

Consumeristic Tendencies and Commodification in *Fasting, Feasting*

Dr. Asok A. R.*

Associate Professor, SVR NSS College, Vazhoor

Abstract – Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting* is a novel which clearly projects the consumeristic tendencies and commodification in west as it is perceived by the protagonist Arun. The novel portrays India as a land not yet facilitated by modernity. At the same time Indians are gradually taken to ways of western modernization. Eurocentric notions make a sort of neo-colonization in the minds of the erstwhile colonized people. Avarice and over-indulgence become the key-words of the consumeristic world. Abundance leading to wastage becomes the trend of the west.

Key-words: Consumeristic Tendencies, Commodification, Avarice, Over-Indulgence, Euro-Centric Notions.

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INTRODUCTION

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. In fact the most projected aspect in the novel is the economic disparity between the two cultures and the consumerist tendencies and culture of commodification in the west.

MODERNITY OF THE ORIENT AND THE OCCIDENT

The influence of modernity in India is shown in the novel, *Fasting, Feasting* as something at the minimum level. Mira-masi's pilgrimages in buses and rickshaws show the poor plight of transportation in India. The rickshaw man's "lungs and legs pumped, and the dust flared up from the road into their faces and eyes, stinging" (26) and the sight

serves as a fine example of the sad state. The description of a bus journey to a hill-top pilgrim centre almost seems incredible to a Westerner:

The bus did stop every now and then, not at a tap where they might wash but to collect more and more passengers – there were now people practically sitting on their laps, and necks and shoulders as well. The heat of midday circulated amongst them sluggishly. The bus seemed barely able to proceed, it was so overloaded with people and luggage, and there were more people with more objects on the street to prevent from proceeding even if it could have done. (55)

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 do not seem to have a chance in the country: "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. In *Fasting, Feasting* also there is reference to the squandering of money for the parties in connection with the

marriage of even middle class people. Aruna's "wedding was as chic as Aruna had planned it..." (102) and "The Carlton Hotel provided the dinner,... most of the guests were profoundly impressed and grateful and said so in heartfelt tones as they left, compensating Papa somewhat for the shocking expense"(102-103) These incidents show that the West's over-indulgence and avarice is also shared by the wealthy and middle class Indians.

The fact that elders are over-enthusiastic in feeding a child even if it doesn't require food at that particular moment is evident from the case of baby Arun. Mama, Uma and the 'ayah' would give spoonfuls and he would swallow unawares. Whenever the child notices the process, he either averts his face or spits out the food (32). In fact it is symptomatic in the case of Arun as everything in his life including his education was thrust up on him rather than Arun exercising his choice. Soon it is realized that Arun likes only vegetarian food. Arun's Papa is terribly agitated because his education has brought him the awareness that meat is absolutely necessary for proper nourishment and that it meant progress:

Papa was confounded. A meat diet had been one of the revolutionary changes brought about in his life, and his brother's, by their education. Raised amongst traditional vegetarians, their eyes had been opened to the benefits of meat along with that of cricket and the English language: the three were linked inextricably in their mind. They had ever succeeded in convincing their wives they married of this novel concept of progress, and passed it on to their children.(32)

Arun's Papa prescribes cod-liver oil and the elders spooned it down his throat. Poor Arun suffers from mumps, measles, chicken pox, bronchitis, malaria, the flu, asthma and nose-bleeding in turn (33). These anecdotes clearly show how euro-centric notions make a sort of neo-colonization in the minds of the people. At the Patton family, Mr. Patton is obsessed with broiling or grilling or frying or roasting meat. Arun doesn't like to take meat, "the odour of raw meat being charred over the fire ought to have warned him (161)". When Mr. Patton cuts or saws piece of meat "that to Arun seems not merely raw but living: it is bleeding in a stream across Mr. Patton's plate. The air is murky with the smoke of the dying barbecue" (167). When Arun politely declines the offer of charred meat, Mrs. Patton rushes to his help and informs that Arun is a vegetarian: "Mr. Patton either does not hear the whisper or does but ignores it. He responds only to the first half of the statement. 'Okay, now I remember', he says at last. 'Yeah, you told me once. Just can't see how anyone would refuse a good piece of meat, that's all. It is not natural. And it costs'- (166)". Then Mrs. Patton explains Arun's refusal of meat in terms of "the Hindu religion and the cows" (166). Mr. Patton replies: "... Yea, how they let them out on the streets because they can't kill 'em and don't know what to do with

'em. I could show them. A cow is a cow, and good red meat as far as I'm concerned (166)".

Rod eats whatever he thinks could nourish his body into shape. Melanie's diet mostly consists of candy bars and peanuts and sometimes cookies. She is always sick and vomits by inserting fingers down her throat. Mrs. Patton gets the information from her sister in India that many Indians are vegetarians and she claims that she also hates eating meat. In fact she would not have taken meat but for her family. After Arun's arrival in the family she would always purchase a lot of vegetables and cereals. She would make vegetarian dishes mostly raw as she thinks it as the natural food of a vegetarian (167) and Arun finds it extremely difficult to eat all the time. When Arun tells Mrs. Patton that Americans are healthy people Mrs. Patton replies: "Oh, shoo, don't you believe that. Just ask me about American health - I will tell you, she cries. The statistics are just awful. You go into any doctor's clinic and you will see things that will astonish you. We don't know how to eat, she repeats. We have got to learn" (193). Even the perfect shaped big vegetables with bright colour "seemed to Arun as unreal in their bright perfection as plastic representations" (184).

CONSUMERISM IN THE WEST

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).

Consumerism and its craze for commodities are marked in Mrs. Patton who always makes her shopping big feats by reading out "the labels on the cans and cartons with the high seriousness...for their relative food value and calorific content" (183). Arun gets 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)

Once when Mrs. Patton invites Arun for shopping, he pleads with her to let the food in the fridge be finished first and she was astonished at the idea and reminded him of a probable case of

emergency some felt at home. Mrs. Patton's daughter Melanie always stuffs her mouth with chocolates, pea-nuts and cookies and yet she is very anemic. She very often runs to the toilet and vomits by pushing her fingers down her throat to escape from her illness and that is almost symptomatic of the West's habit of avarice and over-indulgence. Chandra Chatterjee opines that the novel shows that "the Americans are bound by the illusion of freedom and the pioneer's dream of an eternally golden west" (219) and he adds that "Desai's sardonic comment is that they [Americans] live in a lonely vacuum of luxuriance" (219). It is this "vacuum of luxuriance" that makes Melanie retches into the toilet despite Mrs. Patton's shopping feats to satiate her family.

Arun is also surprised by the sign of modernity such as shopping malls and their attendant service chains especially by those situated nearby the woods instead of the city hearts. 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.

In the American family depicted in the novel, Mrs. Patton complains to Arun that they don't eat together anymore and that everyone wants a different meal. She explains: "So I just fill the freezers and let them take down what they like, when they like. Keeps the freezer full – that's my job. . ." (197). However, Mrs. Patton is not systematic in her homely chores and in other responsibilities to her family. Her interest in the alternative systems also is shallow, fanciful and temporal. For instance, Mrs. Patton herself does not cook much for her family. She claims that she likes vegetarianism and purchases a lot of vegetables and cereals. She also makes raw vegetable dishes under the impression that vegetarians take food that way. Further she also takes fancy in traditional medicine, yoga, astrology, numerology, gemmology or karmic lessons. Once, the girl at the check-out counter in a supermarket asks her if she is pregnant. The girl also reassures Mrs. Patton that she doesn't look really fat or old. That summer, she spends her time mostly in taking sun bath in bath suits which covers only little of her body. She applies ointment on her body and wears sun glasses and very pink lip-stick. She also cancels all her cooking and purchases. Later she gradually returns to normalcy (218).

Melanie is also a problem character as she leads a miserable life in the middle of abundance. She lives mostly on candy bars and peanuts. As Arun observes, she "is sick all the time" (206). She doesn't like her mother preparing and sharing vegetables dishes with Arun. Her facial expression often tells Arun to get out of the place (188). When her mother takes to sun-bath she also wears "much the same costume as her mother's" (214) and asks Arun if he saw her mom. She also adds with a vengeance that her mom is sun bathing and she would not be cooking for Arun.

At the super market Arun overhears a young man saying that his girl-friend is bringing her parents to dinner and that he is to cook the dinner after cleaning the apartment. Further the indifferent or insensitive behaviour of the westerners at least in some matters becomes evident from the behaviour of Arun's roommate at the university hostel, who fills the room with his cigarette smoke and causes asthma to Arun (169). The student's carefree attitude is also something amazing for Arun:

... students hurled beer cans out of the windows, sometimes entire garbage bags filled with them, and bottles were flung down to shatter spectacularly. The emptiness of Arun's weekends would be punctured by sudden eruptions of music from enormous pieces of sound equipment set up on transported across the campus. These were like voices shouting out of another world, another civilization. (170)

Arun feels whatever he sees in America as "a plastic representation of what he had known at home; not the real thing - ..." (185). Even the film which he happens to see sitting among the popcorn eaters is "about a large rabbit that enters the world of human beings, and proves their equal" (216). The shallow silly concerns and lives of the American's seem even to reflect in the cinema.

Arun is highly amazed by the American ways of shopping in plentitude and dumping them at home, single parentage and strange films. As for example, the theme of one film is a large rabbit that enters the world of humans and proves their equal. During the latter part of the summer, Mrs. Patton does nothing but sun-bathe all the time in her swimsuit. Arun finds much difficulty in facing a much exposed Mrs. Patton. Arun's predicaments sum-up the difference between the two cultures. But towards the end of the season Mrs. Patton returns to normalcy and once again takes fancy in astrology, numerology, acupuncture and such occult and mysterious branches. Rod gets a football scholarship and Melanie is taken to an institution which deals with neurosis of adolescent girls. In fact the Pattons are symptomatic of the American Culture. Mr. Patton is the typical self-centred American who could not accommodate or

understand “others” and Rod is a prototype of that culture.

CONCLUSION

Fasting, Feasting highlights the poor infrastructure, especially the pitiable conditions of transportation in India. Eating meat, studying English and playing cricket are shown as the new concepts of progress in India. It shows that euro-centric notions make a sort of neo-colonization across the globe. In America, personal freedom for each member in an ordinary middle class family is much so that they even never get together for food or prayer. Almost everyone seems to have one's own idiosyncratic ways. Here also children are shown as not getting sufficient care and love from their parents. The teenaged boys and girls do not show any sense of decorum and are highly insensitive to the feelings of other people. In the West, broiling or grilling or frying or roasting meat is all about food. Cow is a sacred animal for most of the Indians, while the Americans consider it as good red meat. The West is shown as engulfed in consumerism and craze for commodities as indicated by the amazing Malls and other shopping outlets. The novel also indicates that the States in the West do not take much care for the lot of the common mass.

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. Ludmik Volna 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. The epicenter of all these conglomerations of binaries in cultural aspects is mainly because the highly commoditized life in the west.

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Web.1 Nov. 2012.

Corresponding Author

Dr. Asok A. R.*

Associate Professor, SVR NSS College, Vazhoor

devaprasanth@gmail.com