



Research Paper

Projected Dichotomies and the Bi-Cultural Pulls in the novel, Fasting, Feasting.

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ABSTRACT: *The novel, Fasting, Feasting by Anita Desai offers a lot of anecdotes which show how the two cultures interact with each other in the novel. Here the protagonist faces an insider/outsider syndrome as he never considers the US as his second home and the homes always remain distinctly divided. The novel definitely shows some projected dichotomies between the Orient and the Occident especially in the areas of Gender sensitivity, Aspects of Private and Public life, Sensibilities of Love and Sex and Signs of Modernity and Commodification. But more than the projected dichotomies, what makes the novel problematic is the refusal of the West to accept alterity.*

KEY-WORDS: *projected dichotomies, gendered existence, modernity, commodification, binaries, bi-cultural pulls, alterity.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

The plot of the novel, *Fasting, Feasting* written by Anita Desai, which made it to the Booker prize finalist list, is given in two frames. The larger frame is in the Indian background and the smaller frame is set in America. Arun, the character common in both the halves is the main link between the two different frames of the novel. The first half tells the rather day-to-day life of Arun's family in India. The second half tells the uneventful life of a family in America with whom Arun stays during his summer vacation. In the perspective of Arun the dichotomies are properly projected in the novel. Pamela Oliver writes: "Fasting, Feasting, as the editors' blurb points out, 'cuts right to the heart of family life in two different cultures' – an apparently close-knit family living in a provincial town on the Gangetic plains and a plastic representation of it in the suburbs of Massachusetts" (247). A plastic representation of life is felt in America because the narration is primarily the reflection of Arun who looks at life in the USA with unusual self-consciousness which underlines the difference between the two cultures.

In fact the novel apparently is a simple but charming description of domestic chores both in India and in America. The third person narrative is in a very composed style and the story ends at a point of time which is yet another ordinary moment. But the novel offers a lot of anecdotes which could be observed as typically Oriental or Occidental. Further it is curious to find out how the two cultures interact with each other in the novel. Here the protagonist faces an insider/outsider syndrome as he never considers the US as his second home and the homes always remain distinctly divided. The novel definitely shows some projected dichotomies between the Orient and the Occident and the same are studied in detail in the following part of the paper.

II. Projected Dichotomies

Gender Insensitivity

The first part gives the disturbing aspects of gender discrimination. In fact Deepsheekha Kotwal and Priyanka Gandotra consider that *Fasting Feasting* "relates the disastrous attempts of an Indian daughter to leave her parents' home and achieve independence without marriage. Her parents, referred to as the indivisible unit Mama Papa, barely notice their daughter's aspirations as they lavish all of their attention on their only son" (92). Arun is born at a time when his elder sisters, Uma and Aruna attain puberty. Mama insists to terminate the belated pregnancy, but Papa insists to try his luck in getting a son.

It is notable that meat, the English language and cricket are considered by Arun's Papa as the vestiges of colonial discourse structure. Arun is fed, much against his will, with all nutrients like milk, boiled egg and meat broth. This clearly shows how male children enjoy a privileged position than the female children in the Indian society. Angelia Poon observes that, "Uma is the one on whom Arun is made to 'feast' in a macabre act of consumption that is echoed on different levels in various incidents throughout the novel" (39). Actually it is for the sake of Arun that Uma stops her school education. Uma's mother tells her: "We are not sending you back to school, Uma. You are staying at home to help with Arun" (18). Uma serves her father with peeled orange segments and serves her brother with various nutrients, but she does not and must not partake of such delicacies solely due to her gendered existence.

The contemptible practice of dowry system in India, among all gender discriminations, is prominently projected in the novel. Both the cases of Uma and Anamika clearly show how gender discrimination denies mobility to the less privileged gender and how women end up as damaged pieces. The narrative of the widowed women, Uma and Mira-masi together with the cases of Anamika and Melanie give a strong feminist paradigm for the novel. The tragic end of a very brilliant girl, Anamika and the lot of Uma underline the gruesome gender discrimination in India and the abominable system of dowry in Indian marriages. Both Uma and Anamika are denied mobility by virtue of their gender.

Uma remains static when she is not allowed to pursue her education, when she is not allowed to accept an offer of employment, when she is not allowed to go to Bombay for her eye check-up and when she is not allowed even to meet her well-wishers like the nuns of the convent. Similarly, Anamika is not allowed to go to Oxford even after getting a prestigious scholarship for the same. Both are entrenched in their respective families in a cruel patriarchal society. Angelia Poon stresses on the "dearth of opportunity" "...Uma faces in terms of formal education, travel, and economic independence." (34) and opines that "The novel underscores the fact that questions about access to mobility and consumption (of food, culture, knowledge and so forth), and how such access varies for gendered subjects in a globalized world,..." (34-35). Uma and Anamika are better understood in the context of their families and their fate very well reflects the larger cultural malaise in the patriarchal Indian society. Usually girls are sent away from their natal families and they struggle to be a member of their conjugal family. But even that is denied in the cases of Uma and Anamika. Both the characters are struggling under the imposing male authority. In fact both discursive and material spaces are denied to both of them.

In his family in the US, Mr. Patton also tries to resist things which he cannot approve of, by leaving the impression of not being heard or noticed. But the gendered treatment is not very evident and their son Rod is not given undue privileges over their daughter, Melanie. Mr. Patton is often found cooking for the whole family and he takes care of both his children's educational courses. The novel shows a patriarchal society in the West also, but definitely gender discrimination is shown as less detestable than that in India.

Public and Private Life

Arun in the Massachusetts University campus shows the other side of the globe. But it is to be noted that his gaze is an "appalled gaze of increased self-consciousness and a heightened sense of difference" (Angelia Poon, 43), rather than "... the curious, delighted, or all-consuming gaze of the consummate cosmopolitan traveler; the urbane polish of a global citizen of the world, who glides in and out of different societies..." (Angelia Poon 43). There, Arun meets with the callousness of the other university students. His own room-mate smokes endlessly in the room to cause fresh outbreaks of asthma for Arun. The corridor of the hostel is fully covered in graffiti. The campus is almost reverberated with blaring music and garbage bags are filled up with beer cans and the lot.

Mr. Patton is shown as a typical American who refuses to accept alterity. He is a missionary whose only interest is eating barbecued meat. In fact the odour of raw meat being charred over the fire is the pervasive odour of the entire suburb on any summer evening. His son Rod is concerned only with body building and selects a course in football. Mr. Patton's daughter, Melanie, eats only chocolate bars, biscuits, peanuts and cookies. She is always sick and sullen in the midst of all "feasting". Many a times Arun finds Melanie nauseating, thrusting her fingers down her throat and vomiting and perspiring badly. Mrs. Patton is a lady who has a bit of interest in everything including vegetarianism. She is after such fancies rather than running her family and the lack of parental care makes Melanie on the "fasting" side.

The difference in culture is again stressed by showing the food habits of the West and the East. Arun is preferably a vegetarian. When Arun and Miss West remind Mr. Patton that Arun is a vegetarian, he still doubts how anyone would refuse a good piece of meat. Mrs. Patton reminds him of the Hindu religion which considers cow as a sacred animal. Mr. Patton is disappointed on such moral feebleness and considers a cow as a good red meat. Arun is fed up with Mrs. Patton who offers raw vegetables to Arun, thinking that raw vegetables are the natural food of a vegetarian. Further vegetables and fruits in the USA are unusually bright and perfect as plastic representations. Mrs. Patton stuffs her kitchen cupboards, refrigerator and freezer with vegetables, butter, yoghurt, jam and cookies. Arun finds it difficult to say that this is not the food that figured in his culture.

Curiously Mrs. Patton also becomes a vegetarian when she gets Arun's company. But Mr. Patton continues to broil, grill, fry and roast his steaks, ribs and chops. He simply pretends not to see and hear the vegetarian ways of Arun and Mrs. Patton which he could not approve. Arun remembers, how back home, his father also uses the same patriarchal tactics when he sees any challenge to his authority.

Sensibilities of Love and Sex

The topic of sex or pregnancy is also by and large suppressed in Indian society as the novel *Fasting, Feasting* shows. When Uma's Mama becomes pregnant, no one reveals the matter to Uma and Aruna who by then had reached the age of puberty. The visit of the doctors and the elders and the murmur of the servants reveal to Uma and Aruna that the problem was "Something grossly physical – sexual" (15). Uma then gets the "vision of a frantic pig", "wriggling to escape from the butcher and a memory of the whines and cries of mating dogs" (15). "Aruna's vision was more domestic --petticoats and saris lifted, legs thrashing, naked legs, in the night, under the mosquito net. They'd heard sounds, muffled, escaping involuntarily from behind curtains. No doors were ever shut in that household: closed doors meant secrets, nasty secrets, impermissible" (15).

Arun finds it difficult to stand the sight of female body exhibited without inhibition in the West, especially when it is from Mrs. Patton, almost a mother figure for him. When Arun sees her, she calls him lovingly and informs that she is taking sunbath. Arun "does not want to glance in her direction. It is like confronting his mother naked. When he glances, as he must, he can't help staring at her limp breasts that fall into pockets of mauve plaid cotton..." (213). "She might have been on display in the Food mart, a special offer for the summer, gleaming with invitation. Almost one feels, one might see a discount sign above it" (213). At the swimming hole, a reluctant Arun gets into the water just to avert the sight of Mrs. Patton stripping off her sun suit. As long as Mrs. Patton is obsessed with her sun bath, Arun spends his time in the town and eats some sandwich under the shade of trees in the town square. "On other benches young couples sit on each other's laps, tightly interwoven" (216). In fact the novel shows Indian people as shy and reserved in love and sex while American people are shown as impulsive.

Signs of Modernity and Commodification

An obvious divide between the East and the West is in matters of Economy. The West is depicted as more or less a self-sufficient world by itself without poverty, pain and hardship. Life is made easy and comfortable in the West due to the development of science and Technology. On the other hand, India, the Orient in the novels, is shown as a country full of starving millions and as lacking in basic infra-structure. But a thorough scrutiny of the novels brings forward not so bright and blissful pictures regarding the West also. The novel also shows marked difference in terms of "modernity" between the East and the West.

The condition of a rickshaw driver in whose rickshaw, Uma once travels describes the living conditions of the poor people in India: "Then he [rickshaw driver] panted and huffed so hugely as he pedaled down the road in the midday blaze that Uma feared he would collapse with heat stroke. . . . Hrr, hrr, hrr, the rickshaw driver's lungs and legs pumped, and the dust flared up from the road into their faces and eyes, stinging" (26). In contrast, in America, Arun sees "the cars speed away like metal darts aimed into space by missile launchers in the towns they leave behind" (201). Further pedestrians don't seem to have a chance in America: "A car drives up suddenly behind him, very close, as if with intention. He climbs hastily onto a grass verge. It passes. Why had it done that? Are pedestrians against the law in this land of the four-wheeled?" (161). Among myriads of curious stickers, number plates, warnings on the cars, Arun observes a sticker pasted on a car which reads: "Guns, Guts and God Make America Great" (182). and that seems to define the country.

Arun, who is from India, is perplexed "to find these stores and the attendant parking lots, bank out-lets, gas-station, Burger Kings, Belly Delis and Darkin 'Donuts..." (18). The attitudes of Arun and Mrs. Patton are juxtaposed: "When they enter the Food mart, she relaxes: it is as if she has come home. She tosses packets and cartons into the shopping cart light heartedly. It is Arun who grows tense, finds his throat muscles contracting, tight with anxiety over spending so much, having so much. Wondering if this is how Melanie feels and if it is what makes her sick" (208). Thus the West is associated with abundance while the East is associated with penury. Abundance leading to wastage is the key-word regarding food and eating habits of the main-stream Americans and such feasting may be associated with other material pleasures as well. LudmikVolna comments:

The difference is alluded by Desai already in the title of her book: the words "fasting" and "feasting" can stand for the two parts of the novel respectively: the first is situated in India (the country of "fasting", which refers not only to the religious aspect, but also to an unwilling "fasting" of the many poor of the country) and the second in the United States (the country of "feasting", abundance). (2).

In India, right from declining red meat or even ordinary meals to rejection of material pleasures amount to a sort of fasting. Both the West's consideration of the cow as merely good red meat and the East's consideration of the cow as a sacred animal seem to be extreme stances rooted in quite different cultures. Here

“homes” still remain distinctly divided. Arun finds it extremely difficult to consider the US as his second home. In Aun’s case it is more an insider/outsider syndrome. Mr. Patton and Melanie evidently remind him that he is an outsider. The words “fasting” and “feasting” evidently show the bicultural pulls which are evident in the novel.

III. CONCLUSION

There are apparent binaries in the novels studied as far as the East and the West are concerned. They do reflect East-West encounter in the form of cultural confrontations. But the encounter is depicted in all the novels in a mild and humourous vein. Apparent binaries exist in the realms of economy and concepts of modernity, gender discrimination, love and sex and aspects of personal and public life especially in their quantitative dimension.

The West and the East are shown as engulfed by consumerism and craze for commodities as indicated by the amazing malls, enticing shopping outlets and the behavioural patterns of the people. In the novel there is ample description of the consumerist craze of the West. Mrs. Patton’s habit of purchasing too many things flippantly and storing them blissfully unaware of the further stages baffles Arun: “Her [Mrs. Patton] joy lay in carrying home this hoard she had won from the maze of the supermarket, storing it away in her kitchen cupboards, her refrigerator and freezer”(184). She is not bothered about cooking to the satisfaction of her family or providing sufficiently good food to her children. Mrs. Patton’s daughter Melanie’s food habit is also a kind of extension of this American habit of consumerism. She stuffs her stomach with chocolate candies, cookies and peanuts as if in an act of rebellion and gets sick. She then pokes her fingers down her throat and vomits profusely. This habit makes her so anaemic and later she becomes ill physically as well as mentally.

As far as social and private life is concerned, Westerners are depicted as more or less practical people while Indians are pictured as emotional and visionary people. At the same time Indians are orthodox in many ways and so co-habitation and even parties are still not very acceptable concepts for the major chunk in India. Events pertaining to marriage and dowry, especially those of Uma and Anamika, are also portrayed in the novel in a murky shade. In the first attempt to give Uma in marriage, the parents of the fiance take a heavy dowry in advance and complete the construction of their palatial house. Later they inform Uma’s parents that their son had changed his mind, went abroad for higher studies and so the engagement is indefinitely postponed. It is proved that the same trick had been played by the family with some other proposed brides (81-83). In the second attempt the marriage takes place but with a man who already has a wife and children. He marries Uma only for an additional dowry which would save his sinking business (87-95). In the case of Anmika, the extraordinarily beautiful and brilliant girl, she is confined to domestic chores at her husband’s home. When she fails to deliver children, she is brutally charred to death probably by her mother-in-law and husband (151). In matters of sex and romance, Indians are shown as shy and reserved. Further as far as modernity is concerned the West in the novel is depicted as a place made extremely comfortable with the help of science and technology

Although India in the novel is depicted as under developed country with gender discrimination, superstitions, dowry system etc the narration in any of these novels, does not stoop to hyperbolic descriptions made into essentialization of Indianness. Here the protagonist faces an insider/outsider syndrome as he never considers the US as his second home and the homes always remain distinctly divided. In fact more than the dichotomies, the really disturbing factor is the refusal of the West to accept alterity. Mr. Patton is the typical self-centred American who could not understand the “others”. He never understands how people could be vegetarians who could “refuse a good piece of meat” (166). For him a cow is nothing but “good red meat” and any other notion is “moral feebleness” which is “not natural” (166). Again Melanie also refuses to accept the food prepared by Arun as food. She protests vehemently and tells “ ‘Eeeuuuh, you call that food? . . . I call that shit’ ” (194). Thus more than the projected dichotomies, the novel thus clearly shows the exclusion practised by the western world and that makes the novel really problematic.

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