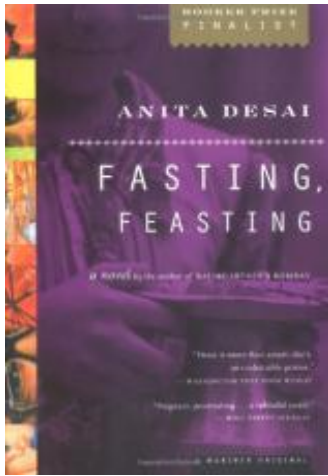


Fasting, Feasting

by Anita Desai



About the Book

Anita Desai's new book, hailed as "unsparing, yet tender and funny,"* brilliantly confirms her place among today's foremost Indian writers. *FASTING, FEASTING* takes on Desai's greatest theme: the intricate, delicate web of family conflict. It tells the moving story of Uma, the plain older daughter of an Indian family, tied to the household of her childhood and tending to her parents' every extravagant demand, and of her younger brother, Arun, across the world in Massachusetts, bewildered by his new life in college and the suburbs, where he lives with the Patton family. Published in Britain to rave reviews, *FASTING, FEASTING* is "rich in the sensuous atmosphere, elegiac pathos, and bleak comedy at which the author excels" (*The Spectator*). From the overpowering warmth of Indian culture to the cool center of the American family, it captures the physical -- and emotional -- fasting and feasting that define two distinct cultures. *(*Times Literary Supplement*)

Discussion Guide

1. In what ways do the two terms of the title?"fasting" and "feasting"?apply to family life and society in general in India and the United States?
2. What kinds of freedom and what specific freedoms do the characters seek? In what ways is the "total freedom of anonymity" that Arun experiences in his university dormitory similar to the freedom that Uma seeks?
3. What is the significance of Uma's experiences at, on, and in the sacred river? What does Desai mean when she writes of Uma's near-drowning (in chapter nine), "The saving was what made her shudder and cry ..."? What mysteries and "golden promises" does Uma seek within the convent school, with Mira-masi, and in her Christmas-card collection?

4. In what ways does spirituality enter the novel? What characters have authentic spiritual leanings or capacities? Are Uma's seizures, for example, instances of spiritual possession or eruptions of suppressed frustration and rage?
5. What roles and expectations are open to women and men in the India and America of *Fasting, Feasting*? What do the details of Anamika's and Aruna's marriages reveal about women's lives in traditional India?
6. What rebellions and attempts at escape, successful or not, occur? How do they suggest the significance of Uma's vision of escape as "a huge and ancient banyan tree" and a river? (131)
7. Arun "ponders these omens and indicators" of life in Massachusetts?the objects that adorn the interiors and exteriors of the houses. What do these "omens and indicators" reveal to Arun and to us as his summer stay with the Potters proceeds?
8. What differences and similarities are there between the Indian and American families, between corresponding members of the two families (for example, Mama and Mrs. Potter), and between the their communities?
9. "I've always been aware of food as an obsession," Desai has said. What function does food play in the novel? How does food provide both "focus and continuity" in both societies?
10. What instances and images of imprisonment and entrapment occur in the novel's two parts? To what extent is entrapment of one kind or another envisioned as an inescapable fact of life?
11. What are the purposes of the various rituals, ceremonies, traditions, and routines?personal, social, and religious?that are observed in the novel's two parts? What are the consequences of ignoring tradition and custom and of disrupting established routine?
12. Arun takes up jogging, having recognized the American joggers' struggle "to free themselves and find, through endeavor most primitive, through strain and suffering, that open space, that unfettered vacuum where the undiscovered America still lies ..." Why does Arun partake of this *American* struggle?
13. How does Desai establish Mama and Papa's identities as separate persons and, at the same time, as the single, and singular, MamandPapa? In what ways do "they have the comfort of each other," as Uma later realizes?

Author Bio

Anita Desai is the author of FASTING, FEASTING, BAUMGARTNER'S BOMBAY, CLEAR LIGHT OF DAY and DIAMOND DUST, among other works. Three of her books have been shortlisted for the Booker Prize. Desai was born and educated in India and now lives in the New York City area.

Critical Praise

"Anita Desai's latest novel is a poignant, penetrating look at the travails of the eldest daughter and the only son of a strict couple in a provincial Indian town. In *Uma*, the aging, oppressed daughter No. 1, Ms. Desai ('Journey to Ithaca,' 1995) has created a marvel. Bullied by her parents, whom she thinks of as a single unit ('MamaPapa'), her eyes failing and her hair graying, Uma finds pleasure in small things: a hoard of old Christmas cards she treasures for their garish decorations, banal tea parties at the home of a Baptist missionary, volunteer work at a convent school she attended before her parents, hoping to marry her off, yanked her out. Moments of unexpected visits from two relatives: her odd, exuberant cousin Ramu, who, in a memorable episode, takes her out to dinner and gets her tipsy; and an older relative, Mira masi, a perpetual pilgrim who lugs icons around the countryside. The closest Uma gets to true contentment is when she accompanies Mira masi to a remote ashram -- indeed, she would stay there forever, but her parents send her brother and cousin to bring her home. About the only time Uma feels liberated is when she's under water, unable to swim but somehow sprung loose in the black depths: 'It was not fear she felt, or danger. Or rather, these were only what edged something much darker, wilder, more thrilling, a kind of exultation it was exactly what she had always wanted, she realized... "

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