

Meat & flesh:  
A reading of Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting*

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As is known, the novel by Anita Desai, *Fasting, Feasting*, is divided into two parts.<sup>1</sup> The main male character of the story is Arun, who represents a temporary link between two worlds, namely, his Indian family and the Pattons from America. Food is the key-theme, although it has no nutritive functions. On the Indian side, it is used to make small transgressions, to reach marriage agreements and celebrate weddings; it also helps as a demonstration of being part of an unbreakable couple where the male is the absolute sovereign: he, in fact, exercises power over the family and also shows off modernity. Food serves as a useless means of finding a husband, and as a short and disastrous test of marital life and of being trapped at home; it is used to celebrate extraordinarily chic and untraditional weddings and, through vegetarianism and dietary sobriety, to firmly underline a personal freedom of thoughts and movements. Furthermore, as we shall see later, food is also an instrument of death.

If we take a look at the American side, we find food as an instrument of affirmation of Western masculinity (Mr. Patton's barbecues). By contrast, Mrs. Patton views food as a way of filling her life or as an attempt to reinvent it in a style that she believes exotic (vegetarianism). Ron, the Pattons' son, continuously 'feeds' his muscles, while his sister Melanie literally vomits everything and everyone. I should like to point out that food in this novel does not only replace sexuality, but also the family and maternal roles, whether they are authentic or 'vicarious'; indeed, there are other key topics, such as the persistent heat pervading the story and the inexorable ritual and ritualistic value of what we eat (or we do not eat) common to all cultures.

I feel that Desai is suggesting that none of the characters is really happy, and, even if they do eat, they live an existence of emotional and spiritual fasting.

1. Desai 1999; throughout the article, the numbers of pages refer to this edition. See the *References* for a list of critical works on this novel.

The main character in the first part is Uma, an Indian and Hindū spinster, who waits on her parents as if she were a servant, but only receives anger and spite in return. The second part is focused on the bloodless Arun, Uma's younger brother, who has gone to study in America. In a continuous succession of flashbacks, the first part of the novel covers thirty years, whereas the second part only deals with a single summer. In some way, we are put in touch with the Hindū roots of the family and the lives of the characters until Uma reaches the ripe 'old age' of just forty three. On the other hand, the Pattons are 'timeless': we know nothing about them. Desai's vitriolic irony seems to highlight the emptiness of the modernity of a rootless America. Notwithstanding, she criticizes the Indian *modus vivendi*, pointing her finger at its hypocritical traditionalism.

The novel begins with the image of Uma preparing a parcel, as her parents have ordered, to send to Arun in Massachusetts. *Fasting, Feasting* ends with the arrival of the parcel which seems to represent a double estrangement. In fact, Arun presents Mrs. Patton with the tea and the shawl sent by his family, that is to say, something to taste and something to warm oneself up with.

Arun's family's gifts reveal their complete lack of touch with reality, since a man wearing a shawl in America would cast doubts on his manhood. Arun, however, rids himself of the gift and apparently breaks off all connections with his Indian family. This last attempt seems fruitless: the reader has the impression that Arun has never really left home. Indeed, ever since he was a child, his family had fed him, most of the time forcedly, on account of his lack of appetite; they had also given him an education and forced him to move to America. On the other hand, Uma had prepared the parcel out of a mere sense of duty, knitting a sweater for her brother 'more practical (...) than the shawl (...) (p. 66). However, she does not send it to him: all of Uma's initiatives are destined to be set aside.

The end of the first part is characterized by heat, death, and food, once more by means of a ritual: we take part in the scattering of the 'perfect' cousin Anamika's ashes. This woman had 'spent her entire time in the kitchen, cooking for his family (...) – first the men, then the children, finally the women' (p. 70). For 25 years, Anamika had literally been swallowed up by her family-in-law, in such a way that Uma wonders: 'had marriage devoured her?' (p. 134); she eventually died burned alive: is it suicide or murder? [Some of the neighbours said:] 'she herself [i.e. Anamika's mother-in-law] (...) poured the kerosene over her and set her on fire' (p. 151). She was useless: after an abortion caused by her mother-in-law's beatings, she became sterile. During Anamika's funeral, as her ashes disappear into the water, a sort of connection emerges for the first time between Uma and her mother, which, interestingly, is not the usual servant-mistress one. In Anamika's case, food is a cause of death.

The second part, starting with 'It is summer', shows Arun absorbed in watching Mrs. Patton pleasurably emptying enormous grocery bags. She acts with the same religious attention as those who place precious objects in a shrine.

Soon after, we perceive the stink of the first in a long series of Mr. Patton's pyre-like barbecues, whose disgusting smell poisons the air (we often 'smell' in this part of the novel, 'the odour of raw meat being charred over the fire', p. 162). I believe that there is a clear reference to Anamika's body sizzling in the kerosene flames. Once again: heat, food, death... and blasphemy: Mr. Patton is uselessly keen on his 'summer night's sacrament'.

At first, Mrs. Patton is charmed by the young Arun. To conquer her guest, she (trapped at home like Uma, deprived of the freedom that Mira-masi enjoys, incapable, like Mama, of being a good mother) initially identifies herself with a vicarious mother, playing the game of food. She enthusiastically becomes vegetarian ("I've always wanted to be one myself (...) Look, Ahroon, you and I – we'll be vegetarians together!"), p. 179).

However, Mrs. Patton is only capable of proposing a misrepresentation of the vegetarian diet to Arun. After this, Arun 'developed a hearty abhorrence for the raw foods everyone here thinks the natural diet of a vegetarian' (p. 167). Even more disappointing and pathetic is her attempt at preparing 'Indian dishes': Mrs. Patton buys what she *believes* to be exotic, forcing the young man to cook these ingredients. Arun, who cannot cook, can only put a miserable imitation of *dhal* on the table and is forced to eat it under the delighted gaze of Mrs. Patton. In this episode, food bears witness to a misunderstanding or an erroneous communication between worlds, since everything is wrong: first of all, the choice of ingredients, and then the expectation that a man, Arun, could ever take a place in the kitchen. As he swallows this sludge, he feels just as revolted as Melanie Patton was on viewing the horrible dish. So, 'For the first time in his existence, he found he craved what he had taken for granted before and even at times thought an unbearable nuisance' (p. 185). Here, and once again, there is a fasting of the senses; of course, food and Eros are both present, but both are 'untasted'.

Paradoxically, as a child, Arun had been obliged to follow a meat-eating diet, because of Papa's Western tastes; by contrast, Arun had turned vegetarian of his own free will. After this, he arrives in Massachusetts, hungry for freedom and anonymity: '(...) he had at last experienced (...) the total absence of relations, of demands, needs, requests, ties, responsibilities (...)’ (p. 172). Nonetheless, he is trapped 'in the sugar-sticky web of family conflict' (p. 195). Since he is persistently the victim of an obstinate sense of nausea, Arun discovers the countless forms of the American food ritual.

Every boiling evening, he takes part in Mr. Patton's barbecues (Arun finds vegetarianism 'not natural', p. 166, and states that 'A cow is a cow', *ibid.*), and also reluctantly participates in the compulsive spending sprees at the supermarket. He is witness to the Pattons' daughter's bulimia; Melanie immediately vomits whatever she eats.

Mrs. Patton's vegetarian turning point is soon followed by an apparent change of feelings towards Arun. After an offering of food as an action of

‘vicarious motherhood’ and complicity, I see open seduction, although I have not found evidence of this aspect in the numerous essays on *Fasting, Feasting*. Mrs. Patton’s love (her ‘appetite’) is so evident that a cashier even asks her if she is pregnant (“‘You pregnant?’”, p. 209). While ‘Summer is beating at them’ (p. 212), Mrs. Patton starts excessively seducing Arun: she nastily exhibits ‘lipstick (...), very pink’ (p. 218) and scanty clothes.

Definitely, Arun is also obsessed by the flesh of his hosts, which is as disgusting as the packages ‘damp from the seeping blood of (...) carcass’ (p. 202) from the supermarket. The woman shows her shapeless flesh, which is doubly repugnant to Arun. On the one hand, the spectre of incest is recognisable (‘It is like confronting his mother naked’, p. 213). On the other, Mrs. Patton’s semi-nudity is pathetic and revolting: ‘(...) her limp breasts that fall into pockets of mauve plaid cotton, freckled and mottled like old leather’ (p. 213). Thus, Mrs. Patton arrives at a new turning point: she ‘no longer cooks dinner for Arun’ (p. 215). The lady, [s]unstruck, bedazzled’, lets the sun cook her, after anointing her body with oil, just like a red steak. Therefore, Mrs. Patton resembles the meat sold at the supermarket (‘[that] meat [which] lay steaming in pink packages of rawness’, p. 183). From a sexual point of view, she is not at all attractive, since she is ‘a scrap’. As a result, Arun ‘finds he has lost his appetite’ (p. 216). Once again, Desai does not express moral or moralistic judgments, but a harsh and merciless realism. Melanie is obviously bony, her face disfigured by acne, always dirty with vomit. She suffers from a chronic, not spiritual, repudiation of food: it is a blasphemous eating-vomiting in view of her painful and real hunger, and also of the useless abundance that surrounds her.

Finally, there is Ron Patton, who belongs to the ‘gladiatorial species’ (p. 191). He is exclusively devoted to the care of his body, he is brainless. In spite of his obsession with physical vigour, he has no interest in girls. Ron openly dislikes the ‘slim chicks’ (*ibid.*) like his sister and the other girls who lack male muscular virility. Not surprisingly, Ron is a hearty eater and, indeed, the scene at night where he devours the barbecue leftovers is memorable.

Hence, this is the picture: Ron is devouring, Melanie is vomiting, Ron is stuffing himself, Melanie is distraught. There is a very thin boundary between rubbish and food, as Arun eventually declares. He also highlights the similarity between Melanie and Uma, although their ‘hungers’ are as different as equally unfulfilled (‘Then Arun does see [...] a resemblance to the contorted face of an enraged sister’, *ibid.*).

Desai never shows Arun in the act of appreciating a woman of any age. Although he lives in a country with total female freedom (‘He has never seen so much female flesh before’, p. 215), he only observes their too revealing or sloppy clothes, etc. Indeed, Arun does not manifest any homosexual tendencies, whatever Mr. Patton may insinuate.

Therefore, America eats greedily. Food is nothing but stuff to accumulate and swallow, a ritual, openly compared to the Eucharistic celebration, when Arun

feels himself ‘unfit to take the wafer upon his tongue, the wine into his throat’ (p. 165). Its consumption is mandatory, the ways of getting it are homologated, but the act of eating has lost every inclusive or exclusive meaning. Everyone can eat everything with everyone, unlike in India. There is no communion. In America, the act of cooking recalls neither warmth nor any sense of protection; food and its waste offer proof of prosperity, of social success. Mrs. Patton usually buys more than they need, their bins are always full and Melanie resents her mother for considering the family as ‘garbage bags you keep stuffing and stuffing’ (p. 207). Mrs. Patton literally gets pleasure from stuffing the pantry, which is as fresh and comforting as the air conditioning in the supermarkets, but then she loses interest in the following step, i.e. cooking.

In the Indian part, the food is constantly under control and is absolutely women’s business, even if Mama is never described preparing food herself. As Arun recalls in America, ‘he has never seen his mother cook’ (p. 193). Mama is incessantly giving orders about what and how to cook; food is the only cause of arguments between the Mama-Papa couple.

On the other hand, Mama’s small transgressions are related to food and play. It is only in these rare moments that she seems a silly girl. Arun’s birth coincides with the end of these playful and gastronomic eccentricities. As the mother of a son, she cannot behave like a ‘little girl’ as she used to do with her daughters: a son deserves total attention.

Uma never cooks but only serves others and, first of all, men. For this reason, Mama recalls, ‘In my day, girls in the family were not given sweets, nuts, good things to eat (...) it was given to the boys in the family’ (p. 6). In this part, food is a mark of the hierarchy between the two sexes.

As if in a mirror, cooking food (i.e. meat) in America is paradoxically in the hands of Mr. Patton. In this presentation of meat-food, Desai seems to evoke the archaic test of virility, violence, blood, and power, up to foreshadowing the spectre of cannibalism.

The farewell to Mrs. Patton corresponds with the end of the novel. Arun gives the woman the shawl and the strong Indian tea, passing them off as gifts from his parents. Is he really lying when he says, “‘Please take these things – my parents sent them for you,” he lies’ (p. 228)? After the failure of her seduction-vegetarianism and the exposition of her flesh, she starts dressing like a sober nun. Basically, Arun has changed continent just to find ‘a plastic representation of what he had known at home’ (*ibid.*), often being forced to carry out unintentional fasting in the country of plenty. Overall, as regards the *feasting* part of the novel, the reader experiences a deep and permanent sense of nausea, the same feeling that Arun has towards food.

By contrast, the *fasting* part of the novel is a triumphal celebration of smells and tastes, of (food) ‘needs’. Suddenly, Uma’s, Aruna’s (Aruna is the older sister of Uma and Arun) and Arun’s parents, PapaMama or MamaPapa, appear on the scene: within the novel, they only have this double name, a *dvandva*

(‘MamaPapa. PapaMama. It was hard to believe they had ever had separate existences’, p. 5). In particular, Papa is an arrogant despot: he needs to be ‘stuffed’ by his wife and his daughter Uma. Here, food is an order and a service; as she does not have a husband, she must serve her father.

Mama is now responsible for an unexpected happening: she suddenly discovers that she is ‘full’ (i.e. pregnant): ‘it was a late pregnancy’ (p. 16), which is rather annoying to her. Her ‘enlarged’ family sees this as a catastrophe and the result of an abhorrent act which brings revolting images to Uma’s mind. In Papa’s opinion, however, it represents his last chance to have a son.

This embarrassment soon turns into excitement when the son arrives, although his birth does not break the MamaPapa twin-set. On the other hand, Mama’s self-confidence is boosted, since she is now the mother of a son.

At this point, Uma achieves a new *status*, as from maidservant she now becomes babysitter. More precisely, her responsibilities are such that the young girl does not have any time to dedicate to her education. As Mama imperatively proclaims: ‘We are not sending you back to school, Uma’ (p. 18). In addition: ‘You will be happier at home. You won’t need to do any lessons’ (p. 22).

Soon after, Mama ‘developed a nervous fear on the subject of Arun’s feeding’ (p. 32), but often Uma gives proof of being an inadequate nanny when trying to wean her little brother. In fact, unlike Papa, Arun has no interest in food and taste. The boy is often forced to take food; there would be trouble if Papa were to find out that his only son was not getting enough food.

As a young man, Arun is under double pressure: on the one hand, his father compels him to study, on the other, he is obliged to overfeed himself. Instead of making him stronger, this compulsive diet leaves the boy weak and bespectacled. Therefore, in this Indian home they do not fast at all; in actual fact, they eat too much, to such a point that Arun thinks it is a ‘grim duty’ (p. 197). Uma does not even allow herself to indulge in innocent gluttony, frustrating her desires. She has also been forced to leave school in order to ‘feed’ others. This means that even though she is a very bad student, Uma has had to forget her hunger for studying: school represents her only chance to escape the domestic sphere.

The only ‘satisfied’ character is Arun’s and Uma’s maternal aunt, Mira. With her name connected to Mirabai, she lives ‘safe in her widow’s white garments’ (p. 38), strolling around as an ascetic. Her vegetarian diet is a banner of abiding faith: she believes in the religious meaning of food and has religious values. If we consider the Pattons, they never allude to anything concerning religion or religiosity in a proper sense: Mr. Patton does not like Arun because he is a vegetarian, not because of his Hindū background. Melanie despises him because of the food he eats, not for religious reasons. Uma welcomes her aunt, foretasting the delicacies that she will cook; in fact, Uma says ‘(...) I love Miramasi – she makes the very best ladoos!’ (p. 38). From Arun’s point of view, what Aunt Mira makes for herself – what insipid food! – is so appetising! Food

is given a paradoxical meaning here: a true woman and true mother, Mama, is incapable of fulfilling her children's needs, which are strangely gratified by the exact opposite of an 'authentic woman' – a widow. Now we experience food, surrogate maternity, and jealousy.

Soon after Arun's birth, Uma decides to follow Mira on a pilgrimage: on this occasion, the girl suffers a convulsion fit, perhaps due to the fasting and heat. Even in this case, Uma is manifestly a disaster, echoing her mother's words: 'You, you disgrace to the family (...)' (p. 53). While watching the 'fits', Mira-masi diagnoses that 'She is possessed. The Lord has taken possession of her' (p. 60). Like Mirabai and Mira, Uma has also become a spouse of God. But a gynaecologist rushes over and takes steps to revive her. Once again, Desai seizes her chance to underline Uma's endless childhood, from which there is no way out: 'Seeing Uma blue and purple on the floor and fighting for breath, he [the gynecologist] bent and lifted her up as if she were an infant newly born' (p. 60). Thereby, Uma's supposed possession pathetically glides into the wail of a baby. After the pilgrimage experience and the embarrassing problem of her convulsions, the family devotes itself to the cause of getting Uma married. To do so, the main concern is Uma's skills in the kitchen. Mama succeeds in obtaining a good match and the marriage is celebrated but not consumed. What the virgin-spouse learns during her pseudo-conjugal short experience is only 'how to cut vegetables in pieces of exactly the same size, how to grind spices into a wet paste (...)' (p. 93): in this case, food is a substitute for eroticism.

Years go by, but Papa's needs do not change. Arun has the chance to move to America: Uma can only commit a few transgressions, merely in the field of food. Chronically afflicted by the heat and others' needs, she starts her journey to her unsolved spinsterhood, the true 'emptiness' and the supreme 'fast'.

The correspondences between the first and the second part of the novel are clearly recalled. The pretentious Papa is mirrored in Mr. Patton's arrogance. The former is trying to westernise, the latter to affirm his superiority with respect to the vegetarian Indians. Neither Mama nor Mrs. Patton cook: the first one has servants, the second one confines her role as a housewife to raids at the supermarket. PapaMama are only one, but at last, the Pattons also form a unit, with no trace of sex. Mama calls her husband Papa, more often father; Mrs. Patton calls her husband dad or daddy. The late pregnancy of Mama is brightly reflected when Mrs. Patton is suspected of being pregnant. But, Mama bears fruit, while in contrast Mrs. Patton exhibits the sterility of fat. Furthermore, both women do not 'nourish'; Mama never cooks and is practically unable to give love; Mrs. Patton only stuffs her pantry and is always reproached for trying to 'poison' relatives.

The (apparently happy) Aruna finds her parallel in Ron. We do not know how satisfied they are from their lives; ironically, we can read about the boy that 'Fortunately, (...) has won a football scholarship' (p. 227). As for Aruna, Uma

perceives her sister's unhappiness as soon as her perfect world steams up. Nor does Aruna seem to find particular satisfaction in motherhood.

She only appears to have fun with her daughter Aisha, but the little girl seems to be more like a toy.

Although Uma shares several characteristics with Melanie (both are unsatisfied, ugly, pimply and just as prone to eccentric or pathological behaviours), the American girl also represents the tragic counterpart of Mira-masi: Mira escapes her sad and traditionally unhappy condition to enjoy hectic religious activities and the so-called 'food oddities'. Melanie is searching for the attention of her nuclear family.

The result of the two stories is also interesting: the Western girl is hospitalised in a specialised clinic. By contrast, Mira-masi is tolerated in India.

There is also an indubitable link between Uma and Arun. On the one hand, Uma is firstly useless as a woman, abhorred because she is incapable of meeting the standards of womanhood (beauty and culinary skills); she eventually becomes the victim of a condition of semi-slavery at home. On the other hand, we have Arun: he is the favourite, the one who must receive Uma's service. Arun is given every opportunity: he can go abroad, but this is to no avail.

Uma and Arun seem to be two sides of the same coin; when we stop listening to Uma's voice, we immediately meet Arun, who observes food. Both are unattractive, bespectacled and forced into a programmed life; neither of them seems interested in sexuality. Both disappoint their parents. Uma feeds the others and Arun struggles to eat as he likes, that is to say, their hunger for life remain unsatisfied. This point is even apparent in his sad letters from America, where food as a subject clearly finds its manifesto: "The most personal note he struck was a poignant, frequently repeated complaint: "The food is not very good"" (p. 123).



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