

INTERACTIVE ARTICLE COVER

RUPKATHA JOURNAL

ON INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES IN HUMANITIES



ISSN 0975-2935

About the Journal

Journal DOI	https://dx.doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha
Journal Home	www.rupkatha.com
Indexed by	Scopus Web of Science: Emerging Sources Citation Index (ESCI) DOAJ
Journal Metrics	CiteScore 2020: 0.2 SJR 2020: 0.162 SNIP 2020: 0.193 JCI 2020: 0.50

About the Issue

Issue	Volume 14, Number 2, 2022
Editor	Tirtha Prasad Mukhopadhyay
Issue DOI	https://doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha.v14n2
TOC	https://rupkatha.com/v14n2.php

About the Article

Title	Identity in Consumption: Reading Food and Intersectionality in Anita Desai's Fasting, Feasting	
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Author ID	0000-0003-0002-5024 ¹ & 0000-0001-9682-6074 ²	
Funding	No funding received. Published free of any charge.	
Article DOI	https://doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha.v14n2.20	Pages: 1-10
Abstract	https://rupkatha.com/v14n220	
Full-text PDF	https://rupkatha.com/V14/n2/v14n220.pdf	
Article History	First Published: 26 June 2022	
Article Impact	Check Dynamic Impact	
Copyright	Aesthetics Media Services	
Licensing	Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial 4.0	

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Identity in Consumption: Reading Food and Intersectionality in Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting*

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Abstract

With the resurging interest in Food Studies, this rapidly emerging field of study has seen multiple disciplines adding in their distinct flavours that truly make this an area to savour. Literary food studies, in particular, has become a relevant field of study with the understanding that food in literature always plays a symbolic role, as food in literature is never depicted for the sustenance of the literary characters. This paper seeks to explore the novel *Fasting, Feasting* (1999) by Anita Desai through the lens of food and foodways to explicate how the characters interact with the culinary arena, and ultimately, interact with each other and themselves. These interactions will serve as crucial insights into their identities, particularly their intersectional gender identities considering the facets of nationality, class, and the like. A special focus will also be rendered on the notion of marginalisation seen in the text, of which gender is a crucial deciding factor. The title of the novel hints at consumption—at both its presence and absence—which will prove as the gateway to the interactions of the characters with food in the novel to examine who it is that gets to feast while who are forced to starve.

Keywords: literary food studies, food in literature, gender, intersectionality

1. Introduction

Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting* (1999) has been the subject of immense critical inquiry due to the varied themes that Desai explores in the novel. The text is a fertile ground wherein discourses regarding the diasporic concerns of alienation and belonging (Amo, 2016, p. 138), gender (Choubey, 2004; Volná, 2005), the psychological insights into the oppressed central characters (Narayan & Mee, 2003, p. 227)—an aspect reflected in Desai's other works as well and is often considered reminiscent of Virginia Woolf's literary oeuvre (Kanwar, 1991)—and the like, thrive and flourish.

The foray of food studies into literary studies has invited more nuanced introspections into Desai's text through the lens of food. Its multidisciplinary background lends to innovative analyses that add to the existing critical literature surrounding this crucial contribution to world literature. One such notable work is the conception of viewing the material culture depicted in the novel as politically charged, a perception that is primarily shaped by post coloniality and post liberalism (Wiegandt, 2019). These "post" conceptions have further invited migration and transnationalism. It is here that studies on food and its associated practices can "make a significant contribution not

just to the anthropology of food, but also to our understanding of the ways in which the globalized movement of people, objects, narratives and ideas is experienced and negotiated" (Abbots, 2016, p. 115). Food is "endlessly meaningful," writes Carole Counihan (1999, p. 6), for among its many other functions, it also serves as a marker of ethnic identity (Counihan, 2004; Vallianatos & Raine, 2008, p. 365). The multiplicity of identities takes on intricate nuances due to intersectionality in the globalised contemporary world. Initially, the term "intersectionality," introduced by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw (1989), was primarily related to the issue of race in feminism, especially concerning "the multidimensionality of Black women's experiences" (p. 140). During the third wave of feminism, the term has developed to give rise to a subjectivity influenced by race, gender, class, sexuality, and more such classifiers (Cooper, 2016, p. 391; Nash, 2008, p. 2).

This subjectivity is visible in the chosen text's food practices which "form the material nexus of class, gender, and political distinctions between individual characters and between India and the United States" (Wiegandt, 2019, p. 123). The title of the novel hints at consumption—at both its presence and absence—which will prove as the gateway to the interactions of the characters with food in the novel to examine who it is that gets to feast while who are forced to starve.

2. Feasting and Fasting—the Gender Divide

Rana Dasgupta, in her introduction to Desai's novel (1999/2008), states that the book is an "excruciating account of how society can seize control of individuals—especially women—through such practices as eating, and remove them from everything they intended to be" (p. viii). Carole Counihan (1998) asserts that there is a "clear significance of food-centered activities and meanings to the constitution of gender relations and identities across cultures" (p. 2). Furthermore, food and food practices are often taken for granted due to their association with women (D'Sylva & Beagan, 2011, p. 280).

Kumkum Sangari (1993) observes that a household's politics are seemingly dictated according to the degree of access women have to power (p. 871). An instance that demonstrates this fleeting supremacy of the woman over the man in the matters of the kitchen is seen in the exercise of deciding on the meals of the day by "MamaPapa," the conjoined entity that they are referred to as in the book (Desai, 1999/2008, p. 5). The dining table was a "fertile ground" for "discussion and debate." However, the narrator observes that "it was impossible not to see that the verdict would be the same as at the outset"—it would be Mama's suggestions and "no other" (p. 14). Only Mama reserved the right to control the cook in the household. While the family's economic and social status afforded the family cooks and servants, this exercise shows that it is the mother who is essentially cooking through the kitchen help.

The image of the ideal woman that has been created and perpetuated shows a being that is inferior to the male figure in every way. Pitted against masculinity, femininity is always considered as the weaker counterpart and as a member of "disadvantaged and devalued social categories" (Counihan, 1999, p. 8). While women are often entrusted with providing food for the family, notions of the ideal woman being submissive and sacrificing factors in this scenario present the ideal provider as one who creates and distributes but never consumes what she makes. "Many studies demonstrate that men eat first, best, and most" (Counihan, 1998, p. 2). Class, caste, race,

and gender hierarchies are partly maintained and sustained through differential control over food and the varying levels of access to the same (Counihan, 1998, p. 2; 1999, p. 2). The rich distinguish themselves from the poor through food and foodways, and a similar correlation is perceived in the way men are distinguishable from women (Counihan, 1999, p. 8).

Desai's work provides numerous examples of the way people are treated differently based on their gender identities (Karam, Khan, & Ahmad, 2022). What, how much, and when they can eat are dependent on their gender (Counihan 1999, p. 8). This creates an unequal footing between them as one is clearly favoured over the other in the prevailing heteronormative worldview. In the family that the first part of the novel revolves around, the dominance and supremacy that the father has are clearly exhibited through the way he behaves and how the rest of the family behaves towards him, especially on matters related to food and consumption. While it is the mother who takes decisions regarding the kitchen, as was established before, it can also be seen that the mother merely functions as a puppet that moves along to the father's whims and fancies.

Additionally, the father's supremacy is explicitly expressed through how he is considered akin to royalty and is often treated as such. The special attention that he garners is solely because he is a man. According to the norm propagated by the traditional society, the rest of the women have to take it upon themselves as their duty to serve him, regardless of whether they are willing to do so. This can be seen in the way the mother asks the elder daughter Uma to serve some fruit for her father, and she comes to the realisation that she "can no longer pretend to be ignorant of Papa's needs, of Papa's ways." They make a whole ritual of the process of preparing the fruit to be fit for his consumption—wherein each orange segment is painstakingly peeled and rid of the pips—and "everyone waits while he repeats the gesture" of eating the pieces. When the whole process is completed, what remains are the peels and seeds on the mother's plate and smears of orange juice on the father's (1999/2008, pp. 23-24). With the depiction of the scene here, it is evident that the father was the only one to eat the fruit. The meals end with a flourishing presentation of "a napkin and a finger bowl" to the father and "he is the only one in the family who is given" these "emblems of his status." The feeling of grandeur that his meal evokes is further exemplified when the narrator signals the end of the meal with the statement: "the ceremony is over" (p. 24).

The mother is used to being treated as inferior to the men, and she cultivates this idea in the minds of her daughters as well:

In my day, girls in the family were not given sweets, nuts, good things to eat. If something special had been bought in the market, like sweets or nuts, it was given to the boys in the family. (p. 5).

As she recounts this, she adds that her family did not belong to "such an orthodox home" and that her mother and her other female relatives often slipped her some "good things to eat...on the sly" (p. 6). While the mother remembers these situations so fondly, the pleasant feelings here do not take away from the fact that she was forbidden from eating certain food items solely because she was a female. The idea that these women, controllers of the kitchen space in their homes, still had to abide by the rules drawn up by the family's men and had to hide what they had consumed shows the injustice in this scenario. The perceived notion of feminine control over the domestic space is just that—a false perception far away from reality. Other instances further

express this sentiment of a man having control over a female's eating and consumption patterns and preferences (Counihan, 1999, p. 8). The father disapproves of the mother playing rummy with her friends and eating betel nuts and leaves as he sees them as sinful indulgences that he dislikes. Still, when he indulges himself "in a little whisky and water," the "little" being an understatement when he goes overboard and becomes an embarrassment in a social gathering, he hardly sees any of it to be his fault. He never deigns to apologise to anyone (pp. 7-10). An interesting alimentary image that makes its appearance numerous times in the novel is that of the glass of lemonade served to the father. The mother frets and worries herself to the extent that it pointedly draws the reader's attention in the process of her ensuring that the father's glass of lemonade is always ready for him to drink when he reaches home. It suggests that perhaps the mother had neglected to perform that particular task once and the repercussions were probably not so forgiving. It may be due to this fear that Uma always "decides to say nothing" (p. 12) when it comes to expressing her desire for food (Swarnakala & Kirubakaran, 2021, p. 423).

While she is never free to consume what she wishes nor that she creates, a woman's self-worth is dependent on her abilities in the culinary space, her culinary prowess, and her ability to manage a kitchen. These are considered to be the only factors that impact her self-esteem, as illustrated through the mother forcing Uma to take credit for all the culinary delights served to the guests to increase her prospects of acceptance by the visiting family in the chances of a marriage match (pp. 75-78). Even the approval from the future family-in-law is expressed through a reference to the tea that she had served; "very nice tea," says the prospective mother-in-law (p. 78).

However, Uma's marriage plans do not come to fruition. The multiple failures at being wedded result in her parents giving up on those prospects for her, deigning themselves to an obligated maidservant in the form of their unmarried daughter (Chandel, 2018, p. 33). This situation provides a glimpse "into the fate of the women who remain single in this society" (Nandan, 2002, p. 171), always remaining bereft of autonomy (Jackson, 2018, p. 168). The younger daughter, Aruna, finds herself even more burdened to succeed where her sister had failed. Hence, she ends up in a marriage upheld merely out of obligation and not by choice.

On the other hand, Arun—the only son of the family—gets a radically different treatment than his sisters as he is greatly favoured over them (Jackson, 2018, p. 164). His mother feels that her status as a wife has been elevated once she birthed a son after numerous failed pregnancies. "What honour, what status. Mama's chin was lifted a little higher in the air.... She might have been wearing a medal" (Desai, 1999/2008, p. 31). Papa insists on "proper attention" (p. 30) for his son with the assurance of "the best, the most, [and] the highest" (p. 121) for him, not just regarding education, but other needs as well. Papa believes that consuming meat is necessary to develop Arun's strength (Poon, 2006, pp. 35–37). This reflects Counihan's (1998) assertion that "food symbolically connote maleness and femaleness and establish the social value of men and women" (p. 2). This notion is also seen in "the practical philosophy of the male body as a sort of power, big and strong, with enormous, imperative, brutal needs...asserted in every male posture, especially when eating," thereby functioning as "the principle of the division of foods between the sexes, a division which both sexes recognize in their practices and their language" (Bourdieu, 1979/2013, p. 35). However, all this attention works to culminate in the opposite of the desired effect in Arun, for he ends up burdened by expectations and scrutiny, and instead yearns for freedom. Moreover,

ironically enough, the force-feeding of meat causes his body to unconsciously reject it entirely, and hence he relies solely on vegetarian food for his sustenance.

3. Beyond Boundaries—the Transnational Experience

In the second part of the book, Arun is in the USA, where the culture is very different from India. What remains almost constant is perhaps the gendered differential treatment of food. Arun stays as a guest with the Pattons, a seemingly conventional white American family. Mr. Patton cooks in the stereotypical overtly masculine way by cooking an enormous amount of meat out in the patio, for it “is a man’s thing” (Parasecoli, 2005/2013, p. 292). Arun is highly displeased with it, as evidenced by the choice of words that he uses to describe it— the “pervasive odour” of “raw meat being charred over the fire” (Desai, 1999/2008, p. 166), and the images of “grease and blood” (p. 169) — all of which are far from appetising thoughts.

Mrs. Patton, on the other hand, uses Arun as a crutch; she hides behind the excuse of Arun’s vegetarianism to avoid eating meat herself. Her domineering husband ignores her constant expressions, both verbal and otherwise, of being disgusted by meat. The choice of food is taken away from the woman in this situation and it is the man who decides for her. She is rendered insignificant in her household which she is supposed to run, and seen as suffering from “emotional and spiritual starvation” (Jain, 2014, p. 24). Arun sees a reflection of his mother in Mrs. Patton and her “bright plastic copy of a mother-smile...that is tight at the corners with pressure, the pressure to perform a role” (Desai, 1999/2008, p. 198). This realisation is at once comforting and disturbing for Arun—the former for it serves as a reminder of home (Jackson, 2018, p. 168). The latter is due to the feelings of entrapment and stagnation that he associates with his family in India. Mrs. Patton experiences the same emotions within her own family (Jain, 2014, p. 24). “Mrs Patton is afraid, defeated, and no less a prisoner in her own home than Uma” (Desai, 1999/2008, introduction by Dasgupta, p. x). Even the Pattons’ daughter, Melanie, is adversely affected by the tensions in the family. Her mental afflictions result in her suffering from eating disorders, which hint at her need for some semblance of control in her turbulent life (O’Connor, 2013, p. 32). Her food consumption is seemingly the only aspect of her life that she can direct. Consequently, her eating disorders and hostile behaviour are cries for help that are constantly left unheard and ignored.

The idea of gender identity accompanies sexuality and how its perception has evolved and been rediscovered. Food and sex are seen to be “metaphorically overlapping” (Counihan, 1999, p. 9) as they are multisensorial experiences that excite similar responses within the body. By exploring the role that food plays in “enabling antinormative relationships to emerge within the sexualized, gendered, and classed domestic space,” Anita Mannur (2010) argues that “the relationship between food and queerness challenges the apparently seamless links between food, home, nation, and (hetero) sexuality.” And hence, “the culinary functions as a site of cultural negotiation: both disciplining subjects into gendered roles and buttressing an alternative rendering of sexuality and gendered performance that cannot be contained by the structures of heterosexual patriarchy” (p. 20).

Desai puts forth the contrast between the gender identities of Arun and the two father figures that he encounters: his father in India and Mr. Patton in the US. Arun is a vegetarian not under

religious restrictions but by his own volition. This choice is a concept that neither of the older men can fathom. Arun's father finds his decision to be "baffling," for he considers vegetarian men as "meek and puny men who had got nowhere in life" (1999/2008, p. 33). Mr. Patton thinks of vegetarianism to be "not natural," and he finds himself disappointed with "such moral feebleness" (p. 170), for men are supposed to be "the natural meat eaters" (Bourdieu, 1979/2013, p. 35). All these qualities that these men describe are precisely the opposite of those associated with masculinity, and it is to be noted here that they pride themselves on being men who embody the masculine nature. By referring to Arun as weak and frail, they associate him with the notions of being effeminate and subservient solely based on his food choices. While the men never explicitly mention any outright words about Arun's sexual orientation, they may consider the possibility of him being a homosexual as well. Regardless, the thought of the formative men in his life thinking Arun to be weak indicate that they see him as soft and hence, not masculine in their binary oriented perception. This pushes Arun into a category that is neither here nor there of the narrow heteronormatively constructed gender identities, and into a state of uncertainty and confusion.

"Food consumption," writes Tulasi Srinivas (2006), is the "narrative of affiliative desire" that affectively recreates social identity groupings for the "cosmopolitan Indian" (p. 193) by simultaneously functioning as a medium of showcasing assimilation as well as resistance to the dominant culture (Mannur, 2010, p. 7). Furthermore, "[t]he domestic arena...becomes a space to reproduce culture and national identity" (p. 30). Or in Arun's case, it becomes a space for him to resist his old identity and reinvent himself. For Arun, India is a far cry from the central stage of the nostalgic reverie of other literary characters who usually make appearances in diasporic literature. He only sees India as the home of his overbearing parents, and he dreads the very thought of going back. And hence, he willingly suffers through the alienation he experiences at the Pattons' place due to them reinforcing "the boundaries between Self and Other through appropriation of and emphasis on Arun's Otherness" (Amo, 2016, p. 133). He would much rather make peace with the USA's paltry contribution of sandwiches and salads to vegetarians than return to the place that was never his home. He has completely severed himself from the culinary performance of making food and always buys comestibles that are made in outlets by faceless strangers. He is apprehensive of the food that Mrs. Patton prepares for him, for she reminds him of his mother. He prefers the impersonal act of buying food from his college cafeteria instead. Even though Arun hardly pays attention to what he consumes while leading his busy life as a college student and as a part-time worker, his conscious avoidance of everything that may remind him of his life in India indicates his desire to leave that existence behind him. He never learned to cook the kind of food he ate throughout his childhood, and he does not exhibit a desire to do so in the future. He has no qualms in adhering to his new country's food norms, and while he does not particularly enjoy his stay there, he still considers it much better than his life in India (Desai, 1999/2008, pp. 175-202).

4. The Potpourri of Marginalised Identities

Returning to the first part of the novel, Uma has various interactions with others who shape her life, presenting alternative ways of existence to her enslavement at home, and perhaps, the opportunity to live and experience life vicariously through them. Ramu, her traveling vagabond

cousin, always provides her with good memories sprinkled with food, wine, dancing, and laughter (pp. 48-52). Though considered slightly lower than other men due to his club foot, his status as a man in society still grants him the sanction to be Uma's protector on the short trips that they take. However, the understanding that Uma's worth as a non-disabled woman being much lower than a disabled man is an undercurrent in their scenes together.

The gendered perception of life is also seen in the treatment of widows. "The life of the Hindu widow has always been the dark side of eating in India," says Chitrita Banerji in *Eating India* (2007, p. 142). She writes about her grandmother whose identity as a widow has permeated her life so profoundly that even her eating habits have not been spared. The food that she now consumes indicates her identity as a woman who no longer has the support of her husband. The death of her husband is "traditionally attributed to her misdeeds and unnatural appetites; a common word of abuse in rural Bengal translates as 'husband-eater'" (p. 142). A widow is considered guilty of "the sin of survival" (p. 142), and her presence is thought of as a bad omen. As punishment for her existence, she is forced into permanently giving up many food items and developing a culinary palate that is as bland and bleak as her life as a widow is supposed to be, even going so far as to be kept away from cooking in the kitchen during the occasions of feasts and festivals (Lamb, 2000, p. 213-217; Patgiri, 2022, p. 152). The want for food beyond the measure of mere sustenance is seen as a reflection of lust and desire, and hence, abstinence from all pleasure is wielded as a way to control sensual desires. And a way of ensuring this control is seen in the way that some widows are only allowed one meal a day, leaving them in a state of almost fasting (Lamb, 2000, p. 213-217). As anticipated, only the desires of women need to be curbed, for there are no such restrictions for a widower to follow (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2009). Mira is Uma's aunt who ascribes to the forced asceticism due to her status as a widow. She embraces religious devotion to escape from the marginalisation accompanying her status (Jain, 2014, p. 25). Uma, perhaps rebelliously enough, associates her aunt with her decadent ghee laden *laddoos* that she painstakingly prepares (Desai, 1999/2008, p. 38)—an exercise of Mira's choice—instead of the forced austerity of widowhood.

Anamika, Uma's cousin, is yet another victim of a forced social practice. Her marriage at the expense of her scholarship to Oxford is filled with trauma and physical abuse at the hands of her husband and her mother-in-law (p. 67-72). All she is reduced to now is a harried servant who cooks and cleans at her marriage home, relegated to days of service after her worth is tarnished beyond relief after a miscarriage brought about at the hands of her husband leaves her to identify as "damaged goods" (p. 72). In one stroke, all that she had achieved in life is disregarded, and her identity is solely defined based on her trauma.

5. Conclusion

The characters' experiences "illustrate the interplay of individual and collective identity, the consequences of identification, and the magnitude of the historical themes that everyday situations may evoke" (Jenkins, 2008, p. 4). Desai initially seems to posit a gender-centric classification to the characters by drawing a defining line between the subservient female and the privileged male. However, the delicate nuances of identity come into play on further introspection, where the "differential control over and access to food" exhibits the various societal hierarchies (Counihan, 1999, p. 8). The evaluation of the characters' lives and experiences gets flavoured by

aspects such as their nationality, class, and notions of marginalisation. On viewing the text through the lens of food, the characters exhibit their various characteristics in their interactions with food. Additionally, food also serves as a medium that highlights the relationships among the characters—of kinship and otherwise—and ultimately, shapes and moulds their individual and collective identities. A more holistic view towards the characters invites the appreciation of the richness of Desai's story world as being a true reflection of the real world.

The title of the novel is often thought to convey significant meaning as well, at first glance seemingly referring to the geographical backgrounds of the two parts of the novel— "fasting" associated with the regressive and poverty-stricken India and "feasting," in turn, representing the dreams, hopes, and plenty in the USA (Amo, 2016, p. 134). However, on careful consideration, the fasting and feasting seen in the context of the characters are "relative and multiple at the same time" (Volná, 2005, p. 2). Each character experiences fasting and feasting in their separate ways with their experiences, thoughts, and memories creating bespoke blends that influence their identities—in how they perceive themselves, in the projection of their identities, and in the way, others perceive their identities.

Declaration of Conflict of Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest.

Funding

No funding has been received for the publication of this article. It is published free of any charge.

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