



Regulated Lives and Unspoken Desires: Emotional Discipline within the Domestic Space in Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting*

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ABSTRACT

Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting* explores the tensions between abundance and deprivation within the constraining frameworks of family and society. The novel offers a critical examination of gender roles across two contrasting cultural contexts, India and the United States, demonstrating how patriarchal expectations shape individual identities in both settings. The title itself foregrounds inequality, reflecting the uneven distribution of privilege, autonomy, and desire. In the Indian context, women's social worth is measured through submissiveness, domestic competence, physical attractiveness, and reproductive ability, while men are expected to embody success, diligence, and intellectual authority. Aruna and Uma are groomed solely for marriage; however, when repeated attempts to marry Uma fail, she is relegated to the role of caregiver, first to her brother Arun and later to her ageing parents. Mama's identity remains inseparable from her status as the obedient wife of a dominant patriarch, rarely asserting independent agency. Anamika's tragic death exposes the extreme consequences of idealized femininity, as her conformity to social expectations culminates in fatal domestic abuse. In contrast, figures such as Dr. Dutt and Mira-masi disrupt normative gender roles by asserting autonomy beyond familial and marital obligations. The novel also suggests that men are constrained by rigid masculine roles, which restrict emotional expression. Desai extends this critique to American society, where gendered norms persist through obsessive standards of beauty, athleticism, and productivity. Characters such as Mrs. Patton and her daughter Melanie are burdened by ideals of female perfection, while Mr. Patton and Rod exemplify traditional masculine stereotypes rooted in physical strength and control. Parallels between Papa and Mr. Patton, as well as between Mama and Mrs. Patton, underscore the universality of gendered oppression, despite cultural differences. Ultimately, *Fasting, Feasting* reveals how entrenched gender expectations systematically limit individual freedom across cultures.

Keywords: Gender expectations, social identity, patriarchy, female subordination, cultural norms

Introduction

Anita Desai, a post-Independence Indian English novelist, occupies a distinctive position in the canon of Indian English fiction for her sustained engagement with psychological realism and feminist concerns. With over three decades of distinguished literary production, Desai is particularly acclaimed for her nuanced portrayal of female interiority. Her fiction consistently explores familial conflict, the alienation of middle-class women, and the muted suffering embedded within domestic spaces. A close reading of Desai's oeuvre reveals that her advocacy for female autonomy is articulated within and often in resistance to deeply entrenched patriarchal cultural structures. In this sense, her writing may be viewed as a self-conscious critique of hegemonic masculinity, using the private sphere of the family as a microcosm for larger social inequalities. Born into a multicultural household to a Bengali father and a German mother, Desai possesses a hybrid sensibility that allows her to view Indian culture simultaneously from insider and outsider perspectives. This dual positionality significantly informs her literary treatment of alienation, displacement, and emotional estrangement, themes that recur across her works. Desai's fiction is marked by a profound psychological depth, achieved through an incisive exploration of her characters' inner lives. While her narratives predominantly foreground female subjectivities, she also employs male perspectives to articulate experiences of exile and isolation, notably in *Baumgartner's Bombay* and *Bye Bye Blackbird*.

Fasting, Feasting (1999), shortlisted for the Booker Prize, has attracted considerable critical attention due to the multiplicity of themes it encompasses. Scholars have examined the novel through diverse lenses, including diasporic gender identities (Choubey, 2004; Volná, 2005), alienation and belonging (Amo, 2016, p. 138), and the psychological oppression of its central characters (Narayan & Mee, 2003, p. 227). Desai's psychological method has also been frequently compared to that of Virginia Woolf (Kanwar, 1991), particularly in its emphasis on interior consciousness and emotional fragmentation. The novel traces the experiences of the younger members of an Indian family as they struggle to assert individual identities against the rigid traditions of the older generation, while simultaneously confronting confusion, loneliness, and displacement in diasporic spaces.

Set partly in India and partly in the United States, where Desai herself resides, *Fasting, Feasting* offers a compelling juxtaposition of Eastern and Western cultures. Arun's cultural upbringing and emotional

dislocation are rendered with remarkable sensitivity. Although deeply constrained within his familial home in India, Arun experiences a complex mix of freedom and alienation when he travels to Massachusetts, where he is immersed in the rhythms of American suburban life. His initial encounter with cultural difference evokes confusion and anxiety, characteristic of the immigrant experience. Through Arun's subjective perceptions, Desai captures both the pleasures and the disquieting aspects of cross-cultural existence. Beyond individual experience, the novel engages with broader concerns of globalization, particularly its role in eroding cultural diversity and destabilizing social and cultural identities across indigenous communities in India and elsewhere. Persistent questions of "belonging," "identity," and "homeland" permeate the narrative, underscoring the emotional costs of cultural homogenization. By presenting subtle yet telling contrasts between India and the United States, Desai raises critical questions about cultural difference in a measured and balanced manner. Arun's fleeting sense of independence away from home, for instance, poignantly illuminates these contrasts, revealing the fragile and contingent nature of freedom in a globalized world.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws upon three interrelated feminist theoretical interventions to analyze gender construction in *Fasting, Feasting*. Simone de Beauvoir's assertion that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" provides the foundational lens for understanding how female identity in the novel is shaped through social conditioning rather than biology. Uma's upbringing exemplifies this process of becoming, as her education, desires, and autonomy are systematically subordinated to the single goal of marriage. Anamika's tragic fate further illustrates de Beauvoir's argument that woman is positioned as the "Other," valued primarily for her conformity to idealized femininity. Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity extends this analysis by conceptualizing gender as a repeated enactment governed by social norms. In *Fasting, Feasting*, femininity is performed through obedience, silence, and bodily restraint, while masculinity is enacted through authority and emotional withdrawal. These performances are not freely chosen but compulsorily reiterated, as deviation invites punishment or exclusion. Both Indian and American characters are shown to be trapped within these performative scripts, revealing the fragility and artificiality of gender norms. Susan Bordo's work on the disciplined body provides a crucial framework for examining how control over women is exercised through bodily regulation. While Indian women are constrained through domestic labor and reproductive expectations, American women such as Melanie and Mrs. Patton are subjected to ideals of thinness, beauty, and self-surveillance. Bordo's theory allows for a comparative reading that foregrounds

how power operates through the body across cultures, transforming the female body into a site of control rather than autonomy. Together, these three theorists enable a transnational feminist reading of *Fasting, Feasting* that moves beyond cultural essentialism and instead focuses on shared structures of gendered discipline.

Methodology

The study employs a qualitative textual analysis grounded in feminist literary criticism. Close reading is used to examine narrative voice, characterization, domestic spaces, and representations of the body. Selected episodes involving Uma, Anamika, Mama, Mrs. Patton, and Melanie are analyzed to trace how gender norms are internalized and reproduced through everyday practices. The comparative structure of the novel is treated as a critical strategy rather than a backdrop, allowing for an analysis of how similar mechanisms of control operate within culturally distinct settings. The methodology is interpretive rather than empirical, focusing on theoretical application and textual evidence. By restricting the theoretical framework to Beauvoir, Butler, and Bordo, the study maintains conceptual coherence and avoids theoretical dilution, enabling a focused exploration of gender as social construction, performative identity, and embodied discipline.

Analysis:

Feasting and Fasting: Gender, the Body, and Regulated Subjectivity

Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting* (1999/2008) offers a sustained critique of gendered power by locating patriarchy not only in overt authority but also in the regulation of everyday bodily practices, most notably eating, serving, and abstaining. As Rana Dasgupta observes, the novel exposes how social systems seize control of individuals, especially women, through practices such as eating (Introduction, p. viii). Reframed through Simone de Beauvoir's assertion that woman is constructed as the Other within patriarchal culture (*The Second Sex*, 1949/2011, p. 26), Desai's narrative demonstrates how female subjectivity is systematically shaped through deprivation, self denial, and silence. Within the Indian household, food becomes a primary instrument through which gender hierarchy is naturalized. Uma's upbringing is marked by unequal access to nourishment, pleasure, and choice. Mama's recollection that "girls in the family were not given sweets, nuts, or good things to eat" (Desai, p. 8) is not merely anecdotal but emblematic of a broader cultural logic in which male bodies are privileged as deserving, while female bodies are trained in restraint. Susan Bordo

argues that cultural control over women often operates through the body, rendering self-denial a moral virtue (*Unbearable Weight*, 1993, p. 165). Uma's habitual fasting, both literal and metaphorical, thus becomes a form of internalized discipline rather than an act of agency.

Marriage in the novel functions as a regulatory apparatus that fixes women within narrowly prescribed roles. Uma's repeated failure to secure a husband does not liberate her from patriarchal expectations; instead, it intensifies her confinement. Beauvoir's contention that marriage institutionalizes woman's dependence (*The Second Sex*, p. 451) is borne out in Desai's portrayal of Uma's stalled life, where the absence of marriage paradoxically results in greater domestic exploitation. Her body and labour remain appropriated by the family, reinforcing her status as a means rather than an end. Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity provides a crucial lens for understanding Uma's existence. Butler argues that gender is not an innate identity but a repeated performance compelled by social norms (*Gender Trouble*, 1990, p. 33). Uma's femininity is enacted daily through cooking, serving, cleaning, and silent compliance. These acts do not express an inner essence; rather, they constitute her gendered subjectivity. Her moments of resistance, including interest in education, participation in social gatherings, and linguistic curiosity, are swiftly curtailed as they threaten to disrupt the script of normative femininity.

Masculinity, Privilege, and Asymmetrical Freedom

While the novel foregrounds women's oppression, it also reveals how masculinity is constructed through entitlement rather than emotional autonomy. Arun, as the male child, receives educational investment and mobility denied to Uma. His departure for higher studies abroad underscores what Beauvoir identifies as man's position as the default human subject, whose aspirations are culturally legitimized (*The Second Sex*, p. 29). Yet Desai complicates this privilege by depicting Arun's emotional detachment and discomfort, suggesting that patriarchal advantage does not equate to psychological fulfillment.

Transnational Bodies and the Politics of Consumption

The second half of the novel, set in the United States, dismantles the assumption that Western liberalism offers genuine freedom from gender regulation. Mr. Patton's barbecuing rituals exemplify what Bordo describes as the cultural association between masculinity, meat, and dominance (*Unbearable Weight*, p. 190). Arun's visceral reaction to the "raw meat being charred over the fire" and images of "grease and blood"

(Desai, pp. 166–169) signals ethical and bodily unease, highlighting consumption as an assertion of power rather than pleasure. Mrs. Patton’s suppressed vegetarianism mirrors Uma’s silencing, demonstrating what Butler terms the transnational repetition of gender norms (*Gender Trouble*, p. 179). Despite cultural differences, both women perform the role of the accommodating wife, their desires rendered inconsequential. Arun’s observation that Mrs Patton’s strained smile resembles his mother’s, tight at the corners with pressure (Desai, p. 198), collapses the East West divide, revealing patriarchy as a portable structure rather than a culturally isolated phenomenon. Melanie’s eating disorder represents the most extreme manifestation of bodily regulation. Bordo interprets anorexia as a cultural pathology in which control over the body becomes a substitute for agency (*Unbearable Weight*, p. 139). Melanie’s refusal to eat, despite abundance, exposes the violence embedded in ideals of perfection, thinness, and emotional repression. Her body becomes the site where cultural contradictions are inscribed.

Gender, Difference, and Hierarchies of Value

Desai further complicates gender politics through Uma’s relationship with her disabled cousin Ramu. Despite his physical impairment, Ramu enjoys social mobility and authority denied to Uma. This asymmetry confirms Beauvoir’s argument that masculinity overrides other forms of marginalization, ensuring male superiority even in contexts of bodily disadvantage (*The Second Sex*, p. 89). Uma’s relative worth as a woman remains consistently lower, underscoring the primacy of gender in social valuation.

Regulated Bodies, Reproduced Inequality

Through the dialectic of “fasting” and “feasting,” Desai exposes how both deprivation and excess function as mechanisms of control. Indian patriarchy enforces obedience through denial, while American consumer culture disciplines bodies through abundance and surveillance. Drawing on Beauvoir, Butler, and Bordo, *Fasting, Feasting* can be read as a critique of how gender is produced through repetitive bodily practices, internalized norms, and culturally sanctioned performances. Ultimately, the novel suggests that liberation cannot be achieved through geographical movement or economic progress alone. As long as bodies, particularly female bodies, remain regulated by patriarchal expectations, freedom remains illusory. Desai’s text thus positions everyday acts such as eating, serving, and refusing food as deeply political gestures, revealing the intimate workings of power within the most ordinary spaces of life.

Conclusion:

Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting* offers a nuanced critique of gendered existence by showing how women's identities are shaped and constrained through everyday domestic practices. Viewed through Simone de Beauvoir's assertion that one is not born, but becomes, a woman, the novel exposes how femininity is socially produced within patriarchal family structures that prioritize obedience, sacrifice, and silence. Characters such as Uma are not inherently passive but are conditioned into submission through repetitive social expectations that deny autonomy. Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity illuminates identity as an enacted process rather than a fixed essence. Gender roles are sustained through habitual acts such as cooking, serving, fasting, and emotional restraint, which must be continually performed to maintain social legitimacy. Uma's life becomes a series of enforced performances that naturalize inequality, while Arun's gendered privilege remains largely unquestioned, rendering patriarchal power invisible. Susan Bordo's feminist analysis of the body and food clarifies the novel's symbolism of eating and abstention. Differential control over food reflects the disciplining of female bodies, where restraint marks virtue and excess evokes shame. Women's emotional and physical deprivation, visible in Uma and mirrored in Mrs Patton, shows how food practices operate as mechanisms of cultural control, shaping subjectivity through internalized regulation rather than overt force. While the novel contrasts fasting in India with feasting in America, this binary dissolves on closer examination. Patriarchal discipline of the female body transcends national and cultural boundaries, revealing the global circulation of gendered norms. Fasting and feasting emerge as relative, context-dependent experiences that shape identity through lived embodiment rather than geography alone. Thus, *Fasting, Feasting* aligns with Beauvoir's critique of gendered becoming, Butler's understanding of performative identity, and Bordo's analysis of bodily discipline to reveal the subtle yet pervasive mechanisms of patriarchy. Desai presents domestic space as a crucial site of ideological control, where gender, culture, and power intersect to regulate women's lives across cultures.

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