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## EDIBLE BODIES IN ANITA DESAI'S *FASTING, FEASTING*

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### Abstract

This article examines moments of consumption in Anita Desai's fiction and seeks to establish a connection between eating practices and the narrative construction of diasporic subjectivity. *Fasting, Feasting* in particular harnesses images of food and flesh to explore and extend the boundaries of possible affinity between subjects and to negotiate alterity in a foreign land. Frequently theorised as a marker of identity, food is constitutive to the formation of the self in diasporic studies.<sup>1</sup> Eating delineates cultural differences and signals belonging to different human groups.<sup>2</sup> But eating also generates moments of productive tension in the novel. Eating implicates human bodies in a process of exchange with the nonhuman world, and thinking about the way animals figure in texts that focalise eating will therefore open up new ways of thinking about the role of consumption in configuring self and other. The animal figure is pivotal in literary representations of alterity, and this combined interest in animals, bodies, and food hence allows for a critical reading of how food and flesh contribute to the way diasporic subjectivity is developed in the novel.<sup>3</sup>

**Key Words:** animal studies, food, consumption, body theory, postcolonialism, alterity, diaspora.

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### Food and the Animal Body

Food plays a crucial role in narrative constructions of belonging and negotiations of alterity in postcolonial and diasporic studies, and scholars interested in consumption practices therefore tend to highlight human relationships in these texts.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, Angelia Poon, Ludmila Volná and Dimple Godiwala's critical responses to Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting* all focus on her use of eating practices as a narrative device for examining gender relations and asymmetries of power.<sup>5</sup> Yet the way Desai regularly brings the narrative to a halt, pausing the progression of the human-driven plot to scrutinise people's thinking about animals and subvert expectations about literary representations of nonhuman life, suggests that these moments of human-nonhuman interaction merit further analysis. Direct human-animal contact is rare in the novel, but Desai's language and imagery recurrently draw attention to the way acts of consumption enable an investigation of the discursive limits of the human. A strictly human-oriented reading of the text is therefore quite limited; this essay will read food in conjunction with body theory, and hence advance a more critical way of thinking about consumption in relation to narrative configurations of alterity in postcolonial studies.

*Fasting, Feasting* explores intricate family relationships in a dual Indian-American setting. Outlining the upbringing and adult lives of two siblings, Uma, a spinster who leads a monotonous life caring for her aging and perpetually demanding parents, and Arun, her younger brother, who migrates to America to attend university, the novel revolves around food in both settings. In fact, the text sets up the centrality of consumption in articulating 'the distribution of power and its hierarchy' within its first few pages.<sup>6</sup> 'Women's subordination is locked into food', and the scene Volná calls the 'orange ceremony' immediately exposes asymmetries of power between the sexes, casting Mama as an 'instrument' of the patriarchy.<sup>7</sup> Volná's arguments about how food practices denote power relations and function to delineate cultural difference certainly hold up, but her focus on human relationships

also imposes strict limitations on the narrative potential of food in the novel. Studying dietary habits necessarily involves attention to the role of animals in shaping human relationships, and my approach to the novel will therefore enable a broader critical investigation of how difference and belonging are configured in relation to consumption in a cross-cultural framework.

In *Racial Indigestion*, a critical text that examines representations of subaltern bodies in American food writing, Kyla Wazana Tompkins theorises consumption as ‘a flexible and circular relation’ in which ‘reader and text, self and other, animal and human [...] recognize our bodies as vulnerable to each other in ways that are [...] politically productive’.<sup>8</sup> It is this concern with ‘circulation’ between human and nonhuman worlds that makes *Racial Indigestion* such a useful starting point for my analysis, as the text’s language allows for a productive slippage between human and nonhuman – a slippage that is very much in tension with traditional food studies approaches, and that demands attention to issues that animal studies raises in a postcolonial framework.<sup>9</sup> By reading animals as food, I will ‘render discursive two kinds of matter towards which so much human appetitive energy is directed: food and flesh’, without being limited to an anthropocentric approach to consumption.<sup>10</sup> Anita Desai’s extensive body of work demonstrates recurrent aesthetic and thematic interest in the nonhuman, yet animals in her writings are consistently read as incidental presences, as symbols that only function to ‘reflect’ human ‘psychic states’<sup>11</sup> But animals are in fact central to *Fasting, Feasting*’s character development. They recurrently allow characters to think through difference, to re-evaluate their relationship with consumption, and to arrive at the possibility of a new articulation of their sense of self.

### **Consumption and (Non)Belonging**

Far from representing India as a space of cultural ‘purity’, the novel presents heterogeneous versions of Indian identity by cataloguing the vastly different consumption habits of Uma’s family members.<sup>12</sup> Epitomising traditional Hinduism, Mira-masi prepares her ‘vegetarian meal’ outdoors, ‘at a safe distance’ from the ‘mutton curries [...] that made [her] cover her mouth and nose [...] and choke’.<sup>13</sup> She takes pride in these dietary restrictions, dismissing her more liberal relatives as ‘meat-eating, polluted’ (63). Her sense of self is contingent upon these prescriptions against the consumption of animal flesh, and her food practices therefore emphasise her difference from Uma’s parents, who view her refusal to embrace the ‘benefits’ (32) of meat-eating as ‘old-fashioned’ (38).

Uma yearns for a sense of connection to her family, her culture, but she is ‘clumsy’, ‘frazzled’ (18), ‘undependable’, and incapable of performing any of the roles and duties expected of her (5). Even her attempts to participate in traditional Hindu rituals end in her nearly ‘drowning’ herself (43) or ‘polluting’ Mira-masi’s food (41). ‘Uneasily caught [...] between powerful forces pulling in different directions’ (58), her connection to her cultural milieu remains ‘unsteady’ (26). If she were ‘asked to paint a picture of heaven’, it would be a hybrid colonial utopia with ‘stalls all along one length of it, where ladies stood frying potato fritters, and selling toffees’, and ‘stalls all along the opposite length where girls [...] supervised games of chance’ like ‘guess-the-weight-of-the-plum-cake’ (128). Food figures prominently in the way the text configures belonging and alienation both in India and abroad, and indeed, in the brief moments Uma seems to be forming a connection with her cousin Ramu (51-2) or her mother, the possibility of closeness always emerges out of food: ‘Mama [...] tightens her hold on Uma’s hand as though she too finds the puri-alu comforting; it is a bond’ (155-6). When Arun arrives in the US to study, it is through consumption choices that he negotiates his relationship with his culture and his new environment.

Diasporic scholarship has long acknowledged the connection between food and cultural identification; dietary choices enable immigrants to either align themselves with or ‘distinguish themselves [...] from particular constructions of ethnic identity’.<sup>14</sup> Arun’s food choices in America certainly bespeak his ambivalence towards his cultural heritage. Refusing to eat traditional Indian cuisine ‘concoct[ed] over an illegal hot plate’ (172) by homesick immigrant students, he settles instead for a plain ‘cafeteria [...] sandwich’ (174) which he eats alone. He even ‘reject[s]’ the idea of being friends with a girl based on the way she ‘hungrily ate her way through packages and cartons full of food, bottles full of coloured liquids, rolls of candy and gum, then finished off with a very ripe banana or an almost rotten orange’ (170). ‘Every cell of his body’ is filled with ‘resistance to being included’; he establishes no connection with the other students, and he has ‘every intention of keeping it so’ (172). The narrator states that he has ‘no past, no family, and no country’ (172), stressing his desire for ‘independence’ and for ‘control over [his] own identity’.<sup>15</sup>

When his newfound freedom is foiled by a letter from India informing him that his living arrangements have been planned for him, Arun’s despair is made visible via images of ‘his family laying its hands upon him’, ‘making him swallow cod liver oil’, and ‘spooning food into him’, forcing him to ‘put his hand over his mouth’ to suppress his nausea (175). He is depicted here as a captive, a prisoner of his parents’ ‘plotting and planning’ (175). Unlike Uma, who is severely chastised for eating dinner at a restaurant and reprimanded for ever voicing her opinion, Arun seems to be given a great deal of personal freedom. But all the ‘opportunities’ (120) America offers him are imposed upon him forcibly, stifling his ability to make any decisions himself and preventing him from experiencing real growth and autonomy. Even the university he attends was chosen for him. When his acceptance letter arrived, Uma ‘searched’ her brother’s face ‘for an expression, of relief, of joy, doubt, fear, anything at all. But there was nothing’ (121). The years of ‘staying up night after night’ to study (119-20), ‘sunk into books’ (120), have left his face merely ‘blank’ at the prospect of going through another ‘phase of his existence arranged for him’ (121). Uma recognises in this look the same ‘expression’ with which he devoured the ‘several hundred comic books’ (122) into which he would disappear between the end of his daily lessons and the moment he ‘collapsed’ (119), exhausted. If the colourful ‘tales of adventure’ he consumed so voraciously brightened his existence, he did not show it; they only seemed to ‘drown’ in the ‘deep well of greyness that was his actual existence’ (122). No trace remained of the ‘crime, passion, daring’ they conveyed; all ‘evidence of colour’ had ‘sunk without a trace’ (122).

Arun is shocked that his family still seeks to control his life from thousands of miles away. This realisation disheartens him greatly: ‘he floundered, he sank’ (175).<sup>16</sup> Positioned as a stand-alone four-word paragraph, this line of text draws attention to itself. The futility of his attempts to resist his domineering family and carve out his own path are emphasised through the recurrent use of ‘sinking’ (175), establishing a continuity between his docility at home and his behaviour in America. Arun does go to stay with the all-American Patton family, as arranged. However, only a few pages later, on a trip to the supermarket with Mrs Patton, this ‘sinking’ feeling is echoed once more. The narrator here compares his pointless struggle to free himself from his family’s influence to that of live lobsters in a tank that ‘sank again, tragically’ (183). The word choice here suggests ‘connections’ between Arun and the lobsters – connections that Poon, Godiwala, and Volná, in their focus on human relationships in the narrative, seem to overlook.<sup>17</sup> There is an undeniable parallel drawn between their circumstances: both are trapped in a delimited space, unable to alter or escape the situation in which they find themselves. The narrator thus brings the relationship between narrative representations of human and nonhuman life to the foreground, suggesting that these syntactic and aesthetic links between separate moments in the text require further ‘critical scrutiny’.<sup>18</sup> Constructing parallels between human and animal actors through the repetition of the ‘sinking’ image, the narrator calls the possibility of an

unyielding divide between the two into question.

### Imagining Otherness

One night during his stay with the Patton family, Arun is woken up by a ‘clatter’ outside his bedroom window (189). Looking out, he spots ‘a forager standing beside [the barbecue], peeling the shreds of leftover meat from the implements that lie scattered about’ (189). The speaker initially provides no hints as to who this may be, but ‘the size, the bulk and the clothing’ signal that it is his host’s son, Rod Patton (188). Indeed, while the presence of the ‘luminous band’ worn by ‘jogg[ers]’ suggests that the figure is human, the rest of the description only functions to call this assumption into question (188). Rod’s stance, ‘legs apart’, as well as the fact that the narrator describes him ‘gnawing at whatever nourishment he can find’, generates an image of the boy that is more reminiscent of a scavenger animal than a human being (188). Portraying him in brutish and animalistic terms, the narrator stresses the aspects of his physique and behaviour that align him with the nonhuman world: he is described ‘prowling’ through the yard like a beast ‘in search of victuals’ (189).

Desai’s illustration of the figure wearing a ‘traditional mask’ (189) functions as an inversion of the previous portrait. When Arun looks out into the yard moments later and spots the ‘burglar’, it is described as a bipedal figure with ‘small gloved hands helping themselves to the contents of the garbage can’ (189). The reference to the two items of clothing the figure wears, paired with the fact that Arun initially believes it is ‘Rod [...] still prowling there’, seems to indicate that the ‘burglar’ is human (189). It is only when the narrator directly refers to the ‘white bar of fur across its face [which] gives it away in the intense dark’ that the reader can understand the narrator is describing a raccoon (189). Allison Carruth, who explores the ethical problem of representing animals in literature, suggests that making animals accessible to readers by extending human characteristics to them may encourage the ability to ‘imagine our bodies in terms of theirs’, but also makes it difficult to ‘represent [...] otherness’.<sup>19</sup> And indeed, the misleading portrayal of the raccoon undermines the reader’s ability to clearly differentiate the human from the nonhuman. By framing the images of Rod and the raccoon in parallel terms and using similar visual cues in each description, the text disrupts simplistic self-other dichotomies and pushes the reader to question assumptions about the human-animal difference. *Fasting, Feasting* thus destabilises hierarchical configurations of the human-nonhuman relationship.

In his examination of uses of animal symbolism in various cultures and their effects on human-animal relations, Roy Willis concedes that ‘all human cultures, including our own’, share a conceptual framework for negotiating difference: ‘these questions are all framed in the same way, along opposed but complementary axes of continuity and difference’.<sup>20</sup> He argues that this same type of ‘coexistent unity and duality’ can be seen articulated in philosophers’ and anthropologists’ attempts to focalise ‘the boundary between human and nonhuman’ throughout history.<sup>21</sup> The novel certainly presents readers with a ‘conception of humankind as being *both* part of, continuous with, the world of nonhuman nature, *and* separate from it’, but it does not frame this simultaneous connection and disconnection as a ‘logical contradiction’, as Willis does.<sup>22</sup> Tensions between similarity and difference are sustained throughout the text’s representation of human and animal bodies, and although they are never resolved, it is through these tensions that relationships with consumption can be re-evaluated. When Arun catches Melanie purging into the toilet bowl, for example, he ‘frighten[s]’ her, and she likewise scares him: ‘the dark rings under her eyes make her resemble the raccoon at the garbage can – but frighteningly, not comically’ (189). Her body is ‘white as the flesh of a fish fillet in the supermarket’ – the link Arun’s mind makes here between food and flesh troubles him, and his thoughts return to it recurrently (189).

### **Food vs. Flesh**

Throughout the novel, acts of consumption coincide with heavy reliance on nonhuman imagery, generating moments of tension in which the narrator stresses Arun's discomfort. Since 'Part Two' of the novel is filtered through his perspective, the representations of food in this section are inextricable from the way Arun conceives of consumption practices. The detailed list of different kinds of foods available, for example, paints an image of the typical American grocery store as an overwhelming place. While it must be acknowledged that Arun's status as a foreigner, a young man who has just arrived in the US, undeniably contributes to his feeling of discomfort in the 'clean, bright, gleaming' supermarket, the narrator's manipulation of syntax, foregrounding the 'tragic' way animal bodies have been displayed for human consumption, makes it impossible for the reader not to feel uneasy (185).

Upon discovering her houseguest is vegetarian, Mrs Patton, a docile woman who always aims to please, enthusiastically decides she too 'hate[s] eating meat' (179), so she consciously 'avoid[s]' the meat section of the store and 'instead' moves Arun towards the 'pasta, beans and lentils' (183). Despite the fact that she would prefer not to look at 'that red, raw stuff', the narrator makes it a point to paint the reader a vivid picture of the store's meat displays:

they wheeled the cart around and avoided walking past the freezers where meat lay streaming 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 (183).

In stating that the two shoppers intentionally move away from the meat section without laying eyes on it, and then walking the reader through this section and describing everything in great detail anyway, the text seems to insist on the importance of acknowledging what they ignored. But the melodramatic tone the semi-omniscient narrator adopts here also infers how Mrs Patton would perceive the meat displays – 'tragic', unappetising, 'streaming' with blood – while the vegetarian section of the store appears 'harmless' in her eyes: the produce there is described as 'dry', 'odour-free', and always packaged 'with kindergarten attractiveness' (183). The word choice here suggests that the narrator is being ironic: he is critiquing the shallow logic of 'good versus evil' that these vegetarian food options are invested in, while at the same time gently satirising Mrs Patton's misguided compassion for the lobsters' fate. It is her own perception of their suffering that she projects onto the 'helpless' animals (183). The sarcastic tone here highlights the epistemological error she commits in anthropomorphising animals, in ascribing to them human psychological states that are incommensurable with their cognitive processes and their experiences, and that are completely unknowable to her in the first place. Though Mrs Patton's views on the ethical problem of eating seem admirable at first glance – since they are motivated by compassion and responsiveness to perceived suffering – they are also fundamentally flawed because they refuse to acknowledge or engage with the more complicated aspects of human-animal relations with which Arun visibly struggles.

The narrator emphasises the notion that all of this food used to be living flesh, reinforcing this idea via the mention of 'rawness' and the presence of live lobsters (183). Descriptions of the fish's 'pale flesh [...] curled in opaque twists' (183) are strangely reminiscent of the bulimic Melanie's own 'naked' and 'discolor[ed]' body, 'kicking and struggling' on the bathroom floor (223). Though her 'thrash[ing]' arms (223) set her apart from the still bodies of the dead fish, the syntax makes it clear that the image of the young woman who 'vomits again, copiously' (224) triggers Arun's recollection of the crustaceans that 'sank again, tragically' (183). Arun is the only one present in both the supermarket and the bathroom scenes, and the narrator therefore relies on the adoption of his perspective to highlight

the simultaneous contrast and likeness between Melanie's and the aquatic creatures' bodies. Through its use of syntactic and aesthetic patterns, the text presents Arun imagining parallels between human and nonhuman bodies, while at the same time acknowledging their incommensurability. Carruth argues that 'compassion for animals' is contingent upon imagining affinity between fundamentally different bodies, and Arun is evidently capable of such imaginative leaps.<sup>23</sup> Clear connections are made between representations of life forms that are completely different from one another, and although the text seems to encourage the reader to see similarities between them, it also calls attention to the ontological distance between fish and human bodies. Human and nonhuman suffering appear to be placed side by side, but the tongue-in-cheek descriptions of Melanie, and the overly-dramatic language with which the sea creatures are introduced, force the reader to acknowledge that equating human and animal experience, while contextually relevant and imaginatively useful, is erroneous.

In fact, the motif of aquatic creatures recurs at key moments throughout *Fasting, Feasting*, and every time, it has a corresponding human counterpart. At the supermarket, the captive lobster functions to illuminate Arun's psychological state (183); in the Patton household, Melanie's body becomes a 'fish fillet' because it is being 'consumed' by her illness (189). The way these nonhuman bodies are described bespeaks their narrative role as important sites of contrast for negotiating the discursive limits of humanity. Desai's choice of foil, however, is curious: instead of selecting nonhuman species that more closely resemble human beings, the author selects water-dwelling, cold-blooded, non-mammalian life forms that are clearly positioned as food, and only function to highlight the anatomical and biological distance between the human characters and their nonhuman foil.<sup>24</sup> The lobsters' essential biological distance from humans, in addition to making it difficult for Arun and Mrs Patton to think their way into these animals' consciousness, is further complicated by the way their bodies are spatialised. Desai places them in a supermarket setting – a space which polarises the human and nonhuman subjects within it, positioning the human as the 'eater', and the animal as the 'eaten'.<sup>25</sup> In this context, the animals cannot be seen as subjects or agents in themselves, but only as objects of human consumption. Unlike like the semi-anthropomorphised raccoon, the lobster is not elevated beyond its status as a nonhuman animal; it is in fact re-inscribed into its less-than-human status. The lobster or the fish occupy a fundamentally different status and function than the raccoon; consumption here elucidates the way the novel constructs difference and negotiates affinity between humans and animals.<sup>26</sup>

To Arun, the steak Mr Patton 'cuts and saws' appears 'not merely raw but living' (167). The 'slab of charred meat' on his plate is depicted as a still-living body part, as Arun sees it 'bleeding' and focuses on the elements of the setting that resonate with violence, like the 'dying' barbecue and the 'blood' on the grill: 'a stain, a wound in its heart' (167). The steak is thus reconfigured through consumption, presented as 'flesh', as part of a body, rather than simply as inert 'food'.<sup>27</sup> The ease with which the narrator is able to manipulate the status of the animal body in this scene illustrates the slipperiness surrounding edibility, and once again ties this narrative moment back to Arun's vision of Melanie's body resembling a 'fish fillet' (189). Undeniably, Arun's feeling of intense discomfort and non-belonging in America is directly associated with the way he sees food and eating in these unfamiliar settings.

### **Negotiating Alterity Through Consumption**

Unaccustomed to being in or near 'wild' spaces, Arun aligns the American outdoors with everything uncomfortable and alienating: he 'cannot help eyeing' the woods just beyond the Patton family backyard 'with the greatest suspicion', and 'wonders what animal life might lurk' there (221). It is at the 'swimming hole' that the extent of Melanie's illness becomes fully apparent to him, and the narrator

makes it clear that Arun's mind immediately creates an association between her eating disorder and the nonhuman environment in which he finds her (220). 'Parting bushes and vines', Arun arrives in 'a clearing amongst some poisonous-looking plants with evil dark heads and a rank odour. Melanie is there, lying on the ground' (223). Before the reader is even made aware of Melanie's presence, or of the fact that she has been purging, the narrator has already set up the wooded area in which she lies as 'menacing' (224). By projecting his feelings of horror and disgust about her problematic relationship to consumption onto the setting, the speaker is able to mediate and materialise the tension Arun feels. This projection of negative qualities becomes most obvious when the narrator states that 'it is not the strange green plants that give off that sour odor but her vomit' (223). The text here seems to acknowledge that the way natural landscapes are configured is more telling of Arun's internal state than anything else.

While he finds 'natural' spaces frightening, man-made spaces like the grocery store also 'unnerve' (183) him, 'presenting shapes impossible in the outside world' (184). These fruits and vegetables do not constitute food to him; he sees both the produce and the space in which he finds himself as 'plastic representation[s]', 'without taste, savour or nourishment' (185). Desai's brief reference to the letters that arrive from the treatment centre Melanie attends for her bulimia only reinforce the connection between eating and negotiating foreignness: 'she has helped bake cookies in the kitchen. She is making friends. [...] She can eat cereal, bread, butter, milk and boiled carrots' (226). The way these short staccato sentences are positioned one after the other hints at a sense of progression between them. Indeed, the narrator does introduce them as 'reports on her progress', thus framing the next few lines as accomplishments Melanie achieved gradually, over a period of time (227). Melanie's capacity to engage in normal social interactions by 'making friends' and to negotiate the space she inhabits by 'playing tennis' are presented as directly linked to her ability to 'bake cookies' and to consume food 'without throwing up' (227). The very order in which these bits of information are proffered implies a direct correlation between relationships with food, interactions with the other people, and the establishment of belonging in an alien environment.

In the same way, negotiating his own food choices in a foreign land and observing the consumption habits of other beings allow Arun to re-evaluate his thinking about America, and about his homeland. Whereas the raccoon he spots from his window feeds in a manner that is totally healthy and normal for a scavenger animal, Rod's obsessive working out (204) causes him to miss meals, thus forcing him to adopt the behaviour of a scavenging beast (188). His unusual eating habits prompt Arun to comment that 'one can't tell what is more dangerous in this country, the pursuit of health or of sickness' (205). Melanie's bulimia is equally presented as distinctly abnormal; no parallel is drawn between her eating habits and those of any animal, since her affliction is so distinctly human – this eating disorder is, after all, the 'emblematic disease of young women neglected emotionally'.<sup>28</sup> What Melanie eats does not satiate her hunger, and her 'seeming [...] feasting' only 'brings about starvation'.<sup>29</sup> Perhaps this is why she is compared to a 'fish fillet' by the narrator, to the body of a dead animal prepared for human consumption (189).

Volná qualifies the status of women in the novel as "'carcasses"-to-become', and the narrator likening Melanie to a dead fish certainly supports this interpretation.<sup>30</sup> Volná's essay acknowledges that Arun's experiences in the US force him to open his eyes to the 'unfavorable condition of women' both at home and abroad, to 'their suffering, and the necessity to act for their benefit'.<sup>31</sup> When he sees Melanie's 'struggling' body, 'lying in her own vomit', he is forced to acknowledge that 'this is no plastic mock-up, no cartoon representation such as he has been seeing all summer; this is real pain and real hunger' (224). In her 'hunger', he sees 'a resemblance to something he knows' – 'an enraged sister who, failing to express her outrage against neglect, against misunderstanding, against inattention,

merely spits and froths in ineffectual protest' (214). The narrator's use of imagery here makes an explicit link between Melanie's and Uma's mouths, and how their 'writhing' bodies (29) 'register resistance in unconscious yet symbolically telling ways'.<sup>32</sup> While Melanie 'vengefully' (214) gorges herself on junk food and then forces herself to expel the only things she consumes, Uma periodically throws what the narrator calls 'fits' (29) when the restrictions imposed upon her become overwhelming. Though these 'violent' (29) episodes in which she loses control of her body are probably descriptions of epileptic seizures, they coincide with moments of intense psychological distress, such as when Uma is withdrawn from school to care for her brother, or when her parents, who threw her a 'drab, cut-rate affair' of a wedding, orchestrate a 'splendid' one for her sister (101). Both women yearn to have their needs acknowledged by their indifferent families. Unable to vocalise this hunger and be heard, their psychological struggles manifest corporeally.

In the very last chapter, when Melanie is sent off for treatment after Mrs Patton discovers her 'face-down in the dirt' (223), America no longer seems as 'menacing' (224). 'Everything is normal again' (225), perhaps because Arun has by now spent enough time in this environment to become accustomed to it, or perhaps because he is finally able to leave the Patton family and return to the solitary, anonymous existence he so covets. Whatever the reason, the scene in which he gifts Mrs Patton the tea and shawl sent by his family aptly embody the way in which his thinking about the nonhuman world has changed over the course of the summer. When Mrs Patton accepts the shawl, 'an aroma arises from it, of another land: muddy, grassy, smoky, ashen. It swamps him, like a river, or a fire' (228). Here, it is not the foreign space of the US but rather his home country of India that is designated as an 'other land' and aligned with elements of the nonhuman environment such as 'mud' and 'grass' (228). Even though there seems to be a binary set up between the 'river' and the 'fire', these words are used in a parallel manner to simulate the visual of the aroma wafting around him (228). Fire and water are usually conceived of as diametrically opposed, but the text makes these two elements converge into one unified image. The tension within this imagery, the way in which each of its separate elements pull away from one another and then coincide momentarily to form a cohesive whole, mirrors Desai's treatment of the relationship between human and nonhuman life. More importantly, however, the tension in the imagery surrounding Arun offering Mrs Patton the shawl and tea signifies not a resolution, but rather a temporary pause, a moment of 'recognition' in the narrative.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, 'the novel ends on a suspended note' with Arun deciding to give away the tea and the shawl.<sup>34</sup>

These two specific items resonate with the colonial history of India, and Desai's choice to make him give them up to Mrs Patton thus embodies his conscious decision to leave behind some of his familial and cultural 'baggage' in order to move forward unencumbered. Although Arun acknowledges that for most of the summer, he 'craved' the food 'he had taken for granted' (185) back home, he still chooses to leave these familiar flavours and scents behind: he 'has no extra space' (226) in his luggage for these items, and chooses to negotiate his sense of belonging in the US without relying on familiar, comforting elements. Ironically, however, this scene can also be read as an analogy for the colonial tea trade, and Arun's decision to give Mrs Patton these items can therefore be interpreted in two ways. Certainly, in giving up these markers of South-Asian culture, Arun can either be trying to separate himself from his Indian identity, abandoning it in order to negotiate a completely new, perhaps hybridised one, or this gesture can be read as reproducing the actions of his colonised ancestors, thus directly aligning him with his Indian heritage. The novel ends without resolving the ambiguity in this scene, avoiding 'totalizing closure' and sustaining the tensions that emerged throughout the text by refusing to provide the reader with any unified sense of Arun's relationship to America, or to his homeland.<sup>35</sup> Though Poon claims that 'we have come full circle' in the narrative, Arun's perception

of the nonhuman environment, as well as his thinking about food practices, have been undeniably altered by his experiences in this foreign land.<sup>36</sup>

During this summer in the US, Arun found a new appreciation for ‘those meals cooked and placed before him whether he wanted them or not’ (185). His exposure to the Pattons’ food practices and to the problems and neuroses involved in the food choices they make, offer him a unique opportunity to re-evaluate his own relationship with food and with alterity. Punctuating acts of consumption with reflections on what constitutes appropriate human thinking about affinities with and differences from nonhuman life, the narrator raises important questions that remain unanswered when the narrative comes to an end. But this lack of closure is perhaps even more valuable than any resolution could have been; its open-endedness aptly embodies the idea that Arun’s sense of self and his relationship to his cultural heritage will ‘continue to be shaped’ by his experiences in the unfamiliar space of the new diaspora.<sup>37</sup> In resisting closure, Desai’s novel provides the postcolonial subject with narrative opportunities to continue re-evaluating his thinking about relationships with consumption. The text draws attention to the way in which discourses of belonging, on which postcolonial and diasporic studies rely so heavily, are already embedded, both thematically and aesthetically, in epistemologies of the human versus the nonhuman. In dismantling hierarchical conceptions of human relationships with animals and challenging clear-cut boundaries between ‘self’ and ‘other’, *Fasting, Feasting* calls for a new way of reading consumption in the context of postcolonialism and displacement, and enables an exploration of the way animals and food play a fundamental role in shaping human thinking about alterity.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983); Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo; Some Points of Agreement between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics* (New York: Norton, 1952).

<sup>2</sup> Anita Mannur, *Culinary Fictions: Food in South Asian Diasporic Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> Cary Wolfe, *Zoontologies: The Question of the Animal* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003); Kari Weil, *Thinking Animals: Why Animal Studies Now?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

<sup>4</sup> Bob Ashley, *Food and Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 2004), pp.71-2.

<sup>5</sup> Angelia Poon, ‘In a Transnational World: Exploring Gendered Subjectivity, Mobility and Consumption in Anita Desai’s *Fasting, Feasting*’ in *ARIEL*, 37:2 (2006), 33-48, (p.37); Ludmila Volná, ‘Anita Desai’s *Fasting, Feasting* and the Condition of Women’ in *Comparative Literature and Culture*, 7:3 (2005), 1-10, (p.8); Dimple Godiwala, ‘Postcolonial Desire: Mimicry, Hegemony, Hybridity’ in *Reconstructing Hybridity: Post-colonial Studies in Transition*, ed. by Joel Kuortti and Jopi Nyman (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), pp.59-79, (p.71).

<sup>6</sup> Volná, p.3.

<sup>7</sup> Tamar Heller and Patricia Moran, *Scenes of the Apple: Food and the Female Body in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-century Women's Writing* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2003), p. 8; Volná, p.3.

<sup>8</sup> Kyla Wazana Tompkins, *Racial Indigestion: Eating Bodies in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), p.3.

<sup>9</sup> Tompkins, p.3.

<sup>10</sup> Tompkins, p.2.

<sup>11</sup> Madhusudan Prasad, ‘Imagery in the Novels of Anita Desai: A Critical Study’ in *World Literature Today*, 58:3 (Summer 1984), 363-9, (p.368); Francine E. Krishna, ‘Anita Desai: Fire on the Mountain’ in *Indian Literature*, 25:5 (September-October 1982), 158-69, (p.166).

<sup>12</sup> Vijay Mishra, ‘The Diasporic Imaginary: Theorizing the Indian Diaspora’ in *Textual Practice*, 10:3 (1996), 421-47, (p.423).

<sup>13</sup> Anita Desai, *Fasting, Feasting* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1999), pp.38-40. All further references to this edition.

<sup>14</sup> Ashley, p.71.

<sup>15</sup> Ashley, pp.71-2.

<sup>16</sup> 'Flounder', in *Oxford Dictionaries: Definition of Flounder* (Oxford University Press, n.d.) <<http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/flounder>> [accessed 16 November 2013]. It might be a bit of a stretch to argue that Desai is making use of the dual meaning of 'flounder' to draw this parallelism between Arun and the sea creature, but it is useful to note that the word refers to both the action of 'struggl[ing] or stagger[ing] clumsily in mud or water' and to 'a small flatfish'.

<sup>17</sup> Poon, p.37; Godiwala, p.71.

<sup>18</sup> Poon, p.33.

<sup>19</sup> Allison Carruth, 'Compassion, Commodification, and *The Lives of Animals*', in *Postcolonial Ecologies: Literatures of the Environment*, ed. by Elizabeth M. DeLoughrey and George B. Handley (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp.200-13, (p.202).

<sup>20</sup> Willis, p.7.

<sup>21</sup> Willis, p.7.

<sup>22</sup> Willis, p.7.

<sup>23</sup> Carruth, p.202.

<sup>24</sup> Thomas Nagel, 'What Is it Like to Be a Bat?' in *The Philosophical Review* LXXXIII, 4 (October 1974), n.p. According to philosopher Thomas Nagel who, like Carruth, is interested in the limitations of human thinking about animals, the more distant the evolutionary relationship between the animal and the human, the more difficult it is to empathise with and to imagine oneself into the 'subjective [...] experience' of that being: 'the further down one travels down the phylogenetic tree, people gradually shed their faith that there is any experience there at all'. It is precisely for this reason that Nagel uses 'bats' in his essay, 'instead of wasps or flounders': 'after all, they are mammals, [...] more closely related to us than those other species', but they still 'present a range of activity and a sensory apparatus so different from ours' that they do present a challenge to human empathic capacities.

<sup>25</sup> Tompkins, p.2.

<sup>26</sup> J. M. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello* (New York: Viking, 2003), pp.31-38. Perhaps Desai is using this animal as a point of contrast for her human characters specifically because of how difficult it is to imagine any sort of affinity with such a creature. Indeed, in 'The Lives of Animals', in which J. M. Coetzee dramatises an ethical and philosophical debate concerning animal rights and the animal-human difference, the idea of the fish as a 'fundamentally alien form of life' is equally addressed. John Costello, the animal rights activist's son, states that fish is the perfect meal to accompany a talk about the unethical treatment of animals; 'the ambiguous fish' can slip by on the menu without making guests 'fret through the evening, dreaming of the pastrami sandwich or the cold drumstick they will gobble down when they get home'. Certainly, the fish is a life form that humans have a much more difficult time empathising with: it 'has a backbone but does not breathe air or suckle its young'. Because of its fundamental 'otherness', John believes its presence on the menu will not make people lose their appetite or feel guilty about consuming the animal flesh after having listened to a long, detailed speech about the unethical treatment of animals. The very fact that his anxiety is alleviated when he discovers 'he was right about the fish' bespeaks the fact that human thinking about animals is configured through polarised conceptions of likeness and difference. In both 'The Lives of Animals' and *Fasting, Feasting*, this fundamental difference is articulated through the context of consumption.

<sup>27</sup> Tompkins, p.2.

<sup>28</sup> Volná, p.8.

<sup>29</sup> Volná, p.8.

<sup>30</sup> Volná, p.8.

<sup>31</sup> Volná, p.8.

<sup>32</sup> Poon, p.36.

<sup>33</sup> Volná, p.10.

<sup>34</sup> Poon, p.46.

<sup>35</sup> Poon, p.46.

<sup>36</sup> Poon, p.46.

<sup>37</sup> Mishra, p.422.

\*Cover Image is a drawing by Rebecca Garner. Thumbnail is a photograph by Vedis Ronald entitled "Animal Feasting"

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### **Biography**

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