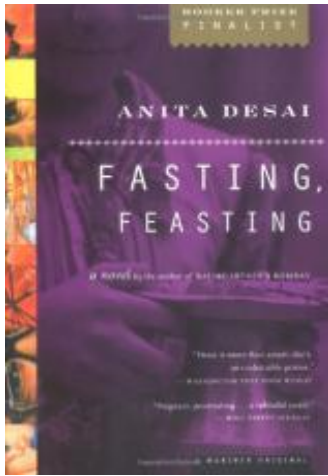


Fasting, Feasting

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

"Certain novels seduce us with invitations to visit distant places and participate vicariously in the thrill of exploration. Others manage to sensitize us to some aspect of our ordinary lives that we may never have fully appreciated. Set mostly in India amid a colorful milieu of arranged marriages, bride murders and ascetic ashrams, Anita Desai's new novel, 'Fasting, Feasting' which was a finalist for the 1999 Booker Prize would seem to fit into the former category. But soon enough we realize we're mistaken. For beneath its trappings of foreign customs and cultures, the novel's claustrophobic domesticity begins to look very familiar...What distinguishes Desai's novel from countless other depictions of airless and repressive households is the subtle and original way in which she makes us understand how much of our lives is encoded in and determined by tiny, repetitive, deceptively trivial decisions about what we will and won't eat...As in her previous novels, Desai employs a rich and subtle palette to convey her crisp, unsentimental view of character and behavior. 'Fasting, Feasting,' makes the apparently exotic destinies of Uma, Arun and their family seem as universal, as vital and familiar, as the food on our plates. "

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