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Let Them Eat Curry

By Francine Prose
Published: January 9, 2000

Fasting, Feasting

By Anita Desai.

228 pp. Boston:

Mariner/Houghton Mifflin Company.

Paper, \$13.

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. The blighted fate of Desai's heroine, Uma, could take place in thousands of small American towns or a Balzac novel or a Chekhov story -- any place or time in which parents refuse to see that they have suffocated whatever was most vital in their child.

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. These minute quotidian expressions of conflict and concord, preference and identity, are omnipresent but easily ignored, nearly invisible but all-important in their effect on our relations with one another, on our sense of self, on our very survival. Thus the heart of family life beats, with maddening regularity, in ritualized conversations about the daily menu: "It was actually wonderful to see what fertile ground the dining table was for discussion and debate. But it was also impossible not to see that the verdict would be the same as at the outset -- if Mama had suggested plain rice and mutton curry to begin with, then it would be that and no other, no matter what fancies had been entertained along the way: pilaos, kebabs, koftas."

In its opening scene, the aptly named "Fasting, Feasting" allows us to eavesdrop on a middle-aged Indian couple in a small provincial city. "The parents" -- inevitably referred to as Mama and Papa or, collectively, as MamaPapa -- are discussing whether to have sweets along with fritters for their afternoon tea. Having decided, they summon their daughter Uma to inform the cook, and the reader quickly comes to understand that Uma exists -- is permitted to exist -- chiefly to ensure her parents' comfort.

Myopic, prematurely gray, unbeautiful, lacking any particular charm or grace, Uma is doomed from birth by character and appearance, by the bad luck of having been born into a culture in which a plain middle-class woman has little hope of making an advantageous marriage, and by the additional misfortune of having parents who cannot see her as an individual entitled to freedom and happiness but only as a sort of unpaid servant who can be counted on to help raise her younger brother, Arun, and deal with family celebrations

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and crises.

Throughout the first and longer of the two sections into which this wry, touching and understated novel is divided, we witness the failure of Uma's pathetically tentative efforts to leave home and establish her individuality. As a girl, she is taken out of the convent school that she loves despite her utter lack of any gift for learning. An innocent trip to a restaurant with an eccentric cousin and a religious pilgrimage with a pious female relative are barely tolerated by her conventional and self-centered parents. And, most damaging, the family's attempts to find a husband for their nave, compliant daughter result in heartbreak, humiliation and financial disaster. As her beautiful and confident younger sister marries "the handsomest, the richest, the most exciting of the suitors who presented themselves," Uma's life grows more and more narrowly circumscribed.

MEANWHILE, all the family's energies and resources are being channeled into Arun's education -- a process that culminates in his being sent away to study in New England. In the book's second section, we follow him to his high-rise dormitory and to the suburban household where he arranges to board for the summer. There he learns how very differently the secret language of food expresses and influences the inner lives of Americans. His hosts, the Pattons, use their dietary preferences as a tool with which to form allegiances and exert power -- and as a weapon with which to cause pain, to struggle for self-determination.

Inspired by their guest's vegetarianism, Mrs. Patton decides to give up meat -- much to the chagrin of her husband, who considers manning the barbecue grill to be a crucial part of his role as head of the family. Some of the novel's most humorous and sharply observed scenes involve the false -- indeed, delusional -- camaraderie that develops between the young Indian and the disaffected housewife, the bond that sends them off on foraging expeditions to the local supermarket:

"Together they wheeled the cart around and avoided walking past the open freezers where the meat lay steaming in pink packages of rawness, the tank where helpless lobsters, their claws rubber-banded together, rose on ascending bubbles and then sank again, tragically, the trays where the pale flesh of fish curled in opaque twists upon the polystyrene, and made their way instead to the shelves piled with pasta, beans and lentils, all harmlessly dry and odor-free, the racks of nuts and spices where whatever surprises might be were bottled and boxed with kindergarten attractiveness."

Melanie, the Pattons' teenage daughter, is a dangerously ill bulimic; her behavior provides a striking contrast to that of Uma, her pacified counterpart halfway around the globe.

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.

Drawing (Peter O. Zierlein)

Francine Prose's new novel, "Blue Angel," will be published this spring.

A version of this review appeared in print on January 9, 2000, on page 710 of the New York edition.

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