

Fasting, Feasting Study Guide

Fasting, Feasting by Anita Desai

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Plot Summary

Anita Desai's novel of intricate family relations plays out in two countries, India and the United States. The core characters comprise a family living in a small town in India, where provincial customs and attitudes dictate the future of all children: girls are to be married off and boys are to become as educated as possible. The story contrasts the life of the main character, Uma, the family's older daughter, with Arun, the boy and baby of the family. Uma spends her life in subservience to her older demanding parents, while massive effort and energy is expended to insure Arun's education and placement in a university in Massachusetts.

Despite Uma's thirst for knowledge, she is removed from the convent school she adores in order to care for her new baby brother, Arun, as well as her parents. It is a role she maintains throughout her life. Uma is the picture of a bumbling incompetent who fails at almost everything she attempts, whether it is cooking, studying, or becoming a wife. Two attempts to arrange marriages for Uma end disastrously. She lives with this shame, even though she had nothing to do with the arrangements or the resulting deceptions.

In contrast, Uma's younger sister, Aruna, is beautiful, adept, and poised. Traditionally, the younger sister in a family cannot be married until any older sister has married and left the family home. However the family realizes that Uma's fate is to remain single; and plans are initiated to secure a husband for Aruna.

Although Uma is woefully clumsy and not exceptionally bright, she yearns for a higher purpose, as exhibited by her leanings toward social, cultural and spiritual activities. Uma is especially drawn to an old widowed aunt, named Mira-Masi, who encourages Uma's spiritual education in ashrams and other religious events, much to the chagrin of Uma's parents.

By the time Arun leaves for college in the United States, Uma is a woman in her forties, too old to capture the possibilities of a life of potential now open to her brother. Uma is forced to send letters dictated by her father to Arun inquiring about progress in Arun's new life; but Uma never begrudges Arun his more positive fate.

Arun is thrust into a completely different world by living in the United States, especially during the summer when he rooms with a family named the Pattons. The typical American suburban life, with its manicured lawns and barbecue grills, presents a facade beyond which Arun is allowed to glimpse to see the dysfunctional workings of its inhabitants. Arun is at once both intrigued and appalled by the abundance of material goods and food, while the Pattons remain within parameters seemingly starved for authenticity.



Part 1, Chapters 1 and 2

Part 1, Chapters 1 and 2 Summary

Anita Desai's novel of intricate family relations plays out in two countries, India and the United States. The core characters comprise a family living in a small town in India, where provincial customs and attitudes dictate the futures of all children: girls are to be married off and boys are to become as educated as possible. The story contrasts the life of the main character, Uma, the family's older daughter, with Arun, the boy and baby of the family. Uma spends her life in subservience to her older demanding parents, while massive effort and energy is expended to insure Arun's education and placement in a university in Massachusetts.

As the story begins, Uma's parents, Mama and Papa, swing on the veranda of their home and issue orders to Uma related to housekeeping duties. Uma silently but begrudgingly obeys. Uma relates to the housekeeper some of Mama's domestic orders for the day and then returns to her parents on the veranda to take dictation from Papa for a letter to be sent to Arun who is studying at a university in America. Mama comes from a family of prosperous merchants. She married Papa, whose career as a lawyer has secured a nice lifestyle for his family. Papa continually speaks of the value of his own education and the hardships he endured to achieve it, while Mama's stories are filled mostly with stories of food and family.

Papa has no use for frivolities. Mama builds her life around meeting Papa's needs; so the household is one of little gaiety. Mama sees Papa off each morning, making sure to pack Papa's tennis clothes, so that Papa can play before returning home each evening where he will find Mama waiting for him on the veranda. Each night Mama instructs Uma to have lemonade prepared for Papa, and the family settles in for their routinely quiet evenings.

The only social occasions for the family include business-related events and the occasional evening of Mama and Papa playing cards at the club with friends. Uma and Arun resign themselves to a life comfortable in accommodation but sorely lacking in joy and social stimulation.

Papa has asked the family's driver to prepare the car for an outing. Papa, Mama, and Uma will spend a Sunday afternoon at a park. Papa is irritated by the number of people in the park. They apparently have the same idea of spending some family leisure time. Papa's method of managing this uncontrollable situation is to barge through the crowds leaving Mama and Uma to follow behind at a more leisurely pace. Papa walks the circumference of the park three times in the time that it takes Mama and Uma to circle it just once. Papa's impatience with his wife and daughter demands that the family leaves the park and return home. Upon their return home, Mama and Papa assume their customary position on the veranda swing, and Uma is dispatched to bring cold lemonade.



Uma and Aruna are so aware of their parents' feelings and mutual opinions that the actual atmosphere of the house can literally change based on Mama and Papa's approval or disapproval of a recent event. Uma and Aruna, who are now young ladies, sense a powerful change in the household when the secret of Mama's pregnancy emerges from furtive conversations and doctor visits. To Uma and Aruna, the fact of sexual contact between their parents is an idea both repugnant and fascinating. The mores of the family have led the girls to believe that sexuality is a dirty thing; and the fact that their parents, at this stage of their lives, could have partaken in such behavior brings both awe and shame on the household.

Despite Mama's despair and Papa's embarrassment, the family accepts Mama's pregnancy and tends to her needs during a sweltering summer at whose end Mama delivers a healthy baby boy. Papa retains his composure at the hospital; but upon returning home, Papa's joy overtakes him. He behaves like a young boy as he screams with delight to the relatives who have gathered to welcome the young male, Arun, to the family.

When Mama returns home from the hospital, Mama enlists the help of Uma, the older daughter, to assist in caring for the new baby. Uma's clumsiness, and her protests that her schoolwork is suffering do not faze Mama. She is still weak from the delivery and does not see the value of a girl becoming so immersed in studies. Before long, Uma learns the unhappy news that Mama and Papa will not allow Uma to return to the convent school, so that she has more time to help care for Arun. Mama tries to console her by reminding Uma of her failing grades at school and that staying at home will be less stressful. Besides, Uma needs to learn domestic skills so that she will be prepared to marry when the time comes. Yet Uma is not at all pleased with this decision for her life.

Part 1, Chapters 1 and 2 Analysis

The author establishes some important parameters for the novel in this first chapter. The family lives a comfortable and respectable life due to Papa's legal profession and respect in the community. Mama does not venture out into public and stays at home to oversee the domestic help and monitor the children. Mama and Papa were married at a young age, in a marriage arranged by their parents, as is the custom in India. The couple has fully adapted to their marriage by this time and presents such a unified persona that Uma thinks of them as one person. She silently refers to them as MamandPapa, MamaPapa, and PapaMama. To Uma, this combined personality does not allow any distinguishing characteristics and establishes her parents as an immovable force in the household.

This chapter further defines the plight of female children born in India. Families desire male children to continue the family line and do not attempt to conceal their delight when a boy child is born, as in the case with Arun. Female children are raised without the benefit of much, if any, education until they become of age and can leave home in arranged marriages. Uma's disappointment at having to leave the convent school is



heightened when Papa does not intervene and save Uma from a fate of domesticity. Unwittingly, Mama tries to console Uma by reminding Uma of her failures at school; but Uma is distraught by the cessation of her life outside the home. This is Uma's first encounter with societal restrictions as well as with major disappointment

with her own parents.



Part 1, Chapters 3 and 4

Part 1, Chapters 3 and 4 Summary

Uma is now twenty years old and firmly entrenched in the household, tending to both Mama and Papa's demands. One day, Uma stealthily leaves the house with some money she has saved and escapes to St. Mary's School, the convent school, where she hopes to plead with Mother Agnes to continue her education. When Uma arrives at the school, she frantically searches the classrooms until she encounters Mother Agnes and collapses in a weeping mess at the nun's feet.

Unfortunately, Mother Agnes does not rally to Uma's defense and encourages Uma to concentrate on her domestic duties, which are also important for young women to learn. When Mother Agnes attempts to steady Uma in preparation for leaving the school, Uma collapses again, this time writhing and foaming at the mouth. Eventually, Uma recovers and is returned home in the school's van, accompanied by one of the school nuns.

Mama's fury over Uma's inappropriate display at the convent school just increases Mama's fervor that Uma will be even more confined to the home and will be in charge of Arun's care. Mama essentially assumes the role of overseer of Arun's care. She reports Arun's daily activities and food consumption every evening to Papa.

Mama's position in the household and in the community is elevated with the birth of a son, and Mama's relationship with Papa is even further cemented. If anything, giving birth to a son has elevated Mama almost to Papa's status in the community; and Mama quietly gloats in her accomplishment, both privately and publicly.

As Arun grows, much attention is lavished on his physical development. Papa realizes, much to his chagrin, that Arun will not eat meat it is a habit Papa has tried to instill in his family as a sign of a better educated and more progressive household. Despite Mama's vegetarianism, Papa demands meat at his meals and looks with disfavor upon those who refuse to eat meat.

Papa retires from his law practice. Mama and Papa rarely go out anymore, leaving even fewer times when Uma can be alone in the house to dream and have some privacy. One night, when Uma thinks she is alone for the evening, her privacy is interrupted by Ayah, a domestic worker who had cared for Uma and Aruna as children and who has returned to the household to help care for Arun. Ayah invades Uma's privacy and begins to brush Uma's hair in an attempt to create a sense of closeness; but Uma knows that Ayah is interested only in Uma's saris and Uma parts with most of her clothing so that Ayah will leave her in peace.

Another female presence in Uma's life, Mira-Masi, a distant relative of Mama, appears at the household periodically en route to some spiritual adventure or pilgrimage. Mira-Masi is widowed and has more freedom to determine how she wants to live. This



annoys Mama, who attempts to limit Mira-Masi's influence over Uma and Aruna. Uma, however, revels in Mira-Masi's stories of Hinduism and delights in the tales of the gods and goddesses whom Mira-Masi almost considers to be her own family members.

When Mira-Masi visits, Uma accompanies her on the daily visits to the temple where Uma watches Mira-Masi participate in the sacred rituals. Uma especially likes to accompany Mira-Masi when the old woman visits the Ganges River for her ritual dip. Mama and Papa frown upon this but nevertheless indulge the old woman's desires for Uma, Aruna, and Arun's companionship. On one occasion, Uma nearly drowns, as the rushing water takes her under until she is rescued by another ritual participant.

Part 1, Chapters 3 and 4 Analysis

The author uses much visual imagery in the novel, setting vibrant scenes that could otherwise be considered ordinary. For example, she writes, "True, a koel was calling in the neem tree—piercingly, questingly, over and over again—but its voice was the voice of summer itself; noticeable when it first arrived, along with the blaze and the lethargy of the season, and then just a part of the background, a thread in its worn, faded fabric." Page 40. The author defines the bird's call as the voice of summer that, at first, is noticed at the change of season; but as the season progresses, the noise is likened to a thread that is woven into the season as if it were part of the seasonal tapestry. This is a much more lyrical way of describing the visual and auditory sensory characteristics than if the author were to simply say that a bird sang throughout the summer season.

In addition to the visual cues about the story's setting, the author also uses auditory clues to help add dimension the story. For example, she writes, "Then all the bells would ring—tang! tang!—and the conch-shells blow—hrr-oom, hrr-oom—" Page 62 These elements are also examples of onomatopoeia, which means that the sounds are spelled out as words and those words describe the sounds which actually sound like the sounds they describe.

This chapter is also important because of the presence of Mira-Masi, a strong female character, in Uma's life. Uma is not quite sure why Mira-Masi's visits have always been so appealing, but she begins to understand that Mira-Masi represents an independent female figure that is very rare in Indian society and culture.



Part 1, Chapter 5

Part 1, Chapter 5 Summary

Uma's world suddenly brightens one day when her adventurous cousin, Ramu, arrives unannounced for a visit. Mama and Papa do not approve of Ramu's ill manners in arriving without warning and intending to stay for awhile without benefit of an invitation. Still, Mama and Papa do their best to be accommodating. Mama and Papa are further outraged when Ramu takes Uma to dinner at the Carlton Hotel, the finest restaurant in town.

Uma, who is not accustomed to drinking alcohol, enjoys the shandys that Ramu orders. They laugh and enjoy the evening together until the hotel band leaves and the dining room lights are shut off. Papa and Mama are waiting angrily when Uma and Ramu return home. Uma is sent to her room in shame for her behavior this evening.

Mira-Masi returns for another visit on her way to an ashram where she hopes to have her failing health restored. Mama does not think Mira-Masi should make the trip, but Mira-Masi suggests that Uma accompany her and Mama reluctantly agrees. Mira-Masi seems to rally in this situation; but Uma is overcome with heat exhaustion and fatigue on this trip, which is an adventure completely unlike anything Uma has ever experienced.

It is late afternoon when the bus stops at the town where Uma and Mira-Masi find a tonga ride out of the bustling city to the ashram, situated at the foot of some hills in the country. The ashram's gatekeeper greets Mira-Masi warmly. Mira-Masi and Uma are shown to their quarters, a bare room with a cement floor just off the veranda of a long low building. The atmosphere is extremely devoid of human noises, with the exception of morning and evening prayers. Mira-Masi immediately sinks into her spiritual rituals, ignoring everything but her prayers; and Uma is delighted to be so unsupervised for the first time in her life.

Uma does not participate in the spiritual rituals with the others and maintains a polite distance. She doesn't reject the others, but also lets them know that she is not embracing their faith. One afternoon, though, Mira-Masi, in a fevered state, tells Uma that Uma has the mark of the Lord. Uma suddenly enters into a violent trance, writhing on the floor and shrieking until one of the pilgrims strikes Uma's back so that she may catch her breath. Uma vomits and the onlookers scurry away, unsure of the significance of what they have just witnessed.

Before long, Uma is surprised by a visit from Ramu and Arun, who have been sent by Papa to bring Uma home from the ashram. Apparently, Papa and Mama had assumed Uma would be gone for only a week, and Uma has already been at the ashram for a month. Despite Mira-Masi's wishes that Uma remain, Ramu is able to convince Uma to



return home with him and Arun. It is not until Uma is well on the way home that she realizes that she has lost the freedom and serenity of life at the ashram.

Part 1, Chapter 5 Analysis

Just as the author had introduced elements of Western culture into the story with Uma's attendance at the Catholic convent earlier in the story, there are other elements that arise in this chapter. When Ramu and Uma dine at the hotel, Ramu calls out to the band to play several American songs such as "My Darling Clementine" and "She'll Be Coming 'Round the Mountain." Just the act of dining out is a Westernized act, especially for Uma who has never eaten at a restaurant in her entire life. The author does this to contrast the American and Indian cultures, which are beginning to collide in Uma's world.

The author also connects Uma's strange, almost epileptic, fits to religious or spiritual events. The first time Uma collapses in one of her fits, she is in the presence of Mother Agnes at the Catholic convent school. In this chapter, Uma spins out of control, writhes on the floor, and shrieks hysterically when Mira-Masi tells Uma that she has the mark of the Lord on her. It is not clear yet why these fits happen at these specific times; but the author may be trying to symbolize Uma's need for release from her imprisoned life. Spirituality may be one method of achieving some sort of freedom. The fits may also symbolize the precipice of a new life for Uma who is likened to an infant when the pilgrim at the ashram hits Uma on the back to restart her breathing just as if Uma is freshly born again.



Part 1, Chapters 6 and 7

Part 1, Chapters 6 and 7 Summary

Ramu's sister, and one of Uma's favorite cousins, Anamika, is promised in marriage to a man much older than the bride-to-be. Uma and Aruna are struck with disappointment for the beautiful Anamika to be tied to someone so seemingly unsuitable for such a girl, on whom fortune has always smiled. It is clear at the wedding ceremony that the bridegroom and his mother feel superior to Anamika's family, but require Anamika's beauty to further the groom's social and business future.

Before long, the family hears of Anamika's trying life in Bombay with her new family. Anamika's mother-in-law requires Anamika to clean and cook constantly and, in her spare moments, to rub her mother-in-law's feet. There is also news that Anamika suffers a miscarriage after receiving a beating at the hands of her husband, leaving her barren for life. Although Uma wishes that Anamika could return home, Mama tells Uma that even though Anamika has a miserable life in Bombay, Anamika cannot return home and bring shame upon her family.

Uma is now considered to be of marriageable age and the female relatives in the family begin to send photos and letters of recommendation about men who may be suitable mates. Uma is allowed to view the photographs and is not at all pleased with the prospects, but must act the part of a grateful daughter when one man is selected to visit to meet Uma. This particular man is the son of a friend of Mrs. Joshi, the next-door neighbor.

Before the arrival of the prospective bridegroom and his mother, Mama dresses Uma in a special sari, braids her hair, and instructs Uma to declare that Uma herself has made the treats to be offered at the meeting. Uma does not know how to cook and shows no interest in it; but Mama feels that cooking is at least one positive aspect of Uma's character that could be offered. Uma is not a beautiful girl and needs other qualities to compensate for her physical shortcomings.

Finally, the prospective bridegroom and his mother arrive. Mama extends the utmost hospitality, even though the guests act superior and the young man sits at the far end of the veranda, refusing to participate in the conversation. After what amounts to a significant inspection of Uma, the woman and her son leave Mama and Uma relieved that the stressful encounter has ended. Tradition dictates that the groom's parents should extend a return invitation; but no such invitation arrives. After several disappointing weeks, Mrs. Joshi tells Mama that the young man had wanted his mother to request Aruna for his bride, not Uma.

Of course Mama cannot consider such a request because Aruna is only thirteen-years-old. As Aruna grows up, marriage requests for the young girl continue to arrive. Unfortunately for Aruna, tradition dictates that the oldest girl in the family must marry



before any younger sister may be allowed to do so. Efforts to find a suitable match for Uma are disappointing until one day Mama and Papa see an advertisement in a newspaper, placed by a family looking for a bride for their only son.

Mama and Papa travel to the city to meet the prospective bridegroom and find that he is from a prosperous family of cloth merchants that is building a grand new house. The father explains to Papa that more money is needed to complete the new home, thus the importance of a bride's dowry. Of course, the bride would live in this fine new home, a fact that seals the deal for the property-hungry Mama. The dowry and engagement are negotiated immediately.

Mama's invitations to the bridegroom's family are refused repeatedly, prompting a visit by Mama and Papa to the groom's family home. Mama and Papa learn that the young man has opted to continue an education instead of marrying. Mama's shame is surpassed only by Papa's anger that Uma's dowry money has already been spent by the groom's family. The groom's father reasons that he kept his promise to put the money toward the building of the fine home in which Uma was to live; the father cannot help that fate had other plans for the groom. The next day Mrs. Joshi tells Mama that this unscrupulous family has a history of defrauding families out of dowry money because of their fear that their less desirable daughters will never marry.

Part 1, Chapters 6 and 7 Analysis

This chapter makes very clear the questionable prospects of young girls who are married off to seemingly suitable husbands. Anamika's fate is sealed at the hands of her abusive husband and mother-in-law. She cannot leave the marriage because leaving would bring shame on her own family according to Indian culture. Even Uma notes the irony in the situation that the beautiful and gifted Anamika, to whom life has always been kind, suffers a miserable fate, even more miserable than the suffocating and hopeless existence lived by Uma.

Once more the author points out more traditions of Indian culture that either belittle or sublimate women. Uma is forced to go on display to men she neither knows nor cares for, just to save face for her family. Uma has no choice but to obey her parents because a woman has no chance of supporting herself with a career. Uma is especially vulnerable because she has not been allowed to continue her grade school education at the convent. Ironically, the desirable Aruna is also handicapped by this system because she may not marry, in spite of several offers, until her older sister has been married. Up to this time, Papa has considered the business of arranging marriages to be women's work; but now that Uma's dowry has been so fraudulently stolen, Papa also feels the shame of the flaws in this antiquated system.



Part 1, Chapter 8

Part 1, Chapter 8 Summary

The marriage proposals for Aruna continue to arrive; but still no one will ask for Uma's hand in marriage. Uma cannot help but notice that Aruna instinctively knows how to dress and behave in public, while Uma feels awkward and dowdy. Even Aruna begins to lose her patience with the situation that thwarts her own progress. She starts to gently chide Uma into changing her appearance and behavior in order to make herself more appealing to prospective bridegrooms.

Mama actively responds to matrimonial ads in the newspapers; but most people reply that they are looking for someone younger or more beautiful than Uma. After many rejections the family is disheartened about Uma's prospects for marriage. Then, one day, a response comes that a man is interested in meeting Uma. The prospective bridegroom is older, was married before, and works in the pharmaceutical industry. The man is positioned as being responsible and making a good living as a traveling salesman. Although the man lives with his extended family, which is not an ideal situation for a newly married couple, Mama and Papa decide to proceed with marriage negotiations because the options for Uma are decidedly slim.

Because Uma's first marriage encounter had ended disastrously, Mama and Papa decide to dispense with preliminaries and proceed with the formalities. For several days, Mama directs massive preparations of celebratory foods and Papa tends to the operational details of the upcoming nuptials. Finally the day comes when the bridegroom arrives with selected members of his family. Uma is taken aback by the man's appearance; he is as old as Papa, extremely overweight, with a sour, pockmarked face. The groom's sullen demeanor does nothing to redeem himself in Uma's opinion either.

After the long ceremony, Uma boarded a train with her new husband and his relatives who ignore Uma on the trip and make only derogatory comments about the wedding feast. The train trip lasts all night. When morning comes, the train stops long enough for Uma and her new family to disembark and make their way to the family home. Uma is left with her rude mother-in-law and other female family members while her new husband leaves for work. Uma is given domestic chores and learns that her husband is to be away for quite awhile, a fact that Uma shares in letters home to Papa and Mama.

Before long, Papa arrives with the news that Uma's new husband is already married with four children and living in another town. The husband's pharmaceutical factory is in great decline, which is the reason Uma's dowry had been so attractive. Papa, infuriated at having been duped once more in this matrimonial game, rants at the family members to no avail and leaves the house with Uma in tow. On the train ride home, Uma cowers in shame while Papa vents to all those who will listen about the injustice of Uma's misfortune.



Uma's marriage is soon annulled and the family determines to stop any more attempts to arrange a marriage for the twice-scorned Uma. Mira-Masi tells Mama that the Lord has rejected the two men in Uma's life because they had not been worthy of Uma; but Mama finds little comfort in the fact that her older daughter is to remain unmarried living in Mama and Papa's home.

Part 1, Chapter 8 Analysis

The author uses much figurative language, and in this chapter writes: "The tightly knit fabric of family that had seemed so stifling and confining now revealed holes and gaps that were frightening—perhaps the fabric would not hold, perhaps it would not protect after all." Page 127. This is an example of a metaphor, which is a technique to show a direct relationship where one thing or idea substitutes for another. In this case, the family is equated to a finely woven fabric, which had stifled Uma and then begins to degenerate much like cloth that is worn or abused.

This chapter also serves as a climax for Uma's life. Uma is no longer considered to be marriageable and will not need to transition into another life as a single woman living in her parents' home. It is interesting to note that Uma's feelings about her situation are barely acknowledged by the family; Mama even refusing to talk about the marriage disasters almost as if she were the one to have suffered the humiliation instead of the dejected Uma.



Part 1, Chapter 9

Part 1, Chapter 9 Summary

On an evening when Mama and Papa have gone out to play cards, Uma finds herself in a rare moment alone in the house. Because Uma has so little time to herself, she delights in indulging in one of her favorite pastimes without fear of interruption by Mama, Papa or the cook. For years, Uma has collected Christmas cards given to her by Mrs. O'Henry, the Baptist missionary's wife, Mother Agnes, and other friends who know of Uma's love for the cards.

After putting the card collection away, Uma stealthily dials Mrs. O'Henry's phone number, afraid that Papa will appear at any minute and demand an explanation for this unwarranted behavior. Uma learns that Mrs. O'Henry is not at home so Uma slams down the phone and proceeds to the veranda where she swings in the moonlight until Mama and Papa return home.

Before long, Aruna has accepted a marriage arrangement with Arvind, an exciting man with a very prosperous future. The wedding plans are very elaborate and in stark contrast to the small celebration held for Uma's doomed nuptials. It is at an elegant pre-wedding cocktail party that Uma collapses into one of her fits, writhing and jerking spastically on the floor. Uma's humiliation is superseded only by Aruna's embarrassment and anger that Uma should behave so horribly on such an important day. The wedding day proceeds beautifully and Aruna is whisked away by her bridegroom to live a stylish life in Bombay.

Aruna's new life keeps her preoccupied with entertaining Arvind's family and friends, leaving little or no time for Mama, Papa, and Uma. Before long, Aruna has two children. Yet she rarely takes them to visit Mama and Papa, rendering the children as strangers to their own grandparents. One time Aruna brings her in-laws to Mama and Papa's house for a visit. Aruna cringes the entire time because of the provincial ways of her parents, in contrast to her sophisticated in-laws.

During this visit, both families take a trip on the Ganges River to partake in ritual baths; a custom frowned upon by Mama, who perceives such potentially dangerous outings as little proof of one's religious fidelity. As the others tumble out of the boat and into the sacred water, Uma begins to sink rapidly and is rescued by some of the women who pull her to a sandbar to recover. Uma recalls the experience as being more exciting than frightening and regrets that the women pulled her from the profound feelings she experienced in the dark, murky water.

Part 1, Chapter 9 Analysis

This chapter is important because it compares and contrasts the lives of the two sisters, Uma and Aruna. Uma has endured humiliating attempts at marriage and now lives a

relatively settled life. Aruna, in contrast, has achieved the pinnacle of marriage success; yet she is not happy with her life, always finding fault with her husband, in-laws, and parents. The author uses the literary technique of irony to display Aruna's unhappiness when she is the one who supposedly has achieved all that should engender joy and contentment for a woman in Indian society.

This chapter is also important in that it shows another emotional transition for Uma. When Uma goes underwater during the sacred rituals, she revels in the speed of the current pulling her along and the dark water rushing over her. For the first time in her life, Uma feels exhilaration and is angry when the women save her from the experience. The event is also important because it symbolically marks Uma's immersion into a more spiritual path in her life.



Part 1, Chapters 10 and 11

Part 1, Chapters 10 and 11 Summary

Mrs. O'Henry invites Uma to a coffee party, much to the chagrin of Mama and Papa who consider such events silly and unnecessary. Mama also feels that Mrs. O'Henry, being the wife of a Baptist minister, has alternative motives in inviting Uma to a party - such as converting her to the Baptist religion.

In spite of her parents' objections, Uma attends Mrs. O'Henry's coffee party. The other guests are mildly disdainful of Mrs. O'Henry's food made from typical Western style recipes. Mrs. O'Henry senses that Uma is different, however, and tries to establish a friendly relationship. Mrs. O'Henry gives Uma some new Christmas cards for Uma's collection and asks Uma about Arun, who is attending school in Massachusetts where Mrs. O'Henry's sister lives. Uma reluctantly leaves the coffee party and returns home to the sullen atmosphere with Mama and Papa.

Uma thinks about Arun's childhood and the one word that best defines it: education. If Mama's job had been to prepare Uma and Aruna for marriage then Papa's mission had been to prepare Arun for the business world. Even when Arun had been very young, Papa had stressed the importance of the best education for a boy. No expense had been spared in providing tutors and private education. Every night after school, Arun was expected to study with his tutors until the daylight was fading, and Papa allowed one hour of exercise. Arun, however, always chose to fall into his bed and read comic books as his only escape from Papa's demands and expectations.

Mama had hoped that Arun's diligence would earn him some holiday time; but Papa was relentless in prodding Arun to complete his studies in order to get exemplary test grades, which would hopefully earn an education in the United States. Eventually, a university in Massachusetts accepted Arun. Papa collapsed in relief; but Arun seemed unmoved by any emotion at all. After Arun left for school, Papa had retired. This left even more time for he and Mama to swing on the veranda and await letter from Arun.

Papa wants to send an aerogramme to Arun and enlists Uma's help with the writing. Papa dictates his well wishes and shares with Arun that Mrs. O'Henry's sister in Massachusetts, Mrs. Patton, is willing to let Arun live with the Patton family during summer break from school. The university does not allow students to stay in dormitories during the summer months; so the offer from Mrs. Patton is quite welcome, except to Mama, who worries that Arun will not be cared for properly.

Later that day, Uma receives a phone call from Mother Agnes, requesting that Uma help Mrs. O'Henry with the upcoming Christmas bazaar. Uma accepts enthusiastically, despite Mama and Papa's glares and snide remarks. Uma drifts off into her own thoughts about how heavenly the bazaar will be with all the music, games, and wonderful foods.



Uma strikes up a closer friendship with Mrs. Joshi from next door, who encourages Uma to expand her horizons and even consider the possibility of getting a job. Although Uma frequently thinks of escape from her life, the idea of a career is completely foreign. She does not even know how to begin such a venture. At times, Uma allows her daydreams to descend into meditation. She remembers Mira-Masi's influence on her life and lets herself slip even further into nothingness so she can enjoy only blackness.

Part 1, Chapters 10 and 11 Analysis

Although Arun is Papa's favorite child, and the one on whom much effort and expense are expended, Arun does not understand this favorable position and does not extract any joy from it. Although Uma loves Arun, she cannot help but feel some jealousy and irritation at Arun's advantages and his resulting lack of enthusiasm.

The author uses the literary technique of flashback in this chapter as Uma recalls Arun's childhood. At this point in the novel, Arun has already left for school in the United States; but the reader has not learned much about Arun's life at all. By utilizing the flashback, the author fills in the blanks about Arun's childhood and departure for school via Uma's mental imagery.

This chapter is important because it shows the seeds of change being planted in Uma's mind. Outside influences, such as requests for Uma to help in social events, are beginning to creep into Uma's world, much to Mama and Papa's consternation. Even the next-door neighbor, Mrs. Joshi, begins to encourage Uma to expand her life, an encouragement that Mama would have quickly squashed had she been aware of it. Uma struggles instinctively to not let her life drift away, but she is always mindful of Mama and Papa's disdain for change or anything that will upset the household.



Part 1, Chapters 12 and 13

Part 1, Chapters 12 and 13 Summary

It is a particularly hot and dusty day when Uma, having tended to Mama and Papa's every tireless need, finally reaches her breaking point and refuses to attend to one more task. Mama and Papa cannot believe Uma's outburst of exasperation, but they do not follow Uma to her room where she immerses herself in some books won at the Christmas bazaar. Finally, Mama beats on Uma's door demanding that Uma inform the cook that it is time for Papa's coffee and biscuits. Uma grudgingly completes the task and returns to the veranda to deliver the coffee to an astonished Papa.

Mira-Masi continues to visit the family; but Uma notices that the old woman's health and spirit both seem diminished. Eventually, Mira-Masi returns to a temple in the Himalayas to live a singular, religious life and would never see Uma again.

An unexpected visitor to Mama and Papa's home, Dr. Dutt, has come to inquire whether Uma would be interested in helping to run a nurse's dormitory at the Medical Institute. Mama and Papa immediately shoot down the idea of Uma needing to work outside the home; but Dr. Dutt persists in the hopes that Uma will be able to share her opinion on the proposition. However Uma is silenced by Mama once more, and Dr. Dutt leaves without her mission accomplished.

Uma boldly phones Dr. Dutt a short while later. She does this when Mama and Papa are out for the evening. Uma pleads her case for the position at the nurse's dormitory. Dr. Dutt tells Uma that Mama is ill and needs a hysterectomy. This means that Uma will be needed at home.

One night while Mama and Papa swing on the veranda, the electricity in the area goes out. Mama instructs Uma to tell Mali, their domestic, to walk to the sub-station to inform the authorities of the blackout. While Mama, Papa, and Uma await Mali's return, a telegram arrives notifying the family that Anamika has died. Sometime later Mama and Papa learn that Anamika had committed suicide by lighting herself on fire on the veranda of her home. Anamika's neighbors tell the family that they believe that Anamika's husband and mother-in-law killed Anamika by burning her to death and claiming that the death had been a suicide. Mama and Papa host Anamika's family when they return home for the ritual of spreading Anamika's ashes in the sacred river.

Part 1, Chapters 12 and 13 Analysis

The author uses the literary technique of personification to describe the idea of Mira-Masi's independence imagined by Uma. "Only at night the idea that there was someone who *had* won what she desired would come winging through the dark, rustling her awake, sweeping across her and making her sit up so she could see its shadowy passage and watch it fade into the paleness of daybreak, the sound of its beating wings



overtaken by the cacophony of the mynah birds in the sun-drenched trees outside." Page 203. Obviously, independence does not have wings that allow it to fly, rustle or make loud beating sounds; but the author uses this technique to figuratively describe the elusive and powerful quality of the independence that has eluded Uma her entire life.

The arrival of the telegram at the time of the blackout is a symbolic technique used by the author to relate the news of Anamika's death. Anamika, who had been a beautiful, intelligent girl, had been married for twenty-five years to an abusive husband with a tyrannical mother whose role in Anamika's death is in question. The darkness resulting from the electricity outage coincides perfectly with the news that the brightness of Anamika's life is officially gone out.



Part 2, Chapters 14, 15, 16 and 17

Part 2, Chapters 14, 15, 16 and 17 Summary

The school year has finished and Arun prepares to move for his summer stay with the Patton family in Massachusetts. As Arun walks to his temporary home, he is struck by the tidy houses sitting amidst the verdant landscape of a prosperous subdivision. Arun is particularly struck by how large the houses are in proportion to the small number of people residing in them. When Arun finally arrives at the Patton home, Mrs. Patton, who had been putting away groceries, greets him warmly. Mr. Patton grills supper on the back patio and Arun can tell from the smell that it will be some sort of red meat, a thought which disgusts Arun's sensibilities. Mrs. Patton shares Arun's disdain for meat but feels powerless to change the family's dining rituals.

Mr. Patton calls the family to dinner and, when Arun emerges from washing up in the bathroom, Arun encounters Melanie Patton sitting on the staircase in the dark and eating fists full of salted peanuts. Melanie's sullen demeanor discourages any further interaction and Arun proceeds outside to the patio area to join Mr. and Mrs. Patton. Mr. Patton finishes his grilling with a flourish and proudly presents the charred meat. He is more than a little annoyed when Mrs. Patton informs Mr. Patton that Arun is a vegetarian. Melanie and her brother, Rod, do not appear for dinner, which is spent in uncomfortable silence due to Mr. Patton's petulant behavior for not being appreciated for purchasing and grilling select meat for his family.

Arun's first year at the university had been very trying for someone who values his privacy. All the typical antics of college students, especially the weekend parties, are totally foreign to Arun's sensibilities. Even though other students try to include Arun in conversations and activities, Arun always makes excuses for why he cannot participate. Arun is completely happy with his new, private life, which is in stark contrast to the cluttered, noisy life he had shared with his family in India.

Faced with the reality of needing to find a place to live for the summer, Arun's first thought is to secure a room in some nondescript housing unit where he could become invisible, with no demands on him to interact with others. Yet finding such accommodations proves fruitless. To Arun's surprise, the aerogramme from Papa arrives announcing Mrs. Patton's offer to house Arun for the summer. This irritates Arun because he feels he is being monitored all the way from India. Reluctantly, Arun phones Mrs. Patton to take her up on her generous offer and silently wonders how he will make it through the summer.

Part 2, Chapters 14, 15, 16 and 17 Analysis

In this section, the author changes the setting of the novel from India to Massachusetts in the United States. Through Arun's eyes, the reader experiences the differences in the



two countries and cultures, such as the spaciousness afforded the suburban families when his own neighborhood in India had been cramped and noisy. Of particular note is the difference between Arun's Hindu beliefs that cows are sacred, in contrast to Mr. Patton's enthusiastic red meat grilling rituals almost every night.

In these chapters, the author tries to establish Arun's extreme need for privacy, a characteristic driven by his boyhood filled with intense study and monitoring by Papa and an endless string of tutors. Arun is doing his best to succeed in his education, despite the fact that this goal is Papa's, not his own. This resentment never surfaces until Arun receives the aerogramme from Papa announcing a solution to Arun's summer housing problem. Arun feels as if Papa is monitoring his life all the way from India and the resentment, coupled with no better housing solution, sends Arun to his summer fate with irritation and resentment.



Part 2, Chapters 18, 19, 20 and 21

Part 2, Chapters 18, 19, 20 and 21 Summary

Mrs. Patton is eager to make Arun feel comfortable and tries to determine how she may prepare food which Arun is accustomed to eating at home in India. Arun does not like the extra attention and offers to eat his meals in town before and after his job at the library. Mrs. Patton would prefer that Arun instruct her on how to cook his favorite foods. Arun shares that he is a vegetarian, a fact that pleases Mrs. Patton. She has always had the same inclinations but has never been brave enough to resist her family's eating habits. Mrs. Patton happily declares that she and Arun will be vegetarians together and declares that they will stock up at the grocery to make delicious meals this summer.

Arun's first visit to a suburban shopping mall is filled with awe and disgust as he sees the blatant shows of abundance: minivans whose interiors are filled with enough items to house a family; the overflowing shelves and bins of foods of every description; and especially Mrs. Patton's immersion into the vegetarian lifestyle armed only with her check book and good intentions. Arun does not have the heart to tell Mrs. Patton that vegetarian cooking in America is quite different from the raw, unprocessed vegetarian diet in India and attempts to eat the dishes prepared by Mrs. Patton. Mr. Patton continues to bring home big cuts of red meat to grill and does not acknowledge Mrs. Patton's declaration of her new vegetarian lifestyle.

As Arun adjusts to life in the Patton household, he begins to understand some of the family dynamics with the Pattons' two children. Rod, the Patton's teenaged son, is an athlete. His life revolves around eating the right food and getting the correct exercise and weight training program. Melanie constantly eats junk food instead of regular meals. One night Arun finds Melanie vomiting in the bathroom and she growls at Arun to leave her alone.

One night Arun must walk home because his job at the library ran late and he has missed the last bus. Suddenly, Arun is overtaken by Rod, who is jogging home. Rod asks Arun to join him but Arun declines because he is no athletic match for Rod's prowess. When Arun finally arrives at the Patton home, Rod and Mr. Patton are watching a ballgame on TV. However Arun does not join them because he does not feel a part of the family.

Mrs. Patton encourages Arun to cook an Indian dish for his supper and Arun accommodates, although has never cooked before and cannot recall ever seeing his mother cook. Arun produces a bowl of food, which Melanie calls offensive. Arun silently agrees. Mrs. Patton admonishes Melanie for her rude behavior and tells Melanie that she should eat things other than peanuts, cookies and candy bars. Melanie does not listen and proceeds to her room to binge on Hershey chocolate bars.



Part 2, Chapters 18, 19, 20 and 21 Analysis

It is ironic that Papa insisted on eating meat in his Indian household; even when others in the house did not eat it, because he thought it to be a status symbol and would help Arun achieve his educational goals. The insistence is lost on Arun, who did not like the taste nor the thought of eating meat. Yet he has succeeded admirably to this point in his life. Arun again finds himself in a household with a dominant male whose idea of status and abundance is the consumption of large quantities of meat. Arun sometimes feels almost as if he is at home with that dynamic in the household, although Arun believes that Mrs. Patton has not acquired the skills of evasion and willfulness so masterfully exhibited by Mama.

In these chapters the author introduces the reader to eating disorders, a major problem with America's teenage girls. Melanie gorges on snack foods instead of eating regular meals with the family, and then vomits what she has eaten so that she will not gain weight from the fatty and empty caloric foods. It is not clear yet why Melanie has chosen this method to feed her emotional needs, but Arun does not know how to relate to Melanie's sullen demeanor and odd behavior. It is ironic that in a country, and a household, where abundance is everywhere, that a girl like Melanie must make herself sick in order to assuage her emotional starvation.



Part 2, Chapters 22, 23, 24 and 25

Part 2, Chapters 22, 23, 24 and 25 Summary

Arun accompanies Mrs. Patton on another excursion to the grocery. He is almost physically repulsed by the volume and the choices made by Mrs. Patton. Arun tries to muster the courage to bring up the topic of Melanie's eating disorder, but decides that it is not an appropriate topic for him to broach at this point.

Arun adopts the ritual of jogging all through the Pattons' subdivision and pushes himself past his level of endurance in order to become more like the American stereotypes that surround him. Arun arrives home just as Mr. Patton comes home from work carrying a grocery bag filled with more meat for tonight's grilling. Mr. Patton is annoyed that Rod and Melanie do not do any chores around the house. Arun escapes the argument between Mr. and Mrs. Patton and heads to his bedroom. Arun realizes that Melanie is vomiting again in the bathroom and Arun tells Rod that Melanie is sick but Rod does nothing, fully aware that Melanie binges and purges her food.

The next morning Melanie violently refuses the scrambled eggs Mrs. Patton has prepared; but Mrs. Patton does not confront Melanie on her outburst. Instead, Mrs. Patton wants Arun to accompany her to the grocery despite Arun's claims that the freezer is bursting with food. Mrs. Patton seems to relax once inside the grocery, but Arun grapples mentally with the unabashed show of affluence and overspending. Arun also wonders if these are the same feelings that Melanie experiences about Mrs. Patton's unending food spending, yet with no gratification or nourishment, physically or emotionally. At the checkout counter, the girl at the register asks Mrs. Patton if Mrs. Patton is pregnant because she has a healthy glow; but on the drive home Mrs. Patton questions Arun about whether she looks fat and is visibly upset by the checkout girl's question.

The next day, when Arun returns home from his job at the library, he encounters Mrs. Patton sunbathing in the back yard. Arun is visibly uncomfortable around the scantily clad Mrs. Patton whose flirtatious behavior prompts Arun to hurry into the safety of the house. In the kitchen, Melanie ravenously eats ice cream from a carton and sarcastically informs Arun that Mrs. Patton will not be cooking dinner tonight because she is sunbathing. From this day on, Mrs. Patton no longer goes on shopping binges or attempts to cook dinners that will go uneaten by her family, preferring instead to lie in the sun all day.

Part 2, Chapters 22, 23, 24 and 25 Analysis

The author has slowly shared the dysfunctional dynamics of the family into which Arun has stumbled. In stark contrast to the perfectly manicured lawns, large homes, and



other signs of affluence, the Pattons are like many middle class American families who are starving for authenticity amidst an environment of excess.

The author lets the reader understand the effects of rage within people who are too powerless to change their circumstances. When Arun realizes this helplessness exhibited by Melanie Patton, Arun can now also understand his sister, Uma's, behavior of blacking out in writhing fits. Both girls are sublimated in their home lives, yet neither one has the power or the ability to declare her own needs or her rights to be heard and understood. While Melanie drowns her unsatisfied emotions in an eating disorder, Uma drowns her own frustrations in a swirling blackness where she does not have to feel anything at all. Through Arun's character, the author compares and contrasts the unhappy lives of girls and young women when society and their families deny the essence of who they really are.



Part 2, Chapters 26 and 27

Part 2, Chapters 26 and 27 Summary

One morning, toward the end of the summer, Mrs. Patton invites Arun to accompany her and Melanie to spend the day at the swimming hole. Although Arun does not want to go, he cannot think of an appropriate excuse. He resigns himself to getting the day started so it will end. Mrs. Patton shocks Arun by removing her bathing suit, an act which plunges the usually water shy Arun into a painful belly flop in order to escape Mrs. Patton and her strange behavior.

Eventually Arun tires in the water and he returns to the shore to find Mrs. Patton asleep on her beach towel with another towel partially covering her formerly nude body. Deciding that he does not want to be around when Mrs. Patton wakes, Arun takes a walk in the woods where he finds Melanie lying on the ground, covered in vomit. When Melanie sees Arun, she sticks a finger down her throat and vomits once again. Arun is at a loss at what to do and Melanie does not respond when Arun asks if he should get Mrs. Patton for help. Arun cannot begin to understand Melanie's angst and, mercifully, Mrs. Patton arrives on the scene, aghast at what she finds.

The end of summer finally arrives and Arun packs his belongings in preparation for moving back to the dormitory on campus. Before Arun leaves the Patton home, a package from Uma arrives in which Arun finds a brown wool shawl and some tea to help Arun get through the next Massachusetts winter. Melanie has been taken to an institution that works with adolescents with nervous and eating disorders; so Arun cannot bid her goodbye. Mrs. Patton has transitioned from a sunbathing zealot to a much more subdued woman considering yoga and natural health alternatives.

Arun gives Mrs. Patton the shawl and tea as a gracious gesture, gathers his suitcase, and exits by the back door leaving Mrs. Patton sitting quietly with the shawl around her shoulders.

Part 2, Chapters 26 and 27 Analysis

Finally, the author brings the story to a peak to reveal the dysfunctional behavior of both Mrs. Patton and Melanie. Both characters are starved for emotional fulfillment and choose food as the tool to help; but each uses it in a different way. Mrs. Patton endlessly buys groceries in hopes that her family will eat what she provides, thereby appreciating her for her efforts. Melanie, on the other hand, binges and purges the junk food she consumes in pitiful attempts to nourish herself, although her body and spirit remain starved. Arun is the innocent bystander who feels powerless to help but whose presence serves as a catalyst to transition both Mrs. Patton and Melanie to better lives.



Characters

Uma

Uma is the main character in the book and the author's symbol for the grossly subservient role of women, especially in Indian society. The portrait painted of Uma is one of a not especially pretty girl who is clumsy, slow, and not academically inclined. Uma has an earnest desire to learn, despite her handicaps, because she seeks stimulation outside the confining world in the home of her parents. Uma's world narrows even more when she is removed from the convent school in order to help care for her newborn brother, Arun. This act will destroy Uma's source of joy and hope. In keeping with Indian customs, girls are raised to be married and boys to be educated, a premise which will ultimately destroy Uma's spirit and opportunities for a fulfilling life. According to Indian tradition, the older daughter in the family must be married before a younger sister can marry. Attempts to arrange marriages for Uma end disastrously, leaving Uma to live the life of a spinster and to step aside so that her younger sister, Aruna, may marry. It is not only society that oppresses Uma, but her own parents as well. Papa has never considered education a necessity for girls. When Uma is of a marriageable age, it is Mama who tries to package Uma more attractively in order to get rid of her. With failed marriage attempts and no hope of outside employment, Uma retreats into her own world of simple pleasures: a Christmas card collection, a book of poems, and sitting on the veranda when Mama and Papa are out for the evening. As the novel progresses, Uma reaches her mid-forties yet lives the life of a subservient child trapped in a world she has no power to change.

MamaPapa

Uma considers her parents to be one person because they are so inextricably intertwined in their thoughts and actions. In her mind, Uma even refers to them as one name: MamaPapa. To Uma, this combined source is the center of all power in her universe, because of their direct effect over her life every day. Papa works as a lawyer, a position he had worked hard to achieve. He feels that the proper image for someone in his position is critical. Although Papa is slightly untraditional in some of his approaches, he serves meat in his home and enjoys playing cricket and drinking whisky. Most of what Papa does is to maintain appearance and decorum. Mama is the perfect match for Papa because she completely sublimates herself to Papa's needs in order to maintain an orderly household and to present the proper image to the community.

MamaPapa are so clear in their personal codes and their family mission that they seem an impenetrable force to their children. The household is one of rules, structure and not much joy. Papa's life, as the father of two daughters, is quite unfulfilled until Mama has a son later in life. This gives Papa new meaning for living. Papa invests all his time and much money into achieving the best education and opportunities for his son, Arun, while the daughters are merely maintained until they become of marriageable age.



Most of Papa's interactions with Uma are of frustration and impatience due to Uma's plodding sensibilities and the drain on Papa's funds to finance two dowries for marriages that end disastrously. Although Mama does not invest herself emotionally in any of her children, she is more taken with Aruna who has the potential to marry well and bestow some better fortune on the family. Mama is probably least vested in Arun because she does not understand the male world in which Arun is being schooled and in which he will live in the United States.

Arun

Although Arun is the favored child in the family and is the beneficiary of all the attention and opportunities, Arun is as equally unhappy with the state of his life as Uma is with hers. As the only male child in the family, Arun receives favored treatment from the day of his birth. Soon after Arun arrives, Uma is forced to quit school in order to help care for her new brother and Papa shows a pervasive joy he had never before exhibited. Throughout Arun's indulged childhood, though, his sisters do not begrudge his privileges, accepting the way things are. Just as Uma has lost her childhood to care for Arun, Arun loses his childhood to studies strictly enforced by Papa. Papa defines Arun's future without ever consulting Arun about his dreams or preferences. Arun produces and succeeds, but almost mechanically. After many years of exhausting study, Arun is unmoved to learn about his acceptance to the university in America, considering this event just the next step in Papa's plan for his life. Arun receives a multi-levelled education in Massachusetts when he explores the human dynamics, particularly within the dysfunctional Patton family household. Arun does come to the realization that women are poorly mistreated in America as well as in his own country. Perhaps Arun will be changed by the experiences and conduct his interactions with women differently from the way they are conducted by Papa and male societies in general.

Mrs. Patton

Mrs. Patton's character serves as the American counterpart to Uma's character in India. Although the women are vastly different in appearance and cultural backgrounds, there are many similarities that even Arun comes to realize by the end of the story. Mrs. Patton is also starved emotionally and feels powerless to alter her own circumstances. Just like Uma, Mrs. Patton has no career and attempts to vest herself in her family, which has tired of her superficial ministrations. Mrs. Patton is completely dependent upon Mr. Patton's support and acquiesces to his needs, even sublimating her own desire to be a vegetarian in favor of Mr. Patton's carnivorous diet. Mrs. Patton's role in the household has been reduced to shopper and chauffeur. Even these levels, she fails because her husband is never pleased with her food selections and her daughter eats only junk food, which she ultimately binges and purges.

Mrs. Patton is not emotionally connected to her insensitive husband or their son, Rod, who is patterning his own behavior after his father. Probably the one who Mrs. Patton fails the most is Melanie, whose needs are overshadowed by the men in the household,



and whose visible cries for help are unnoticed by Mrs. Patton until events reach a crisis point. Ironically, it is Arun, a slight, quiet boy from India, who helps Mrs. Patton understand her role as a woman, as the maternal guide in the family, and as someone who has rights and needs just as important as her husband's or her son's.

Aruna

Aruna is the middle child of Mama and Papa. Aruna is so named because Papa had hoped for a boy to name Arun; and when Aruna arrived as a daughter, Papa adapted the name. When a male child is born later, Papa fixedly names the child Arun, in spite of Aruna's name, indicating the importance Papa placed on the boy. Aruna has more redeeming qualities than Uma in that she is a little brighter, prettier, and more socially adept. Aruna is ready to escape the restrictive childhood home when it comes time to marry. Her impatience increases her rudeness to the unmarriageable Uma, who cannot be removed as an impediment to Aruna's plans quickly enough. Eventually, Aruna marries a successful man and Aruna creates a shallow, distant life in Bombay, far away from her family's emotional and physical ties.

Mira-Masi

Mira-Masi is a widowed relative in Mama's family who takes a special liking to Uma. Because Mira-Masi has no husband or children to take care of, she is free to explore her own interests, particularly those of a spiritual nature. Mira-Masi's wanderings take her to holy places and ashrams around the area. Uma is always happy to see the older woman arrive because Mira-Masi will transport Uma to magical places through her stories. When it becomes clear that Uma will never marry, it is Mira-Masi who informs the family that the Lord did not approve of the selected bridegrooms, wanting to keep Uma for Himself. Mira-Masi attempts to lead Uma on a parallel spiritual journey which is cut short by Papa, who will not tolerate such rambling, pointless behavior from his own daughter.

Anamika

Anamika is Ramu's sister and cousin to Uma, Aruna, and Arun. Anamika's arranged marriage is filled with physical abuse ultimately ending in her death either by suicide or murder by her husband and mother-in-law.

Mr. Patton

Mr. Patton is the stereotypical successful, white businessman living in suburban America. Mr. Patton provides handsomely for his family but does not attempt to address their emotional needs or try to connect with them in any meaningful way. Mr. Patton also embodies many of the male chauvinistic tendencies of strictly ruling his household and verbally abusing those who do not like to appreciate the same things he does. In his



own way, Mr. Patton is also lacking understanding; but the family's dynamic is so entrenched that they remain at an impasse on most issues.

Rod Patton

Rod is Mr. and Mrs. Patton's son and Melanie's brother. As a high-school athlete, Rod's life is consumed with training, eating, and little else that does not relate to sports. Ironically, Rod is the product of his own father's ideals and expectations for athletic prowess, just as Arun is the result of his father's idea of what a son's life should be.

Melanie Patton

Melanie is Mr. and Mrs. Patton's teen-aged daughter and Rod's sister. Melanie's typical teenage anxieties have reached a crisis mode exhibited by her bulimic behavior. Melanie feels invisible in the Patton household, overshadowed by her much more powerful father and brother; so she retreats into her self-abusive world and punishes herself for not being born a boy. Ironically, Melanie's agony is partially illuminated by Arun, a male who understands the threat of being sublimated by a much more powerful and restrictive force.

Mother Agnes

Mother Agnes is the head administrator of St. Mary's School, the convent attended by Uma and Aruna.

Ayah

Ayah is a domestic worker who had cared for Uma and Aruna as children and who has come out of retirement and returned to the household to help care for Arun.

Ramu

Ramu is Uma's mischievous older cousin whose sense of adventure and threat of misbehavior infuriates Mama and Papa. They try to dissuade Uma from any further contact.

Mrs. Joshi

Mrs. Joshi lives with her husband in the house next to Mama and Papa's. Mrs. Joshi is a delightful, happy person who befriends Uma and adds some joy to Uma's dull existence.



Mrs. O'Henry

Mrs. O'Henry is the Baptist missionary's wife, who attempts to befriend Uma, but whose overtures are seen as threatening by Mama and Papa who ultimately force Uma to cut off communication.

Arvind

Arvind is Aruna's husband, a successful businessman in Bombay. Arvind is pleased to have successfully arranged a marriage with someone as lovely as Aruna and acquiesces to Aruna's every whim in a life of privilege and sophistication.

Dr. Dutt

Dr. Dutt is the female physician in the area who periodically sees Uma's unconscious fits. Perhaps Dr. Dutt senses Uma's deep frustrations. She offers Uma a job as a nurses' dormitory manager; but Mama and Papa do not see the need for their daughter to work outside the home. Uma's hopes are once again squelched.



Objects/Places

St. Mary's School

St. Mary's School is the convent school run by Mother Agnes, where Uma attends classes until she is forced to quit in order to care for her baby brother, Arun.

The veranda

The veranda of Uma's home is an important location for much of the novel's action. It is where Mama and Papa spend much time in their swing discussing family matters.

Carlton Hotel

Ramu takes Uma to dinner at the exclusive dining room at the Carlton Hotel.

The ashram

Mira-Masi takes Uma to an ashram, which is a sacred secluded place where those of the Hindu faith can practice their religion with rituals, penance, and prayer.

The Patton home

The Patton home is in a suburban Massachusetts neighborhood and is the summer residence of Arun on break from the university.

The supermarket

The supermarket is the center of Mrs. Patton's world and where she drags Arun for frequent shopping trips.

The swimming hole

The swimming hole is an isolated beach area on the edge of a forest where Mrs. Patton takes Melanie and Arun for a day of fun and where Melanie's bulimia is finally discovered.



Themes

Family Life

Although the novel has action in two separate countries and has many characters, there is the central theme of family life that unites them all. In India, the immediate family has great importance; but the extended family also has an impact on the characters' lives. This is evidenced by the coming together of family members for securing bridegrooms and making wedding arrangements for Uma and Aruna. There is also huge family support and involvement related to times of sorrow, such as the coming together after the death of Anamika. The rituals for both these happy and sad occasions are marked with tradition and purpose. These elements seem to be sorely lacking in the Patton household in America. It is understood that the time period of Arun's stay with the Pattons encompasses only three months and does not represent a comprehensive look at the Patton family. Yet the limited window leads the reader to believe that the Pattons are devoid of any strong family ties, both within their immediate family unit and in their extended family. Arun is the character who envisions the similarities between the two families toward the end of the novel. Ironically, it is the youngest person among all the characters, Arun, who can see the differences in how his mother and Mrs. Patton direct their families. More poignantly, it is Arun who sees how Uma and Melanie are alike in their sublimated frustrations, destined to struggle against their circumstances with mothers who are either unwilling or unable to help.

The Role of Women

The time period of the novel is never stated; but it may be assumed that it occurs during the mid to late twentieth century, a time of evolution in the role of women in society. Within the two cultures, Indian and American, the author paints portraits of women with vastly different appearances, educations, and opportunities; but they are so alike in their inherent lack of self esteem and repressed dreams. In India, Uma and Aruna must take their cues from Mama, who was raised to become a marriageable girl, hopefully to a man with promise. This would insure Mama's security and the position of the family.

Fortunately, Mama secured a good husband and created a good family life, although the environment is very male-centric, first for Papa's needs and then later on for Arun's. The culture is built on making girls ready for marriage, sublimating education except for the very few. Uma is a sad example of the needs of daughters being minimized for the good of the family, especially the male members. When Mama and Papa remove Uma from the convent school, it is the beginning of the end of Uma's hopes of ever learning more about the world or achieving any dreams. From that point, Uma's life takes on the role of proper subservience and indebtedness to her parents, especially in light of her failed marriage attempts.



In contrast, Aruna, because of her beauty and social skills, succeeds in making a good marriage and living an affluent life. The author wants the reader to understand that life is usually easier for those women who are attractive and have pleasing personalities, despite the culture. In America, Mrs. Patton is just as subservient to her husband; although the initial restrictions were never an issue for Mrs. Patton, whom it is assumed had the right to choose her husband. Mrs. Patton was raised in a generation of girls taught to be good mothers and wives. When Mrs. Patton's family no longer needs what she has to offer, she is unfocused and tries to fill the void with daily excursions to the supermarket where she feels most comfortable. Melanie, like Uma, is a tragic character because she is so emotionally fragile. She tries to feed her soul with an eating disorder, which threatens to destroy her. Melanie does have the advantage over Uma, in that Melanie is younger and lives in a country where psychological and lifestyle help is available. So Melanie at least has the chance to lead a happy life.

Food and Eating

From the title of the book, the reader understands that the novel is about food and eating; both the physical act and the symbolic meaning of spiritual nourishment, or lack of it. The author liberally speaks of different Indian foods and dishes, those prepared for festivities, for comfort, and for everyday consumption. The food served indicates the level of importance of the person eating. For example, Aruna's pre-wedding cocktail party and wedding are filled with delicacies; but Papa bristles when Uma orders the cook to prepare a dish out of the ordinary when wayward cousin, Ramu, visits. When the family returns on the boat after scattering Anamika's ashes, Uma whispers to Mama that she has instructed the cook to prepare puri-alu for breakfast so that the family can share the bond that this comfort food provides.

The family's daily life is punctuated by Mama's orders for Uma to direct the cook to bring Papa's coffee and lemonade and the family meals hinge on Papa's pleasure of the dinner rituals and offerings. In America, in the Patton household, food holds no such sacred place, but is more of a status symbol. For example, Mr. Patton grills fresh slabs of red meat almost every night, as do most of the other families in the neighborhood. To Mr. Patton, the overt preparation and consumption of the costly meat indicates Mr. Patton's ability to provide well for his family, as well as the importance of the neighbors witnessing his provisions.

Unfortunately, Mr. Patton is oblivious to his family's emotional needs, evidenced especially by Mrs. Patton and Melanie. Mrs. Patton, who feels unneeded and unloved in her own home, shops every day and fills the cupboards and freezer with snack foods consumed by her disjointed family, symbolizing the emptiness experienced by all of the Pattons in spite of their zealous consumption. Melanie is the one who exhibits the most serious emotional deprivation, as exhibited by her bulimic behavior hopefully caught in time by the end of the novel so that Melanie may have the hope of better physical and emotional nourishment.



Style

Point of View

The novel is written in the third person limited point of view. This means that the author tells the story from an objective position, as if viewing the story's events without benefit of any thoughts or feelings coming directly from the individual characters. The author presents the chain of events in the story and then interjects what the characters may be thinking or experiencing based on their reactions, facial expression, and tone of voice. This point of view is especially pertinent for the content of the novel, which revolves around the issue of repression, especially for the female characters. The women are not allowed authentic voices in their homes or their societies. So the author restricts what the reader can know to mimic the repression experienced by the characters.

Typically, when writing in this point of view, an author will select one character upon whom to center the action and anchor the story. In this novel, the author tells the story by focusing on Uma in Part 1 and Arun in Part 2. Although the author does not directly reveal Uma or Arun's thoughts, she does project on them the typical reactions of someone in the specific situations in which they find themselves. In this way, the author lets the reader better understand these core characters without changing perspective and confusing the narrative.

Setting

The story takes place in two countries, India and America. Although the town in India is never identified, it is somewhere near the Ganges River where the family conducts its religious rituals. The author indicates that the town is small to medium-sized, because of the limited amenities, and because of the awe in which Bombay is held in comparison. Much of the story's plot line occurs at Mama and Papa's home as Uma, Aruna, and Arun grow up there. The home is a comfortable one; but Mama wishes the family owned property, while Papa is content to rent. As the story progresses, the home begins to deteriorate without any intervention by the landlord or the tenants. This fact embarrasses the children, especially the married Aruna. Mama and Papa spend much time on the swing on the veranda, symbolizing their relatively leisurely life which indicates a home of comfort and moderate prosperity.

In America, the story continues when Arun attends school in Massachusetts. Arun's life in the dormitory is not fully described; but the author spends much time describing the suburban lifestyle Arun adopts when he stays with the affluent Patton family for the summer break. The Patton's neighborhood stands in stark contrast to the spare life Arun had lived as a child. The Patton home is an even greater revelation when Arun first encounters its expanse and abundance and the encroaching evergreen forests, which Arun considers to be the wilds of America. The second section also shows the author's sense of humor, as she shares the experiences of Arun encountering the dysfunctional

Pattons and the Pattons' reactions to the shy, sensitive, skinny boy from India who is frightened of everything the Pattons represent.

Language and Meaning

The author mirrors the two sections of the book to the title, so that the language in the first section is spare indicating the "fasting" of the Indian portion of the story. In the second part of the book, the author is more expansive when writing about the "feasting" perspective in America. During the "fasting" portion, the language is abrupt and clipped, almost stilted in its spare prose. The dialogue between the characters is also short and without any embellishment. The author wants the reader to understand that the culture in which this Indian family lives is built on traditions and rituals where every gesture and word has a meaning. Nothing is to be wasted or taken lightly. Periodically the author inserts some Indian words to add some authenticity to the narrative, but she is always careful to explain for those unacquainted with the prose. When the author transitions to the American part of the novel, the language opens up a bit more to include more slang and colloquialisms inherent in New England at the time period. The writing style also seems a bit more relaxed to mirror the culture in which Arun finds himself.

Structure

The novel is divided into two parts to indicate the plot line in India, which then transitions as the story unfolds in America. Within the first part, the author utilizes the literary technique of flashbacks to help fill in some of the characters' backgrounds and to explain some behavior and reactions. Uma, in particular, maybe because of her dreamy mindset, engages in flashbacks so that she can return to times in her life that were more pleasant. Perhaps because Uma has no real future, it is critical for her to revisit days in her past which represented pleasant times and times when she still had some hope for a normal life. Within the story there is no transitioning back and forth between locations, which have obvious breaks between the two parts. Throughout the novel, the author also interjects stanzas of poems and lines from songs to help add some personal touches to the story line as appropriate. This technique not only helps to add dimension to the characters, but also breaks up what has the possibility of being a monotonous narrative. It is interesting to note that the chapters in the second section are markedly shorter, possibly the author's way of indicating the shorter attention spans and lack of ritual of the American people in contrast to the Indians.



Quotes

"Mama said, 'In my day, girls in the family were not given sweets, nuts, good things to eat. If something special had been bought in the market, like sweets or nuts, it was given to the boys in the family. But ours was not such an orthodox home that our mother and aunts did not slip us something on the sly.' She laughed, remembering that—sweets, sly." Part 1, Chapter 1, Pages 12-13

"Servants, elderly relatives, all gathered at the door, and then saw the most astounding sight of their lives—Papa, in his elation, leaping over three chairs in the hall, one after the other, like a boy playing leap-frog, his arms flung up in the air and his hair flying. 'A boy!' he screamed, 'a bo-oy! Arun, Arun at last!'" Part 1, Chapter 2, Page 29

"For Arun's birth did not mean that MamaPapa were finally separated into two entities—Mama Papa—not at all: Arun appeared to be the glue that held them together even more inextricably." Part 1, Chapter 3, Page 48

"Mira-Masi sat cross-legged on the veranda, holding her string of wooden beads in her hands, her lips moving soundlessly. When fever overtook her, she went in and lay down on the mat she had spread on the floor, and her lips continued to murmur prayers till she fell asleep. Only occasionally did she open her eyes and glance at Uma, almost as if she were surprised by her presence. Uma was perfectly happy not to be noticed. She had never been more unsupervised or happier in her life." Part 1, Chapter 5, Page 86

"There was a time, a season, when every girl in the big, farflung family seemed suddenly ready for marriage. It was as if their mothers had been tending them, in their flowerpots, for just this moment when their cheeks would fill out and their lips take on a glisten and all the giggles and whispers would arrive at that one decision—*marriage*." Part 1, Chapter 6, Pages 97-98

"It was said she could not bear more children. Now Anamika was flawed, she was damaged goods. She was no longer perfect. Would she be sent back to her family? Everyone waited to hear. Uma said, 'I hope they will send her back. Then she will be home with Lila Aunty again, and happy.' 'You are so silly, Uma,' Mama snapped as she whacked at a mosquito on her foot with the small palm-leaf fan she was waving. 'How can she be happy if she is sent home? What will people say? What will they think?'" Part 1, Chapter 6, Page 105

"While Mama searched energetically for a husband for Uma, families were already 'making enquiries' about Aruna. Yet nothing could be done about them; it was imperative that Uma marry first. That was the only decent, the only respectable line of behaviour." Part 1, Chapter 7, Pages 117-118

"The ceremony wound on at its own ponderous pace. Finally the sullen bridegroom broke in and said curtly to the priest, 'Cut it short, will you—that's enough now.' The



priest looked offended, Uma was mortified. If he could not even tolerate the wedding ceremony, how would he tolerate their marriage?" Part 1, Chapter 8, Page 132

"Once Uma overheard Mama telling Mira-Masi, who was visiting, 'All those astrologers we consulted about her horoscope, what liars they proved to be,' only to have Mira-Masi reply, 'It was not to astrologers you should have taken her, but to the Lord Shiva, to pray for His blessing instead.' 'And you think your Lord Shiva would have blessed *her*?' Mama cried. Mira-Masi gave her a severe look, and Uma heard her say in her most dignified manner, 'She *is* blessed by the Lord. The Lord has rejected the men you chose for her because He has chosen her for Himself.'" Part 1, Chapter 8, Page 141

"When they leave, the ladies laugh gaily all the way back to their own homes and families where no one expects any such talents or expertise from them, but Uma clutches a large envelope full of Mrs. O'Henry's failures, each pressed fern and violet and pastel paper frill to be added to her collection—tokens of a fairytale existence elsewhere. Elsewhere. Elsewhere." Part 1, Chapter 10, Page 171

"So when the letter of acceptance finally arrived, Papa it was who collapsed from sheer exhaustion. He was not even able to rise to a celebration, the festivities he had promised his son if he won this prize. He lay back weakly on the swing, his face grey, and allowed Mama to take over and have her way." Part 1, Chapter 10, Page 177

"All the years of scholarly toil had worn down any distinguishing features Arun's face might once have had. They had left the essentials: a nose, eyes, mouth, ears. But he held his lips tightly together, his nose was as flattened as could possibly be, and his eyes were shielded by the thick glasses his relentless studies had necessitated. There was nothing else—not the hint of a smile, frown, laugh or anything: these had all been ground down till they had disappeared. This blank face now stared at the letter and faced another phase of his existence arranged for him by Papa." Part 1, Chapter 10, Page 178

"A career. Leaving home. Living alone. These troubling, secret possibilities now entered Uma's mind—as Mama would have pointed out had she known—whenever Uma was idle. They were like seeds dropped on the stony, arid land that Uma inhabited. Sometimes, miraculously, they sprouted forth the idea: run away, escape. But Uma could not visualize escape in the form of a career. What was a career? She had no idea." Part 1, Chapter 11, Page 191

"Mr. Patton gives his head a shake, sadly disappointed in such moral feebleness, and turns the slab of meat over and over. 'Yeah, how they let them out on the streets because they can't kill 'em and don't know what to do with 'em. I could show 'em. A cow is a cow, and good red meat as far as I'm concerned.'" Part 2, Chapter 15, Page 240

"It was the first time in his life away from home, away from MamaPapa, his sisters, the neighbourhood of old bungalows, dusty gardens and straggling hedges where he had grown up, the only town he had ever known; he had at last experienced the total freedom of 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." Part 2, Chapter 16, Page 247

"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, yogurt, 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 where ice secretly whispered to itself, she was content. She did not appear to think there was another stage beyond this final, satisfying one." Part 2, Chapter 19, Pages 263-264

"He is consumed by both horror and contrition. He wishes to explain why the meal he had cooked had been so poor: it had been his first effort. He wishes to apologize for her having to eat candy instead. He is on the point of doing so when he realizes it would mean a criticism of her mother, and so he desists. On the other side of the world, he is caught up again in the sugar-sticky web of family conflict. Desist, O desist. Edging past her towards his room, he gets away from her accusing glare." Part 2, Chapter 21, Pages 278-279

"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 license and plenty." Part 2, Chapter 25, Pages 302-303

"'Melanie,' he says, desperately, 'shall I call your mother?' Staring at her, huddled on the ground and trembling, he feels this could be a scene in a film—a maiden at the feet of the hero, crying—but of course it is no such thing. It is not safely in the distance, flattened and reduced to black and white: it is daylit, three-dimensional and malodorous. They are not the stuff of dreams or even cinema: he is not the hero, nor she the heroine, and what she is crying for, he cannot tell. This 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. But what hunger does a person so sated feel? He croaks, 'Shall I, Melanie, shall I?' but is rooted to the spot, its reality holds him captive. There is no escape, and it is Mrs. Patton who comes in search of them and finds them. 'My Lord,' says Mrs. Patton. 'Dear Lord.'" Part 2, Chapter 26, Pages 315-316



Topics for Discussion

Discuss what you think the author really means by "fasting" and "feasting." What are the physical and emotional implications of each?

How do you think the story would have been different if it had been Uma who had gone to America instead of Arun?

Do you think Anamika and Aruna ended up having better lives than Uma did? Explain why or why not.

What commonalities do you see in the dynamics of both families? What things are vastly different?

Discuss the importance of everyday spirituality in India as opposed to the apparent lack of any spiritual substance exhibited by the lives of the Pattons.

Why do you think Mrs. Patton has not recognized Melanie's obvious cries for help when they are clearly evident immediately to Arun?

What inner personality traits does Uma possess that allow her to not be envious of her siblings or to take out her frustrations on her?

Do you think Arun will remain in the United States upon completion of his formal education? Explain.

Discuss the role of women in India and America today. Have circumstances and opportunities advanced or regressed?

Discuss both the triumphs and tragedies for the women in the novel. What characteristics or circumstances are present for each to occur?