

**Parent-Child Relationship in the New Millennium:
A Study of Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting***

Jitender Singh, M.A., M.Phil., NET

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Binary Opposition – Tradition versus Modern

Anita Desai's novel, *Fasting, Feasting*, seems to be based, as the very title suggests, on the binary opposition, fasting and feasting, which dominate the life of the modern men and women in all sections, groups and societies world over. This dichotomy works in the lives of the proletariat and capitalist, servant and master, poor and rich, and above all woman and man. The title itself is ironical, putting the oppressed one before the oppressor. But Desai has invested something very new and peculiar in this novel; that is, how this dichotomy works between parent-child relationships. Parenthood, however, has been glorified and celebrated since times immemorial.

All our ancient scriptures and religious documents including *Puranas*, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, are replete with the sacrificing stories of fathers and mothers. Their role and duty has remained unquestioned and uncompromising in Indian society and culture. In Hinduism, parents have acquired a position of dignity similar to god and goddess. Since

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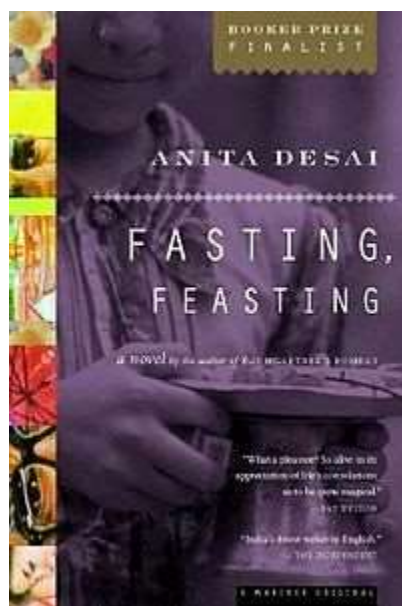
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childhood, children are conditioned to have an unflinching devotion and reverence towards their parents.

But in the new millennium, the ‘workinghood’ of parents seems to have replaced their parenthood. Their commitment to materialistic values has become more important than their responsibility to their children. Such negation of parenthood usually causes various mental disorders and adversely affects child’s psychology. Children, neglected by their parents frequently develop a sense of unwantedness and inferiority complex. Their psychological growth can be marred resulting in an undeveloped self and they are left to live a fragile existence bereft of parental care and love. Such indifference on the part of parents either makes the child diffident and submissive or develops a protesting and repulsive attitude in the child. Delineating such dangers to child psychology in the wake of parental alienation, Anita Desai’s novel *Fasting, Feasting* has been scrutinized to arrive at certain more insightful observations and generalizations in the context of parent-child ties.

Recounting Human Relationships



Moreover, Anita Desai’s present novel “recounts human relationships in the language not only of fasting and feasting but of greed, craving, taboo, denial and disgust” (Dasgupta viii). Delineating the human hungers, as its title suggests, the novel is about the starving children and prospering parents who are no more concerned with their traditional duties. The

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parents here retain something of their own, a niche for their individual being, divorced from the duties of a traditional father and mother. In addition to this, “the novel gives 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” (Dasgupta viii).

Contrasts

It shows that Desai’s vision is quite different from other contemporary writers. Here the parents adapt the traditions and values of patriarchy for creating a haven for themselves. They do not bother, in the way of traditional parents, for children and family, turning their face from their responsibility of caring and nurturing. By leaving their children devoid of parental care and love, they keep on enjoying their life in their own terms. But the question arises if parents, in the wake of Postmodern movement, abandon their domestic sphere completely, what would become of their children? How can freedom be earned at the cost of negating parenthood? Thus it seems as if in the light of the new millennium, the caring eye of the parent has lost its eyesight, leaving the children in the eternal darkness of abandonment where insanity awaits them. Individual freedom won at the cost of assassinating one’s own children’s emotions is worthless.

There must be a kind of harmony, some sort of balance between a person’s two distinct roles- of a parent and of an individual. Otherwise what being sown are mere dry bones of neglect, rejection and hatred; it can be imagined what would sprout from them. Desai’s present text, in this context, is found to be arresting enough, unravelling certain complex dimensions of parent-child relationships with a remarkable dexterity. The objective of the paper is not to subvert the reverentially held position of parents but to question the emergent phenomenon of modern parenthood, discussing simultaneously its drastic consequences on the child’s psychology.

Fasting, Feasting

The novel, *Fasting, Feasting*, has been divided into two segments, dealing with two diverse cultures – Indian and American. The first part tells Uma’s story in relation to her parents with the backdrop of her relationship with her sister, Aruna, and brother, Arun. Much

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like Jane Austen, Anita Desai primarily deals with two or three families as forming the plot of her present novel. Uma's family consists of her parents, a son and two daughters, one being Uma herself. The parents have merged into each other so intensely that now it appears quite difficult to conceive them as separate beings. "MamandPapa. MamaPapa. PapaMama. It was hard to believe they had ever had separate existences, that they had been separate entities and not MamaPapa in one breath" (Desai 5).

The novelist has not felt the need to give them separate names; instead, they are addressed as MamaPapa in the same breath. In his review of the novel, Andrew Robinson comments, "In Papa and Mama, the Indian parents, she [Anita Desai] creates two monsters of almost Gothic proportions, locked into inseparable marital disharmony, determined to inflict on their two daughters and only son every ounce of the prejudices and disappointments of their own lives, as a respectable barrister and his wife in an undistinguished town" (39).

Uma's father had studied under the streetlight and seems to be infatuated with education. He burdens his son, Arun, with his own unfulfilled aspirations and thus becomes excessively concerned about his son's education. Whereas Uma's mother is a housewife who has absorbed patriarchal values to such an extent that she cannot even like to think beyond patriarchal horizon. Herself a victim of gender discrimination, she remembers, "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" (Desai 5). Thus conditioned by the gender biased attitude of the parents, Uma's mother tends to inflict the same fate on her children.

Special Bond between Mother and Girls

At the initial stage "there is seen a special bond between the mother and the two girls, all of them being the victims of Papa" (Choubey, Mothers 111). But later the mother becomes one with her husband and serving him remains the sole aim of her life. The mother is completely overtaken by patriarchy that the father represents. It is because:

. . . his thoughts were one with hers. Their opinion differed so rarely that if Mama refused to let Aruna wear a pearl necklace to the matinee at the Regal cinema or Papa

decided Uma could not take music lessons after school, there was no point in appealing to the other parent for a different verdict: none was expected, or given. (Desai 14)

Therefore, the daughters of the family, both Uma and Aruna, receive only rejection from their parents. The mother either remains busy with her husband on the swing in the veranda or in going for kitty parties and playing cards with her female friends. The daughters are treated as a nuisance by their mother. “She swatted at her daughters as if they were a pair of troublesome flies . . . her daughters trailing after her, and by the time she arrived at the veranda, her manner had become the familiar one of guarded, restraint, censure and a tired decorum” (Desai 7). In doing her duty to serve her husband, Uma’s mother does not pay any heed to her daughters and they are left neglected, bereft of any care and affection.

Gender-based Attitude

Such a gender-based attitude on the part of parents seems somehow unnatural but what Amar Nath Prasad remarks is quite relevant, “Most probably, the reason of their frustration and step-motherly treatment can be sought in the psychology of the parents- such parents who are more interested in a boy child than in a girl child” (40). However like Virmati in *Difficult Daughters*, Uma too is burdened with the responsibility of her kid brother even before she can enjoy her own childhood. The eldest sister is made to act as a surrogate mother to her younger brother. The author candidly states, “When Mama came home, weak, exhausted and short-tempered, she tried to teach Uma the correct way of folding nappies, of preparing watered milk, of rocking the screaming infant to sleep when he was covered with prickly heat as with a burn” (Desai 18).

Uma’s Failure

Thus, Uma’s mother begins to shape her daughter in the traditions of patriarchal society where a girl is moulded in the role of a housewife and a domestic servant. Moreover herself not much educated, Uma’s mother pays no attention to her daughter’s education. Like Kasturi, Virmati’s mother in *Difficult Daughters*, she does not value her daughter’s academic career. Once she snaps, “We are not sending you back to school, Uma. You are staying at home to help with Arun” (Desai 18).

Uma wants to be educated but bereft of the parental support, she fails miserably. She is made to remain engaged in household chores which consume most of her valuable time. No tuition classes are arranged by her parents. As a result, Uma fails in her exams. The novelist states, “. . . in spite of her raging enthusiasm, she was an abject scholar. . . . There was not a thing Uma put her hand to that did not turn to failure” (Desai 21). The issue of education has usually remained a battleground for both parents and children to fight. The influence of education generally results in developing questioning attitude in the child. But the parents never like to be questioned by the creature of their own blood.

Uma seems to be a mere shadow of her parents, not an individual self. “Reduced thus to a baby-sitter at her earlier days and an unpaid servant for her self-centered parents for the rest of her life, Uma finds no escape from her entrapment” (Ravichandran 83). However the school is a kind of escape for Uma from her parents’ dominance and where she can feel more safe, secure and a mistress of her own. Even weekends are difficult for her to pass at home. The novelist remarks:

There were the wretched weekends when she was plucked back into the trivialities of her home, which seemed a denial, a negation of life as it ought to be, somber and splendid, and then the endless summer vacation when the heat reduced even that pointless existence to further vacuity. (Desai 21)

Choosing the Path of Rebellion

Once Uma takes to the path of rebellion and escapes in the afternoon from the house to school to meet Mother Agnes, so that she can be admitted again in the school. But this attempt of Uma too results in failure. Uma’s mother becomes infuriated at such an independent step of her daughter. She retorts, “See what these nuns do . . . What ideas they fill in the girls’ heads! I always said don’t send them to a convent school. Keep them at home, I said- but who listened? And now- !” (Desai 29). Such a reaction of her mother renders Uma submissive and docile. However, the plight of Uma raises a significant question in the reader’s mind, that is, in patriarchy the same miserable fate awaits the daughter, no matter she is rebellious or submissive.

Uma's school education is curtailed and she is further trained in the duties of a housewife. Uma's mother wants her daughter to accept marriage as her career instead of education. She asks:

‘What is the use of going back to school if you keep failing, Uma? . . . You will be happier at home. You won't need to do any lessons. You are a big girl now. We are trying to arrange a marriage for you. Not now,’ she added, seeing the panic on Uma's face. ‘But soon. Till then, you can help me look after Arun. And learn to run the house.’ (Desai 22)

She has to serve her father bananas, oranges, apples and lemonade at the right time and with appropriate gestures on her mother's behalf. She is, thus, made to feel proud at trivialities. Her mother comments, “Girls have to learn these things too, you know . . . she showed Uma how to pour a little oil on her fingertips and then massage it into the baby's limbs” (Desai 28-29). Consequently, Uma loses interest in the world around her. This state of Uma reminds us of Laura, the daughter in Tennessee Williams' play *The Glass Menagerie*. Like Uma, Laura leads a fragile existence. So she cannot face the world of harsh reality and finds escape in her collection of glass animals as Uma usually finds escape in her Christmas cards and bangle collection.

Education versus Marriage in Patriarchy

In patriarchy, instead of education, it is the marriage which is offered to girls as a career. Since their childhood, girls are conditioned to consider marriage as their ultimate destiny. When nothing works for Uma, she is made to plunge into marriage. “It was as if their mothers had been tending them, in their flowerpots, for just this moment when their cheeks would fill out and their lips take on a glisten and all the giggles and whispers would arrive at that one decision – *marriage*” (Desai 67). Now Papa is so desperate that he himself sends letters to all their relatives asking for marriage proposals for Uma. He writes, “Uma is still young but may be considered of marriageable age and we see no reason to continue her studies beyond class eight” (Desai 75).

Proposals for Marriage

Although Uma was withdrawn from school before she could reach class eight, proposals arrive and Uma is shown the snaps of eligible bachelors as a sign of family's progressive outlook. Three desperate attempts are made to get Uma married but unfortunately all of them end in fiasco. The first suitor likes Aruna rather than the elder daughter of the family. Second suitor's family refuses to perform marriage after acquiring a pre-marital dowry from Uma's family. In a conversation with Uma's mother, Mrs. Joshi, their neighbour, comments:

'Yes, that is why the Goyals are able to do such things, because of parents being in too much of a hurry. If parents will not take the time to make proper enquiries, what terrible fates their daughters may have! Be grateful that Uma was not married into a family that could have burnt her to death in order to procure another dowry!' (Desai 84)

Even after such warnings, no serious inquiries are made about the third suitor and a hasty marriage is offered. "Since it was clear Uma was not going to receive any other offer no matter what a good job the photographer had done with his unpromising material, Mama and Papa decided to proceed with the negotiations" (Desai 89). It seems as if Uma is a burden for her parents to be released as soon as possible. And finally when Uma gets married, her husband is found to be already married, having a wife and four children. She is brought back to her parental home where nobody is concerned about her humiliation and her ruin. Her parents merely curse the moment of marriage and moan over the dowry and the wedding expenses. After that Uma remains an outcast from the world of marriage, the world that matters above all in patriarchy. "Having cost her parents two dowries, without a marriage to show in return, Uma was considered ill-fated by all and no more attempts were made to marry her off" (Desai 98).

Lack of Perfection in Physical Beauty Blamed

Uma's mother thinks that it was her daughter's bad looks and uneducated status that never enabled her to find a suitable husband. Uma recollects, "How Mama had always envied Lila Aunty for having a daughter like Anamika, a model of perfection like Anamika. No, that was not for her, she sighed" (Desai 77). Uma's feelings about Anamika have a very strong influence on her relationship with her mother. Uma sometimes tries to justify her mother's

rudeness towards herself by observing the beauty and intelligence of Anamika that she herself unfortunately lacks. Uma thinks that Anamika deserves Lila aunty's love and care because she is a very intelligent and laborious student. But this is not true in a patriarchal society where every girl, educated or uneducated, is expected to be a good housewife and an obedient domestic servant.

Uma's cousin Anamika presents a sharp contrast to Uma in that she is more pretty and educated than her. "She was simply lovely as a flower is lovely, soft, petal-skinned, bumblebee-eyed, pink-lipped, always on the verge of bubbling dove-like laughter, loving smiles, and with a good nature like a radiance about her. Wherever she was, there was peace, contentment, well-being" (Desai 68). She wins a scholarship to Oxford. "To Oxford, where only the most favoured and privileged sons could ever hope to go! Naturally her parents would not countenance her actually going abroad to study – just when she was of an age to marry . . ." (Desai 69). They look upon the letter of acceptance as a trump card which is used to search a husband for her. Anamika has never objected or questions her parents' decision. She is married to a man much older than her and who is more conscious of his superiority. "Anamika had been beaten, Anamika was beaten regularly by her mother-in-law while her husband stood by and approved – or, at least, did not object" (Desai 71). She has a miscarriage as a result of regular thrashing. And then one day news comes that Anamika has committed suicide.

Aruna, the Younger Sister

Since childhood Aruna, Uma's younger sister, presents a contrast to Uma both in matters of looks and education. Though conditioned by the same mother, Uma and Aruna have formed different personalities. One becomes the victim of that conditioning and can never prosper; and other takes that conditioning as a challenge and carves out a space for herself. Alladi Uma points out, "Even while a daughter may seem to be neglected by the mother, even while she questions the relationship, she cannot totally negate her mother or her influence" (74).

If Uma has learnt her mother's docility and submission, Aruna has opted freedom and zest for life from her mother. Aruna uses her attractiveness as a survival device. While Mama

searches energetically for a husband for Uma, families are already making inquiries about Aruna. Moreover, when after marriage Aruna comes back to her mother's home with her children, she exactly imitates her mother's behaviour. Most of the time Aruna remains out of the home busy in visiting her old friends and their families as her mother remained in kitty parties and card game. She is as careless and indifferent as her mother in regard to her children. However, Uma's relationship with her sister, Aruna, does no good but intensifies the tensions between Uma and her parents.

Same Patriarchal Norms, Different Results

Now the question arises why these three daughters – Uma, Aruna and Anamika – have different fates despite being conditioned in the same patriarchal norms and values by their parents. It is because these daughters respond to their parents' conditioning differently and consequently develop diverse attitudes and individualities. Uma adopts submissiveness at an early stage to derive some solace from the hazard of her neglected existence. The path of submission and docility appears to her as the only valid way out from the nudging and tirades of her parents. For Aruna her mother's strictness is a kind of challenge which she accepts and counters in her own way. She develops a predilection for her femininity and makes the family notice her adroitness in by far adopting feminine traits. As far as Anamika is concerned, her distinctiveness lies in her intelligence and astuteness. She takes to education for creating a separate space for herself in her parents' patriarchal home. She performs well in studies and earns a scholarship to Oxford.

Thus, these girls have espoused three different modes of survival as a result of their distinct individualities. Apart from this fact, it is the role of the parents that has contributed in creating distinction in the life of the daughters. Uma is offered a typical arranged marriage by her parents in which she does not have any say. The parents solely take it as their right to decide for her and ultimately, Uma has to pay severely for her submissiveness.

Although in Anamika's case it is different. Her education is used as a trap by her parents to ensnare their daughter in a mismatched marriage. It is Anamika's subservient nature and conformity to her image of the ideal daughter that renders her meek even in her marital home. Consequently, she suffers silently and meets her terrible end.

However, Aruna is offered an arranged cum love marriage. “As was to be expected, she took her time, showed a reluctance to decide, played choosy, but soon enough made the wisest, most expedient choice – the handsomest, the richest, the most exciting of the suitors who presented themselves” (Desai 102). Aruna is given the chance to decide for herself by the parents and this results in a successful marriage. Thus, parents’ unnecessary intervention in the daughter’s life is not a healthy affair in that a single wrong decision of the parents can convert the daughter’s life into a hell. Parental role in a child’s life is the crucial deciding factor of what kind of life he/she would lead.

Alva Mrydal and Viola Klein point out:

Although deficient understanding of the children’s need at each age level may itself cause emotional and social and perhaps also intellectual underdevelopment, and although a feeling of ‘rejection’ occurs now and then for reasons which have to do with a mother’s personality . . . the risk exists that ambitious mothers may more often cause their children to feel willfully neglected. (130)

Son – Victim of Overprotected Attitude

However, MamaPapa’s only son, Arun, becomes a victim of his parents’ overprotected attitude. They never attempt to understand Arun’s needs and aspirations. Consequently, he develops a reserved attitude and suffers from depression. The novelist candidly states: “Now his own son, his one son, displayed this completely baffling desire to return to the ways of his forefathers, meek and puny men who had got nowhere in life” (Desai 33).

The same happens with Uma who, a victim of her parents’ indifference, can never develop a social self for herself. No understanding ever exists between Uma and her parents. Even the presence of her mother makes her feel a culprit. For her own comfort, Mama burdens Uma with the responsibility of Arun’s upbringing. Uma never receives any encouragement from her father to study and make a career for herself. Even she is made to quit her school by her mother. Education is required not merely to be eligible for a job or career, but it also contributes to the mental development of the individual. As a consequence, Uma lacks independence and confidence even after being a grown up.

Meenakshi Raman and Sushila Rathore observe, “Their apathetic and rude behaviour has never allowed her to become a mature person. They are responsible in making her a diffident child having no inclination towards creating a separate existence of her own and whenever she has tried to do it they have tried their best to evade it” (137). When a job is offered by Dr Dutt to Uma, the very idea of it enrages the parents. It is her mother who raises an objection on behalf of Uma’s father. “Our daughter does not need to go out to work, Dr Dutt,” she said, “As long as we are here to provide for her, she will never need to go to work” (Desai 146).

Her parents never allow Uma to be independent. She is turned into a mere loyal servant to them who they do not want to lose. Even a few moments of private life are not allowed to her. She can neither visit her neighbours nor can sit alone in the home. “The biased and rigid attitude of parents, papa always scowling and mama scolding leave no room for Uma to fulfil any of her desires and dreams. Even a few moments of peace and tranquility in her room are denied to her” (Rani 177). Every time her parents keep her busy in one domestic task or another. She is not even permitted to make phone calls. Once she secretly makes a call to Dr Dutt but forgets to lock the phone after use and is caught. Her father retorts, “‘Costs money! Costs money!’ he kept shouting long after. ‘Never earned anything in her life, made me spend and spend, on the dowry and her wedding. Oh, yes, spend till I’m ruined, till I am a pauper – ’” (Desai 149).

This shows the hypocrisy of parents. On the one hand, they do not allow Uma to do a job outside the home, and on the other curse her for not earning anything. Her parents never support Uma to look for a career even after splitting off her marriage. They never pay any heed to the fact what would become of Uma when they would no longer be in this world. Thus, such behaviour of her parents leaves Uma a baffled child, devoid of any emotional support.

This indifference at the hands of her parents makes Uma feel insignificant and she starts losing confidence. “Parental strictness is often experienced as rejection by children. From these deprivations result many neurotic personalities, insecure, restless, dissatisfied people, both young and old” (Mrydal and Klein 130). Uma’s humiliation and disgust with herself has affected her inner world to such an extent that she begins to have fainting fits. She

does not have anybody to unburden her heart to. Such a pathetically isolated self, Uma has no source from where she can gain love and attention. In this context, Meenakshi Raman and Sushila Rathore point out, “All her quests and her frustrations are restricted to her thoughts without any outlet” (136). Thus these accumulated frustrations find an outlet through fits. The reader is left with a lump in his throat after viewing Uma’s condition. What type of parents these are who are so unkind even to their own daughter?

Patton’s Family

The second part of the novel deals with Mr. and Mrs. Patton’s family and their relationship with their daughter, Melanie, and son, Rod. The connecting link between these two families is Arun, brother of Uma, who is sent to study further in America. “The two grave psychological risks which young children normally run are those of ‘rejection’ and ‘over-protection’” (Mrydal and Klein 130). This observation seems quite appropriate in this context. If Uma in India and Melanie in America are victims of their parents’ rejection, Arun is the victim of his parents’ over-protective attitude. Melanie has lost appetite to eat anything else than nuts and candy:

She sits in the gloom of the unlit staircase, munching the nuts with a mulish obstinacy, regarding him with eyes that are slits of pink-rimmed green. Has she been crying? She looks sullen rather than tearful. It is her habitual expression. Arun reflects that he has not once seen it change. (Desai 168)

But her mother never bothers about her daughter’s losing appetite. Later in the company of Arun, Mrs. Patton has become obsessed with shopping. She is not least concerned about her daughter’s health and never cares what Melanie and Rod eat and why. Arun does not see in her a real mother but just a plastic copy of the original. He states, “She smiles a bright plastic copy of a mother-smile that Arun remembers from another world and another time, the smile that is tight at the corners with pressure, the pressure to perform a role, to make him eat, make him grow, make him worth all the trouble and effort and expense” (Desai 198).

Much like Uma’s mother, Mrs. Patton has a very detached outlook towards her children. She is concerned only to fill the freezer with food items. “She is not involved in the lives of her own children. She is not aware of the fact that her teenage daughter, Melanie is

practically starving and has developed a habit of vomiting after consuming her favourite peanuts and candies” (A. Goswami and B. J. Goswami 202-03). She is never shown to be talking with either of her offspring personally and in an intimate relationship. Melanie is left all by herself to manage. Once Melanie reveals her frustrations to her mother, “I hate scrambled eggs! Why don’t you ask me what I want? Why can’t you make me what I want? What do you think we all are – garbage bags you keep stuffing and stuffing?” (Desai 209-10).

Modern Version of Parenthood

Melanie’s parents represent a modern version of parenthood where it is the husband who cooks and mother enjoys sunbathing without caring for anything else. Neglected by her parents, Melanie becomes a patient of depression. She eats only candies and keeps on vomiting all day. Desai aptly describes:

Then Arun does see a resemblance to something he knows: a resemblance to the contorted face of an enraged sister who, failing to express her outrage against neglect, against misunderstanding, against inattention to her unique and singular being and its hungers, merely spits and froths in ineffectual protest. How strange to encounter it here, Arun thinks, where so much is given, where there is both licence and plenty. (217)

Thus children neglected by their parents often become hysterical. Like Uma, Melanie does not have any outlet to relieve her frustrations. Same is the case with Arun too. Such isolated children have nothing in store but only bulimia, anorexia, depression, withdrawal, compulsive behaviour and hysteria.

Anita Desai, through her present novel, tends to show that excessive concerns of parents in case of Arun and complete disinterestedness in case of Uma and Melanie leave the children completely shattered. *Fasting, Feasting* is both a plea and warning to those parents who venture into their own individual worlds by rejecting their children’s right to be loved and cared. Such negation of parenthood would render the future generations crippled.

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Jitender Singh M.A., M.Phil., NET.

Research Scholar

Department of English and Foreign Languages

Maharshi Dayanand University

Rohtak - 124001

Haryana

India

jitenderwriter@gmail.com

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