

**In a Transnational World: Exploring Gendered  
Subjectivity, Mobility, and Consumption in  
Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting***

Angelia Poon

Triumphalist versions of globalization often celebrate the possibilities presented by increased mobility and travel in an interconnected world, foregrounding cosmopolitanism, the rise of global cities, and the pathways taken by elite classes of marketable professionals and business entrepreneurs. In the general euphoria of these romanticized visions of present and future reality, the world has become, through an intensification of the time-space compression that is the hallmark of the 'new globalized world', a multiply-linked place of mutual benefit, deterritorialized identities, porous borders, hybrid cultures, and mobile capital. The cosmopolitan transnational implied by this paradigm of globalization negotiates deftly between different cultural contexts, languages and selves, and possesses the means to "flexibly" accumulate not only economic capital, but in Pierre Bourdieu's terms, cultural and social capital as well.<sup>1</sup> The effects of globalization are far from uniform, of course. The methods of capital accumulation and the related processes of consumption in a globalized world vary significantly for different individuals and groups of people, many of whom are excluded or restricted from participating in certain circuits of exchange depending on the different permutations of gender, class, race, sexuality and nationality which determine access to power and privilege.

Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan deploy the term "transnational" to "address the asymmetries of the globalization process" ("Global Identities" 664), and they implicitly underscore the need for self-reflexivity in the use of the term when they examine how transnationalism has been appropriated to mean different things in different contexts.<sup>2</sup> Thus they note, for example, how the emphasis on transnational flows in certain subject disciplines tends to neglect critical consideration of "aspects

of modernity that seem fixed or immobile” (664). Indeed, the very language of “flow” itself—an inextricable part of the hegemonic conceptualization of globalization that often promotes ideas of cultural hybridity and economic interconnectedness at the expense of issues about domination and exploitation—requires critical scrutiny.<sup>3</sup> Anna Tsing, for example, has underscored the need for a scholarly yet critical detachment that resists embracing such language and instead interrogates the way such apparent descriptions of the global economic and social landscape are not truthful reality, but rather *localized* cultural claims and characterizations of the world by particular parties with specific vested interests in notions of globality, the local, and the regional.<sup>4</sup> Questions of travel and mobility are the focus of James Clifford’s influential book, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*, which looks at precisely the interplay between movement and fixity or the “routes” and “roots” of peoples and cultures. His argument for re-framing culture and cultural identity in terms of a notion of “dwelling-in-travel” is by now relatively familiar. Clifford turns the question of rootedness on its head, seeing it as a function of routes and travel rather than fixity. At the same time, he is careful to make the point about *different* forms of travel including forced migration and violent displacement by referring to the production of what he calls “discrepant cosmopolitanisms” (36). Clifford is engaged in an attempt to dismantle monolithic meanings of travel and cosmopolitanism by widening the experience and politics of travel and including more subjectivities for serious consideration. But as Pheng Cheah points out, Clifford’s move remains predicated on the assumption that “physical mobility is the basis of emancipatory practice because it generates stasis-disrupting forms of cultural displacement” (297). There are several implications here, not least for the relationship between travel and female subjects as cultural agents, who have long been and still continue to be in many instances defined by a lack of mobility. This is a problem that Anita Desai confronts in her novel, *Fasting, Feasting*, through the figure of her stay-at-home female protagonist, Uma, and the dearth of opportunity the Uma faces in terms of formal education, travel, and economic independence. The novel underscores the fact that questions about *access* to mobility and consump-

tion (of food, culture, knowledge and so forth), and how such access varies for gendered subjects in a globalized world, are of critical importance if there is to be any hope at all of addressing the problems of transnational inequality.

In this article, I use the idea of the transnational precisely to evoke notions of disjuncture and disparity in globalization while considering its relationship to, and implications for, literary representation. What are some of the problems and possibilities involved in representing or narrativizing a transnational world, which is experienced differently by gendered subjects? If, for example, it is easy to see how the traveling subject who leaves home and develops through movement and encounters with other cultures is full of narrative potential, how then might stasis, restricted consumption, arrested development, and the subjectivity of the one who has no access to mobility be represented? What are some of the limits to, and not just the possibilities of, cultural knowledge and identity faced by the global traveling subject? I filter these questions through a specific lens—Desai's *Fasting, Feasting*—and consider how she presents the configuration of gendered subjectivities in and through different forms of travel and consumption (both literal and metaphorical) to convey in the process the inequalities, contradictions, ruptures, synchronicities, connections, and epiphanies of a multi-textured transnational world.

In the novel, Desai juxtaposes the life of the plain and ageing Uma in provincial India with the experiences of her younger brother Arun, an undergraduate in the United States, who spends his summer vacation with the American Patton family. At first blush, the sense of a dichotomous society between those who are allowed to accumulate cultural and social capital and those who are not is overwhelmingly obvious. Uma is made to abandon her convent education so that she can help take care of Arun, the long awaited son, as he is carefully groomed for a bright future. In the United States, Arun sees how the Patton family lives in a consumerist land of plenty that is so remote from the concerns of his family in India. The difference between living in India and living in the United States is, on an obvious level, the fasting and feasting alluded to in the novel's title. But more than a static depiction and compari-

son of oppression and opportunity, Third World and First, I argue that Desai's novel explores instead the narrative possibilities for representing the rhythms of a transnational world—the circuits of exchange, patterns of consumption, and life trajectories that bespeak the dynamic concatenation of ideological forces determining the material conditions of transnational inequality. Desai's novel underscores the dialectical relationship between fasting and feasting or the entangled politics of gender and cultural inequality, and shows at times how parasitically or symbiotically subjects are placed in relation to each other. In the process, she raises questions about the possible locations for individual agency. At the same time, she shows us how gendered subjects are caught up in the momentum of larger social processes beyond their control. She also discloses how their bodies register resistance in unconscious yet symbolically telling ways. Thus Uma, assured of a lifetime of confinement in her parental home, nevertheless manages to experience a liberation from her body when she is overtaken by periodic fits and fainting spells which non-verbally express her protest against the oppressiveness of her family and her victimization by patriarchal Indian society. This means of escaping the self may indeed be seen as her own particular and distinctive form of travel. In contrast to Uma, Arun, as the only son in the family, is given the twin privileges of a formal education and the best physical nourishment. Ironically, such preferential treatment results only in his weariness and alienation. Having being pampered and raised on a strict diet from a young age, Arun's rebelliousness is encoded in his vegetarianism, which stands in the novel as a form of passive self-assertion against the meat-eating version of hypermasculinity extolled by his father and the male members of the Patton family in the United States.

Through its textual politics Desai's novel ultimately refuses to endorse a vision of cultural hybridity, or the kind of seamless, eclectic, and joyous blending of cultures and identities that often glosses over power relations and inequities. Instead, the text remains acutely aware of the divisions and distance that are as a result of the uneven processes of travel, capital accumulation, and consumption. The structural logic of the text, which straddles two societies, tends towards transposition and translation instead of amalgamation. Even when parallels and

similarities between characters and situations are offered, these tend to underscore separation rather than convergence. Thus, rather than interspersing Uma's story with Arun's narrative or splicing both stories, Desai realizes her insistence on an unequal world by literally dividing her novel into two parts. This bifurcated and bifocal narrative structure, part of the novel's transnational politics, shows us two fairly circumscribed worlds where there is little room for border-crossing, seepage, and hybrid identities. The novel eschews a totally linear style of narration: in the first part, the narrative shuttles back and forth in time between events in family history and Uma's life in the present while the second part of the novel focuses on Arun's time in the United States as he experiences it concurrently with his sister's life in India. The attempt to capture simultaneity and coequality, in order to suggest disjunction as well as possible connections between gendered subjects and different cultures, forms part of Desai's novelistic vision or what we may call her "imagined world." The latter term has been used by Arjun Appadurai to refer to "the multiple worlds that are constituted by the historically situated imaginations of persons and groups spread around the globe," and which have the potential to subvert or counter state-sponsored or dominant versions of globalization (51).

In the imagined world that Desai constructs, Uma is denied the familiar trajectory of the protagonist who leaves home for the West and whose physical journey is used to signal initiation into a more complex emotional and cultural modernity or self.<sup>5</sup> We see this pattern clearly enough in such recent texts as Monica Ali's celebrated novel, *Brick Lane*, where the female protagonist Nazneen is married off to a husband in London and leaves Bangladesh for the underprivileged ethnic enclave of Brick Lane. As a migrant, she begins the sometimes painful and sometimes exhilarating process of settling into her new environment, discovering and empowering herself so that eventual return to the home country is out of the question.<sup>6</sup> Here, the female subject's relationship to movement and travel is scripted in terms of an incremental creation of new knowledge, often sexual and political, as well as liberation from the strictures of home and traditional Bangladeshi society. In contrast, Uma's story is not the story of intellectual or sexual awakening that travel or a different

positionality excites. Hers, instead, is the story of quotidian stasis and the related question it raises of the possibilities of movement in stasis. In this way, the form of the title, “Fasting, Feasting,” may be seen to reflect the narrative’s disruption of strict linearity and evoke instead other organizational models (of juxtaposition, parallel non-connection, and vicious-cycle causality) with which to view and understand the lives of subjects in a transnational world.

### I. Reading *Fasting, Feasting*

By turning her attention to the subjectivity of the one left behind in the first part of *Fasting, Feasting*, Desai returns to a preoccupation that has been a feature of her writing elsewhere. In her earlier novel, *Clear Light of Day*, and even in her well-known short story “Games at Twilight,” Desai explores the plight and pathos of those who have been forgotten. “Games at Twilight” revolves around an ordinary game of hide-and-seek where one of the “hidiers” is forgotten by the rest of the children who tire of the game and merrily move on to other forms of diversion. It is a simple story that nevertheless resonates on a more symbolic level to signify the painful loss of innocence and youth. Here, the boy Ravi, faced with the “ignominy of being forgotten,” is crushed by “a terrible sense of his insignificance” (10). In *Clear Light of Day*, the main character Bimla lives on in the family home and looks after her alcoholic aunt and simple-minded brother, while her other brother and sister leave and start families of their own. Bim’s intelligence and independence translate in her old age to an intransigence borne out of a keenly-felt and assiduously-nursed disappointment in her favorite brother, Raja, who has settled in Pakistan. By staying on in the family home, Bim occupies the past as though it is another country. It is only at the end of the novel, when she finally lets go of old grievances, that we see in the clear light of day how her adult life is at once a travesty of her childhood ambition to be a “heroine” and its noble fulfillment.

In *Fasting, Feasting*, heroic self-sacrifice in the form of a refusal to leave is not a choice available to the rather naïve and unschooled Uma. The eldest child in the family, Uma’s subordinate status is unambiguously underlined when she is forced early in the novel to give up her

convent school education in order to look after the only son in the family. This is necessary to ensure, as Mama puts it, that Arun receives “proper attention” (30). In this way, Uma’s unpaid labour translates directly into cultural capital for Arun, the son who Papa is determined should achieve greatness through earning academic qualifications from a prestigious American university. Forced into a sacrificial role as caregiver, Uma is the one on whom Arun is made to “feast” in a macabre act of consumption that is echoed on different levels in various incidents throughout the novel. Perhaps the most telling evocation of this act of cannibalistic gender discrimination occurs when baby Arun bites Uma’s finger and draws blood as she tries to feed him. When she reminds him of this incident years later, the young Arun, intuitively but not fully grasping the nature of power relations within the family, threatens to tell their parents that she has been illicitly feeding him slices of guava. Uma’s powerlessness and lack of status is signaled in relation to food in other scenes in the novel where we see her—in the manner typical of daughters raised in traditional Indian families—having always to serve food to her father. She passes the food along, but must not partake of it.

As a female, who does not possess the shrewdness and attractiveness of her younger sister Aruna or the feminine perfection of her cousin Anamika, Uma is unable even to move out of the family home through the normal and often sole route available to daughters—marriage. After two failed attempts at arranged marriage, with no husband to show for the effort and only a loss of dowry, Uma’s unmarriageable status is confirmed. She is a burden to her parents without any exchange value, a debt rather than a credit. In stark contrast to Uma, her sister Aruna capitalizes on her looks to make herself an excellent match. Younger, but sharper, Aruna “ripple[s] with an inner momentum” (72) that is absent in Uma. Marriage to the richest and the handsomest of her many suitors takes her out of provincial India and catapults her into the ranks of the urban elite in Bombay, making her seem to Uma “distant and airy” (103). If Aruna’s married life is a whirl of social activity and networking in the rarefied circles of Bombay society, Uma’s life moves to a less frenetic and more mundane beat signaled at the start of the novel by the to-and-fro motion, the “slow, rhythmic swinging” (5) of her parents on

the “creaking sofa-swing” (3) overlooking the garden, moving but not getting anywhere. Aruna’s access to mobility only accentuates Uma’s entrapment within the home as an ageing spinster because she is not even allowed to accept the offer of employment by the local doctor, even after Arun has left home for the United States. Uma’s predicament is also captured symbolically in the novel by her increasing eye problems. Prevented by Papa and Aruna from traveling to Bombay to have her eyes checked by a specialist, Uma’s fast dimming vision mimics the idea of diminished horizons on both a physical and a literal level. Within this context of domestic confinement, Uma’s hobby of collecting Christmas cards and going through them in the privacy of her own room appears particularly poignant. Metonymically, the cards, with their images of snow and reindeer, suggest distant lands and other cultures. They provide Uma with moments of private fantasy and pleasure that are the closest she ever gets to consumption in the novel.

While the respective positions occupied by Uma and Aruna may be seen in terms of a fasting-feasting binary, the novel also presents other mobile characters from whose traveling experiences Uma derives vicarious pleasure, even if their presence only serves to underline by contrast Uma’s entrapment. The visits from her relative Mira-Masi, who travels around the country on nomadic pilgrimages, are especially welcomed because they constitute a break from the monotonous routine of Uma’s life. Freed from a husband, the widowed Mira-Masi is irrepresible and indefatigable in her spiritual journeys, taking advantage of an access to mobility seldom available to single and married women. She had, as the narrator puts it, “an unsettling habit of traveling all over the country, quite alone, safe in her widow’s garments, visiting one place of pilgrimage after another like an obsessed tourist of the spirit” (38). Drawn to Mira-Masi’s stories about Hindu mythology and her restless yet determined wanderings, Uma sees Mira-Masi offering a window to a spiritual world and inner realm, “tantalizing in its colour and romance,” and hungers after it (40). To the rest of her family, Uma and Mira-Masi are nothing more than “partners in mischief” (44). In addition to Mira-Masi, Uma also has an affinity for another wanderer in the family—her cousin Ramu, brother to Anamika. The black sheep of the family with



always a whiff of scandal about him, Ramu is as ugly and disreputable as Anamika is beautiful and good. Physically deformed with a club foot, his difference and unconventional status, and therefore part of his charm for Uma, is further sealed by his restless peregrinations around the country.

Association with Mira-Masi and Ramu allows Uma to irritate if not totally defy her parents. More significantly, the idea of resistance by Uma is figured in the uncontrolled and unconscious reactions of her physical body to key incidents in the text. Thus, instead of throwing a tantrum in protest at merged parental authority signified by the term “MamaPapa” or railing against the injustice that has been done her, she literally goes into fits during which time appears to stand still and consciousness is lost. This happens, for example, when she approaches Mother Agnes in the convent for help in convincing her parents to continue with her education, but is rebuffed instead. The fit that overtakes Uma then also overtakes her at Aruna’s glamorous, pre-wedding cocktail party. Uma’s spectacular collapse at such a “chic” (101) event provokes an angry denunciation from Aruna, now newly afraid of how her sister’s unruly body might disrupt her carefully-planned wedding. In yet another incident where Aruna and her in-laws are present, Uma nearly drowns in the river where they had gone to cleanse themselves as part of a religious ritual. The fleeting near-death experience is liberating, suggestive of all manner of unrestrained possibility: “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 had always wanted, she realized” (111). Momentary as they are, these fits and fainting spells are the only means by which Uma gets to transcend her body and situation; they transport her and allow her to travel to another place metaphorically while signaling her resistance against her life and expressing her inchoate and unarticulated, though no less deep, desires.

Powerless as Uma may be to alter anything about her life, she is nevertheless capable, as her unintentional fits show, of providing the odd ironic moment of insight into the inequality of things, often because she herself is not aware of the full import of what she says and thinks. The death of her cousin Anamika is a case in point. As the embodiment

of beauty, intelligence, and goodness, Anamika is the centre of her relatives' admiration, the ideal feminine standard against which everyone else is measured. Even if she is passive and totally voiceless in the novel, all draw around her in an admiring circle: "She never allowed herself to be pulled into one camp or another; she achieved this equilibrium by simply remaining at the centre, so that everyone had to come to her, attracted to her as bees to a lotus" (68). Anamika's greatest achievement occurs when she wins a scholarship to Oxford, "[t]o Oxford, where only the most favoured and privileged sons could ever hope to go!" (68). Of course, there is no question of her going. Instead, the letter of acceptance is taken away and used only as part of a marketing strategy to advertise her eligibility as a wife as well as attract suitably educated husbands-to-be. In the end, Anamika enters a terrible arranged marriage and suffers routine abuse at the hands of her husband and mother-in-law before she is finally burnt alive. Her death elicits horror and shock from everyone in the family, including Uma. But more than anything else, Uma is concerned about Anamika's letter of acceptance into Oxford. As the family grieves over the loss of Anamika, to the mortified consternation of her parents, Uma asks, "The letter—the letter from Oxford—where is it? Did you—did you burn it?" (152). Uma's outburst, by any account a grave *faux pas*, is nevertheless apt, unintentionally pointing out the object which gave Anamika value in the marriage circuit. Obliquely, the acceptance letter serves as a critique of the way Anamika had been objectified and commodified, only to be literally "devoured" and consumed by twenty-five subsequent years of marriage (134). Yet, Uma's inappropriate question also foregrounds the fact that the acceptance letter actually offered the possibility of a radically different life. In terms of narrative structure, notwithstanding the horrific nature of Anamika's death, the text makes a link between that tragedy and Uma's continued survival. As part of performing the last rites for Anamika, "Uma dips her jar in the river, and lifts it high over her head. When she tilts it and pours it out, the murky water catches the blaze of the sun and flashes fire" (156). It is a moment that recalls Anamika's death while at the same time marking a significant departure from it. Just as her cousin was destroyed and consumed by flames, Uma appears awash with fiery water

in a parallel gesture connotative this time—if only momentarily—of rejuvenation, renewal, and redemption, rather than death.

The different wasted opportunities that both Anamika and Uma's lives represent are cast into relief by the second section of the novel which deals with Arun as he spends his first summer in the United States. An undergraduate at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Arun is well on his way to acquiring the educational and social capital that is his birthright as the only son in the family and for which he had been primed ever since he was born. But Arun's experience in America is more painful than pleasurable. Craving the "total freedom of anonymity" (172) in the new culture into which he has been transplanted and shunning even his own fellow countrymen, he stands as an observer of, rather than a participant in an American society running on its own tribal rhythms and energy. Thus Uma notes with disappointment his nondescript and bland letters from America, how "thin, [and] without substance" they are, so much so that he might as well have written and sent them from the local college hostel than from halfway across the world (123). In the United States, Arun's gaze is not the curious, delighted, or all-consuming gaze of the consummate cosmopolitan traveler; the urbane polish of a global citizen of the world, who glides in and out of different societies is not for him. K. Anthony Appiah implies this ease of movement and being is implied in his definition of the "cosmopolitan spirit" as "the spirit that celebrates and respects difference" (207). For Appiah, cosmopolitanism is a "dialogic universalism" and "the image of the cosmopolitan" is one "secure in her difference, but also open to the difference of others" (215). Instead of experiencing a sense of openness, however, Arun looks upon the new society before him with the appalled gaze of increased self-consciousness and a heightened sense of difference. The sheer excess of American consumerist society and its material culture is bewildering and disorientating. Obligated to live with the Patton family when his college dormitory closes for the summer, he finds himself in a strange yet uncannily familiar environment. He is caught in the "sugar-sticky web of family conflict" (195) amidst the ineffectual mothering of Mrs. Patton, the self-destructiveness of a bulimic daughter, Melanie, and the hypermasculinity of Mr. Patton and his

son, Rod. Indeed, Arun is placed in a position not unlike his sister's in India as he experiences the physical vulnerability of being different which allows him finally to see the pathologized conditions of Uma's life and those of the Patton women.

In the narrative about Arun, food and the body are repeatedly the symbolic means by which Desai maps the young man's sense of his own gender and cultural identity. In India, the strict regimen of study imposed on him by his father is a form of forced feeding that has visible physical consequences. Rebelling against the burden of expectation and the coercive methods used on him in the only way possible, Arun grows up thin and weak, with no inclination to play any kind of sport and only "the gait of a broken old man" (119). Above all, though, it is his vegetarianism that constitutes the one visceral disposition and natural habit that no amount of applied force or pressure can alter. His distaste for meat baffles his father. To Papa, "[a] meat diet had been one of the revolutionary changes brought about in his life, and his brother's, by their education" (32). Meat, together with cricket and the English language, were "inextricably linked" and signaled, above all else, progress (32). Arun's refusal of meat amounts to a devaluation of masculine identity, it is an inexplicable atavistic desire "to return to the ways of his forefathers, meek and puny men who had got nowhere in life" (33). In the United States, in the land of plenty, Arun's vegetarianism again surprises and causes anxiety. His diet cuts him off from the red-meat-eating and sports-mad world of Mr. Patton and his son, Rod. There is no question of Arun bonding with Rod, the young man whose phallic name underscores his youthful masculinity and obsession with getting on the football team.

In the Patton household, Arun has no ally except for the kind but clueless Mrs. Patton who enthusiastically turns vegetarian for his sake. As a suburban housewife feeding and caring for her family, Mrs. Patton is the quintessential American consumer. Nervous in the home and around her children and husband, it is only the supermarket, with its "chilled air and controlled atmosphere" and aisle upon aisle of products, that puts Mrs. Patton at ease (183). The act of buying and stocking groceries defines her subject position as wife and mother even though no

one eats what she cooks: “Her joy lay in carrying home this hoard she had won from the maze of the supermarket, storing it away in her kitchen cupboards, her refrigerator and freezer” (184). Arun is forced into unwanted consumption yet again as he becomes Mrs. Patton’s shopping partner and has to eat the food which she thinks all vegetarians eat: “How was he to tell Mrs. Patton that these were not the foods that figured in his culture? That his digestive system did not know how to turn them into nourishment?” (185). Mrs. Patton, with her “bright plastic copy of a mother-smile that Arun remembers from another world and another time,” and her shallow if well-meaning attempt at cultural understanding, cannot feed Arun any more than she can feed her own children (194). The idea of a hollowness at the heart of plenty merely compounds Arun’s feeling of American society as synthetic, unable to offer him anything by way of culture or food which can sustain him: “He had traveled and he had stumbled into what was like a plastic representation of what he had known at home; not the real thing—which was plain, unbeautiful, misshapen, fraught and compromised—but the unreal thing—clean, bright, gleaming, without taste, savour or nourishment” (185).

This idea of emptiness in feasting finds ultimate embodiment in the damaged figure of the Patton’s bulimic daughter, Melanie. Here, bulimia, with its rhythm of fasting and feasting, can be read as setting up its own momentum which traps the female subject who can only await some external force to break her out of the vicious cycle. Thus Melanie is caught in the violent and lurching rhythm of her own gorging and purging, the pain of which only Arun realizes and recognizes. When he sees her in the agonizing throes of vomiting, he realizes that “[t]his is no plastic mock-up, no cartoon representation such as he has been seeing all summer; this is a real pain and a real hunger” (224). In Melanie, Arun sees an image of his sister, Uma:

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. (214)

Uma's spiritual, intellectual, and emotional starvation finds its physical counterpart in the inexpressible hunger underlying Melanie's eating disorder. This is Arun's epiphany and the one tangible link between two different worlds and two different subjects.

The novel ends on a suspended note, with an image of generosity and gratitude before departure and separation. As a parting gesture and by way of thanks, Arun gives Mrs. Patton the tea and shawl his family had sent him, the very same items we are told Uma was packing at the start of the novel. Arun places the shawl around Mrs. Patton's shoulders and the narrator observes, "An aroma rises from it, of another land: muddy, grassy, smoky, ashen. It swamps him, like a river, or like a fire" (227). This moment recalls somewhat poignantly the ending of Uma's narrative and her symbolic renewal in the river. In terms of narrative structure, we have come full circle since these objects bookend the text. But instead of totalizing closure, we get a sense that this is a temporary pause, a transitory moment of equilibrium in a transnational world marked by rupture, shifting alliances and connections amid gender and cultural asymmetries, before lives move on again, sometimes coasting on their own momentum, sometimes lurching forward, and sometimes, moving but not getting anywhere. Through her use of symbolism, metaphor and narrative structure, Desai's *Fasting, Feasting* sets forth into circulation and competition with other imaginative worlds in a larger public discourse its own set of images and ideas about the extent of connectedness possible and impossible in a transnational world.

## Notes

- 1 The idea of flexibility, like that of flow, implies a certain fluidity and is used to characterize the ways in which certain groups of people take advantage of increased travel opportunities and informational networks to transcend or maneuver between the territorial demands of nation-states in a globalized world. Ong, for example, uses the term "flexible citizenship" to describe the status and practices of Chinese transnationals who bank on international and often historical

- networks of diasporic capital and business links to forge a modernity moving between, above, and through the disciplinary structures of specific nation-states. See Ong and Nonini.
- 2 Grewal and Kaplan write, “Transnational is a term that signals attention to uneven and dissimilar circuits of culture and capital” (“Postcolonial Studies and Transnational Feminist Practices” 2). See also Grewal, Gupta and Ong.
  - 3 See, for example, Bartolovich.
  - 4 Tsing elaborates, “In the imagery with which I began, flow is valorized but not the carving of the channel; national and regional units are mapped as the baseline of change without attention to their shifting and contested ability to define the landscape. We lose sight of the coalitions of claimants as well as their partial and shifting claims. We lose touch with the material and institutional components through which powerful and central sites are constructed, from which convincing claims about units and scales can be made. We describe the landscape imagined within these claims rather than the culture and politics of scale making” (108).
  - 5 See Grewal and Kaplan, *Scattered Hegemonies*, for a critique of binary oppositions like centre and periphery and global and local which characterize world-system theory and discourse about globalization respectively (9–17).
  - 6 Ali’s novel was published in 2003 and generated considerable controversy because of its portrayal of the Bangladeshi community in London. For a sense of its reception and a reading of the novel that emphasizes its self-reflexiveness as a literary text, see Hiddleston.

## Works Cited

- Ali, Monica. *Brick Lane*. London: Doubleday, 2003.
- Appadurai, Arjun. “Disjunction and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy.” *The Anthropology of Globalization*. Ed. Jonathan Xavier Inda and Renato Rosaldo. London: Blackwell, 2002. 46–64.
- Appiah, K. Anthony. “Cosmopolitan Reading.” *Cosmopolitan Geographies: New Locations in Literature and Culture*. Ed. Vinay Dharwadker. New York: Routledge, 2001. 197–227.
- Bartolovich, Crystal. “Global Capital and Transnationalism.” *A Companion to Postcolonial Studies*. Ed. Henry Schwarz and Sangeeta Ray. Oxford: Blackwell, 2005. 126–61.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. “The Forms of Capital.” *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*. Ed. J.G. Richardson. New York: Greenwood, 1986. 241–58.
- Clifford, James. *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1997.
- Desai, Anita. *Games at Twilight*. 1978. London: Vintage, 1998.

- . *Clear Light of Day*. 1980. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2000.
- . *Fasting, Feasting*. 1999. London: Vintage, 2000.
- Grewal, Inderpal, and Caren Kaplan, eds. *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1994.
- . "Postcolonial Studies and Transnational Feminist Practices." *Jouvert: A J of Postcolonial Studies* 5 (2000). 6 Jun. 2005. <<http://social.chass.ncsu.edu/jouvert/v5i1/grewal.htm>>.
- . "Global Identities: Theorizing Transnational Studies of Sexuality." *GLQ: A J of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 7.4 (2001): 663–79.
- Grewal, Inderpal, Akhil Gupta, and Aihwa Ong. "Guest Editors' Introduction." *positions* 7.3 (1999): 653–66.
- Hiddleston, Jane. "Shapes and Shadows: (Un)veiling the Immigrant in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*." *J of Commonwealth Literature* 40.1 (2005): 57–72.
- Ong, Aihwa and Daniel M. Nonini, eds. *Underground Empires: The Cultural Politics of Modern Chinese Transnationalism*. New York: Routledge, 1997.
- Pheng Cheah. "Given Culture: Rethinking Cosmopolitical Freedom in Transnationalism." *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling Beyond the Nation*. Ed. Pheng Cheah and Bruce Robbins. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1998. 290–328.
- Tsing, Anna. "The Global Situation." *Schools of Thought: Twenty-five Years of Interpretive Social Science*. Ed. Joan Scott and Debra Keates. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2001. 104–38.
- Woodhull, Winnie. "Global Feminisms, Transnational Political Economies, Third World Cultural Production." *J of International Women's Studies* 4.2 (2003): 76–90.