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“A Real Pain and A Real Hunger”: Imagery of Violence in the Context of Family Relationships in Anita Desai’s *Fasting Feasting*

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Shortlisted for the 1999 Man Booker Prize, Anita Desai’s *Fasting Feasting* impressed many judges of the popular literary contest with its close study of the “sugar-sticky web of family conflict” (Desai 2008), spanning two generations and two continents. Though ostensibly about family relationships explored through the cultural symbolism of food and consumption, the novel however surprises the reader with a running presence of violence and menace – that is evident not only as important themes but also in imagery, setting and characterization.

While the setting of the novel is reasonably clear, the historical context seems to be deliberately left vague. The first half is located in a mofussil town on the Northern Plains of India and, based on the descriptions of the characters’ ritual bath where two rivers meet (113), it is most likely the town of Allahabad. However the time depicted is unclear – the father of the Indian family is described as first generation learner in his family while his wife remembers her own childhood as a time when daughters would be home-schooled by tutors instead of attending a formal institution. Thus the novel seems to be covering the post-independence decades of India as the two daughters of the family - Uma and Aruna - grow up from adolescents to middle aged women.

These decades have been anything but sedentary in the history of India. The 1960s, ‘70s and ‘80s saw the country suffer at least five wars with its neighbours and reel through the political violence of the Emergency¹. The Gangetic Belt which provides the setting of the novel has especially been vulnerable to caste and class conflicts. However no hint of military wars, political upheavals, economic crises, natural disasters or social conflicts creeps up in the pages of the novel. The family seems to have been shut off from the social, economic, political winds blowing through these decades.

However this is not a cocoon of peace and comfort. Each half of the novel has a family at its centre which seems outwardly blessed by Fortune. They suffer no pangs of economic distress, disease or any serious blow of Fate. And yet it is a world darkened by a pervasive imagery of violence, blood and menace.

“A blister with blood”

There is almost a constant sense of heaviness, claustrophobia and anxiety that weigh down all major characters in the novel. The dull painful throbbing remains largely unrelieved – much “Like a blister with blood” (15) that Uma mentions early on in the novel when describing the atmosphere in her home as news of her mother’s late pregnancy filters into the rest of the household. For Uma these loaded hints of carnal acts and forbidden sexuality conjure up visions of a squealing pig trying to escape a butcher’s knife – the image of slaughter thus bringing together associations of both blood and violence.

The imagery of blood recurs every now and then. The most violent is that of Uma biting her tongue in the throes of an epileptic fit and blood gushing out from her mouth, “lurid and scarlet”. This scene (60)

takes place at an 'ashram' – a religious retreat that is supposed to be an abode of peace and calm, and for a time even seems to offer Uma a refuge from the withering environs of a loveless family. However it is clear in the course of the novel that though certain aspects of religion may hold within its depths a kind of mysticism that is highly attractive to Uma, salvation does not lie here.

In the beginning the writer evokes the compassionate concern of Mother Agnes who runs the convent school where Uma studies. The orderly simple charm of her room and the deeply spiritual atmosphere of the chapel initially seem to offer Uma a refuge from the chaos and negativity of her own home. However when Uma does gather the courage to run away to Mother Agnes, she not only finds no help but is actually appalled to see her beloved Mother firmly nudging her back into the clutches of her family. This extreme stress – in the moment of realization that there is no escape from the vice-like grip of patriarchy-ordained domestic roles – brings in Uma about of epileptic fit for the first time.

The last time that Uma will experience the 'fits' will be at Aruna's pre-wedding cocktail party. By this time, Uma has suffered the physical and emotional trauma of a duplicitous marriage and has been blamed for it too by her parents. This, followed by months of verbal mockery and sniping by Aruna, has reduced her to an emotional wreck so that the stress of her sister's wedding proves to be the last straw. As Uma is hurried by Mama to serve snacks to the guests, she simply keels over "as if she had been cut down by an axe". She hits "her head against the tin tray so that it was cut open" (103). Once again the body suffers trauma and is described in terms of violent images. Each time Uma has an epileptic attack, it is notably a non-family member who intervenes and administers medical assistance. Despite her condition being known to the family, no member bothers to learn the basics of first-aid for an epileptic patient. It is left to strangers and acquaintances to save her from further injury!

Interestingly no blood is spilled the first or the last time when Uma has an epileptic attack. Incredibly that is drawn by the child for whose care Uma is pulled out of school – her kid brother, Arun. Uma is commanded by her mother to force-feed the child, which makes him bite Uma's finger so sharply that it starts bleeding. The imagery of blood here underscores the violence with which the act of feeding is entwined throughout the novel. Instead of being associated with nurturing and sustenance as it should be, eating is associated with resistance and force. Mama orders to Uma to feed Arun spoonfuls of cod-liver oil. Faced with the child's resistance, Uma herself tries to force the repulsive liquid down Arun's throat who in turn bites his sister's finger which results in "blood tricking down" (33). The episode, like others associated with eating, can only end in violence and pain.

In the second part of the novel, blood is impersonalized. Rather than appearing as the consequence of violence suffered by any character, blood is seen seeping out of the chunks of grilled meat "bleeding in a stream across Mr. Patton's plate" (171). As the head of the American family in the novel, Mr. Patton takes it upon himself to organize a summer evening barbecue, which incidentally is rejected both his own family as well as his Indian lodger, Arun. Not surprisingly the imagery is then expanded to include the setting too - "the air is murky with the smoke of the dying barbecue and the spreading dusk". The violence inherent in this way of life - where food "seems not merely raw but living" where roads are a menace to pedestrians and where "one can't tell which is more dangerous...pursuit of health or sickness" - is externalized on to the reddening evening sky, "where the blood is a stain, a wound at its heart."

"Red...like a tongue"

Blood is not the only red thing associated with the body. If the body is the site of pain and violence, it can also be the medium of seduction. When describing Aruna's readiness for marriage, readers are given a peek of a "red slipper thrusting out suddenly like a tongue" (87).

And yet what happens to Aruna who is both attractive and astute enough to make a match with every tangible benefit? She marries a man who is not only rich and handsome but living in a metropolis like Mumbai and thus away from his parents – which means that she can run her marital home just as she pleases. However the image of Aruna that readers are left with is hardly that of a happy and contented

woman. Once again stress – in this case, caused by the pressure of maintaining the front of the perfect family – overtakes the body; it is expressed as a perpetual frown between her brows and more significantly as a nervous tic which makes her blink in such an unseemly manner that both Uma and Mama notice it. The body that Aruna had used to her advantage in snagging a suitable match now once again becomes the site of frustration and anxiety.

“A bluish lump”

A running trope thus is the human body as the major site of violence. If the stress created by Uma’s lack of control over her circumstances erupts as epileptic fits, in the case of Melanie, the teenage daughter of the American family, it takes the form of bulimia. However, the difference between the two is that while for Uma, the condition is involuntary, in case of Melanie, the violence against the body is self-inflicted. Both conditions though can be read in Lacanian terms as the consequence of a split subjectivity. French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan argued that there are three major stages of psychological development “whereby we emerge into consciousness” (Barry 96). The first is the Real stage which begins at birth and is characterized by the child’s connection to the mother. The child has no notion of itself as a distinct individual and instead feels a deep sense of oneness with the mother. At around eighteen months the child sees itself reflected in an external object or mirrored in the way it is looked at by the Mother – this enables the child to recognize that it is separate from its mother. It is this ‘look from the place of the other’ according to Lacan, that enables the child for the first time to recognize itself as a unified subject (Lacan 2). This stage is known as the mirror stage and marks its entry into the Imaginary Order.

The final stage is the Symbolic at which the child is born into language and society and begins to associate the father figure with the presence of authority as well as all its “prohibitions and restraints” (Barry 114) - also known as the ‘Law of the Father’.

In the novel, both Melanie and Uma are deprived of the love and acceptance in the gaze of the (M)other. Though Melanie submits to the Symbolic Order of family routine, she does so reluctantly and incompletely. In fact she refuses to eat what Mrs. Patton prepares, like eggs and sandwiches, and instead gorges herself on candies and peanuts which she makes herself throw up later. In Lacanian terms, her bulimia is an indication of a neurosis, caused by her incomplete subjection to the Law of the Father (Fink 76) and thus her symptoms are an expression of her rejection of the Symbolic Order.

Likewise Uma too develops her epileptic fits when forced to submit to the Symbolic Order of patriarchy-ordained domestic roles. When her parents decide to pull her out of school, the Law of the Father bars her access to the mystical realm of experience that so attracts Uma to Mother Agnes and the chapel. This thwarting of access leads, in Lacanian terms, to her developing neurotic desires which can be only expressed in the gaps of social laws and conventions and which inevitably manifest themselves as something that is forbidden in the Law of the Father (Sharp). This in the novel, takes the form of Uma’s successively gravitating towards Mira Masi, Ramu bhैया and especially to water – as though she had a death-drive to drown herself in the river.

Yet another instance of a character subjecting his/her own body to extreme stress is that of Rod. His excessively rigorous exercise leaves his face “contorted and inflamed” (Desai, 208). The full impact of the torturous routine is brought home through the experience of Arun who tries to “jog and jog – like Rod” (204). However instead of feeling invigorated and stronger, he ends up not only exhausted but in severe physical agony as “his toes stub into his shoes, his ankles...pain shoots up his leg muscles” (203).

In fact this form of self-inflicted physical strain that is almost punishing is foreshadowed as early as chapter 2 when Papa is described as taking a walk in the town park on a Sunday. While still at home, he prepares for it by “swinging his arm upwards...” in what is presumably some form of warm-up. His antics become weirder as he enters the park, “he jumps out and rushes in with great urgency”. He experiences everything around him as obstructions and thus his manner of walking is to “lower his head,

square his shoulders and charge past them regardless” (12). Rather than making Papa calmer and refreshed, this form of exercise only seems to heighten his anxiety and stress.

Interestingly three out of four major male characters in *Fasting, Feasting* engage in some form of physical exercise which appears more of a self-inflicted punishing routine rather than health-inducing. Only Mr. Patton seems to have escaped this but in the end, readers are told he is compelled to pick up a night job in order to earn enough to pay for Melanie’s rehabilitation – thus forcing on himself another kind of long-term physical stress.

Then there is the awful story recounted by Papa of the best student in his year who studied “day and night, day and night”. And he did this by having cut off his eyelashes so that “whenever his eyes shut, they would prick him and he would wake up so he could study more”. Rest and sleep which are once again supposed to be nurturing, life-enhancing in the natural scheme of things, are to be obliterated and that too with violence. No wonder the readers are told, “Papa’s stories tended to be painful” (6).

Further turning the proverbial screw in the novel are instances of pain inflicted on the body by others. Papa enforces a physically and mentally gruelling schedule on his only son, the young Arun, in the hope of making him a successful student. His childhood is one long punishment, at the end of which he is left physically stunted and emotionally desiccated. Even when he is accepted in MIT, he gives no evidence of relief, joy or hope – “these had all been ground down till they had disappeared” (125). Arun only wishes to be left alone.

Children too are perpetrators of violence in this novel. While Arun’s biting of Uma’s fingers may be considered as an instinctual response to her force-feeding him, elsewhere Aruna’s kids show that they are far from any angelic manifestations of innocence. Aruna’s daughter erupts in “frightful temper tantrums” if asked to do anything; for example if told to wash her hands or drink her milk, she “would kick and scream with rage” (106). However it is Aruna’s son, Dinesh who hides a sadistic streak that is more frightening. He uses the air gun when expressly told not to and wounds a pigeon with it. While the bird lies “dying in a tumult of bloodied feathers” (108), Dinesh seems to be relishing the scene of pain and torture. When a horrified Uma asks him to put the dying bird out of its misery, Dinesh does so with pleasure but later narrates the incident in such a way as to make it appear Uma’s fault. The imagery of blood and injury further serves to drive the theme of violence, especially in the context of family relationships.

The violence unleashed in the bosom of family assumes the most horrifying form with Anamika’s murder. After several years of physical and emotional torture by her in-laws, the girl - considered an epitome of perfection by her kin - is ultimately doused with gasoline and set on fire (154). Anamika – in Hindi meaning, ‘the one without a name’ – remains appropriately a shadowy presence throughout the novel. There are no instances where she speaks – readers don’t get to hear her own voice at any point of time. Every crucial stage of her life – winning an Oxford scholarship, getting married, suffering a miscarriage and subsequent torture – is filtered through the reactions of her parents, relatives and in-laws. Not once readers are privy to her thoughts and feelings. Despite being showered with the choicest blessings of beauty, grace and intelligence, Anamika ends up being pushed by her parents into an abusive marriage and then murdered by her husband and his family – in the end, the one without a name is completely obliterated from any physical existence as well.

The “smothering wilderness”

While the body and family network figure as the chief sites of violence, the setting of the novel is often infused with images of threat and menace. Clumps of bougainvilleas rather than appearing as bursts of gorgeous colours are only thorny which catch Uma by her hair; fruit trees in the bungalow. Instead of offering fresh delicacies, only attract thieving boys and monkeys. Pigeons don’t coo here – they are perpetually “scolding, complaining and grumbling” (129). When Arun leaves the hot and dusty plains of his hometown to go to the United States for studies, even the verdant suburbs of Edge Hill appear as a

“smothering wilderness”. Instead of the greenery of the forests providing relief and refuge from the summer, they seem to him, “a creeping curtain of insidious green” (223).

Later when Arun is forced to tag along with Mrs. Patton and Melanie to the swimming hole, the woods are far from a cool refuge - rather they are filled with sounds of violence, “thrumming with cicadas, they shrill and shrill” (222). Just like in India, here too birds don’t sing or even chirp, but just ‘shriek’. After Arun has finished swimming at the hole, he wishes to rest on a clump of grass but that instead of providing a cool shade, becomes the site of attack by all sorts of flying insects.

Towards the end of the novel, this degradation in Nature seems externalized in Melanie’s condition when Arun wading through “poisonous looking plants with evil dark heads is hit with a wave of rank odour”. He comes upon Melanie thrashing in her own vomit and realises that this is the real source of the repulsive smell. Through the novel, both Nature and the human body, have often figured as sites of menace and violence and at this point the imagery appears to have fused both into one – “the reality is daylight, three-dimensional and malodorous”(227).

“Chromium-centred wheels that flash past”

If Nature is menacing wilderness, civilization is no better. Highways, long hailed as the symbol of America’s victory over the untamed frontier, here threaten with danger and violence. In Chap 23, Arun tries to emulate Rod and embarks on a long run. Eventually he is lost and finds himself near a highway along which “cars flashing by, dangerously close, forbiddingly silent and fast”(204). He is desperate for a lift, but knows no one will stop and help. The motorists in “their sealed chambers” rule the vast landscape and by contrast, the “earthbound joggers” are “overtaken and obsolete”. As Arun sinks down in exhaustion along the road, he barely escapes a rushing car and “...is left sitting blinded by the dust....groaning at the thought of making his way back” (206).

Again music - considered an expression of high culture which is supposed to soothe the human soul - is here experienced as nerve-racking and stressful. It not only fails to provide any emotional succour to Arun but instead widens the gap between him and his college mates. He hates these “voices shouting out from another world...their very volume created a fence, a barrier, separating him from them”(174). Later at the Pattons’ home too, music coming from the bathroom – “the sounds of saxophone and trumpets and a lead singer in distress” – seem an assault on the senses, “pounding upon the door, hammering it with all its fists”(207).

Even an activity as seemingly harmless as shopping can mask anxiety and stress beneath its glistening surface. As is common in a consumerist society, retail therapy is Mrs. Patton’s way of coping with the discontent and bleakness in her life. Arun on the other hand is horrified at the pointless shopping for food and the sheer wastage. He “grows tense, finds his throat muscles contracting, tight with anxiety over spending so much, having so much”(211) but when he tries to stop Mrs. Patton from buying more, she erupts in an angry outburst.

“Ferocious under the cover of geniality”

Images of menace and violence repeatedly surface in descriptions of major characters – how they look, sound and act. Thus in Chap 5, after Uma returns from her dinner with Ramu, Mama’s extreme disapproval is evident in the “face which glints like a knife in the dark”(53). Papa submits his dinner guests to “frightening attempts at jocularity” which instead of creating a convivial atmosphere merely wound and hurt. A joke is considered successful only “according to the amount of discomfort it caused others”(9). Another kind of verbal venom is spewed by Melanie at whoever tries to engage her in a conversation – if Arun is trying to be polite, she ‘hisses’ back and if her own mother is trying to get her to come to the family dining table, she hits back furiously with defiance and indignation. Even Rod who is mostly harmless approaches Arun with “thundering feet pounding closer” and is described as a “gladiatorial species of northern power”(195).

“The comfort of each other”

Is there no respite then, from this atmosphere of violence – that sometimes spills on the surface as blood or injury but always seems to be present around the edges as menacing shadows? The family clearly provides neither a nurturing nor an enriching context for the younger generation. And yet there are tentative suggestions that the two main ones in the novel at least can still be counted to pull one away from complete annihilation. Uma’s parents seem to commit every oppression of the patriarchal system – denying her an education, career, health, freedom and forcing her into a marriage as well. And yet when she is caught in a fraudulent marriage, Papa brings her back. Though Uma is herself later blamed for being unable to bring off a proper marriage and costing two dowries instead, she is not left to slave away in the house of her in-laws. This becomes especially significant in comparison to Anamika’s fate who - despite making her parents proud with her beauty, Oxford scholarship and an advantageous marriage - is left to suffer at the hands of her in-laws and is eventually murdered. Though one can argue that Papa’s motives for bringing back Uma are far from liberating – she ends up being a drudge in her parents’ house like before – in the final analysis, he does what Anamika’s parents don’t.

Likewise, Mr. Patton takes charge of her daughter’s situation. Despite being neglected by her parents for a long time, Melanie is eventually pulled back from the deep end and her parents decide to get her bulimia treated. Mr. Patton for all his emotional sterility takes on the rigours of a night job so as to be able to fund Melanie’s expensive rehabilitation. Significantly though, she is taken away from the heart of her family and the authenticity of her reported progress also remains doubtful. Nevertheless, the very fact that she is getting help implies that she could be on the path to recovery.

Indeed this act of the family - pulling the child back at the last possible minute from annihilation - is symbolically described when Uma is saved from near-drowning in the river – not once, but twice . Uma in fact seems to have a kind of subconscious attraction to water. The first time she feels herself drawn to its depths is when as a girl she accompanies Mira Masi for a ritual bath in the river. Still a child, she wades in with “thoughtless abandon...certain that the river would sustain her” (Desai 44).

Many years later, when Aruna’s in-laws come to visit, a dip in the sacred spot where the two rivers meet, is planned. Again Uma plunges in “without hesitation...not onto the sandbar... but into the deep dark river itself” (113). Water has long signified the subconscious in psychoanalytic terms. Freud considered water as symbolizing birth or standing for the security, love, comfort of the Mother’s womb (Freud). It is possible that the fractured self caused by Uma’s incomplete submission to the Lacanian Symbolic Order – represented by the patriarchal institutions in the novel – is made whole by her entry to the subconscious which is symbolized by the water. Certainly the readers are told that the second dip in the river seemed to have cured her of her epileptic attacks (Desai 141).

Again in Lacanian terms, Uma’s attraction to water could be interpreted as the desire to return to the peace and wholeness of the Real Order. As an individual enters the Symbolic stage, it becomes aware of the lack of and the separation caused by the absence of the mother; consequently the person is filled with the desire to return to that lost sense of oneness (Barry 114). In the novel, Uma seeks this wholeness - variously in Mother Agnes’ calm orderliness, Mira Masi’s religion and briefly feels it during the gaiety of the fete. However it is only when she allows herself to sink into the depths of the river so that “she can feel the water close over her...” she realizes “it was exactly what she had always wanted” (Desai 114). In its waters, Uma hopes to find the comforting embrace that she has been denied all her life and with it, the possibility of achieving emotional completion.

The last time readers see Uma in the novel is her - once again - standing in the river, pouring out the water from her jar onto her head – an act of cleansing and benediction. More importantly this comes in the wake of a fleeting moment of understanding between the mother and daughter. In the aftermath of Anamika’s death, Uma and Mama are united in grief, relieved that despite all difficulties, “they have the comfort of each other...it is a bond” (159).

The peace and comfort offered by the depths of water feature in the second half of the novel too when Arun is practically forced by Mrs. Patton to trek down to the swimming hole. Though he jumps into the water, initially to avoid her, soon he finds himself relaxing and letting go of his anxieties – it is “an element that removes him from his normal self, and opens out another world of possibilities”(225).

In a novel where family relationships come unravelled amidst shadows of lurking menace and violence, this kind of benediction can be tenuous at best. Moreover not everyone can be as lucky - though Uma and Arun find some measure of peace or at least understanding of their situation, Melanie must make her own way back to health and salvation. The road is long but she is young and - the reader hopes as he/she puts the book down - time is on her side.

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