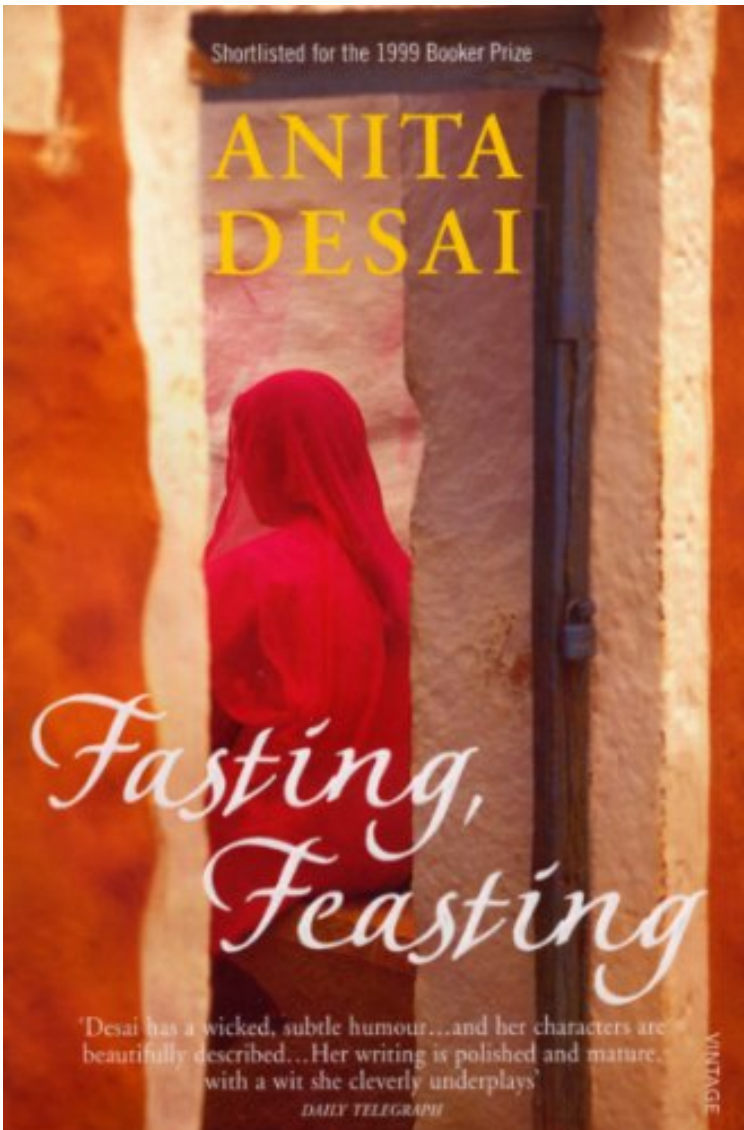


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# Fasting, Feasting



*Par Anita Desai*

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**Description :** Description du produitUma, the plain spinster daughter of a close-knit Indian family, is trapped at home, smothered by her overbearing parents and their traditions, unlike her ambitious younger sister Aruna, who brings off a "good" marriage, and brother Arun, the disappointing son and heir who is studying in America.Across the world in Massachusetts, life with the Patton family is bewildering for Arun in the alien culture of freedom, freezers and paradoxically self-denying self-indulgence.

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proved herself one of the most accomplished and admired chroniclers of middle-class India. Her 1999 novel, *Fasting, Feasting*, is the tale of plain and lumpish Uma and the cherished, late-born Arun, daughter and son of strict and conventional parents. So united are her parents in Uma's mind that she conflates their names.

"MamaPapa themselves rarely spoke of a time when they were not one. The few anecdotes they related separately acquired great significance because of their rarity, their singularity." Throughout, Desai perfectly matches form and content: details are few, the focus narrow, emotions and needs given no place. Uma, as daughter and female, expects nothing; Arun, as son and male, is lost under the weight of expectation. Now in her 40s, Uma is at home. Attempts at arranged marriages having ended in humiliation and disaster, and she is at MamaPapa's beck and call, with only her collection of bracelets and old Christmas cards for consolation. Uma flounces off, her grey hair frazzled, her myopic eyes glaring behind her spectacles, muttering under her breath. The parents, momentarily agitated upon their swing by the sudden invasion of ideas--sweets, parcel, letter, sweets--settle back to their slow, rhythmic swinging. They look out upon the shimmering heat of the afternoon as if the tray with tea, with sweets, with fritters, will materialise and come swimming out of it--to their rescue. With increasing impatience, they swing and swing. Arun, in college in Massachusetts, is none too happily spending the summer with the Pattons in the suburbs: their refrigerator and freezer is packed with meat that no one eats, and Mrs. Patton is desperate to be a vegetarian, like Arun. But what he most wants is to be ignored, invisible. "Her words make Arun wince. Will she never learn to leave well alone? She does not seem to have his mother's well-developed instincts for survival through evasion. After a bit of pushing about slices of tomatoes and leaves of lettuce--in his time in America he has developed a hearty abhorrence for the raw foods everyone here thinks the natural diet of a vegetarian--he dares to glance at Mr. Patton." Desai's counterpointing of India and America is a little forced, but her focus on the daily round, whether in the Ganges or in New England, finely delineates the unspoken dramas in both cultures. And her characters, capable of their own small rebellions, give *Fasting, Feasting* its sharp bite. -- Ruth Petrie

From Publishers Weekly Short-listed for the 1999 Booker Prize, Desai's stunning new novel (after *Journey to Ithaca*) looks gently but without sentimentality at an Indian family that, despite Western influence, is bound by Eastern traditions. As Desai's title implies, the novel is divided into two parts. At the heart of Part One, set in India, is Uma, the eldest of three children, the overprotected daughter who finds herself starved for a life. Plain, myopic and perhaps dim, Uma gives up school and marriage, finding herself in her 40s looking after her demanding if well-meaning parents. Uma's younger, prettier sister marries quickly to escape the same fate, but seems dissatisfied. Although the family is "quite capable of putting on a progressive, Westernized front," it's clear that privileges are still reserved for boys. When her brother, Arun, is born, Uma is expected to abandon her education at the convent school to take care of him. It is Arun, the ostensibly privileged son, smothered by his father's expectations, who is the focus of the second part of the novel. The summer after his freshman year at the University of Massachusetts, Arun stays with the Pattons, an only-too-recognizable American family. While Desai paints a nuanced and delicate portrait of Uma's family, here the writer broadens her brush strokes, starkly contrasting the Pattons' surfeit of food and material comforts with the domestic routine of the Indian household. Indeed, Desai is so adept at portraying Americans through Indian eyes that the Pattons remain as inscrutable to the reader as they are to Arun. But Arun himself, as he picks his way through a minefield of puzzling American customs, becomes a more sympathetic character, and his final act in the novel suggests both how far he has come and how much he has lost. Although Desai takes a risk in shifting from the endearing Uma to Arun, she has much to say in this graceful, supple novel about the inability of the families in either culture to nurture their children. (Jan.)

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