

## time out

**Fasting, Feasting**

Anita Desai

ISBN: 0-099-28472-3

Review by **Dashini Ann Jeyathurai**

In the words of Gerald Kaufman, Chairman of the Booker Prize 1999: 'If we could have chosen a runner-up, we would undoubtedly have given the runner-up award to Anita Desai and *Fasting, Feasting*'.

In '*Fasting, Feasting*', Anita Desai takes upon herself a task that many Indian and expatriate authors have themselves deemed Herculean in nature. A task which involves delving into the inner sanctum of an orthodox Indian family in India itself. Many have failed miserably in such tasks and come out of the whole charade looking undoubtedly ignorant or lacking in sensitivity towards certain aspects of the culture. Very few have succeeded in truly fathoming this culture and among them lies the name of Anita Desai.

The reader is faced with several poignant issues played upon in a middle-class family attempting to deal with modernisation but ultimately, real life is meant to be lived in their society. A society with a veritable amount of prejudices weaved into its complex tapestry of customs and beliefs.

The story in itself is told to us from the perspective of the protagonist, Uma. Beginning her life as a wide-eyed child with an enthusiasm for education at the Convent and in constant awe of the enigmatic nuns who seemed to glide through the school grounds. Unlike her younger sister Aruna, our protagonist does not have the privilege of having "books marked healthily in green and blue for success and approval". Instead with the birth of Arun, her youngest brother, she puts on the role of nanny to him. Here, one encounters the distinct preference her parents have for this male child, an ugly practice that was not uncommon at one point in time. Anita Desai uses the teenage Uma to question this sexism when she points out that an ayah had looked after both Aruna and her as children. Why wasn't the ayah's care sufficient for a male child? Was it because an ayah's care was only fit for girls and not the male heirs in the family?

The author goes on to tackle classical perceptions in the society when it comes to beauty and how a woman who lacked some of these qualities was very often rushed into the first marital alliance they received, only to pay a very heavy price later on as Uma did. Anita Desai goes about depicting the various challenges a spinster faces regardless of how materially successful she is, simply because there is no man by her side. A parallel is drawn for the reader in Uma's cousin, Anamika. Portrayed as the ultimate success simply because of her beauty, she is able to marry well. Yet one wonders how much better was the quality of her life compared to Uma when this success comes to a sorry end through suicide? Even at that point, Anita Desai picks at the family's denial and continuous attempt to blanket the torture Anamika was going through.

However, the character of Arun is also brought to light several chapters into the book as he begins his studies in America, coming into contact with the dysfunctional Patton family. Here, he is faced with unlimited freedom and attempts to grapple with such an alien culture where his landlord's daughter periodically vomits after meals and Mrs. Patton is almost a non-entity in the family. Perhaps this could be a purposeful juxtaposition of the two families by Anita Desai.

Ultimately, Anita Desai has lived up to being one of India's finest writers in fiction. However to a sixteen year old like myself, great authors aren't always the pundits of the English language or those who deal with a multitude of overlapping themes in one short novel. They are the authors who can make you keep turning the pages eager to read the next line and the next, although there are more pressing matters at hand. Indeed, Anita Desai is one of those.

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A GOOD BOOK IS THE  
BEST OF FRIENDS,  
THE SAME TO-DAY  
AND FOREVER

*Martin Tupper*