marriage and subsequent divorce. Back at home, she gets a rare, job offer through Dr. Dutt, but MamaPapa refuse to send her. When Dr. Dutt persists on taking Uma for the job, Mama lies of an illness for which she needs Uma to nurse her. In like manner, when Uma receives an invitation for a coffee party from Mrs. O’Henry, MamaPapa refuse to send her to the party because of the apprehension that Mrs. O’Henry might ensnare her and convert her into a Christian nun.

Reduced thus to a baby-sitter at her earlier days and an unpaid servant for her self-centred parents for the rest of her life, Uma finds no escape from her entrapment. Uma experiences, however, a brief repose of happiness and freedom once when she is allowed to accompany her ailing aunt, Mira-Masi, on her pilgrimage. During her stay at

night in an ashram, Uma finds a strange link of her life with the barks and howls of the dogs:

At night she lay quietly on her mat, listening to the ashram dog bark. Then other dogs in distant villages, out along the river bed and over in the pampas grass, or in wayside shacks and hovels by the highway—barked back. They howled long messages to each other. Their messages traveled back and forth through the night darkness which was total, absolute. Gradually the barks sank into it and drowned. Then it was silent. That was what Uma felt her own life to have been—full of barks, howls, messages, and now—silence (61).

At this juncture, one is reminded of Anita Desai's characteristic way of making her internally turbulent protagonists find expression by association with external surroundings. Thus, for instance, in *Cry, the Peacock*, Maya's feelings of isolation and longings are coupled with those of the crying of the peacocks. Still, one locates a kind of sublimity in the agonised inner cry of Maya when it is likened with peacocks. When Uma's pain is related to the barks and howls of dogs, the poetry of Maya's anguish is to be seen in sharp contrast to that of the excruciating poverty of Uma's entrapment.

Catering to the whims and fancies of MamaPapa, but keeping her remorse self-contained, at one point of the novel, Uma feels utterly friendless and alone, even when she is at home and surrounded by her MamaPapa. In desperation, she thinks of writing a letter to a friend to share her grief but it only ends up with the realisation that she has none to confide with:

She could write a letter to a friend—a private message of despair, dissatisfaction, yearning; she has a packet of notepaper, pale violet with a pink rose embossed in the corner—but who is the friend? Mrs. Joshi? But since she lives next door, she would be surprised. Aruna? But Aruna would pay no attention, she is too busy. Cousin Ramu? Where *was* he? Had his farm swallowed him up? And Anamika—had marriage *devoured* her? (134).

However, it would be wrong to presuppose that Anita Desai shows Uma's unattractiveness, clumsiness and dullness of mind as causes for her entrapment. Uma's polar opposite, her graceful, beautiful and brilliant cousin, Anamika's confinement is more poignant. While Uma's failure in her school exams pressurises her to stay at home, Anamika does so excellently in her final school exams, that she wins a scholarship to Oxford. Yet, Anamika lives in a patriarchal society that considers higher education to be

the prerogative of males, and marriage as the major preoccupation of females. The scholarship obtained is used only as a means to win her a husband who is considered an equal to the family's prestige. Anamica's parents are unperturbed by the fact that he is so much older than her, so grim-faced and conscious of his own superiority, and is "totally impervious to Anamika's beauty and grace and distinction" (70). But it is Anamica, who starts another life of entrapment the moment she enters her in-laws' house. Anamica's husband is a typical 'Mama's boy' to the extent he could be a silent witness to his mother's beating of his wife regularly. Anamica, who won scholarship to Oxford, spends her entire time in the kitchen cooking for a very large family that eats in shifts—"first the men, then the children, finally the women"(70). After a miscarriage, which followed a brutal beating, and the belief that she could not bear more children, finally, the family ties her up in a nylon saree, pours the kerosene over her, and burns her to death.

Here again Desai is not implying that the un-burnt brides and the well-settled ones may live a content life. In this regard, she portrays the story of Aruna, Uma's smart and pretty younger sister who makes a discreet choice and marries "the wisest, ... the handsomest, the richest, the most exciting of the suitors who presented themselves"(101). Aruna's marriage to Arvind who has a job in Bombay and a flat in a housing block in Juhu, facing the beach is just a like a dream-come-true. Yet to live that dream-life fully she transforms herself and desperately seeks to introduce change in the lives of others. She cuts her hair, takes her make-up kit wherever she goes, and calls her sister and mother as 'villagers' once they refuse to accept her sophisticated and flashy style of life. For that reason, she avoids visiting her parents' home and the rare occasions of her short visits are spent in blaming the untidiness of the surrounding and the inhabitants. Even she goes to the extent of scolding her husband when he splits tea in his saucer, or wears a shirt, which does not match, with his trousers.

In this way, Aruna's entrapment is different from the rest. She has liberated herself from the customs and dominating home rules that bind the rest of the characters like Uma and Anamica. Yet, in negating those codes, she ensnares herself in her mad pursuit towards a vision of perfection. And in order to reach that perfection she needs to

constantly uncover and rectify the flaws of her own family as well as of Arvind's. When none other than Uma sees through the entrapment of Aruna, she feels pity for her:

Seeing Aruna vexed to the point of tears because the cook's pudding had sunk and spread instead of remaining upright and solid, or because Arvind had come to dinner in his bedroom slippers, or Papa was wearing a t-shirt with a hole under one arm, Uma felt pity for her: was this the realm of ease and comfort for which Aruna had always pined and that some might say she had attained? Certainly it brought her no pleasure: there was always a crease of discontent between her eyebrows and an agitation that made her eyelids flutter, disturbing Uma who noticed it (109).

While Uma, Anamica, Aruna present the female versions of entrapment in *Fasting, Feasting*, Arun pictures the male version of it. Unlike his sisters, right from his birth, Arun desists eating the food of his family which is symbolic of its values. Much to the dismay of his father, he shows his preference for vegetarian food. Simply because it revolutionised the life-style of his father, Arun can not be forced to eat non-vegetarian food. This, of course, is a cause of disappointment for Papa:

Papa was always scornful of those of their relatives who came to visit and insisted on clinging to their cereal-and vegetable-eating ways, shying away from the meat dishes Papa insisted on having cooked for dinner. Now his own son, his one son, displayed this completely baffling desire to return to the ways of his forefathers, meek and puny men who had got nowhere in life. Papa was deeply vexed (32-33).

Nonetheless, Arun cannot fully come out of the clutches of Papa, especially, in terms of his education. And ironic enough, it is education, which instead of offering the desired autonomy, paves way for Arun's entrapment.

Papa, in order to give "the best, the most, the highest" (119) education for his son, takes charge of Arun's life from his childhood. Although Arun's school examinations are over, Papa cannot allow him to go to his sister's house in Bombay during holidays, since he has planned that time for taking up entrance examinations and preparation for sending applications to go abroad for 'higher studies'. However, in the eyes of Aruna, her father's manic determination to get a foreign scholarship for Arun, is actually on account of his unfulfilled dreams, which he tries to impose on his son. That is why, when the letter of acceptance from Massachusetts finally arrives, it stirs no emotions in Arun:

Uma watched Arun too, when he read the fateful letter. She watched and searched for an expression, of relief, of joy, doubt, fear, anything at all. But there was none.... There was nothing else—not the hint of a smile, frown, laugh or anything: these had been ground down till they had disappeared. This blank face now stared at the letter and faced another phase of his existence arranged for him by Papa (121).

As a reviewer rightly observes, “With a deft touch, Desai shows us that MamaPapa’s ambitions for Arun are as stifling as their lack of ambition for Uma,”² From America, Arun’s letters come just to indicate his endurance and survival. His messages are diluted, and are devoid of any emotion and substance. “The most personal note he struck was a poignant, frequently repeated complaint: ‘The food is not very good’” (123).

The ties, though invisible, are so overwhelming that even in a country that feasts on individuality, Arun fails to manifest his identity as an individual. Caught in the prison house of his own family’s food habits, he can neither nourish the alien food nor develop a sense of belonging with Patton’s family that shelters him during his vacation. The smell of the raw meat being charred over the fire by Mr. Patton for steak or hamburger is loathsome for Arun. Conversely, Mr. Patton fails to understand why Arun really refuses to eat a good piece of meat. While Mrs. Patton sympathises with Arun, and gives him the vegetarian food items, particularly tomato slices and lettuce on bread, Arun finds them detestable too. Because he thinks that “in his time in America he has developed a hearty abhorrence for the raw foods everyone here thinks the natural diet of a vegetarian”(167). Hence when Mrs. Patton, quite satisfied with her job of a host, watches him eating with pride and complicity,

Arun ate with an expression of woe and a sense of mistreatment. How was he to tell Mrs. Patton that these were not the foods that figured in his culture? That his digestive system did not know how to turn them into nourishment? (184-185).

Where Mrs. Patton’s daughter, Melanie, bluntly says she finds the food revolting, and refuses to taste it, Arun has to helplessly eat it. Melanie, however, suffers from bulimia—a disorder in which overeating alternates with self-induced vomiting, fasting, etc. Her bulimia, along with her mother’s frenzy for buying food items to fill the freezer, signifies the consumerist society that she hails from, where excess becomes the malady. This seen in contrast to Rod, the fitness fanatic, who spends all his time and energy in

jogging, baffles Arun who wonders that “one can’t tell what is more dangerous in this country, the pursuit of health or of sickness”(204-205). He apprehends that like Melanie, who eats, vomits and lies on her vomit most of the time, the people of her country too, go through an inexplicable pain and a real hunger. Yet he cannot reconcile his mind to the unanswerable question: “But what hunger a person so sated can feel?”(224).

Anita Desai, in portraying the stories of entrapment in *Fasting, Feasting*, presents one version after another; each contributing together to a master version, and each simultaneously subverting the other towards an open and contingent version. Accordingly, in the story of Uma, we find her unattractiveness leading to her eventual entrapment. Yet, if we pass a final verdict on this account, we would be proved erroneous since Desai presents the versions of Aruna and Anamica, Uma’s appealing sister and charming cousin, respectively. Beauty cannot offer them escape from entrapments; in truth, it is rather their good looks that victimise them. Further, if we think again that it is Uma’s lack of education that has led to her entrapped situation, Desai presents us the subversion of Anamica, where foreign scholarship fetches her an equal match but fails to provide her the required escape, it suffocates and kills her literally. In like manner, if as Uma thinks, “A CAREER. Leaving home. Living alone” (130) would bring in the necessary freedom from entrapment, Desai presents us the story of Arun, who leaves home, lives alone for a career but feels the pangs of entrapment despite it.

Also, in providing a male version through the story of Arun’s entrapment, Desai negates any feministic verdict based on the other female versions of entrapment that is likely to put the blame on the patriarchal, male-centred society. Thus, Anita Desai, often described as one of the finest writers of this country, has moved from her earlier, typical way of sympathising with her characters, females especially, to a different level of sensibility now. Where it would be easy to presuppose her overt feministic concerns in a novel like *Cry, the Peacock*, it would be unwise to approach her *Fasting, Feasting* with any such preconceived notions. Desai herself speaks out in a recent interview that she has been deliberately shifting her focus from female characters to male characters. She

rather feels she needs to address and voice out themes which concern males too. She says:

Specially in my earlier work I found myself addressing the same things over and over again: very much about the life of women, specially those women who are confined to home and family, also the solitude from which a person can suffer even if living within a big family or surrounded by crowds. But after several years and several books I began to feel suffocated myself by the confinement of these subjects. I felt I was limiting the territory to such an extent that it created a kind of suffocation even for me. So I deliberately opened the doors, to widen the canvas, and started writing more about male characters and their lives, because I felt they had a wider experience of the world, and I could address a greater variety of experiences.³

Finally, if we consider the male version represented by Arun and the female versions constituted by Uma, Anamika and Aruna as Indian versions, Desai offers American versions to counter them. The story, thus dangling between two countries and cultures shows to prove through the characters of Uma and Arun, and their counterparts Melanie and Rod, that attempts of escape from entrapments can only be temporary, illusory and self-destructively futile since entrapments through familial knots are ubiquitous, all encompassing and universal. And perhaps the salvation comes when one accepts entrapment of one kind or another envisioned as an inescapable fact of life.

References

¹Anita Desai, *Fasting, Feasting* (London: Vintage, 1999) 3.
All subsequent page references are to this edition.

²Sylvia Brownrigg, "Fasting, Feasting" by Anita Desai.
<http://archive.salon.com/books/review/2000/02/17/desai/print.html>. [9/15/2002].

³Magda Costa, "Interview with Anita Desai, *Lateral* (March 2001).
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