

The Hunger of the Oversoul

Senior Paper

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For a Degree Bachelor of Arts with
A Major in Literature at
The University of North Carolina at Asheville
Spring 2006

By *Luanne Popkin*

Thesis Director Dr. Dee
James

Thesis Advisor
Dr. Merritt Moseley

"If I were a Bostonian," Charles Dickens quipped, "I think I would be a Transcendentalist" (Dickens quoted in Woodlief). Anita Desai, perhaps born out of her time, otherwise might be both, too, as demonstrated by her 1999 novel *Fasting, Feasting*. The book is divided in two parts, the first part is set in contemporary rural India, and the second part is set in contemporary suburban Massachusetts. The protagonist, Uma, is in the Indian setting. The American portion of the text, featuring her brother Arun, serves to reiterate and refine ideas presented in the Indian setting. It is no accident that the American setting is Massachusetts, the birth place of Transcendentalism. The author has interwoven in the novel philosophy reminiscent of Transcendentalism. There is very little critical discussion about this recent novel, but the critics who discuss Desai's other works and the critics of Indian post-colonial texts would fully expect their ideas to apply to this work. None of the critics cite Transcendentalism, so I am pleased to creatively apply the abstractions of a literary movement with a recent work. This recent work of literature is built on a long literary tradition, which includes Transcendentalism. Residing in Massachusetts, Western-educated Desai is undoubtedly familiar with Transcendentalist works. It makes sense that Desai would appreciate them for their similarities to her native Hinduism. It further follows that she would appreciate those works for their acknowledgment of equality and the individual's importance, a political concern in post-colonial India. The Transcendental-like statement in *Fasting, Feasting* is a durable and universal one, and the text derives richness from it. A brief overview of Transcendentalism will be useful in evaluating the text in this framework.

New England Transcendentalism was a movement of the early nineteenth century. By all accounts, it initially evolved from Unitarianism and Kantian philosophies. The

Unitarians believed in the immortality of the human soul. The Unitarians rejected the prevalent Calvinist predestination concept. They dissolved the notion of the Trinity and claimed that Jesus was merely a paragon of Godly virtue. Yet, Unitarians did not deny the miracles performed by Jesus. Some parishioners were unsatisfied by what seemed to them incoherent logic in the acceptance of the miracles but the rejection of the Son. Moreover, the church seemed to those who would later become Transcendentalists to be stagnating in ceremony without meaningful substance. Meanwhile, the ideas of both Locke and Kant were gaining ground. John Locke identified the senses as the only means of understanding the world, for the human mind, to Locke, is a blank slate to be filled by experience. His philosophy was based on empiricism. Some skeptics used his ideas to challenge the rationality of the miracles of Jesus and the traditional teachings. Consequently, there was a revival movement by those who sought to revitalize faith by evolving and utilizing the Kantian principles. Christianity, according to those leading the movement, had a history of befuddling the true meaning of the Divine message. This group, the Transcendentalists, thought, based on ideas evolved from Immanuel Kant, that the human mind was inherently spiritual. They valued the innocent child for his unfettered reason, untainted by the understanding of the world gained from tradition and empiricism. A child's mind, exemplary of the human mind, Transcendentalists said, was endowed with the capability of intuition by which it could comprehend divinity by virtue of its own reason. This act of intuition came from within the individual, in contrast to external revelation. Transcendentalists believed they were on a higher plane of existence due to their ability to do reason. They countered societal norms built on a foundation of empiricism with the ideas intuited by innate divine reason above and beyond the senses.

Instinctively the human mind believes in God, not merely because of ceremony or tradition, said Transcendentalists. Although the human mind does not need to use the five senses to make this connection, ample physical evidence abounds in nature as reinforcement. Transcendentalists perceived nature as faces of God. The world was God's symbolic revelation, so all things deserved the respect due to God. The notion that all things were created by God and expressions of God evolved into God's existence in all things (some of the inspiration for this concept was derived from ancient Hindu texts accessed by increased contact with India during this time period). Therefore, to achieve self-knowledge was to achieve divine comprehension. Intuition was performed by the individual as opposed to a revelation from God. Self-realization, then, was the key to happiness, and it required the reconciliation of the opposing forces of desire to unite with and withdraw from the world. Because divine essence was in all things, all things were united in one collective soul. Having achieved immortality and amorphousness through a collective, universal soul, Transcendentalists made historical time inconsequential. The power belonged to the moment, so predestination was invalidated. This placed equal importance on the individual's present circumstances and the afterlife. Life was not a chore to be tolerated in pious duty, but a magnification of God. Life's conclusion was not to be feared either, for God was to be found in death, as well, in unison with the immortal collective soul (Bowers 9-21).

Transcendentalists were concerned with developing a deep, personal relationship with God. This personal relationship with God was thought to communicate a divine revelation of God's word to an individual. Later the idea evolved into the presence of God within each individual and nature. Because all humans were said to be endowed with

this capability of reasoning and have the Divine dwelling within, all humans were equally entitled to freedom. The pursuit of wealth was contrary to the pursuit of holiness. Wealth was substance of the faulty, empirical world, so material simplicity was encouraged. Furthermore, property ownership was thought to create dependence, to hamper freedom, and to flout egalitarianism. Though not a political movement, Transcendentalism emerged and was supportive of equality during a politically charged time. It contrasted with other viewpoints that upheld inequity in society. Transcendentalism is chiefly considered a spiritual, philosophical, and literary movement. (Hochfield 35-51). The Transcendentalist movement was characterized by a particular combination of ideas, of which these are echoed in Desai's novel: appreciation of the child; reconciliation of embraced and rejected society; rejection of material wealth; spirituality as determined by one's own reason; denial of fate; and celebration of both life and death.

It is relevant that the novel portrays the protagonist's childhood and child-like mannerisms, for the child, in Transcendentalist philosophy, is most attuned to spiritual matters. Uma is the fidgety child who laughs at the monkeys and scratches her scabs (Desai, 61). Uma is the irresponsible young lady who ignores her parents' instructions and comes home drunk (Desai, 51). Uma, a grown woman, is the subject of her neighbor's comment, "'That Uma, still like a child of six. Won't she ever grow up, poor thing?'" (Desai, 74) Margery Sabin belongs to the group of critics who say the coming-of-age theme in Indian literature is an expression of the emerging Indian nation. The theme is representational of "a literature in whose unfamiliar reflections a nation slowly learns to recognize itself. Self-awareness, so formulated, goes beyond the personal to a more general and collective cultural goal; the writer's self-acquired culture should

ultimately serve the nation by confronting it with unfamiliar reflections of itself (Sabin). Other post-colonial critics take that analysis one step further and claim the childhood home is an exploration of the function of traditional values in contemporary India. National allegory is clear, says Burton, and the domestic setting of Desai's stories is linked to the greater political scheme. "Actively framed the 'domestic' discourses of the nationalism, imperialism, and feminism in these decades and thereby helped to guarantee the heightened archival value of house and home by making them evidence of both disappearing past and a promising 'progressive' future" (Burton 10). These critics distinguish characteristics of post-colonial literature. Still, the element of childhood also agrees with Transcendentalism, for it is the child who has the capacity to be the most profoundly in touch with the universe.

Dr. Paul Reuben, English professor at California State University Stanislaus, says that the resolution of conflicting feelings about society was a key for the Transcendentalists' study of the universe. "The belief that individual virtue and happiness depend upon self-realization - this depends upon the reconciliation of two universal psychological tendencies.. .a desire to embrace the whole world - to know and become one with the world; and the contracting or self-asserting tendency - the desire to withdraw, remain unique and separate - an egotistical existence" (Reuben). Uma represents the embracing tendency in that statement. Uma's imagination leads her to great heights of longing. She wants a deep connection with humanity. When she has free time she looks at her collected Christmas cards that fill her imagination as she "reads through the merry little jingles that make her smile: they are so loving and bright with goodwill and friendship" (Desai 98). She defies her parents to go to a coffee party with a missionary

woman because she insists that Mrs. O'Henry is her friend irrespective of her agenda (Desai 114). In addition to friendship, Uma wants passion. Uma reads poetry books bearing names such as *Poems of Pain*, *Poems of Cheer*, *the Kingdom of Love*, and *Poems of Pleasure* (Desai 136). These books illustrate that she wants deep feeling. Uma sits on the porch swing and sings a song from a film she once saw. "Tale, pale moonlight,' she sings to the flower in the cup of her hand" (Desai 100). One must infer from this passage that she is thinking about romantic love. Desai's critics say that protagonists in her novels follow a pattern of learning to compromise. Usha Bande says, "Anita Desai's characters can be classified in two distinctive groups—those who fail to adjust to the harsh realities of life and those who compromise" (Bande 15). Salgado holds with Bande, stating, "the overtly romantic rendition of her character's experience suggests that it is shaped by an aesthetic idealism that renders it immature and vacuous—the product of a highly romantic, self-serving imagination" (Salgado 105). Those analyses are excellent, but they suggest she is not entitled to her dreams. Moreover, Uma does, in fact, concede to the demands of society prior to her epiphany by following orders even when they seem distasteful to her. Though she fully expects to get married, she does not anticipate that marriage will provide romantic love. She has an idea of what love is, but her parents' example falls short of her idealism. "'Was *this* love?' Uma wondered disgustedly, 'Was *this* romance?'" (Desai 31) This idea of romance does not appear to Uma to provide the intimacy that derives from a human deep connection that she craves.

The latter of Dr. Reuben's two types, Arun, contracts from society. He tries to live a separate existence. Arun hides in his comic books to avoid family contact (Desai 95). He avoids students at school. "His instant reaction was to reject them all as potential

friends" (Desai 170). Some critics say that Arun's isolation is indicative of a greater movement in India to forget its cultural origins. "Desai's isolated houses are testimonies, not to an aspiration to accommodate the whole of Indian reality, but rather to deny it" (Roy 88). Nevertheless, Arun's behavior is not inconsistent with Transcendentalist philosophy, as articulated in Reuben's statement. Arun keeps to himself. "He had at last experienced the freedom of total anonymity, the total absence of relations, of demands, needs, requests, ties, responsibilities, commitments. He was Arun. He had no past, no family, and no country" (Desai 172). Arun's solitude provides him with the space he needs to make the reflections in a manner similar to Transcendentalist reflection as described, "An individual is the spiritual center of the universe - and in an individual can be found the clue to nature, history and, ultimately, the cosmos itself (Reuben). It is interesting to note that over the course of time he comes to secretly want to be a part of the family. Even though he would like another invitation from Rod, "Having rejected Rod's earlier overture, he knows he cannot expect it to be repeated.. Arun finds himself nodding since he cannot convey to her what he would give to join the two men in the den instead" (Desai 192). Already, a change is happening within him, the change that spiritually unites him with humanity. The rejection of materialism also leads to that spirituality.

The materialism in the book represents a cause for rebellion for both characters from the standards of society. It is one pivotal point, which ushers the characters toward epiphany. Many of the novel's characters live superficial materialistic lifestyles, including Uma's sister Aruna. Aruna accepts traditional life as it is handed to her. She has balanced the needs and desires she has with the reality she is presented. Aruna's balance causes her to seek the highest level of success through marriage. Feminist critic

Lakshmi Chandra declares, "They," neither Uma nor Aruna, "have no say in the choice of their life-partners" (Chandra). But, that is not true of Aruna who manages to assert her will in the selection process. Aruna "had her way" in spite of her "perturbed" parents objections to the match (Desai 101). It is true that options for woman are limited in her society, but Aruna demonstrates no desire for something other than that. Aruna's ambition is apparently directed toward achieving the highest level of status and financial success available to her. "Aruna was pretty too, and in her case it was also evident quite early that her future would be bright, but there was a sharp edge to her prettiness, a harsh edge given to it by a kind of steely determination, a dogged ambitiousness, that seemed to be born of a desperation" (Desai 67). Aruna centers all her desires on earthly aspirations, such as shopping. Henry David Thoreau would advise she cast away all the superfluous possessions that shackle her mind. "Most of the luxuries, and many of the so called comforts of life, are not only not indispensable, but positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind" (Thoreau 854). Luxuries affix her thoughts to the empirical world. Aruna is a tragic character by Thoreau's definition, for she will never achieve a higher level of understanding as long as she remains anchored to property ownership. She is content with accepting life as it is handed to her in its traditional, material form. Aruna's picture-perfect marriage is apparently unfulfilling. "Uma felt pity for her: was this the realm of ease and comfort for which Aruna had always pined and that some might say she had attained? It certainly brought her no pleasure: there was always a crease of discontent between her eyebrows and an agitation that made her eyelids flutter, disturbing Uma who noticed it" (Desai 109). Uma is not the only one who notices the strangeness of the pursuit of wealth at the expense of profundity.

Arun observes the excessive materialism habitual to the American family with whom he resides. Melanie exemplifies this by destructively indulging in candy. Mrs. Patton is the quintessential consumer, purchasing compulsively through both catalogs and retail outlets. Arun is disgusted with Mrs. Patton's compulsion and attempts to prevent Mrs. Patton from shopping. "'I *want* it,' she cries, snatching it back. 'It's Chunky Monkey - my favorite' (209). Neither Mrs. Patton nor Melanie can find happiness through consumption. Arun rejects their materialism. "He feels revulsion rising in his throat as if from too gigantic a meal" (Desai 197). Some critics might say Melanie and Mrs. Patton represent Western capitalist values to be evaluated in the context of post-colonialism. Alexandra Schultheis writes that contemporary Indians are under pressure to compete globally. She says, "The greater one's success in imitating Western skills in the material domain, therefore, the greater the need to preserve the distinctness of one's spiritual culture" (Schultheis). Her argument applied to Arun's situation means Western materialism is perceived as interference with traditional values in post-colonial discourse. Likewise, from a Transcendentalist interpretation, the women represent the materialism that Arun must reject. Transcendentalist philosophy indicates that materialism interferes with spirituality.

The novel is profoundly spiritual. The novel's title *Fasting, Feasting* implies hunger and scarcity in contrast with indulgence and plenty. Hunger is deeper than food; it is a hunger of the soul and the feasting is the richness upon which it dines at the critical epiphany. Many critics claim Desai's novels are political allegories, so their interpretation of hunger would be relative to international politics or sociological trends. Some of Desai's novels focus on "the anguished history of fratricide, of partition, of religious

bigotry, of treatment and representation of women, and finally, of the destruction of Islamic Indian culture" (Mukherjee). This text can be easily read that way, particularly as it concerns the lot of women. The approach to the text from a Transcendentalist perspective does not contradict this interpretation. Post-colonialists agree that equality is a theme of Desai's works, and Desai's application of a Transcendental-style philosophy in *Fasting, Feasting* reasserts equality through the divine interconnectedness of being. Transcendentalism was originally a religious movement, as previously stated, so that must be addressed in revealing the novel's meaning.

One clue to the spiritual meaning in the text is Uma's need for answers to the universe. She begins her quest by seeking answers from the Catholic school. "She would have confessed how the order pleased her, the rationality of the whole system, each element having its own function and existing for a reason" (Desai 20). Uma senses there is something about the Catholic faith that requires contemplation to elevate her consciousness to a higher plane. In this way, she seeks to establish her identity through Catholicism but only finds it is a world out of her grasp. The religious campus has closed doors and "secret chambers" (Desai 20) to which she is not admitted, signifying that it did not meet her expectations. Though she seeks faith, Catholicism is a faith that seems to her more concerned with ceremony than substance, much like the catalyst for the Transcendentalists. Uma craves deep substance. Mira-masi, her mentor, tells religious stories, and Uma responds to them with the notion of replacing reality with the higher realm of spirituality. "Then Uma, with her ears and even her fingertips tingling, felt that here was someone who could pierce through the dreary outer world to an inner world, tantalizing in its color and romance. If only it could replace this, Uma thought hungrily.

It was her passion to attempt this miracle that made her follow Mira-masi through the cycle of the day's rituals" (Desai 40). Among the school of thought that agrees with Kajali Sharma, it is said Desai likes to explore the human mind. "Anita Desai, like the modern psychological novelists, is primarily concerned with the exploration and delineation of psyche, with the examination and presentation of the inner being of people, and not with the external life of systematic thinking, coherent speaking, and intelligible actions based on principle of causality" (Sharma 147). In exploring Uma's mind, Desai depicts her innate reason of a higher order. Mira-masi motivates Uma and gives her a new way to direct her thoughts. "Uma felt she had been admitted to some sanctuary that had previously been closed to her" (Desai 42). Uma wants to make a great leap of faith by plunging into the holy river. Her immersion in the river is not total, for her head remains above the water (Desai 43). She is withheld by the immaturity of her budding conviction. She does not truly know herself yet. Transcendentalists would have said she must know herself to know the divine, and for this reason her head is not submerged.

There are spiritual clues about Arun's experiences, as well. To describe the barbecue dinner, Desai alludes to the holy sacrament of communion. Arun wonders, "Will Mrs. Patton be brave and make it unnecessary for him to speak, publicly reveal himself as unworthy, unfit to take the wafer upon his tongue, the wine into his throat?" Meanwhile, insects swarm around the flaming barbeque "like heathens in the frenzy of their false religion" (Desai 165). Desai hints at spirituality in that passage and foreshadows the behavior of Arun's American hosts. But, Arun does not have repeated contact with any organized religion. He does, however, perceive ordinary T-shirts, coffee mugs, and bumper stickers bearing university logos and political messages as significant.

"Arun was dazzled by these biographies, these statements of faith" (Desai 183). Spirituality to Arun, in quasi-Transcendentalist fashion, abounds in all things. Because spirituality is ubiquitous, Arun seeks to derive information from the omens around him. To Arun, a vegetarian, it is barbequed meat that signifies desecration for the miracle of life by those with whom he dwells. He sees other omens around him. "A garage door slides up with an obedient, even obsequious murmur, and the car disappears. Where?" (Desai 160) Small day-to-day objects seem like clues to him of a deeper meaning. "He peers around him for footprints, for signs, for markers. He studies the mailboxes that line the drive" (Desai 160). As Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "Nature is a discipline of the understanding in intellectual truths" (Emerson 498). Likewise, Arun studies and questions his environment. Studying daily life is akin to studying nature because it reveals elements of human nature. "A car drives up suddenly behind him, very close, as if with intention... Why had it done that?" (Desai 182) He wonders this because "Transcendentalists accepted the neo-Platonic conception of nature as a living mystery, full of signs - nature is symbolic" (Reuben).

Likewise, Uma uses her own intrinsic reason, a manner reminiscent of Transcendental reason, to make sense of the world around her. The missionary, Mrs. O'Henry, hopes to provide Uma with life's answers as she understands them. To Mrs. O'Henry "Uma is certainly the most promising of that circle of ladies" (Desai 116). Uma struggles through life because she claims to be unattractive, obtuse, and clumsy (Desai, 21). Here with Mrs. O'Henry it appears those things are inconsequential compared to her place in the spiritual realm. Post-colonial feminists, such as Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, say that Uma's unattractiveness is a symbolic counter to the feminine ideal, personifying the

feminist movement in her character (Rajan 142). Nevertheless, her physical representation is spiritually irrelevant. Her strengths lie in her higher spiritual faculties. Using her intuition, she pieces together spiritual information she can manage to assemble. Mrs. O'Henry provides Uma with supplies and instruction in a crafting project. "Uma clutches a large envelope full of Mrs. O'Henry's failures" (Desai 117). It is as if she is collecting spiritual scraps from the table of the missionary from which she will make something beautiful. She is similar to the Transcendentalist who is not limited in scope of his pursuit of truth. As Emerson pointed out in a lecture, the Transcendentalist uses a large variety of resources to learn the higher meaning. Emerson declared, "If there is anything grand or daring in human thought or virtue, any reliance on the vast, the unknown; any presentiment, any extravagance of faith, the spiritualist adopts it as most in nature. The oriental mind has always tended to this largeness" (Emerson quoted in Reuben). In spiritual matters Uma is searching and creating her own answers from the scraps. Furthermore, Uma can find holiness in nature and everywhere she looks. She has a deep regard for nature and is alarmed by the injury of the bird at the hands of her nephew (Desai 106). Uma does not need to go all the way to the mountain to see the faces of God. "Her vision of an escape, a refuge, took the form of a huge and ancient banyan tree with streaming grey air roots, leafy branches in which monkeys and parrots feasted on berries" (Desai 131). Uma sees the omnipresence of holiness.

Holiness is infinite. The structure of the novel helps to illustrate this. Both the first part and the second part of the novel begin in the present tense and end at a point that is just days or weeks later. The middle sections of each of these parts toggle back and forth between the past history and the present tense by means of flashback. This suggests

the relativity and interconnectedness of time beyond the bounds of the empirical universe. Asha Kanwar explains that the characters' memories uncover their opinions and prejudices. To remember, to Kanwar, is to relive the experience. "These shifts are not artificial or superimposed but are a result of the novelist's desire to convey the substance of life, of experience" (Kanwar 10). So, the shifts of time show the cycle of life as unending, as timeless. Desai effectively demonstrates that the human experience cannot be captured in a single moment of time. To capture the totality of human existence it would be necessary to capture the zygote, the egg, the embryo, the fetus, the infant at multiple stages, etc.; the sun, water, and food as a life force; and the generations of interlinked immediate family and distant ancestry and posterity across national borders. It is impossible. The human existence is both endless and malleable. Everyday through the passage of time the human mind changes, the body changes, and the impact of the human on the world changes.

Because circumstances are constantly in a state of change predestination is not possible. Arun shares in common with Transcendentalists a rejection of fate. Of the slogans around him the most unsettling to him are those that proclaim statements of fate, such as Mrs. Patton's *Born to Shop* tee-shirt (Desai 183) and Arun's college roommate's *Ya Snooze, Ya Lose* coffee mug (Desai 169). The pressure on Arun has always been tremendous, and he struggles with the issue of fate presented to him. "Immediately Arun was over come by the sensation of his family laying its hands upon him, pushing him down into a chair at his desk, shoving a textbook under his nose, catching that nose and making his swallow cod liver oil, spooning food into him, telling him: Arun, this, Arun, that"... "He put his hand over his mouth to quell his nausea" (Desai 175). Parallel to

Uma's seizures, Arun suffers physically (in his case with nausea) when he feels he is not control of his own destiny, as he feels when his family is overwhelming him with demands. He feels that their forcefulness is robbing him of his choices. Critics in favor of the post-colonial interpretation say that the mental and physical demands on the characters are expressions of an ailing nation coming to terms with its newfound liberation. Cindy Lacom says, "In both texts, physical, mental, and gender-based stigmas create and maintain a status quo where normal bodies do the necessary work of assimilating to new social patterns while arbitrating old power dynamics. To that end, the representation of disability, because it remains seemingly stuck in a subordinate relationship to ablebodiedness (which comes to include patriarchy) is problematic" (Lacom). This is an insightful and meaningful observation. Yet, it is equally true that the characters show physical symptoms of their emotional struggles with the concept of fate. Similar to the Transcendentalists' rejection of fate, both Arun and Uma demonstrate their rejection of fate through illness.

On the mountain with Mira-masi, Uma finds herself grappling with her fateful alternatives. Some critics would say the struggle is an historic one, "Anita Desai's position as a postcolonial writer, then, is clear: she has opted to remain within history, despite its ravages and cruelties. She has shown in novel after novel her moral disapproval of a stance that refuses to shoulder responsibility for the past and present and chooses to withdraw from a painful present reality into a romantic or mythicized past" (Afzal-Khan 96). Whether historic or not, Desai clearly advocates responsibility. An alternative explanation to the historic one is that responsibility is centered on the individual's empowerment "She felt uneasily caught between powerful forces pulling in

different directions, and it was no good looking to Mira-masi for guidance; her guidance would clearly lead only to trouble" (Desai 58). Uma cannot turn to Mira-masi for guidance, suggesting that the struggle is not about Mira-masi. The forces are her parents' habitual reality and her own inner-light of worldly intuition. Moreover, Mira-masi proceeds to present the idea that Uma's destiny is arranged. Uma cannot abide this. The consequence of her conflicting thoughts and emotions is manifested physically in her seizure. In fact, every time she considers the possibility of fate she has an epileptic fit. Uma ultimately rejects the notion of fate in her spiritual quest. At the moment with Mira-masi, however, she believes that she simply has no control over her life. "That is what Uma felt her own life to have been - full of barks, howls, messages, and now - silence" (Desai 61). The deafening silence is the resignation with which she morosely confronts what some people tell her is her fate. She does not feel capable of protesting against her fate because she does not yet know herself, and it is only at the moment of her concluding epiphany that she does. Fate is irrelevant to spirit.

Death is also irrelevant to the spirit. All beings are interrelated by essence throughout time, so death is not to be feared nor actively sought. Like life, death is another expression of nature. Contrary to the Transcendentalist view, Arun fears death before he reaches his epiphany. Arun is terrified of nature because of the danger it represents to his physical state. "Gulping, Arun went down to the kitchen again and asked Mrs. Patton if there were wild animals in the woods" (Desai 176). Mrs. Patton tells him there are no wild animals nearby, but even the thought of trees makes him "shiver as he felt them creeping up around him, rustling as they closed in" (Desai 176). The changes in environmental conditions point to death. The summer is coming to an end, and this

symbolizes the fleeting nature of life. "The trees wilt, dust weighs down their leaves that have achieved full span and can unfold no further.. .There is a kind of desolation in the kitchen now. Where once there had been so much bustle and activity, such ambitions, brews, and novel odors, there is now only a litter of empty jars and cartons" (Desai 216). Arun much prefers the safety of city life compared to "grasses stirring with insidious life, and bushes with poisonous berries" (Desai 220). But, at the moment of his concluding epiphany he is no longer afraid. Arun's submersion in water brings him into harmony with the universe. "Surprisingly, it is due to the water, an element that removes him from his normal self, and opens out another world of possibilities" (Desai 222). He offers a shawl to Mrs. Patton, and that demonstrates his compassion and newfound connection with humanity. "An aroma rises from [the shawl], of another land: muddy, grassy, smoky, ashen. It swamps him like a river, or like a fire" (Desai 228). Arun correspondingly accepts both life and death as two sides of the same coin. Kanwar concludes about Desai's use of time in comparison with death, "Hence, life and death are two inseparable facts of human existence. Death, the physical fact is subservient to the time of clocks and chronometers but the question of life and living is entirely a matter of human creativity" (Kanwar 70). Kanwar means that both life and death are fundamental facts, neither of which is diminished in importance by the other.

Likewise, Uma must come to terms with death. Ever the idealist, she appreciates death as a poetic expression of life. On the occasion of a near-drowning incident she is in an excited state. "It was not fear she felt, or danger. Or rather, these were only what edged something much darker, wilder, more thrilling, a kind of exultation - it was exactly what she always wanted she realized" (Desai 111). She wants to be free from the heavy

burden of life. Critic Derek Wright comments, "Desai's India, as presented through the eyes of the average middle-class wife, has neither the romantic exoticism nor the squalid horror of Western stereotypes but is a commonplace, dull actuality, and the attempts by her heroines to escape its confining grayness and mediocrity seldom have any creative outcome or issue in genuine assertions of identity; rather, these attempts are futile gestures that lead Desai's female protagonists deeper into compromise and defeat, illusion and neurosis" (Wright). This seems true of Uma, who attempts to escape, though her outcome is less grim. Even after she is plucked from the river she continues to long for "a fairy tale existence elsewhere. Elsewhere. Elsewhere" (Desai 117). She thinks death will be a magnificent, beautiful expression of life that will transport her to realms beyond. Upon her cousin's death, she inaptly inquires of her cousin's scholarship letter (Desai 152). This can only be explained by a strange fascination with death, as if it were a sublime expression. She has an inappropriate attitude about death, for she wishes to experience it. This is contrary to Transcendentalist philosophy, for the Transcendentalist celebrated life. But, Uma reconciles her death wish at the time of her epiphany. She is a changed person at the epiphany, for she is no longer wrapped up in her own mind. Her suddenly magnanimous behavior, such as concern for her mother, indicates her grasp of the big picture. Upon her concluding epiphany, she correspondingly appreciates the expression of life for the valuable gift it is. One has to examine the epiphany to draw that conclusion. The key to demystifying *Fasting, Feasting* is to observe that the characters each have symbolic encounters with water at the moments of their epiphanies. Sebastian Prasad says of Desai's body of works, "Never otiose, Desai's imagery, which is chiefly anticipatory, pre-figurative, or demonstrative in nature is always highly functional."

Prasad concludes, "Botanical, zoological, meteorological, and color images are central to her fictional strategy and spotlight the tragic vision of life to which she... is essentially committed" (Prasad 369). So, the significance of the characters' exposure to water cannot be overstated, as it defines the characters' conclusions in the novel almost exclusive of actions. Water is a very important symbol in predominantly Hindu India, and a pitcher of water is used regularly for Hindu ceremonies. It symbolizes the spirit of godliness on earth and the inter-connectedness of life. Critic Ludmila Volna indicates that Uma's and Arun's exposure to water is a mythological reference to pilgrims Narada's and Markandeya's exposure to water, who "were finally able to experience a totally different aspect of what they could not see before" (Volna). Because her approach is a feminist one, Volna infers exposure opens the characters' eyes to the plight of the contemporary Indian woman of which they were previously negligent. Indeed, the book can be understood in feminist terms. In a metaphysical view, however, exposure to water expands their discernment of physical and spiritual being.

For Uma, the funeral signals the epiphany. The scattering of Anamika's ashes into the river at the funeral illustrates the reconnection of cousin Anamika's soul into the universe. "Briefly [the urn] remains visible, bobbing like a swimmer trying to keep its head above water, the garland of marigolds floating about its rim. Then as the boat rocks and steadies itself, it sinks. The marigolds float free, then the current carries them away" (Desai 155). The marigolds deliver Anamika's soul back into the collective consciousness. At the conclusion of the funeral, Uma holds a pitcher of water up in the sunlight. This excerpt from Transcendentalist Christopher Pearse Cranch's poem "Correspondences" succinctly describes both the action and the mood of this passage,

"When we perceive the light that breaks through the visible symbol, / What exultation is ours! *We* the discovery have made!" (Cranch quoted in Campbell). Uma pours the water over her head. It is as if she is saying she is united with the universal essence and does not need to actively pursue death to find it, as she once did. It is as if she is accepting her present life as a gift, a part of an artful expression that will have a natural conclusion.

At the pivotal moments the characters are transformed by an intuition that comes from within. Some critics agree that the conflict of the story is centered on the internal struggle to reach this point. Paul Brians says, "[Desai] strives to convey moods and settings more than she does to tell stories: several of her novels contain very little external action" (Brians 87). Uma and Arun become masters of their minds in a manner consistent with William Henry Charming's description. Charming said, "Transcendentalism, as viewed by its disciples, was a pilgrimage from the idolatrous world of creeds and rituals to the temple of the Living God in the soul. It was a putting to silence of tradition and formulas, that the Sacred Oracle might be heard through intuitions of the single-eyed and pure-hearted. Amidst materialists, zealots, and skeptics, the Transcendentalist believed in perpetual inspiration, the miraculous power of will, and a birthright to universal good. He sought to hold communion face to face with the unnameable Spirit of his spirit, and gave himself up to the embrace of nature's perfect joy, as a babe seeks the breast of a mother" (Charming quoted in Campbell). Uma and Arun make such a pilgrimage. In doing so, they present a solution to the problems of post-colonial India. They unite traditional Hindu doctrine with a set of beliefs that have traces in democracy and demonstrate the importance of the individual.

Works Cited

- Afzal-Khan, Fawzia. *Cultural Imperialism and the Indo-English Novel: Genre and Ideology in R.K. Narayan, Anita Desai, Kamala Markandaya, and Salman Rushdie*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University, 1993. Bande, Usha. *The Novels of Anita Desai: A Study in Character and Conflict*. New Delhi: Prestige Books, 1988. Bowers, David. "Democratic Vistas." *American Transcendentalism: An Anthology of Criticism*. Ed. Brian M. Barbour. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1973. Brians, Paul. *Modern South Asian Literature in English*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2003. Burton, Antoinette. *Dwelling in the Archive: Women Writing House, Home, and History in Late Colonial India*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003. Campbell, Donna M. "American Transcendentalism." *Literary Movements*. (June 2005). 1 May 2006 <<http://www.wsu.edu/~campbelld/amlit/amtrans.htm>>. Chandra, Lakshmi. "Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting*." *Feminista!* 3.7 (1999). 26 Apr 2006 <<http://www.feminista.com/archives/v3n7/chandra.html>>. Cranch, Christopher Pearse. "Correspondences." *Transcendentalism: A Reader*. Ed. Joel Myerson. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000. Desai, Anita. *Fasting, Feasting*. New York: Bantam Books, 1999. Hochfield, George. "An Introduction to Transcendentalism." *American Transcendentalism: An Anthology of Criticism*. Ed. Brian M. Barbour. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1973.

Kanwar, Asha. *Virginia Woolf and Anita Desai: A Comparative Study*. New Delhi:

Prestige Books, 1989. Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "Self-Reliance." *The Norton Anthology of American*

Literature. Ed. Nina Baym. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2003.

Lacom, Cindy. "Revising the Subject: Disability as a Third Dimension in Clear Light of Day and You Have Come Back." *NWSA Journal* 14.3 (2002) 138-155. 26

Apr 2006 <<http://www.0-gateway.proquest.com.wncln.wncln.org>>. Mukherjee,

A. P. "Other Worlds, Other Texts: Teaching Anita Desai's Clear Light of

Day to Canadian Students." *College Literature* 22 (1995) 192-201. 26 Apr 2006

<<http://vnweb.hwwilsonweb.com>>. Prasad, Madhusudan. "Imagery in the

Novels of Anita Desai." *World Literature*

Today 58(1984)363-369. 26 Apr 2006 <<http://vnweb.hwwilsonweb.com>>.

Rajan, Rajeswari Sunder. *Real and Imagined Women: Gender, Culture, and*

Postcolonialism. New York: Routledge, 1993. Reuben, Paul P. "Chapter 4: Early

Nineteenth Century - American Transcendentalism:

A Brief Introduction." *PAL: Perspectives in American Literature- A Research and Reference Guide* 25 Apr 2006

<<http://www.csustan.edu/english/reuben/pal/chap4/4intro.html>>. Roy,

Modhumita. "Untitled." *Comparative Literature* 45.1 (1993) 86-89. 26 Apr

2006 <<http://0-www.jstor.org.wncln.wncln.org>>. Sabin, Margery. "Pankaj Mishra

and Postcolonial Cosmopolitanism." *Raritan* 21.4

(2002) 198-219. 26 Apr 2006 <<http://vnweb.hwwilsonweb.com>>.

Salgado, Minoli. "When Seeing Is Not Believing: Epiphany in Anita Desai's Games at

Twilight." *Journal of Modern Literature* 20 (1996) 103-8. 26 Apr 2006

<<http://0-weblinks1.epnet.cora.wncln.wncln.org>>. Schultheis, Alexandra.

"Postcolonial Lack and Aesthetic Promise in the Moor's Last

Sigh." *Twentieth Century Literature* 47A (2002) 569-95. 26 Apr 2006

<<http://vnweb.hwwilsonweb.com> >. Sharma, Kajali. *Symbolism in Anita*

Desai 's Novels. New Delhi: Abhinav

Publications, 1991. Thoreau, Henry David. "Walden." *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*.

Ed. Nina Baym. New York, W.W. Norton and Company, 2003. Volna, Ludmila.

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

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 7.3 (2005) 26 Apr 2006

<<http://vnweb.hwwilsonweb.com>>. Woodlief, Ann. "Transcendental Ideas." *The*

Web of American Transcendentalism

25 Apr 2006

<<http://www.vcu.edu/engweb/transcendentalism/ideas/dickens.html>>. Wright,

Derek. "Anita Desai 1937- (Indian)" *Encyclopedia of the Novel*. Eds. Paul

Schellinger, Christopher Hudson, Marijke Rijsberman. Chicago: Fitzroy

Dearborn Publishers, 1998. 25 Apr 2006

<<https://wncln.wncln.org/validate/http%3A%2F%2FO->

[Hon.chadwyck.com.wncln.wncln.org%3A80%2FgotoSearchTexts.do%3Finitialise%3DAll%26advanced%3Dfalse](https://wncln.wncln.org/validate/http%3A%2F%2FO-Hon.chadwyck.com.wncln.wncln.org%3A80%2FgotoSearchTexts.do%3Finitialise%3DAll%26advanced%3Dfalse)>.