



TASKS

- 1 Outline what Arun observes during the shopping trip. (30 %)

- 2 Analyze the means the author employs to show Arun's and Mrs Patton's differing attitudes towards shopping and consumption. (30 %)

- 3 Choose **one** of the following tasks:

 - 3.1 "If she noticed his expression, she seemed incapable of doing anything about it." (l. 70) (40 %)
Using this quote as a starting point, comment on the lack of cross-cultural understanding between Mrs Patton and Arun and suggest ways to avoid similar misunderstandings.

OR

- 3.2 Compare Arun's encounter with Western consumerism with the experiences of another character from literature or film who also finds himself/herself confronted with socio-cultural values different from his/her own. Assess the way they deal with their situations. (40 %)

OR

- 3.3 At the end of his stay Arun writes an article for an exchange programme brochure. He reflects on the chances and challenges of exchanges so that students and hosts can make the most of their shared experience. Write this article. (40 %)

Text A: Excerpt from the novel

Fasting, Feasting

By Anita Desai

Note: *Arun, an Indian exchange student in Massachusetts, is going shopping with his US host, Mrs Patton.*

[...] AND so they began their careers as shoppers, Mrs Patton driving Arun in her white Honda Civic to the supermarkets along Route Two and opening out to him a vista of experience he had never expected to have. He was perplexed to find these stores and their attendant parking lots, bank outlets, gas stations, Burger Kings, Belly Delis and Dunkin' Donuts stranded on huge stretches of tarmac spread upon fields
5 of meadow grass and summer flowers while in the distance the blue hazy line of woods smouldered and smoked against the blazing summer sky. Why would townspeople need to go into the country to shop? he wondered, but when he ventured to ask Mrs Patton, she could only give a little shake of her head and a small smile, not having understood his question: why should anyone question what was *there?*

10 She had already parked her car, swung out of it with her handbag, and was hurrying past the ranks of parked cars to the nest of stacked shopping carts in her eagerness to begin, while Arun trailed slowly after her, his eyes lingering over the cars that were not what he had previously known as cars – vehicles, designed to carry passengers from one point to another – but whole establishments, solid and rooted in their bulk, all laboriously acquired: weightage, history, even an inheritance. Their backseats piled with
15 baby seats, dog blankets, boxes of Kleenex, toys and mascots adhering to their windows like barnacles. Each a module designed to contain and propel lives and dreams.

Numberplates that read:

'I I♥ve my Car'

'Another Day, Another Dollar'

20 and stickers that proclaimed:

'Guns, Guts and God
Make America Great.'

Histories inscribed on strips of plastic:

25 'My Daughter and I Both Go To College,
My Money and Her Brains.'

Certificates of pride:

'Dartmouth.' 'University of Pennsylvania.' 'Williams.'

And warnings:

'Baby on Board'

30 'I Brake for Animals'

'One Nuclear Accident
Could Spoil Your Whole Day'

Arun was dizzied by these biographies, these statements of faith. He could have lingered here, constructing characters, lives to go with these containers, all safely invisible, but Mrs Patton was waiting for him at
35 the automatic doors. He could see her in her flat rubber-soled sandals, her yellow slacks and T-shirt that

bore the legend *Born to Shop*, her hands on the cart she had chosen. As with his question regarding the location of the supermarket, she could not understand what was preoccupying him. 'Everything okay?' she asked as he caught up at last.

40 Once inside the chilled air and controlled atmosphere of the market, she showed him how to shop by her own assured and accomplished example, all the tentativeness and timidity she showed at home gone from her. He learnt to follow her up and down the aisles obediently, at her own measured pace, and to read the labels on the cans and cartons with the high seriousness she brought to the exercise, studying the different brands not only for their different prices – as he was inclined to do – but for their relative food value and calorific content. [...] Mrs Patton's eyes gleamed as they approached the vegetables, all
45 shining and wet and sprinkled perpetually with a soft mist spread upon them, bringing out colours and presenting shapes impossible in the outside world. To Arun they seemed as unreal in their bright perfection as plastic representations, but she insisted on loading their cart with enough broccoli and bean sprouts, radishes and celery to feed the family for a month.

'But will they eat?' he asked worriedly as he helped her pull polythene bags off their rollers and open
50 them, then fill and close them with a twist.

'What does it matter, Ahroon? We will,' she laughed gaily, at the same time weighing a cantaloupe in her hands and testing it for ripeness.

'Excuse me,' said a voice, and a woman leant over to pick her own cantaloupe: she wore a T-shirt that declared *Shop Till You Drop*.

55 This unnerved Arun but Mrs Patton did not seem to see. 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. Arun, handing her the packages one by one – butter, yoghurt, milk to go in here, jam and cookies and cereal there – worried that they would never make their way through so much food but this did not seem to be the object of her purchases. Once it was all stored away in the gleaming white caves
60 where ice secretly whispered to itself, she was content. She did not appear to think there was another stage beyond this final, satisfying one.

It was left to him to extract what he wanted from this hoard, to slice tomatoes and lay lettuce on bread, or spill cereal into a bowl; she watched, with pride and complicity.

65 Arun ate with an expression of woe and a sense of mistreatment. 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? For the first time in his existence, he found he craved what he had taken for granted before and even at times thought an unbearable nuisance – those meals cooked and placed before him whether he wanted them or not (and how often he had not), that duty to consume what others thought he must consume.

70 If she noticed his expression, she seemed incapable of doing anything about it. She had provided: she had foraged, she had gathered, she had put forth. [...]

No, he had not escaped. He had travelled 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 nourish-
75 ment. [...]

(985 words)

Source: Desai, Anita. *Fasting, Feasting*. London: Vintage, 2000, 181-185



Annotations

Lines

4	tarmac	short for tarmacadam, a type of road surface
14	weightage	<i>here:</i> significance
15	barnacle	any marine animal attaching itself to ship bottoms and rocks
66	to crave	to want something greatly; to desire something eagerly
67-69	those meals cooked [...] he must consume	<i>note:</i> Arun is a vegetarian.
71	to forage	to search for and gather food in large amounts
73	fraught	<i>here:</i> filled, laden