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Ludmila Volná,
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Abstract: In her article "Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting* and the Condition of Women" Ludmila Volná presents a critical culture-based reading of Desai's novel *Fasting, Feasting*, a work that deals with the condition of women (not only) in India. Volná analyzes both female and the male sensitivities in the novel where Desai makes use of a double symbolic of food expressed throughout the novel by (not only literal) hunger. In Volná's view, Desai's Hindu imagery of sun/fire as patriarchal power and water, which, as the counterpart of the sun and fire, represents recognition of women's condition and a possible way to liberation represent crucial aspects of the novel. Volná analyzes the metaphorical voyage towards progress of the Indian Hindu girl/woman Uma, the main character of the novel, with respect to sun/fire milestones, as well as those of water and as related to persons who accompany her. As Volná argues, Uma at the end achieves recognition of her condition although not full liberation. Further, a parallel pilgrimage of Arun, also through the countryside of sun, fire, and water, is analyzed through Arun's recognition of the suffering of both American women/girls and of his sister Uma. Volná concludes that it is only through the synthesis of both female and male recognition and effort can women be released from the oppressive conditions of patriarchy.

Ludmila VOLNÁ

Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting* and the Condition of Women

Anita Desai is recognized as the first Indian author writing in English who addresses feminist themes seriously, focusing on the condition of women in India. Unlike Nayantara Sahgal and Kamala Markandeya, for example, who respond primarily to the external social and political circumstances of their female characters, Desai concentrates on the exploration of the psychological condition of the oppressed heroines (see Narayan and Mee 227) who, at first, are entirely passive (see Kirpal 65, 72). Bipin Panigrahi characterizes aptly the conflict of Desai's characters as one "between reason and instinct, the will and reality, involvement and detachment" (73). The mastery of this insight can be observed, for example, in her novels *Fire on the Mountain* (1977), *Clear Light of Day* (1980), or *Cry, the Peacock* (1980). Nevertheless, the 1980s see Desai's shift of interest from the female towards the male protagonists which carry with them themes classified traditionally rather as male-related, such as trade, raw deals, and mercenary motives of *In Custody* (1984), or, a big city, the clash of cultures, and the social bias as in *Baumgartner's Bombay* (1988) (see Lal 279-83).

Fasting, Feasting (2000), so far Desai's latest novel, is, above all, a work whose main concern is the condition of women in India and is related to women in general. To deal with the situation of women in India, however, it is impossible to stay simply with what is termed "feminism" in the Western sense. First, as Vrinda Nabar argues in her book *Caste as Woman*, "feminism hasn't even begun in any real sense in India" (Nabar 6), although what can be called the women's movement with its varying phases dates back roughly to the early nineteenth century. The Indian cultural and social setting is different from the West and Nabar explores the social and historical contexts of Indian cultural tradition, because, what is peculiar to India, is "the extent of the insistence on such discrimination, the preference given to boys over girls as being historically and traditionally prescribed and therefore indisputable" (Nabar 68). It is therefore necessary to "discredit some of the legacies of the tradition" both in the social consciousness and in the collective unconscious, to adopt a different (from the West) set of paradigms before any consciousness-raising and a consequent reform could take place (see Nabar 20, 30, 34). Second, any relevant research concerning women should not depart from assumptions expressed by vague and simplistic notions such as "the third world women" or "Asian women." Such discourse, as Chandra Talpade Mohanty warns, would be Eurocentric and therefore based upon a paternalistic attitude and would create a "homogeneous notion of the oppression of women as a group" which would consider a specific group of women regardless of its ethnic, social, religious, and historical context (see Mohanty 214, 199, 212). *Fasting, Feasting* is a novel which attempts to interconnect its two parts in one work and this aspiration can be called conveniently called "through difference to androgyny" (a phrase that would certainly please Virginia Woolf). The "difference" from which Desai departs is this: the first part is told as perceived by Uma, a female protagonist, and, characteristically, its prevalent setting is a domestic environment. As such it is a representation of the "accumulation of unrecorded life" (Woolf 135). On the contrary, the main hero of the second part, Uma's brother Arun, is put into a "larger world," an emblematically masculine environment. In each part the respective sets of values and sensitivity associated with its main character can be observed. The "difference" is alluded to by Desai already in the title of her book: the words "fasting" and "feasting" can stand for the two parts of the novel respectively: the first is situated in India (the country of "fasting," which refers not only to the religious aspect, but also to an unwilling "fasting" of the many poor of the country) and the second in the United States (the country of "feasting," abundance). However, there is an apparent difference (another one) as concerns the nature of perception of the two main personages. The "fasting" and the "feasting" of the individual characters is relative and multiple at the same time as perceived by the main protagonists of each part respectively.

So Uma, an Indian girl and when grown up an unmarried Indian woman who lives in the household of her parents, is, as compared to others, the one who is most "fasting" in the novel, mainly with respect to the access to education and the free development of personality. Continu-

ously, as her awareness of her own hunger and suffering grows, she becomes sensitive also to the other characters' "feasting" (complete or partial) on power, freedom, and education. Her feelings are not paid any attention to within the family circle, at least not by her parents and "superiors" in the "fasting" part of the novel. It is only as Arun, the main protagonist of the second part, becomes aware of her suffering, he who himself, contrary to her, is (forced into) "feasting" as to education (and in the first part on the literal level, too), simply because he is a boy and he must receive "the best" in all respects, whether he wants it or not. Arun's understanding is not automatic and immediate and is a result of a long process of perception and observation in relation to his childhood memories. His progress matches that of Uma, which, however, is subjective and therefore much more complex and painful, and will be described in larger detail, and it is in this sense that androgyny in Desai's novel is achieved: "The normal and comfortable state of being is that when the two live in harmony together, spiritually co-operating. If one is a man, still the woman part of the brain must have effect; and a woman also must have intercourse with the man in her" (Woolf 147-48). As androgyny wants it, finally the minds of both siblings acquire unity, the same and new sense of reality which includes both the masculine and the feminine. *Fasting, Feasting*, is, nevertheless, above all a genuinely Indian novel. To understand this, the sophisticated pattern of the fabric of the novel, which determines the way the novel is built up around its main protagonists, must be disclosed. For this purpose it is necessary to work with structures which have been formed by the cultural tradition to which the novel belongs. The imageries of sun, fire, and water, which constitute important spheres of interest in Hindu mythology and cosmology, seem a very convenient strategy to use and become the most significant factors in my analysis. While in both parts a double imagery (fasting-feasting and the sun-fire-water) is present, through Uma's perception the representations of sun, fire, and water become more elaborate. Understandably so, as she is the one who herself personally must work her way out of the landscape composed of these elements. It is she who suffers by the sun and fire and makes use of the beneficial nature of water. On the other hand, from the point of view of fasting and feasting, Uma's pilgrimage is that of hunger; the items of food are used more significantly as markers of Arun's journey.

Food being of significant importance in Indian culture, ways of disposing it have been strictly prescribed since the time of Manu (a supposed ancient law-giver, between 200 BC and 200 AD) and food has been closely related to matters of ritual, hierarchy, and worship (see *Manu-smrti* 137, 246, 247, 251-53). Thus, the motives of food are favoured and often employed by Indian authors. They have been used, for example, in many a Hindi short story and novel, such as in *Oh Ram! These Children!* (*He Ram! Ye bacce!*) by Yaspal or Rajendra Yadav's *The Whole Sky* (*Sara akas*) (see Marková, "Motif of Food" 71, 79, 80) and appear in Indian works in English as well, e.g. in R.K. Narayan's *The Vendor of Sweets* and Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. Food in modern Indian literature is used to stress the importance of what the particular literary work is dealing with and is often associated with social problems (see Marková, "Motif of Food" 71, 72, 79-82). In *Fasting, Feasting* this is particularly apparent when it concerns the introductory passages of each part respectively, which deal with the distribution of power and its hierarchy. The novel introduces to us an Indian contemporary middle class urban Hindu (most probably Brahman) nuclear (not joint) family. These precisions are important because it is necessary to view each specific context with which we have to deal in its ethnic, social, religious, and historical perspective, especially so as it concerns the "Indian" society with its extremely varied and multiple features (see Mohanty 207, 211). The opening of the novel brings us into the middle of a domestic scene of the family, an environment that becomes representative of a hierarchy of power. The parents are on a garden swing, thinking over what they should have for tea. Their adult daughter Uma, who is packing a parcel for her brother, a shawl and tea, is summoned by her mother to tell the wish of the father to the cook. The pattern of the scene becomes a paradigm of the family hierarchy: its hardened features come out best in the description of the "orange ceremony." The patriarch on the top of the hierarchy pyramid, the one for whose enjoyment everything has to be arranged, does not even have to utter a word. The mother, a well-trained instrument of his power, reinforces the awareness of this power in the consciousness of the subject member by performing a ritual, which, for this purpose, has to be repeated regularly: "She taps Uma on the elbow. 'Orange,' she instructs

her. Uma can no longer pretend to be ignorant of Papa's needs, Papa's ways. After all, she has been serving them for some twenty years. She picks out the largest orange in the bowl and hands it to Mama who peels it in strips, then divides it into separate segments. Each segment is then peeled and freed of pips and threads till only the perfect globules of juice are left, and then passed, one by one to the edge of Papa's plate. ... Mama sits back. The ceremony is over. She has performed it. Everyone is satisfied" (23, 24).

The shape and colour of the orange as well as the frequent repetition of the "s" consonant at the beginning of the words in the passage -- such as serving, separate, strips, segments, sphinx, sits, satisfied, status -- indicate the first important symbol in the imagery of the work, which is the sun. In the Hindu inner world the sun is often perceived as a negative, even deadly power, annihilating and devouring the living (see Zimmer 60). Another group of words starting this time with the "p" consonant -- pass, picks, puts, pretend, peels, pith, pips, perfect, places, pursed, plate, pride, performed, Papa -- supporting thus what the passage tells us, indicates that this deadly power of the sun represents the patriarchy, its hierarchy, laws, structures, and operating principles. Only father is feasting on power as represented by the orange, neither the mother nor Uma have any access to the orange. As shown in the above quoted passage, the mother represents here the instrument of the patriarchal power, she is thus a part of the patriarchal structures, nevertheless just as an inferior agent; she is proud that at least pith, pips, and peels rest on her plate (whereas all the juicy parts have been absorbed by the father). Hence the circular structure of the family's patriarchy: PapaMama, MamaPapa. Everything departs from and comes back to Papa. The ritual acquires here almost a religious quality. Aptly so, because as concerns religious practice, the rituals are viewed to serve the same important purpose, that is to reassure the members to stay safely within the bonds of their religion, specifically, when after some time faith becomes subject to questioning and doubts. After twenty years of serving her parents, Uma is no longer willing to take part in the ceremony, but her "good knowledge" of the ritual (based on its habitualness) makes her finally submit to it ("she can no longer pretend to be ignorant"). This is the first confusion as concerns the ritual, to intrigue people to act on the false assumption, that is on that of "knowledge" of the habit without any need to think. Uma thus stays within the realm of "Papa's needs, Papa's ways." That "Papa's needs" are put together with "Papa's ways" indicates another confusion or false assumption, because although these are certainly "Papa's ways," at least this characterization refers again to the habitual nature of the ritual, while the performance has nothing to do with "Papa's needs." The third allusion to the deceptive ways of the rituals consists in the statement that "everyone is satisfied." Of course this is the greatest falsity of all. It is, however, in the interest of the fully satisfied to present the ritual as designed for everybody else to be satisfied as well.

In a remote part of the world an analogical introductory ritual is going on. This time it is an American patriarch who is presiding over the ceremony. It is a stifling hot American summer and the most important item of the ritual is fire. Here the preparation of a barbecue is described openly in religious terms and has its minister and also a congregation. It is an American setting viewed through Indian eyes therefore the image of the oppressive heat and sun has the same connotation as in the above described scene. The use of fire, which in terms of the Hindu cosmology symbolizes a religious offering, has a complementary function here, and for our purposes it indicates that the exercise of the patriarchal power has violent and deadly effects on the affected individuals. The members of the congregation, Mrs Patton, the "minister's" wife, and Arun, do not eat the sacrificial meat but they assist at the ceremonial presentation of it; for the time being they both remain safely within the power influence of patriarchal patterns. So Uma, her American counterpart Melanie, and other girls and women then find themselves in the oppressive environment of sun and fire where it is difficult to survive. Uma, taking care of her parents' household and having served them for many years, presents thus almost all the features of the Victorian archetype of angel in the house (see Gilbert and Gubar 17-27). Almost, because she is not married and as such she is in fact a monster and viewed as such. It is certainly not by chance that this imagery comes to mind because, as Maria Mies states, "in the family ideology of the educated Indian middle classes Brahmanic ideals were combined with puritan-Victorian ones" (Mies 89); the ideal of womanhood

issued from this combination is widely accepted even today. (Mies 121) Uma's behavior, however, comes, before all, very close to how a *pativrata* (the ideal Hindu wife) is supposed to act, almost again, because she stays unmarried. In India, more than in Western cultures, a woman lives for the sake of others, namely for the sake of her husband. Nabar mediates to us Brhaspati's (a law-giver, between 300-500 A.D.) definition of pativrata: "she is someone whose state of mind reflects that of her husband. She shares his distress, his delight, grows sickly and dresses unattractively in his absence, and dies when he does" (Nabar 43). Within the huge body of Hindu mythology numerous representations exist of women called by different names, but "in each myth, she plays the role of the loyal wife, unswerving in her devotion to her lord. She is meek, docile, trusting, faithful and forgiving. Even when spirited and brave, she adheres to the archetype: willing to go through fire and water, dishonor and disgrace for his sake" (Desai, "A Secret Connivance" 972). The goal and fulfillment of the woman's life is the marriage and the birth of (male) children: "Woman is created only to enable man to continue his species through sons and gods" (Mies 41). This is deeply rooted in the Hindu socio-religious code as fulfillment of a woman's *dharma* (duty, law) and has a direct impact on the perception of her future lives representations (see Kakar 56, 67; Mies 50). An unmarried (and subsequently childless) woman has even a lower status than a widow. An unmarried woman living in the house of her parents can be neither a *pativrata* nor an angel, do what she will, and so she is condemned to be a monstrous outcast. The description is fitting: Uma, visualized as blinking her myopic eyes behind the thick glasses, is not found attractive either by her family or by any of the possible suitors and husbands-to-be. When still at school she fails almost all the exams, grown up she is often reprimanded for being childish, slow, and "always sleeping" (*Fasting, Feasting* 101).

To understand fully the essence and significance of both Uma's and Arun's pilgrimage(s) we have to complete first the list of elements of which the landscape of their respective journeys is composed. We have already recognized the oppressive nature of sun and fire and their role as the representation of patriarchal order. This arrangement is static because it is convenient for the holders of power that the state of affairs remains as it is. In order to make the protagonists move and proceed, water as an element of transformation, or a change, perceived so by the Hindu imagery, and a counterpart to sun and fire is introduced. This Hindu perception of water will now necessitate a brief clarification before I proceed to a discussion on the function of water with respect to the respective journeys of Uma and Arun. The theme of water appears to be of primary importance within the huge body of Hindu cosmology. The body so complex that for the purposes of this work I can attempt to present just its several simplified features: water is pivotal in the conception of the changing Hindu universe and as such also for the perception of the enigma of Existence. The burning desire to understand this enigma, which is also called the enigma of Vishnu's Maya, can be fulfilled only to a certain extent, and even that is a result of an incessant striving. Many a Hindu myth presents such efforts of two cosmic pilgrims, the sages Narada and Markandeya (see Zimmer 27, 28, 35; Kakar 20, 21). Their respective pilgrimages consist in reaching the understanding of something which under usual circumstances is beyond the horizon of perception. As such they can be regarded as mythical predecessors of Uma and Arun. Through immersion in water, Narada and Markandeya were finally able to experience "a totally different aspect," "the other (or the reversed) side" of what they could not see before; this is mirrored by Arun's pilgrimage. Having been enabled to live the life as different individuals, they were "initiated into the unconscious side of their own being," recognized their own hidden but still existing desires and attitudes, which is, as we will see, representative of the pilgrimage of Uma. On their journeys the two mythical sages are, in a similar way as their novel counterparts, also accompanied by fire, sun, or heat especially in connection with the transformation of personality by means of water (see Zimmer 23-52).

Uma's pilgrimage, then, begins shortly after the birth of her brother Arun when she is in her early teens. "A son, a son," is heard everywhere in the house; when pronounced it can be confused with the sound of "sun." The atmosphere of the household is changing, Mama is proud to have fulfilled her life role by giving birth to a son, Papa is proud to have been able to produce, finally, a male offspring and lets Mama into the realm of patriarchal structures, although only as an

instrument as pointed out previously. MamaPapa do not allow Uma, who has previously been sent to a Catholic convent school, to continue her education and she, although not a good student, is an eager one and opposes fervently her parents' decision. Now that there is a son in the family, "there is no need" (a famous phrase of Papa) to waste money and education as such on girls which will be necessary to spend on the boy. Consequently, Uma feels she has to escape but she does not know yet exactly what for. It is the "secret chambers" of the inner world what Uma cherishes, for the outer world is dreary and grey. She is progressively introduced into the inner world of Hindu legends and tales by Mira-masi, an ardent worshipper of Shiva. Mira-masi's stories show the dual character of the woman's fate: one of the heroines is a victim, dies after having been abandoned by her husband; the other is a poetess, independent, struggling for recognition; in the meantime she is considered a madwoman (allusion to Mira-Bai, a legendary sixteenth-century's poetess and a Krishna's devotee known for her rebellious attitudes; see Marková, *Hrdinky Kámasútry* 90-96). With Mira-masi, Uma feels that she is "admitted into some sanctuary that had been previously closed to her" (42). The nuns at St. Mary's had not admitted her into their chapel, where she had always wanted to go. Now "she was counted in, a member, although of what, she could not say" (43). But there is then some progress for Uma; she realizes that it is necessary to search for a different reality than that defined by her parents, yet she does not know where to turn. In the company of Mira-masi she has a feeling that at least she receives a certain attention and recognition as a person. The inner world of contemplation of existence is open to her. The inner structures of her culture are revealed to her so that she can better understand how they work. Further on, in another escapist action she undertakes with Mira-masi when they go to an ashram as pilgrims, she is free enough to think. While Mira-masi carries on her worship duties, Uma wanders around, feeling she is caught between two forces pulling in different directions, the power of patriarchal education and tradition, and the urge to get free of it. There is a river there but is not easy to approach during the day because the sand is burning from the sun. But towards the evenings Uma can walk along the river and she becomes sure that she cannot turn to Mira-masi any more for guidance.

Uma stays unmarried but this does not mean that she is spared efforts to be married off, according to the custom of arranged marriages. She has to go a long and painful journey through this suntrap of the valley of marriage arrangements. To look at it more closely it will be useful first to follow how Desai compares Uma with the other two of her girl relatives. If Uma's sister Aruna is dismissed out of the sphere of patriarchal influence soon after the birth of Arun as "having started a lifetime of bridling, of determined self-assertion" (17) and everything then in her life including her marriage she carries on with "a kind of steely determination, a dogged ambitiousness, that seemed to be born of a desperation" (67), cousin Anamika, who manages to please everybody and is beautiful, meek, docile, and brilliant at school, becomes the true *pativrata* and the angel in the house. Actually, they are Uma's alter-egos or doubles; although in real life we could hardly imagine that Aruna's escape from the bonds of patriarchy would be so smooth and made possible only through her own determination, we can, however, accept it as an abstraction or a model. Inside the realm of patriarchy the angelic features of Anamika become more expressive compared to the other two girls or rather reversely: she is too perfect so that she is to be perceived, rather, as an archetypal *pativrata* and even more so in contrast to Uma whose outcast and monstrous characteristics become also just a construct. Anamika has thus also become a model and consequently her fate is carried on to its utmost because to remain a *pativrata* a woman has to go as far as her own destruction. After twenty-five years of abusive treatment and enclosure as total as is hard to imagine in the house of her husband she literally has to go through fire (she is burned to death by her husband and mother-in-law). During the funeral ceremonies exercised for her, "the sun is rapidly turning from a small white disc like a shell in the sand to a shimmering blur like a fire in full daylight" (155). And while Anamika is married off easily and rapidly, all efforts to marry the monster-girl Uma have to be stopped in the end. Poor Uma is not found beautiful by any of her suitors as if to show that the patriarchal order cannot support the "monstrosity" of "ugliness" in women. The importance which the "business" of marriage is dealt with in traditional Hindu culture makes it emblematic of the patriarchal order as such. Staying unmarried literally makes an outcast of Uma,

because "Hindu marriage is a sacrament -- for the husband one among many, but for the wife the only one through which she can acquire spiritual gains. ... If a grown up woman dies without this sacrament she roams about after her death as an evil spirit" (Mies 50). Nevertheless, for the time being and for Uma's sake, all this marriage-making ordeal has to stop as a similar one did for her mythical counterpart, also Uma, who carried on such a severe and long repentance to gain the heart of her husband that her mother had to stop her by exclaiming repeatedly "Oh, no!" ("U ma!") But does Uma's mother in the novel act in a similar way for her daughter's sake? If not, who does? Not in the interest of Uma, but because they are not willing to offer a third dowry, PapaMama or MamaPapa, these unified representatives of patriarchal order abandon any further marriage arrangements for Uma. She needs then another mother who would not be involved in the structures of patriarchy, not her mother in flesh. Such a spiritual mother would finally care for her needs and interests and we will see later on that there will be several such mothers. For the moment we can clearly distinguish the first of them as her literary mother Anita Desai who speaks up and says "Oh, no!" not only for Uma but for all the women oppressed by the law of patriarchy including the institution of marriage-making.

As the climax of Uma's journey is approaching it becomes more and more clear that what Desai considers in her novel as the worst patriarchal imposition on women is the enclosure in the sense of ignorance of "what is on the other side," the above mentioned kind of *purdah*. In Uma's case it is emblematic that she is, for one thing, suffering from an eye disease, and, for another, prevented to go and see an ophthalmologist. For the eyes are a primary means of getting to know, reading, studying, getting out of the bonds of ignorance (we also recall that she was prevented from continuing her school education). Uma's voyage towards the realization finally of "what is on the other side," which coincides with the recognition of the earlier unconscious side of her being with the still living desires and attitudes hidden in the secret chambers of her inner person, is enabled by the escapist contacts with people more or less not infected by the germs of patriarchy or cured of them. They are indeed escapist because, always opposed by PapaMama as they are, they take place usually either out of home, or at home (e.g., on the phone) when PapaMama are not present. Nevertheless, after the years of silence, as if in a sleep, Uma finally reaches the secret chambers of her internal world. Having experienced the contact with the nuns in the convent school and with Mira-masi she finds in the chamber of her own room in the patriarchal home, which is, however, not a room of her own, scattered verses of her other mother. The experience of having been invited to assist at minor charity affairs mediated further on by Mrs O'Henry and the nuns is the embodiment of this challenge and builds up the feelings of fulfillment and happiness for Uma. Appreciated and useful, "a member" of a community which works for someone's benefit, free from the patriarchal supervising of her parents Uma finds this experience comparable to that of the heavenly bliss. And now that same dark corner of Uma's inside, a very remote one, is occupied by the thoughts about a job, "a career." The offer of a job is finally made and the last necessary relevant explanations are furnished to Uma, but for all her overflowing eagerness to accept she has, nevertheless, to submit to MamaPapa's refusal. Obviously, the choice of the job messenger is not made by chance. That Desai entrusts it to Dr Dutt, who herself is an unmarried, educated Indian woman, has two aspects. First, this woman represents the most distinguished part of Uma's figurative collective mother who she constitutes together with the nuns, Mira-masi, Ella Wilcox, and Mrs O'Henry exactly because she embodies the "mother ideal," a "mother" who is a member of the same society and culture as Uma and who has been at the same time able to free herself of the bonds of its patriarchal structures. Besides that, it is interesting to note that in terms of the Hindu cosmology such a collective mother could be considered a justified representation of the life-sustaining aspect of the energy of Mother Goddess known through a number of identities and names (see Zimmer 26, 151, 211). Second, the presence of women like Dr Dutt and their role co-creates the basis for the discussion of the outcome of the "Indian" part of the novel. As to Uma herself, in spite of all her hunger or desires, she is not yet capable of grasping the opportunity because she is not allowed to. Participating in the funeral ceremonies of her "married" alter-ego Anamika, she feels as if she too were cold ashes as having gone through fire, sacrificed as Anamika has been for and by the rules of patriarchy. The concluding passage presenting first the

salutations and hymns to the sun culminates, however, with Uma pouring out of her jar "the murky water which catches the blaze of the sun and flashes fire" (156). Too much sun and fire remains here for any completely positive solution to be drawn.

The second part of the novel is presented as viewed by Arun and depicts Arun's figurative pilgrimage "to the other side." There is more relativization there. In a country of abundance, there is feasting, but there is also fasting; from what point of view, and for whom? Feasting is there, but it is superficial, because it is just the two male characters, the father and the son of the American family, who are "feasting" both literally on the "carcasses" of beef (viewed so by the vegetarian Arun) and metaphorically on the "carcasses"-to-become of their female family counterparts, exactly because the patriarchal order has deadly effects on women. On the other hand, the female characters are feasting only seemingly; the mother supplies the household with tons of food but she herself does not know what to eat, and nobody cares. Her daughter Melanie suffers from bulimia, the emblematic disease of young women neglected emotionally; seemingly she is feasting on peanuts and candy bars, which, in reality, brings about starvation (fasting). Arun himself, although receiving a first-class education, is starving because he has difficulties to adapt to the American "diet," both literal and metaphorical, the food and the American culture. Understandably, the account of Melanie's -- and her mother's -- condition is not systematic sufficiently to constitute as detailed a journey as is that of Uma because it is conveyed as perceived by Arun. It is, rather, Arun's own pilgrimage and progress which we are invited to follow as the introductory passage tells: "It is summer. Arun makes his way slowly through the abundant green of Edge Hill as if he were moving cautiously through massed waves of water under which unknown objects lurked. Greenness hangs, drips and sways from every branch and twig, and frond in the surging luxuriance of July. In such profusion, the houses seem as lost, as stranded, as they might have been when this was primeval forest" (159). First, Arun's journey, as we can see, is set into the landscape of the American summer the paralyzing effects of which are repeatedly mentioned in the novel and make it painfully palpable -- the sun is described as ripe, there is dizziness, sweat, and the hotness of the summer is almost unbearable. These representations of sun are soon to be accompanied by those of fire and so the basic items of the patriarchal background imagery have been assembled. "Arun makes his way slowly": it is with an immense sensitivity that Desai concentrates at the beginning of his journey and distinguishes between the acuteness of male perception of the inter-cultural bias and all its differences on the one hand (the most important emblems of the American culture as perceived by Arun are there, i.e., showy patriotism, relatively few people, cars and the urge to go as far as one can, jogging, advertisements, baseball matches, shopping and consumption), and Arun's dullness of groping his way through the tangle of interpersonal relationships on the other. Arun has to move cautiously because he meets objects about which he "knows nothing" as he makes his way as someone "venturing alone across the border" (160). He finds himself in an unknown area, where he has never been before and he can only find his way to the recognition of the unknown objects or "the other side" of the border by moving through the "masses of water." So the pilgrim Arun has to make a journey analogical to that of Uma. It is the journey towards recognition, but this recognition is and at the same time is not the same as that of Uma. It is the same because in both cases it is the recognition of the unfavorable condition of women, their suffering, and the necessity to act for their benefit. In this respect it can also be said that it is complementary. And the recognition cannot be exactly the same because Uma is affected directly as she is exposed to the mortifying effects of the patriarchal sun and, as we have seen, her pilgrimage is a journey towards the recognition of the inside. That is also why Desai, although using the same imagery of sun, fire, and water in both parts, changes its perspective with respect to Arun's view and makes the imagery of food in the second part more prominent than in the first.

Arun's pilgrimage approaches its climax when he finally recognizes Melanie's suffering and its cause. It is the recognition of the "other side," of the "object" so far unknown and as such it becomes almost a kind of enlightenment: "Then Arun does see a resemblance to something he knows: a resemblance to the contorted face of an enraged sister who, failing to express her outrage against neglect, against misunderstanding, against inattention to her unique and singular being and its hungers, merely spits and froths in ineffectual protest. How strange to encounter it

here, Arun thinks, where so much is given, where there is both licence and plenty. -- But what is plenty? What is not? Can one tell the difference?" (214). Nevertheless, neither he nor Mrs Patton, herself a victim incapable of resisting the paralysing effects of the beams of patriarchal sun, are capable of doing anything for Melanie until the three of them escape temporarily the oppressive heat of the family's males' presence. Then, at the pool, enlightenment and discovery finally start to work for Melanie's benefit. A cooperation of two complementary agents is necessary: Arun, although he is well aware of the real state of affairs and acknowledges the necessity to act, is "paralysed" as to action, he is unable to do anything himself. On the other hand, Arun's presence seems necessary for Mrs Patton to discover finally the destructive consequences of Melanie's condition. As mother she is capable to act, although she ignores the true character of her daughter's suffering. Later, when on the point of Arun's leaving the Pattons' house, emblems of patriarchal hierarchy from his parents arrive (packed by Uma), a packet of tea and a shawl "to keep him warm" through the winter, Arun's luggage is already packed. He decides not to take the presents with him; he has all he needs and he has no space for the additional weight of the "patriarchal baggage." Mrs Patton seems quiet, placated, it is with her that these emblems are to be left, it is where they belong. It is another component of Arun's recognition that even here, in the country of "the other side," the hierarchy of the patriarchal structures has not yet been overcome. Finally, the climax of Arun's pilgrimage together with the outcome of the first part of the novel (Uma's pilgrimage) tells us clearly that the possibilities of woman to escape the suffering in the bonds of patriarchy depend essentially both on recognition and action, i.e., the capability of taking an action. First, the recognition of her "inside chamber" is necessary for the woman to understand her condition (see Nabar 36). Her suffering must then be recognized by those who are around her and especially by those who would have capability (power) willingness to act for her benefit (as in the case of Melanie, who is not yet an adult woman and who has not yet acquired self-recognition). Uma, on the other hand, who has gone all the way of her pilgrimage to self-recognition, is an adult and therefore she can act for herself; yet perhaps the traditional bonds of the Indian family are too strong to severe the ties all of a sudden. Arun, who has reached the recognition of the womens' condition as "from across the border" from the "other side," can do something helpful, not for Melanie because his position in the US-American home does not allow him to, but certainly for Uma when he comes back (if he does) to India precisely because he is a male part of her family and because "the power and the potential to change being considered a male prerogative" (Nabar 61). Then the two complementary elements of female self-recognition and male capacity of action supported by the recognition of the "other side" may produce finally some desirable effects, in a similar way as the two parts of the novel, the female-centered part and that of the male perception, are complementary to each other.

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