

Oppression And Independence: The Role Of Food In Desai's Cross-Cultural Narrative

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Abstract

Food has consistently held a vital position in human culture, serving not merely as a source of nourishment but also as a representation of identity, tradition, and societal values. In literature, food transcends its basic function; it acts as a compelling narrative device, adding depth and emotional resonance to stories. India's cultural ethos and historical legacy have always included multicultural customs. The examination of food within literary contexts serves as a significant framework for comprehending not only the inner lives of characters but also the wider social and historical dynamics influencing their narratives. In Anita Desai's "Fasting, Feasting" deals with the culture of two countries, the United States and India. The novel's title depicts the importance of food as a symbol in the novel itself. In this paper, Anita Desai uses food as a metaphor for oppression, power, and independence to contrast the cultures of both countries and analyze the psychological background of the characters.

Keywords: Food, Culture, oppression, symbolism, power.

INTRODUCTION:

Food, culture, and literature are interconnected, which shape and mirror each other in an impactful and significant manner. Food changes its roles and serves as a cultural identity that is woven intricately into society. Literature, which mirrors the human experience, reflects the importance of food to delve into themes such as memory, identity, social stratification, and interpersonal relationships. The process of eating, cooking, serving, and sharing the food within narratives brings a strong sense of character development and social politics, thereby establishing food as a central theme or important component of storytelling.

In literature, the concepts of *Fasting*, *Feasting* extend beyond mere physical interactions with food; they represent intricate emotional, psychological, and societal challenges. The characters' encounters with food during these rituals often reflect their inner turmoil, aspirations, and paths toward self-realization. For instance, the religious fasting illustrated in Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking* and the opulent banquets in Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* highlight themes of devotion, celebration, yearning, and metamorphosis. These literary analyses reveal how food serves as a locus of power, influencing both personal dynamics and broader social frameworks. This study investigates literary texts that prominently contain themes of *Fasting*, *Feasting*, demonstrating the vast linkages between food, culture, and literature. It shows how culinary traditions reflect the human experience. By examining the symbolic, emotional, and social components of *Fasting*, *Feasting*, this study will shed light on how writers use food as a narrative technique to convey themes of dedication, desire, and the intricacies of the human experience. Finally, the findings will prove that *Fasting*, *Feasting* are more than just cultural traditions, functioning as important narrative tools for highlighting the complex relationships between food, identity, and literary expression.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

Does food only give us the energy to survive?

In what ways does food symbolize the conflict between tradition and modernity in the customs of Indian family?

In what ways does the representation of food in *Fasting*, *Feasting* serve as a metaphor for emotional and psychological sustenance?

How does the novel use food as a means of fostering emotional attachment or separation?

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES:

To investigate the symbolic importance of food in *Fasting*, *Feasting*, and its representation of cultural values and social conventions.

To analyze the inner struggle of the characters through their eating behavior. To understand the title of

the novel.

To examine the connection between gender roles and food

LITERATURE REVIEW:

The novel *Fasting, Feasting* by Anita Desai explores the psychological and cultural facets of the lives of its protagonists in a complex way, highlighting the conflicts between individual needs and social expectations. Fewer academics have examined the psychological aspects of the characters' experiences, even though the novel's portrayal of gender roles and cultural conflict has dominated much of the scholarly conversation surrounding it. By analyzing current readings of the book and concentrating on how cultural factors and psychological struggles interact to shape the characters—especially Uma and Arun—this literature review seeks to close this gap.

BACKGROUND STUDY:

The novel “*Fasting, Feasting*” explores the intricate relationships and disparities between Indian and American cultures. Despite its straightforward language and uncomplicated structure, it tackles significant themes and conveys important messages. The novel *Fasting, Feasting* is divided into two parts, one taking place in India and another in the United States. It traces the identity and experience of the characters in the novel through the use of a beautiful element, food.

In India, the story revolves around Mama and Papa, and their kids -Uma, Aruna, and Arun. The protagonist Uma, the elderly daughter is forced to leave her studies just to look after her younger brother, and the oppression is seen through her character. The denial of good food develops many traumatic conditions in her. Arun is forced to eat and given special attention, which he doesn't like, and he moves into a traumatic condition of developing food aversion, especially in meat.

In the United States, the narrative transitions to Uma's brother, who has relocated to pursue his education. He moves with Mr. Pattern's family and develops a good bond with Mrs. Pattern, who takes care of him as his son. Mr. Pattern's daughter Melanie develops Bulimic Nervosa as she wants to fit herself into a body figure that society expects. The story revolves around the identity crisis of Uma, Mama, Melanie, Arun, and the Patriarchal power of Papa and Mr. Pattern in both different worlds. Anita Desai uses food as a metaphor to bring up the complexities and struggles faced by Uma, her brother, and other characters in the novels.

Food as a metaphor for power and oppression:

Desai describes that the finger bowl is positioned in front of Papa, who enjoys the power that other members lack. He washes them on the napkin after dipping his fingertips in. As a sign of his rank, he is the only member of the family to receive a finger bowl and napkin. When he eats all the delicious bits of the orange while she and Uma simply leave the pith and skins on the plate, it is evident that power is being used during the "orange-peeling ceremony."

“She picks out the largest orange in the bowl and hands it to Mama, who peels it in stripes, 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 Papa's plate. One by one, he lifts them with the tips of his fingers and places them in his mouth. Everyone waits while he repeats the gesture, over and over. Mama's lips are pursed with the care she gives her actions and their importance” (Desai, 23)

The novel's power structure impacts gender issues and household connections because it is focused on food and eating. Mama tells Uma that girls were not given any special foods like nuts, sweets, or anything else during her time. Only the boys and men in the family were served nuts or sweets that were brought from the market. Mama's statement above demonstrates the influence of men and the discrimination against women in food. Uma constrains her wish to buy groundnuts and ice cream when everyone goes to the market, which conveys the reluctance and powerlessness of women to satisfy their food urges. In contrast, men were given the power to eat what they want, and that is seen through the character Papa.

Desai describes Arun's diet: *“A fixed quantity of milk was poured down his gullet whether he wanted it or not and, later, the prescribed boiled egg and meat broth. Then, when Papa returned from the office, he would demand to know how much his son had consumed and an answer had to be given . . .”* (Desai, 30)

Arun was given privileges in both food and education. He was forced to eat non-vegetarian food by his Papa as

it was a sign of masculinity, but it turned into an aversion, and he changed himself to a vegetarian. His father returning from office “*would demand to know how much his son had consumed*” (Desai, 30). Though he was given all the luxuries, he was affected by the over-protectiveness of being a boy child in the family, which led to many insecurities and was affected psychologically. We could see that Uma represses and suppresses her desire to eat, whereas Arun lacks his appetite.

Food as a female identity:

Deborah Lupton describes eating as “*intensely emotional experiences that are intertwined with embodied sensation and strong feelings... They are central to individuals’ subjective and their sense of distinction from others*”. (Lupton, 36)

In the narrative, food is depicted as a profoundly gendered sphere, functioning as a means for securing matrimonial alliances and reflecting women's focus on culinary practices. On the first day of her marriage, Uma received directives to prepare meals for everyone. The text also illustrates the customs surrounding large social gatherings and the dowry system prevalent in Indian matrimonial arrangements. Notably, despite Uma's father's advanced education, he adhered to the dowry tradition and was exploited multiple times under its guise. Ultimately, his frustration led him to abandon the prospect of marriage for his eldest daughter, Uma.

Melanie’s Bulimic Nervosa:

In contrast, Pattern’s daughter Melanie, who lives in the United States, develops Bulimic Nervosa, though she has access to food, unlike Uma.

Pamela K. Keel defines Bulimia nervosa as characterized by recurrent binge-eating episodes coupled with inappropriate compensatory behavior and undue influence of weight or shape on self-evaluation...Inappropriate compensatory behaviors include self-induced vomiting, laxative abuse, diuretic abuse, fasting, and excessive exercising. Of these methods, self-induced vomiting is the most common in BN. (Keel 5).

Melanie, who wasn't given attention and care by her parents, develops psychological difficulties and lacks nutrition. The novel serves as a representation of the psychological challenges faced by women due to socially imposed ideals of beauty, leading to an obsession with conforming to these standards. Telling Arun repulsively to leave, she “*lifts herself onto her knees, thrusts her finger down her throat and vomits again, copiously.*” (Desai,227).

Melaine tries to fulfill the body ideals, whereas her brother Ron tries to fulfill his protein diet. Her intensified insecurities and feelings of inadequacy to unattainable body ideals contributed to her frustration, ultimately resulting in the development of an eating disorder. The observable cycle of initial starvation followed by episodes of compulsive eating reflects her profound sense of repression, which is expressed through her interactions with food. When her mother offers her a nutritious meal, Melanie reacts by forcefully pushing the plate away and defiantly returning to her tub of ice cream and peanuts. Lacking the ability to articulate her anger verbally, Melanie resorts to food as a means of communication.

To summarize, in India, Papa commands Mama to make the food he wants and enjoys eating. Sweets were made in the house only if Papa wanted them. In the United States, Mr.

Pattern cooks meat and serves Mrs. Pattern despite knowing she is a vegetarian. These culinary rituals serve as a reflection of the power dynamics at play, revealing how women often diminish their status in relation to men, which in turn reinforces masculine hegemony.

Furthermore, the narrative critically examines the tendency in the West to misconstrue vegetarianism as an exotic phenomenon.

CONCLUSION:

The paper explores the intricate details of the characters and their psychological trauma in the novel *Fasting, Feasting* by Anita Desai through the symbolic use of food. In addition to demonstrating how the symbolic value of food and the power associated with it impacts women's lives and bodies across cultural boundaries, she also showed how food and eating habits are gendered and sexualized. She has also brought out how food is not just a 3- time meal in a day, but the identity of one’s personality and culture. The novel examines the search for identification and the difficulties faced by women in defining who they are, where female protagonists like Melanie and Uma struggle with their identities. Arun wants to be free and anonymous from the identity that his parents have forced upon him. The power that food confers on those who consume and control it can be a

matter of position and power.

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