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Intimate escapes

Anita Desai extends her range in *Diamond Dust and Other Stories*



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The Guardian, Saturday 3 June 2000 01.25 BST

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Diamond Dust and Other Stories

Anita Desai

Chatto & Windus, £14.99, 207pp

This wittily observed short-story collection is Anita Desai's first book since *Fasting, Feasting*, the novel for which she was named runner-up to JM Coetzee in last year's Booker prize. Both books reveal an abiding impulse to dissect what Desai once called "the web of [family] relationships, sticky and sweet, clinging and trapping". But while these stories slyly take a scalpel to family ties that stifle as much as they sustain, they extend her range in intriguing directions, charting not only bitter confinement but also heady escape.

Fasting, Feasting (now a Vintage paperback) casts a coolly ironic gaze at parallel symptoms of dysfunction erupting in provincial India and suburban America, from bride-burning to bulimia. Food is central, whether scarce and meanly rationed in a middle-class Indian home, or abundant yet rejected in the New England of eating disorders and obsessive keep-fit.

The stories in *Diamond Dust* range across not two but three continents, tracking people on the move - whether exiled from India or Mexico to US campuses (where Desai has taught for years) or fleeing sweltering summers for the relief of Himalayan hills or the Cornish seaside. While mother figures ply long-departed sons with "favourite" childhood foods in vain attempts to rekindle waning bonds, gulfs of incomprehension and resentment open up as the migrants are transformed by their journeys.

"Winterscape", like *Fasting, Feasting*, contrasts the strength of familial ties in north America and India, as Rakesh's "two mothers" visit him and his pregnant wife Beth in Toronto. Although Beth chafes against this invasion of "two foreigners" from her husband's past in Punjab, she gradually gains insight into the love that made Anu gift her own son to her widowed, childless sister Asha, Rakesh's mother and aunt swapping places. In "Tepoztlan", a nephew's return from Texas to a Mexican mountain village where "ageing daughters looked after aged parents" stirs an old claustrophobia, driving him to flee again a household of bitter complaint, "shrouded and still" as an empty

Amid exquisite descriptions of nature and evocation of atmosphere are the violence and rapacity that characteristically break the calm surface of Desai's fiction. In "Royalty", a leech-like character exploits the hospitality of friends, while in the title story a civil servant heads for tragedy over his fondness for his "badmash" pet dog, Diamond. There is also comedy, as in the story where a family bound for Simla gets stuck in a traffic jam, which may be no more than a ruse to deliver captive business to the myriad roadside vendors who materialise out of the dust.

In one of the finest and most moving stories, "Underground", the focus shifts from a couple motoring in Cornwall to a widower, Bob, whom they disturb when they seek a room at his guest house. Their knock triggers memories of buying the hotel with his dying wife, and of his previous job in Iraq, where he found "his voice raised, loudly, like a caricature, a cartoon of a British colonial" at the enticing vision of a close-knit local family that excluded him.

The final and most satisfying story in this collection returns to the subject of Desai's earliest fiction: the lone or isolated woman in India and the ambivalence of independence. In "The Rooftop Dwellers", Moyna, testing her wings as a "working woman in the metropolis", joins a Delhi community of single lodgers in adjacent barsatis or rooftop rooms. Her new landlords raise their eyes from mythological TV epics only to narrow them disapprovingly at their lodger ("too young, too pretty, too unattached"), yet her spirits lift as she savours a new freedom in her rooftop "palace", shaded by the canopy of a parrot-filled pipal tree.

The tone marks a shift from Desai's previous fiction, which has tended to count the high price to women of claiming such freedoms. While Moyna's shunning of the shelter of family does subject her to the scrutiny and exploitation of landlords, gropers on buses, a lewd gallery of rooftop onlookers and an insolent servant boy who blasts out tapes he has stolen from her, the final note is one of triumph. While *Fasting, Feasting* ultimately affirms the comfort and endurance of family ties - however constraining - here the epiphany is one of escape. It is as though, training her eyes on a later generation of women than her own, Desai is finally able to celebrate a widening of the frontiers.