

**Research Article**

**Subversion and Beyond: Celebrating Life against the Odds of  
Uncertainty, Oppression, Indifference, Incompletion and / or  
Failure —A Postmodernist Critique of Anita Desai’s “Fasting,  
Feasting”**

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**Abstract**

The paper attempts to visualize the theoretical foregrounding for postmodernist discourse including the evolution of postmodernist protagonist especially with reference to the postmodernist woman protagonist. Simultaneously it attempts to grasp the implications of being postmodernist protagonist and secondly that of being postmodernist woman protagonist. Thirdly, the paper makes it a point to establish that emergence of postmodernist woman protagonist is coming of age for the Indian English Woman Novelists. As a case in point, the paper attempts to evaluate Anita Desai’s “Fasting, Feasting” with a view to comprehending how postmodernism goes beyond subversion and experience the not-so-explainable life. Accordingly, the paper takes parameters of narrative strategy including splintered and/or fragmented narrative undertaken by Anita Desai in her “Fasting and Feasting.” The paper concludes with validating the not-so- explicit conclusion of the novel, while celebrating indeterminacy and uncertainty that continue to hog over a postmodernist narrative which could function to approximate Life in all its contradictions and nuances.

**Keywords:** Postmodernist Woman Protagonist; Uncertainty and Indeterminacy; Subversion; Inclusivity .

“Clearly, then, the time has come to theorize the term [postmodernism],  
if not to define it, before it fades from awkward neologism to derelict cliché  
without ever attaining to the dignity of a cultural concept.”

--Ihab Hassan in "Pluralism in Postmodern Perspective" (1986).

The Indian English Novel, having commenced its journey in the pre-Independent India, in a few years of time, has evidenced mature creativity and social responsibility. Accordingly, the Indian English Novel by 1930’s could showcase an author, like, Mulk Raj Anand and his masterpiece, *Untouchable*, and two other members of the trio, Raja Rao and RK Narayan who with equal artistry and commitment laid firm foundation for the Indian English Novel rooting it into authenticity and genuine artistic reflection of Indian ethos. In fact the success model of the men-novelists has been carried forwarded, perhaps with greater alacrity by the women-novelists of Indian English Literature in general and specifically by the women novelists, like, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Shobha De, Arundhati Roy and Kiran Desai and the ilk.

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In the process, the Indian English Novel has sustained in its evolution and thereby also has sustained its appeal while striking a proper balance between Indian Philosophy and Western Philosophy. This wonderful accomplishment—the feat of Indian English Novel, striking a balance and or remaining as a bridge between the East and the West—reflects the agility of the Indian English Novel. In the same spirit, among the various genres, Indian English Novel, has risen to the expectations and has undergone the contemporary philosophical outlook and/or philosophy and has expressed itself in the veins of Realism, Modernism and Postmodernism, successively. Definitely, the emergence of the postmodernist woman protagonist in Indian English Novel reflects the democratic and progressive spirit of the Indian English Novel.

Coming in the vein of postmodernist discourse, Anita Desai's "Fasting, Feasting" projects a seemingly passive woman postmodernist in the person of Uma. Though Uma's life is overpowered by silence, marginalization, and inward resistance, the character effects an overt rebellion. While keeping up with the postmodernist concerns, Desai moves away from grand feminist assertions. However, the postmodernist discourse focuses on the fragmented inner life of a woman trapped within rigid patriarchal and familial structures but with a relief of self-assertion, though appearing not-to-be-so, which emerges at the end, typically in a postmodernist manner.

Before exploring how the accomplishment of the portrayal of the postmodernist woman protagonist of the novel, "Fasting, Feasting," Uma has been realized, it will be apt to foreground the significance of the postmodernist approach to represent life. Accordingly, it is put forward by Linda Hutcheon in her seminal work, "A Poetics of Postmodernism," informing that postmodernism posits itself beyond "negativized rhetoric": "It is usually accompanied by a grand flourish of negativized rhetoric: we hear of discontinuity, disruption, dislocation, decentring, indeterminacy, and antitotalization. What all of these words literally do (precisely by their disavowing prefixes—dis, de, in, anti) is incorporate that which they aim to contest—as does, I suppose, the term postmodernism itself." (p.3)

In a way, Anita Desai's "Fasting, Feasting" reflects what Linda Hutcheon states, and thereby "incorporates" how the "rebel" woman protagonist of the novel, Uma, celebrates her life being situated amidst in all its oddity and also being situated against odds. Accordingly the discourse of the novel is replete with Splintered Narrative Structure, Defying Structural Binaries, Human Body and Life as Site for Postmodernist Fluidity of Certainties, Privileging Absence over Presence etc.

This paper makes an attempt to evaluate the Postmodernist Woman Protagonist of the Novel, Uma's struggle to live her life not exactly to arrive at any defined meaning of and success in Life but in a way to put up with and/ or fight with vagaries of Life, needless to state without accomplishing a defined resolution for all the denials that have been routinely given to her by the patriarchal and bourgeoisie combine of Indian society. Understandably, the "denials" include normal childhood, youthful aspirations, marriage and sexuality and liberty and mobility and forced, though in a disguised manner, domestic servitude.

Anita Desai while delineating the seemingly indeterminacy that embodies the life of the woman protagonist of the novel echoes Lyotard's views on the indeterminacy that shrouds and glories in postmodernist discourse. What Lyotard states about the a postmodernist discourse as not being but becoming is worth recalling and in a way epitomizes the way of life of the characters of the novel including the Postmodernist Woman Protagonist of the novel:

"A postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher: the text he writes, the work he produces are not in principle governed by pre-established rules, and they cannot be judged according to a determining judgment, by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work. Those rules and categories are what the work of art itself is looking for." (pp 71-82)

Set against this background, an attempt is made to comprehend how the postmodernist discourse of the novel, "Fasting, Feasting" going beyond "subversion" and attempts to the contradictory and the not-so-contradictory forces and drives that monitor the life of the postmodernist protagonist of the novel, Uma. To realize this, the following theoretical parameters have been set.

### **I. Splintered and Broken Narrative of "Fasting, Feasting":**

As has been widely established, the narrative of "Fasting, Feasting" grows in non-linear and fragmented manner which aptly suits the essence of life and the life story of the protagonist as she doesn't seem to grow and progress in her life. The novel opening at showing the grown-up woman protagonist does show the not-so-grown up condition of her. Understandably the non-linear and fragmented narration does testify the postmodernist concerns of the novel.

Further the non-linear discourse of the novel complements the rhythm of life, read as, fasting, feasting that has been on in a timeless manner. While using the rhythm of life, perhaps a healthy rhythm of life—fasting, feasting—Anita Desai expectedly takes the implications of the title beyond the regular comprehension of it. In a way, Aruna's life reveals attempted forced fasting by the patriarchal culture and also it reveals Aruna's peculiar way of defying it in her own resistance which appears to border on eccentricity and triviality.

The stronghold of patriarchal culture nourished by the gender perceptions is well-represented by Anita Desai: "MamaandPapa. MamaPapa. PapaMama. It was hard to believe they had ever had separate existence that they had been separate entities and not MamaPaap in one breath." (p.5) In a similar manner, the stronghold of authoritarian parenting taking the guise of tradition and culture that strangles Aruna perhaps more and the other siblings at home is revelatory of the postmodernist anguish of the protagonist: "Mama said, 'In my day, girls in the family were not given sweets, nuts, good things to eat. If something special had been bought in the market, like sweets or nuts, it was given to the boys in the family.'" (p.6)

Thus the splintered and fragmented narrative of "Fasting, Feasting" is found to be divided into parts but in an uneven manner between India and America, narrating Aruna's life in India where perhaps the lack of resources reinforce fasting and Arun's life of America where, perhaps, abundance of resources cause feasting. In either case, the discourse of the novel points out that the forced and/or default fasting, feasting that symbolizes the two nations and the two leading characters do reflect a sense of incompleteness.

The tragedy of Uma's life is pivoted on static and repetitive life. Notwithstanding the detached manner of narration, perhaps as part of postmodernist discourse, Uma's life stands vindicated the forced fasting and foregoing the small pleasures of a child, adolescent, grown-up young lady. The other part of the novel, though not seem to be well-connected to the narrative, which perhaps can be taken as a narrative strategy equally vindicates his unfulfilled and incomplete life in spite of the possible feasting because of the abundance that surrounds him in America. In a nutshell the obvious fragmentation and the parallel narrations reflect Jean-Francois Lyotard's concept of "incredulity toward metanarratives."

### **II. Deconstruction of Binary Oppositions as a Means of Narration of "Fasting, Feasting":**

One of the characteristics of the postmodernist discourse is deconstructing the taken-for-granted effect of binaries that control and balance a literary text. Some of the established binaries, like, "East-West," "Man-Woman" "Perpetrator- Victim" and "Tradition - Modernity" are conspicuously present in the discourse of "Fasting, Feasting." However, typical of the postmodernist discourse the binaries are destabilized and their tenacity is questioned by Anita Desai. The supposed binary of East-West collapses with their shared pitfalls and failures in the novel as represented through the characters, like, Aruna and Arun, representing India and America. Similarly and perhaps more interestingly, the Perpetrator-Victim binary, represented

though not in a blatant manner, as Aruna's Parents, "MamaPapa" and Aruna herself. The very much evidenced aspect is "the MamaPapa" would find themselves equally incomplete and unfulfilled notwithstanding their domineering and subduing behavior towards their daughter, Aruna. Anyway, it must be clarified that the binaries are subtle and yet times acute in their functioning and the same is the case with the present discourse:

"Arriving home, however, he sprang out of the car, raced into the house and shouted the news to whoever was there to hear. Servants, elderly relatives, all gathered at the door, and then saw the most astounding sight of their lives - Papa, in his elation, leaping over three chairs in the hall, one after the other, like a boy playing leap-frog, his arms flung up in the air and his hair flying. 'A boy!' he screamed, 'a bo-oy! Arun, Arun at last!' It turned out that when a second daughter had been born, the name Arun had already been chosen in anticipation of a son. It had had to be changed, in disappointment, to Aruna. Uma and Aruna, in the portico, looking in, drew together, awe-struck. Uma never overcame her awe of that extraordinary event, really far have started a lifetime of bridling, of determined self-assertion more memorable than the birth itself." (p.118)

However, Anita Desai effectively questions the efficacy one permanently prevailing over the other, read as, "the MamaPapa" over Aruna. The novelist, while deconstructing various binary constructions, namely, 'Parents over Children and/or Patriarchal Domination over Children's Liberty' including Fasting over Feasting, makes it a point to prove the inherent weaknesses of these binary forces and the consequent efficacy of the same.

### **III. Human Body as a Site for Validating Postmodernist Uncertainties:**

As the title of the novel reinforces, "Fasting, Feasting" in the first place refers to human body and the supposedly healthy rhythm of fasting and feasting in taking food in a monitored manner. But figuratively speaking, the "Fasting, Feasting" transcend the hunger for food but refer to other hunger including sexual pleasures and hunger for identity and for self-fulfillment which are routinely denied to Aruna and the women like her. In the novel, two women characters are found to be "disciplined and fragmented", Aruna and Melanie, through denial, silence and domestic labor and bulimia and consumption, respectively. In a way, the predicament of Aruna and Melanie have overtones of what Judith Butler states in her famous gender-theory book, "Bodies that Matter" wherein she argues and proves that bodies and the desires thereof are constructed and monitored culturally.

ist theory (Judith Butler) views the body as constructed rather than natural, shaped by power relations. Eating and fasting function as discourses of control, not biological necessity.

### **IV. Absence over ( the Explicit) Presence**

As is well-known, postmodern discourse privileges absence over presence. Hence the missing and / or absence of 'childhood' 'identity,' 'love and sexuality' and 'sense of individuality and independence' in Aruna's life validate the postmodernist discourse of the novel. Anita Desai while not all being vocal in representing these missing essentials of human life in the life of Aruna strengthen her postmodernist discourse through subtleties. While this could be a narrative strategy but more importantly the same could be vocal effect of silence and absence. In fact Uma never seems to have comprehended what has been denied to her. Anita Desai makes Uma character realistic with Uma's not-so-explicit comprehension and realization. Perhaps the silent resistance, which happens in a natural way, is the only possible means for a person like Uma or for many in the same predicament. To put it precisely, protest and/or subversion need not be planned and/or tutored to the 'victim.' Perhaps life has its own way of balancing though in a bizarre way. Maybe the balancing and checking would not have explicit cathartic effect. Thus Anita Desai profoundly exploits the postmodernist discourse to reflect the subversion and subtleties in human life.

### **V. Postmodernist Woman Protagonist as "Anti-Heroic and Subjective" :**

The postmodernist woman protagonist of the novel, "Fasting, Feasting" is honed deliberately to be if not un-heroic but definitely anti-heroic wherein virtues do not glory but wherein subjectivity glories. As has been hinted there is no explicit regular growth and evolution of character on the part of Aruna which make her postmodernist. In fact in her life there is no arrival to any satisfactory end and/or realization. To reiterate, while this tendency is postmodernist in spirit, in life also in many cases there may not be no neat resolutions. Hence Anita Desai's portrayal of Aruna testifies the same while not really and completely abandoning incompleteness and uncertainty.

**Consolidation:**

The postmodernist discourse of Anita Desai in "Fasting, Feasting" is profound with all its subtleties which are richly and really revelatory. The novel marks a turn in the portrayal of the Indian Woman while presenting a protagonist like, Aruna, who is found to be silent, non-assertive but discerning in her own way, set against all odds. Thus the novel serves the cause of the Complexity and Incompletion of Life. While taking all the precautions, Anita Desai portrays a protagonist who finds herself subversive, though not-so-explicitly but at the same time not arriving at any resolution which in fact is essence of Life with all its uncertainties.

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