

# Fasting, Feasting



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ANITA DESAI

Desai was born Anita Mazumdar, to a German mother and Bengali father. She grew up speaking a mix of German, Hindi, Bengali, Urdu and later English. She began writing stories at an early age. She studied English Literature at the University of Delhi, and soon after married Ashvin Desai, a philosopher and software company director, with whom she has four children, including writer Kiran Desai. At that time, Desai was beginning to feel pessimistic about her writing career, as few Indian writers had been published in either India or the UK. To her relief after much effort, her novel *Cry the Peacock* was published in 1963 in the UK. She has since written 17 books novels, including *In Custody*, which was adapted for screenplay in 1993, and several short story collections. She has traveled throughout the United States teaching writing workshops at American universities. While many of her works have an Indian context, she also writes narratives which take place in the U.S. and internationally.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Few contemporary Indian writers were published before Desai; she has written that she was an avid reader of English writers such as Virginia Woolf and Henry James, as well as her contemporary, writer Ruth Praver Jhabvala. New Indian writers of the 1980's wave such as Salman Rushdie, Amitov Ghosh, Vikram Seth, and Upmanyu Chatterji can be said to belong to the same literary generation as Desai. Readers of Desai often compare her work to that of her daughter, Kiran Desai, as well as the work of contemporary Indian female writers Bharati Mukherjee, Sunetra Gupta and Jhumpa Lahiri.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Fasting, Feasting.
- **When Written:** 1999
- **Where Written:** Great Britain
- **When Published:** 1999
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Novel
- **Setting:** First section: A small town in India; Second section: Western Massachusetts (1970's-1999)
- **Climax:** The death of Anamika
- **Antagonist:** Uma, Arun
- **Point of View:** Close third person. Uma (first section), Arun (second section)

## EXTRA CREDIT

**Awards:** Anita Desai was shortlisted for the Booker Prize for *Fasting, Feasting*.



## PLOT SUMMARY

In a small town in India in the late 1970's, Uma and her younger sister Aruna are growing up in a traditional Indian household. Their parents, called only Mama and Papa, try to control the destinies of their daughters by teaching them domestic, traditionally feminine skills. Uma takes little interest in marriage or household chores—rather, she loves attending her convent school, despite her failing grades.

Mama and Papa (or MamaPapa, as Uma thinks of them) show little patience for Uma. Papa, a middle-government magistrate with a fragile ego, dominates his family life by dictating the family's daily activities and everyone's futures. Priding herself as the wife of an important man, Mama cooperates with Papa on almost every issue.

After Arun is born, Mama and Papa demand that Uma leave school to care for her baby brother. Uma runs away to the convent school and fruitlessly begs Mother Agnes to talk MamaPapa into letting her back into school. Uma has her first **seizure** on the convent floor after Mother Agnes says she is powerless to help her.

Uma's beautiful cousin Anamika has the opportunity to go to Oxford University, but her parents Lily Aunty and Bakul Uncle don't allow her to go. Instead, they marry her off to the wealthiest, most educated man they can find. Soon, Uma and her parents hear that Anamika's husband and mother-in-law beat her and treat her like a servant.

As Uma grows up, men show little interest in her, preferring her younger sister. After three failed marriage attempts, including two dowry scams and one old man who marries Uma and then abandons her, Mama and Papa give up on trying to marry Uma off. Aruna, meanwhile, receives many marriage proposals, and she chooses Arvind, a wealthy man from Bombay. After her expensive ceremony, Aruna leaves for a new life in Bombay and visits only occasionally. When she does visit, she acts superior to her family, especially Uma.

Given great care and attention, Arun studies to the point of exhaustion every night under the supervision of a forceful Papa. Quiet and expressionless, Arun has been vegetarian since childhood, to the dismay of his parents, who see it as weak and old-fashioned.

Neglected and confined, Uma tries whenever possible to get away from home. On one occasion, her relative Mira-masi, a

religious widow who travels the country freely, tricks MamaPapa into letting her bring Uma with her to an *ashram*, or pilgrimage house. There, Uma wanders around freely and happily for a month, until MamaPapa send her cousin **Ramu** to bring her back. Women in the community try to bring Uma out of her entrapped family life, inviting her to socialize and work with them. On another occasion, Dr. Dutt comes to MamaPapa's house to invite Uma to come work for her, but Mama and Papa refuse. Uma's eyes become painful, but Papa refuses to allow her to seek medical care.

One night, the family hears that Anamika has been found dead, burned to death on her porch. Whether it is suicide or murder is unclear. Lily Aunt and Bakul Uncle visit to distribute Anamika's ashes in the sacred **river**.

The novel now switches its focus onto Arun. After much hard work, Arun wins a scholarship to study in America. When he arrives to Massachusetts, he tiredly withdraws, spending his first year in school by himself.

The following summer, Arun reluctantly stays with an American family, Mr. Patton and Mrs. Patton and their children Rod and Melanie. Mrs. Patton warmly welcomes Arun, but he soon sees how she struggles against the strong will of her unappreciative husband. Mr. Patton and the athletic, self-oriented Rod ignore Mrs. Patton and Melanie, focusing on work, working out, and playing sports.

Mrs. Patton takes Arun shopping with her, insisting that he teach her how to go vegetarian. Meanwhile, Arun becomes disgusted with American excess. He soon finds that Melanie, the daughter, is bulimic, and anxiously tries to find a way to tell the oblivious Mrs. Patton what is wrong. Meanwhile, one day in the grocery store, a cashier tells Mrs. Patton that she looks pregnant. Mrs. Patton becomes obsessed with sun tanning, further neglecting her daughter.

Toward the end of the summer, Arun and Melanie go with Mrs. Patton to a **pond**. Arun delightedly enjoys the feeling of escaping himself when swimming. Later, while Mrs. Patton is sun bathing, Arun goes to look for Melanie, who has disappeared. He finds her half-conscious in a pile of her own vomit. Mrs. Patton soon arrives, shocked at what she sees.

Melanie enters into a rehabilitative institution, and Rod leaves for college. Mr. Patton takes on a second job, and Mrs. Patton becomes interested in eastern spirituality. Arun receives a package carefully packed by Uma, but he gives the contents away to Mrs. Patton, and he leaves, returning to school at the University.

never-married daughter of a middle-class family in rural India. At an early age, Uma disappoints her parents by enthusiastically pursuing school, despite her failing grades, and showing no interest in domestic duties. Against Uma's will, Mama and Papa remove her from the convent school early, forcing her to stay at home and take care of her baby brother, Arun. Uma's parents struggle to find a husband interested in marrying Uma, who isn't pretty, accomplished or flirtatious like her sister Aruna. After several failed marriage attempts, Uma's parents resign their daughter to a life at home taking care of them. Uma's parents neglect her physical and emotional needs, demanding all of her energies and allowing her few freedoms. Yet, she loves people, poetry, and wandering, and is fearless and curious about new people and situations. She has **seizures** throughout the novel, a characteristic that represents her differentness from her family and society.

**Arun** — Arun is the quiet, introverted baby brother of Uma, and the youngest child of Mama and Papa. From Arun's birth, Mama and Papa proudly invest all of their hopes and dreams into Arun, smothering him with attention and forcing him to study until he has no energy left. To the disappointment of his parents, who value meat-eating and physical strength in males as signs of wealth and progress, Arun is a vegetarian who shows no athletic prowess. Prodded along by his father, Arun lethargically flies off to the University in Massachusetts. At college in America, Arun tries to free himself of his family and any other associations that threaten to entangle him. Arun fears being drawn into the judgment and expectations of others, and seeks personal freedom by withdrawing from social interactions and both Indian and American society.

**Aruna** — Aruna is the pretty, confident, and socially ambitious younger sister of Uma and second daughter of Mama and Papa. As a child, school comes easily to Aruna, though she takes no interest in it. While she is kind and helpful to Uma during their childhoods, she becomes snappy and superior when they approach adolescence, laughing at Uma's rejection by prospective husbands. Aruna, on the other hand, is so sexual and graceful that marriage proposals pour in for her. She marries Arvind, a wealthy, handsome man from Bombay. She moves to the city and lives the life of a perfectionist, wealthy westernized socialite—visiting her family only on occasion. While her treatment to Uma is unkind, her struggle to free herself from her roots and her family's limitations reflects in her tendency to criticize them and her ultimate decision to live a life apart from them.

**Mama** — Mama is the wife of Papa and the mother of Uma, Aruna, and Arun. Throughout the novel, her first name is never revealed—rather, she is just called Mama, defined by her roles as wife and mother. Mama is the picture of a proud, submissive wife, seldom expressing an opinion different than her husband's. She pursues her own interests only on the sly, making it her mission in life to cater to her husband's needs and



## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Uma** — Uma is the novel's spirited, oppressed heroine, the

to work with him in controlling the destinies of their three children. Uma can recall few instances of Mama's separateness from Papa. The most noteworthy example is her failed plea to her husband that he let her terminate her late-in-life pregnancy with Arun, which is both painful and dangerous to her health. Later, when Uma is older and complains of pain in her eyes, Mama pleads with Papa to allow Uma to visit a specialist for her eyes. On occasion, Mama shows some comradery with Uma, such as when her niece Anamika dies and Mama draws close to her daughter, realizing perhaps for the first time how lucky she is to have Uma.

**Papa** — Papa is a proud, yet insecure middle-class legal magistrate, the husband of Mama and the father of Uma, Aruna and Arun. Papa grew up in great poverty, and delights in reminding his children that he worked very hard in school to climb the social ladder and make a better life for himself and his family. Threatened by modern ideas of women's liberation, Papa is content to allow Mama to wait on him and obey his requests. Yet, he supports Mama's authority before his children, and the two have a complicit, cooperative marriage. Papa ignores people and ideas who challenge his authority, such as Dr. Dutt and, on occasion, Mama. After his retirement, he dedicates his energies to acting as an academic drill sergeant for Arun, forcing him through school and college. He habitually criticizes and neglects Uma, particularly her physical needs.

**Mrs. Patton** — Mrs. Patton is the sister of Mrs. O'Henry, wife to Mr. Patton and mother of Rod and Melanie, and the host who invites Arun to stay with her and her family in Massachusetts. A suburban American stay-at-home mother, Mrs. Patton is obsessed with shopping, particularly for groceries. Lonely and fascinated by Arun's culture and vegetarianism, Mrs. Patton tries to befriend him. Mrs. Patton routinely denies her own inclinations and feelings, not even following her instinct for most of her life to go vegetarian for fear that her husband will disapprove. Cheerfully trying to preserve her image of a perfect family, Mrs. Patton doesn't try to get to know herself or her children—especially Melanie, whose emotional and physical problems beg Mrs. Patton's attention. Toward the end of the novel, she begins to explore eastern spirituality in an attempt to find peace.

**Mr. Patton** — Mr. Patton is the husband of Mrs. Patton, and the father of Melanie and Rod. Working full-time in an office, Mr. Patton leaves housekeeping and cooking to his wife, with the exception of the barbecue. Athletic, macho and nationalistic, Mr. Patton doesn't understand why his wife and Arun don't want to eat meat. Mr. Patton places great value on work, and gets frequently frustrated by his family for not being more in-line and productive. Showing little interest in his wife and daughter, Mr. Patton only interacts with his son Rod.

**Melanie** — Melanie is the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Patton, and the sister of Rod. Struggling with bulimia and anorexia that go

unnoticed by her parents, Melanie is frequently bitter, angry, and difficult to talk to. Arun becomes preoccupied with Melanie's bad nutrition and defensive attitude, seeing a similarity between her bitterness and that of his own neglected sister, Uma. Melanie's eating disorder isn't treated until her mother and Arun catch her nearly unconscious, writhing in the forest.

**Rod** — Rod is the son of Mr. and Mrs. Patton and the brother of Melanie. Even-tempered and unemotional, Rod betrays little reaction to the conflicts and tension within his home. He knows about Melanie's eating disorder, and while he disapproves, he accepts it as an unfortunate reality. Athletic and accomplished, Rod is usually found working out or watching sports and eating with his dad. For Rod, sports are an escape from the difficult reality of his family life. Rod makes some effort at befriending Arun, but for the most part keeps to himself. In the end, he like Arun escapes his family by going away to college.

**Anamika** — Anamika is the beautiful, graceful, intelligent daughter of Lily Aunty and Bakul Uncle, niece to Mama Papa and cousin to Uma. Kind and sweet, Anamika is everyone in the family's favorite girl, and as children, Uma and Aruna fight for her affections. An excellent student, Anamika wins a scholarship to Oxford, but her parents don't even consider allowing her to go. When the girls reach adolescence, marriage proposals abound for Anamika. Looking for a man who matches Anamika's accomplishments, Lily Aunt and Bakul Uncle marry her off to a rich, educated man from another town. The marriage proves tragic for Anamika, whose husband and mother-in-law treat her like a household servant, beating her on a regular basis. She becomes infertile from beatings, and after twenty-five years of marriage is found burned to death on her porch. The novel never reveals whether Anamika's death was suicide or murder.

**Lily Aunty and Bakul Uncle** — Bakul Uncle is the brother of Papa, and Lily Aunty is his wife. Almost always mentioned together, Bakul Uncle and Lily Aunty have a marriage much like Mama and Papa's—neither one expresses a different will or opinion than the other. The parents of Anamika and Ramu, Bakul Uncle and Lily Aunty live in the city and are wealthier than Mama and Papa, due to Bakul Uncle's successful career as a popular attorney. To the traditionally minded Lily Aunty and Bakul Uncle, success and social approval are very important, which is why they don't allow Anamika to go to college, instead pursuing the wealthiest husband for Anamika — with no consideration for the man's character. It is also their fear of social disgrace that prevents them from rescuing Anamika from what they know is an unsafe marriage. When she dies a violent death, they refuse to acknowledge what really happened, saying it was destiny.

**Mira-Masi** — Mira-masi is the widowed, religious wife of an elder cousin of Papa's family. She has dedicated her life to her worship of the Hindu god Shiva, and spends her days traveling

the country, making pilgrimages to sacred rivers and temples. Untethered by the authority of either husband or any other male relative, Mira-masi has more freedom and independence than any other female in Uma's family. Fanatical in her devotion, Mira-masi lives a simple life focused almost wholly on her religious rituals. Uma admires Mira-masi, who is kind and attentive to her, and sees her as especially chosen by the Lord Shiva. MamaPapa disapprove of Mira-masi, seeing her religion as too traditional and disapproving of her independent lifestyle. Mira-masi tries to free Uma from MamaPapa by bringing her with her to an *ashram*, and even fights Ramu when he comes to bring her back.

**Ramu** — Ramu is the son of Lily Aunty and Bakul Uncle, brother of Anamika, and cousin to Uma. Rebellious and adventurous, Ramu is the "black sheep" of the family. Spending his youth traveling on the seas and throughout the country, Ramu disappears for long periods of time. Uma loves Ramu, ignoring her parents' disapproval of his attitude and ways. When he visits Uma's family, he behaves irreverently and with entitlement, bringing Uma along to dine at the Carlton Hotel in the city. Sweet and doting with Uma, he flirts and laughs with her, and encourages her to be herself. Yet, his character and allegiance are not consistent, as in his youth, he followed MamaPapa's bidding in bringing Uma back from the *ashram* against her will.

**Mrs. O'Henry** — Mrs. O'Henry is the American Baptist missionary who lives in Uma's village, and the sister to Mrs. Patton. Intent on proselytizing, Mrs. O'Henry uses social events to spread her Christian message to the Indian women in her village. Yet, she is kind and helpful, always making an effort to invite Uma to social events, to correspond with her, and to involve her in the community. Mrs. O'Henry is one of the few friends Uma keeps as an adult.

**Mother Agnes** — Mother Agnes is the Mother Superior at the Convent School where Uma attends as a child. Uma loves Mother Agnes, who returns Uma's affection. Yet, she feels helpless against MamaPapa's will to keep Uma at home, so she tries to encourage Uma to accept her domestic responsibilities happily. Mother Agnes reaches out to Uma as an adult, in an effort to involve her in church activities.

**Mrs. Joshi** — Mrs. Joshi is the neighbor and friend of MamaPapa and their family. Kind to Uma, Mrs. Joshi has a more modern parenting style and outlook on the world than Mama, and Uma often wishes Mrs. Joshi were her mother. The only example in the novel of a woman who is in a "love marriage", Mrs. Joshi is one of the only genuinely happy characters. She feels free within her marriage to express herself and allow her children to feel free and take their own paths in life.

**Dr. Dutt** — Dr. Dutt is the confident, smart village doctor. An unmarried, independent woman, she is the daughter of an important politician. Dr. Dutt saves Uma when she has a

seizure at Aruna's wedding, and later comes to MamaPapa's house to offer Uma a job at the nursing school she is supervising. Dr. Dutt, like Mira-Masi, represents female independence—only, Dr. Dutt represents the modern female, who is establishing herself within the male-dominated professional world.

**Ayah** — Ayah is the nanny to Uma, Aruna, and Arun when they are young. Later in life, she stays on as the household servant. Ayah babies Uma even as an adult, and she often uses emotional appeal to get Uma to take pity on her in her old age and give her things she needs. Uma takes Ayah for granted, not recognizing her own privilege relative to Ayah.

**Lakshmi** — Lakshmi is the rebellious daughter of Ayah. After Ayah works to find a good marriage for her daughter, Lakshmi decides she would rather be independent, so she escapes the marriage and goes to look for work as a servant. Ayah, feeling she worked hard for Lakshmi to have a better life, beats her daughter, much to Uma's disapproval.

## MINOR CHARACTERS

**Arvind** — Arvind is the wealthy, handsome husband of Aruna from Bombay. Though he is powerful and has a high status, he accepts Aruna's efforts to run their household, and to keep him looking and acting sharp.

**Aisha and Dinesh** — Aisha and Dinesh are the young children of Aruna and Arvind. Growing up in Bombay within a wealthy household, they are well dressed and behave with a great sense of sophistication and entitlement. When they come to visit, Uma has to watch over them.

**Mali** — Mali is the elderly groundskeeper for MamaPapa. Relegated to living in the field, Mali lives in the hut he has built for himself. He tries to be upbeat, and make jokes with Uma, who is fond of him but treats him with a sense of superiority.



## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



## GENDER AND SOCIAL ROLES

The pressures and expectations placed on the different characters in the novel show the contrast in the social roles men and women are expected to fulfill, both in India and in the United States. While men are expected to be hard working, academic, and successful, the social value of women is dependent on their submissiveness, domestic abilities, beauty and child bearing.

Aruna and Uma are raised, educated, and groomed only with marriage in mind. When the multiple attempts of MamaPapa to arrange a marriage for Uma fail, it becomes Uma's job to take care of her baby brother, Arun, and later her aging parents. Mama's identity is tied in with her role as the wife of an important man, and she seldom disagrees with him. Anamika meets the social expectations of female submission—yet, abused to death, Anamika experiences the ultimate loss of freedom that threatens all women who are forced to fulfill the feminine ideal. Dr. Dutt and Mira-masi both represent women who, independent of family and men, defy female social roles.

Men also lose their free will and individual expression to the social roles they must fill. As a child, Arun is showered with care and attention, unlike his neglected sister, Uma. Yet MamaPapa place high demands on Arun for him to work hard in school and achieve constantly, giving Arun no alternative path. While Papa has the most authority in Uma's household, his ego and pride are bound to his social role as a male head of the household. He cannot appear vulnerable, and so never forms genuine human connections.

American society as portrayed in the novel also places gendered expectations onto its members, particularly in regards to male and female beauty. Mrs. Patton, like her daughter Melanie, is burdened by American ideals of female perfection and beauty, which are obsessed with dangerous degrees of thinness and over-tanning. Mr. Patton and Rod similarly fulfill the traditional Macho American stereotype of athleticism and hard work. Like Papa, Mr. Patton assumes passive control over the members of his household. Mrs. Patton, like Mama, appears to have no other identity beyond wife and mother.



### FAMILY LIFE AND INDIVIDUAL FREEDOM

At the heart of many of the character's stories lies a common search for freedom to be oneself and to carve out one's own life path. The needs and desires of the individual are in constant tension with the demands of the family, which is the central social institution throughout the novel.

Uma's desire for freedom is the central example: Constrained by her family's needs and expectations, Uma yearns to be free, pushing against her family wherever possible. Uma's desires are in constant check by her parents, yet she develops a freedom of spirit in her own world. Mira-masi, Ramu, and Dr. Dutt all represent freedom from family expectations and social roles. Leading very independent lives, they have defected from their traditional family roles and defied societal expectations. Not surprisingly, all of these characters are unmarried. Marriage, with the exception of Mrs. Joshi and Aruna's example, almost consistently threatens individual freedom by

melting two people into one—as symbolized by Uma's reference to her parents as one entity: MamaPapa. Further, this melding through marriage usually comes to the detriment of the woman, who ends up being subservient to the man. While gender expectations inhibit both Uma and Anamika's freedoms, it is the confines of marriage in particular which prove so brutal for Anamika's freedom and her life.

Arun, having never had the choice of his surroundings or his life paths, tries to live as independently as possible in the United States. While in America, Arun tries to avoid situations that involve integrating himself into families and other tight-knit groups, feeling he can be himself only when he is by himself. For the Pattons, the family structure deteriorates, becoming oppressive in its inability to serve the needs and desires of its members. In their American individualism, they neglect each other. Mrs. Patton's determination to present a harmonious family image prevents her from seeing the real problems of her children. Mr. Patton tries to control his family by ensuring that everyone is productive. Neither parent nor child try to form genuine relationships, making family a false haven for its members.



### PLENTY/"FEASTING" VS. WANT/"FASTING"

Access to resources play a large factor in determining the quality of life and opportunity available to individual characters in the novel. Plenty and want are not what they appear to be, and characters who seem to have much are often found wanting; likewise, those who seem to have little are rich in spiritual ways. India is contrasted with America, and Uma's lower middle class parents are contrasted with wealthier families in India.

Seeking economic plenty is very important to characters in the novel. For example, MamaPapa are deeply interested in increasing their wealth and status by affording good marriages for their daughters, and a good education for their son. Even within the same family, male characters have greater resources and opportunities, particularly in the Indian context. While MamaPapa put a great deal of money, time, and attention into their son Arun's education and physical care, Uma is not even allowed to finish her basic primary education or receive needed medical care for her painful eyesight.

For women, personal traits like charm, domestic capability and physical attractiveness allow them access to higher-status marriage partners, and therefore greater social status. Aruna, being prettier and more outwardly charming, is assigned a higher social value by her parents and by the community than her sister Uma. Yet, Uma has a different kind of plenty: she has a vast inner world. Her kindness, curiosity, and her desire for freedom and autonomy allow her to engage her mind and her heart. These make her richer, in many ways, than the other

characters.

When Arun goes to the United States, he discovers a land of economic 'plenty', even excess, which he compares to the modest means of his own family in India. However, lacking the warmth and togetherness of Arun's family in India, the American family seems hollow to him, having a deeper kind of poverty. This is obvious to Arun than when he witnesses Melanie suffering from hunger and malnourishment due to her eating disorder, while there is a fridge full of food.



## TRADITION/INDIA VS. MODERNITY/WEST

Throughout the novel, we see conflict between old ways, or 'tradition' running against new ways, or 'modernity'. Most frequently, tradition is associated with India/Rural/Home/Extended Family/Poverty/Fasting and modernity is associated with Western/Urban/Individuality/Commercialism/Feasting.

MamaPapa, from rural, humble roots, hold fast to traditional values, placing less value on daughters' educations and more value on daughters' obedience and preparation for marriage. The nuns at the convent and the Christian missionaries represent a western perspective in India that challenges MamaPapa's traditionalism. Uma's parents see no need for Uma to go into the city with Ramu or to visit Aruna in Bombay, as they also see the urban settings as threatening.

Yet, the 'Old/India' and the 'New/Western' paradigms are constantly shifting. Mira-masi dedicates her life to traditional Hindu Gods and Goddesses, yet to MamaPapa there is something very dangerous and progressive about Mira-Masi's free-roaming, unmarried life. Arun's desire to be a vegetarian appears so old-fashioned to MamaPapa that it is almost defiant.

While western ideas may seem more liberating, its people more liberated, western society and the urban setting do not offer freedom from gender roles or social expectations. Aruna feels so pressured by the ideals of the wealthy urban India that she becomes anxious and obsessed with perfection. Through commercialism, wealth and image have become the new constraint. American society places high expectations on women: while Melanie is not being pressured by her parents to marry as Uma and Aruna were, she is pressured by American ideals of beauty to achieve unhealthy thinness—at whatever cost. Mrs. Patton, trying to be the picture of motherhood, feels she cannot pursue vegetarianism because her husband won't approve. For the old-fashioned Mr. Patton, vegetarianism represents a threat to the American way.



## LONELINESS AND TOGETHERNESS

The difference between loneliness and being alone is a tension that affects many characters throughout the novel. Loneliness affects many

characters—yet, togetherness, especially within families, doesn't always solve the loneliness of the individual. Balancing the needs for both community and solitude is a constant struggle, especially for Uma and Arun.

Within Indian society, individuals experience mental isolation within tight-knit families. The obligation to maintain a pretense of family harmony is isolating because individuals have no recourse for expressing their true desires without rebelling against the family. Uma is constantly in the company of her parents or other family members - yet she is lonely and isolated within those relationships, because true friendship is lacking: Uma, social and curious in nature, hungrily seeks any opportunity to make new friends and interact with people outside of her nuclear family home. Arun is similarly isolated within his family, as he too has no friends, and his obligation to study takes up all of his time and energy. Yet, unlike Uma, Arun develops a preference for being alone, resisting groups and people who try to include him.

Within American society, the breakup of the family manifests itself more obviously on a daily basis. The barbecue dinner featured in the Patton's house within the novel is a total flop—neither of the Patton children are present, the father is angry, the mother must cover her unhappiness about being forced to eat steak, and the feeling that members of the household are disunited appears stark. Rather than spending time together, the family spends their meals as well as their leisure time apart. Melanie is isolated in her feelings and her struggle in the same way as Uma, except that in the American context, Melanie is openly defiant and individualistic as a way of covering her loneliness, while Uma appears obedient in comparison. Uma's loneliness goes unnoticed by her parents, just as Melanie's. The warmth of the Indian family, however, can be a safe haven during sad times. When Anamika dies, Uma and Mama hold hands in mourning. There is no such mutual consolation to be found among the Pattons.



## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



## WATER / RIVER

Throughout the novel, submersion in water represents freedom from the constraints of society, family, and the self. As a child restricted and unappreciated by her family and society, Uma feels drawn to the water's edge where she sees Mira-masi bathing in the "sacred" river that runs through the village. Uma has no fear of drowning, and against the warnings of her parents, she dips her feet in. Years later, when Aruna and her in-laws come to make a pilgrimage to the river with her family, Uma impulsively jumps off the boat

and into the river, allowing herself to sink to the bottom. At a time in her life when there are no more prospects of education or marriage, nor any other feasible escape from Mama and Papa, Uma feels both neglected and trapped. She is drawn to the river, to the feeling of sinking, as if drawn to death as her only escape. Whether or not she is suicidal is unclear. Later, when her cousin Anamika dies a tragic death at the hands of her abusive in-laws, Uma's parents and relatives go to the sacred river to sprinkle Anamika's ashes. Uma, cold and empty, watches with longing as Anamika's ashes float out, freeing Anamika from the pain of an entrapped life. In America in the second half of the novel, Melanie is also entrapped—by her emotional turmoil, her eating disorder, and her inattentive parents. She spends long nights in the bathtub to escape. Arun finds himself trapped even in America by the memories of his family and the self-restraint he has developed throughout his life as a survival mechanism. The only instance in which Arun feels peace is toward the end of the novel, when he swims for the first time in his life in a pond outside the Patton's house. There, he feels calm, as if freed from reality.



## SEIZURES

Uma's seizures represent all of the nonconformist characteristics that make Uma different from the rest of her family and society. From an early age, Uma fails to meet her family and society's standards of self-restraint, passivity, beauty, and femininity. When trying to escape back to her convent school, Uma has her first seizure just after Mother Agnes tells Uma that she can do nothing to fight MamaPapa on the matter of her education. Mama blames the convent school for causing Uma's epilepsy, and then uses the incident as further justification for keeping Uma at home and out of school. Uma is as helpless to her seizures as she is to her family's decision to deny her education. She is equally helpless to the trouble her parents have in finding her a husband who wants her. When her younger sister Aruna marries, Uma has a seizure at the cocktail party the night before. Aruna blames Uma for ruining the party, as if Uma had done it on purpose. Aruna's anger at Uma's seizure mimics the cruelty of Uma's family blaming her for not managing to catch a husband. When Uma runs off with Mira-masi to the *ashram*, she has another seizure—yet this time, Mira-masi and the other pilgrims respond very differently. Rather than shaming Uma, they revere her as someone sacred, chosen by the Lord Shiva. Their response to her seizure reflects their acceptance of her generally—she is allowed to be herself at the ashram, to wander freely and without judgment. Mainstream society, as represented by her family, has no place for her. Yet religious devotees and others who form the outcasts of society are able to see what is special and unique about Uma's way of thinking and existing.



## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Houghton Mifflin edition of *Fasting, Feasting* published in 2000.

### Chapter 1 Quotes

●● MamaandPapa. MamaPapa. PapaMama. It was hard to believe they had ever been separate existences, that they had been separate entities and not MamaPapa in one breath.

**Related Characters:** Mama, Papa

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 5

#### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the protagonist of the novel, Uma, thinks about her parents, Mama and Papa. Uma is an adult at this point, but she thinks of her parents as one collective being, not two individuals. Uma struggles to remember if there was *ever* a time when she thought of her parents as separate people.

The passage, which sets in motion the flashbacks that constitute the bulk of the first half of the book, also establishes some of the book's key themes: including the importance of family, and the potential collectivism of identity within family and tradition. Growing up in a strict Indian household, Uma is treated severely—her parents have strong expectations for her, and they think of themselves as filling a specific role (i.e., raising their children and making sure they find spouses). Mama and Papa are one character, then, insofar as they fulfill the same basic role (of Mama going along with everything Papa decides), which revolves around supervising their children.

●● One could be forgiven for thinking Papa's chosen role was scowling, Mama's scolding. Since every adult had to have a role, and these were their parents', the children did not question their choices. At least, not during their childhoods.

**Related Characters:** Papa, Mama

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 9

#### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the narrator offers a trivial distinction between Mama and Papa: Mama scolds, Papa scowls. The point of making such a distinction, of course, is to remind readers that there really *is* no difference between Mama and Papa: they're two sides of the same coin, united in their loyalty to their children and, at times, their harsh rejection of their children's feelings and dreams.

The passage is also significant insofar as it alludes to the flashback structure of the book. Uma is now an adult, but she's beginning to think about her parents more critically than she ever has before. It's worth asking why Uma hasn't pondered her parents' lives in more detail before--i.e., why the novel is beginning *now*. Perhaps the narrator's point is that Uma has always felt both tyrannized by and inextricably tied to her family; it's only now that she's an adult that she feels more objectively distanced from them and free to think about whatever she wants.

☝ No doors were ever shut in that household: closed doors meant secrets, nasty secrets, impermissible. It meant authority would come stalking in and make a search to seize upon the nastiness, the unclean blot.

**Related Characters:** Papa, Mama

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 15

### Explanation and Analysis

The narrator here depicts the household in which Uma was raised. Uma was raised by her parents to be totally honest and transparent; she could never have secrets of any kind. While Mama and Papa raised their children this way, presumably, because they thought it would help their children be virtuous and honest, their child-rearing methods had some unexpected effects. Mama and Papa make their daughter Uma weak and fragile: Uma was so "policed" in her home (to the point where she couldn't even keep a door closed) that she couldn't even *think* freely.

This kind of "honesty" regarding Uma and her siblings is then contrasted, in this scene, with the sudden secrecy regarding Mama's new pregnancy. The pregnancy is not discussed because by its very nature it is a reminder of female sexuality, something seen as shameful. For Mama, any kind of sexuality and independence is the "unclean blot" that must be kept behind closed doors.

☝ Mama was frantic to have it terminated. She had never been more ill (...) but Papa set his jaws. They had two daughters, yes, quite grown-up as anyone could see, but there was no son. Would any man give up the chance of a son?

**Related Characters:** Papa, Mama

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 16

### Explanation and Analysis

The passage describes one of the few times in Uma's life when she witnessed her parents disagreeing about anything. Uma's mother was pregnant with a child, and Papa wondered if the child might be a boy. Because Papa wanted a boy (a badge of honor in India, far more than having a girl), he insisted that Mama go through with the pregnancy, even though Mama didn't want to go through the pain of birth one more time (especially now that she's older), or raise a third child.

The passage offers an interesting twist of the theme we've been studying so far: while it's true that Mama and Papa seem to be the same person, united in their "policing" of their children, it's *also* true that Papa exercises comparable authority over Mama: even though it's her body, Papa makes the final call to have the child (and the child ends up being a boy). The authority and unity between Mama and Papa, it's suggested, is a kind of illusion--or it's only a reality because Mama has surrendered her own agency to her husband.

## Chapter 3 Quotes

☝ More than ever now, she was Papa's helpmeet, his consort. He had not only made her his wife, he had made her the mother of his son (...) Was this love? Uma wondered disgustedly, was this romance? Then she sighed, knowing such concepts had never occurred to Mama: she did not read, she did not go to the cinema.

**Related Characters:** Uma (speaker), Papa, Mama

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 31

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Uma--now a teenaged girl--contemplates the loveless marriage between her parents. Uma is used to seeing her parents work as one unit, and she suspects that

they work so well together because her mother has surrendered her freedom to Papa. Papa, Uma thinks, is a bully--he's married Mama because he wants a wife, not because he loves Mama. Uma is disgusted with her Mama for surrendering to Papa so easily: Mama, Uma thinks rather smugly, has no knowledge of romantic love, since she doesn't read or watch movies.

The passage is a good example of how the narrator both makes fun of Uma and suggests that she has a point. Uma sounds a little naive here (why, exactly, does Uma know anything more about love than her Mama--and is it really possible to understand love by watching movies?). And yet we've already seen plentiful evidence that Uma is partly right: Mama has surrendered control over her body and her life in order to marry Papa--because, of course, doing so is a part of life for a woman in India, as it's portrayed in the novel. So perhaps it's too simple to say that Mama doesn't love Papa, even if it's true that she's surrendered her freedom to him.

## Chapter 4 Quotes

☝☝ To Mira-masi, the gods and goddesses she spoke of, whose tales she told, were her family, no matter what Mama might think (...) Uma, with her ears, and even her fingertips tingling, felt that here was someone who could pierce through the dreary outer world to an inner world, tantalizing in its colour and romance. If only it could *replace* this, Uma thought hungrily.

**Related Characters:** Mira-Masi, Mama, Uma

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 40

### Explanation and Analysis

In this flashback scene, Uma meets with her distant relative Mira-masi, a surprisingly independent woman who has devoted herself to worshipping the god Shiva. Uma's parents are (in some senses) modern, practical people, and they don't have a lot of patience with Mira-masi. Uma, however, is naturally attracted to Mira-masi: she's mystical, creative, dreamy, and generally the opposite of MamaPapa. Where MamaPapa encourage eating meat (the "modern" way), Mira-masi practices traditional Hindu vegetarianism. Why, exactly, does Mira-masi's way of life seem so attractive to Uma? Uma doesn't like her life with MamaPapa, and she itches for an escape of any kind. Mira-masi is different enough from Uma's parents that she *must* be better: Uma is

hungry for adventure, excitement, and sincere emotion, and Mira-masi seems to have plenty of all three.

☝☝ Only Uma tucked her frock up into her knickers and waded in with such thoughtless abandon (...) It had not occurred to her that she needed to know how to swim, she had been certain the **river** would sustain her.

**Related Characters:** Uma

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 43

### Explanation and Analysis

In this flashback scene, Uma and her siblings go down to the river with Mira-masi, their distant relative. There, Mira-masi engages in a ritualistic bathing ceremony, a reflection of her worship of the god Shiva. While her siblings hang back, afraid of the water, Uma wades in in an effort to be closer to Mira-masi, whom she idolizes.

Uma's behavior is reckless, dangerous (she nearly drowns), and also deeply revealing of her personality. Uma feels so sheltered and lonely at home with MamaPapa that she's hungry for escape of any kind. By walking straight into the water, she's both active *and* passive: she makes a brave, dangerous choice, crossing her fingers and trusting that the water will be gentle with and "sustain" her. Uma's entire life will be full of "leaps of faith" of a similar kind: for all her repression, she's still full of life and vitality, and wants to find adventure.

## Chapter 6 Quotes

☝☝ Uma said, 'I hope they will send her back. Then she will be home with Lily Aunty again, and happy.' 'You are so silly, Uma,' Mama snapped (...) 'How can she be happy if she is sent home? What will people say? What will they think?'

**Related Characters:** Uma, Mama (speaker), Anamika, Lily Aunty and Bakul Uncle

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 71

**Explanation and Analysis**

In this passage, we learn what happens to Uma's stunningly beautiful, intelligent cousin, Anamika. Although she's awarded a prestigious scholarship to Oxford, Anamika is forbidden to attend university--instead, she's married off to a rich, cruel man, beaten, and rendered infertile. Uma wishes that Anamika's husband would send her away (i.e., back home to her mother); but when Uma raises such a possibility, Mama calls her a fool. Anamika must remain with her husband, Mama insists, or "people will talk."

The passage illustrates Mama's insensitivity to people's individual suffering when it doesn't fit her worldview, as well as her slavish devotion to public opinion. It doesn't matter to Mama that Anamika is suffering, or that she was denied a life of education and liberty at Oxford--the only thing Mama cares about is the opinion of other people (who would, supposedly, be shocked if they heard that Anamika had left her husband). Mama's horizons are so narrow, so confined to the opinions of her neighbors, that she can't conceive of a world in which Anamika's going off to Oxford independently would be the "right thing."

**Chapter 7 Quotes**

☝☝ 'Didn't I tell you to go to the kitchen and learn these things? (...) No, you were at the convent, singing those Christian hymns. You were playing games with that Anglo-Indian teacher showing you how to wear skirts and jump around. Play, play, play, that is all you ever did. Will that help you now?'

**Related Characters:** Mama (speaker), Uma

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 76

**Explanation and Analysis**

As Uma grows older, her mother becomes increasingly angry with her. Because Uma genuinely enjoyed studying in school (despite the fact that she wasn't much of a student, to say the least), she never spent much time learning how to cook, clean, or dress from her Mama. Mama is furious that Uma is so ignorant of how to "be a real woman"; she doesn't respect Uma for trying to learn, or for enjoying herself at school with her friends. For Mama, the only business women have is learning how to serve husbands domestically; everything else is just frivolity.

Here Mama is basically encouraging her daughter to abandon her interest in education altogether, and dismissing Uma's interest in studying at a convent as "play."

Mama is so devoted to the idea that women are made to be wives that she can't see anything but laziness in Uma.

**Chapter 8 Quotes**

☝☝ Uma's ears were already filled to saturation with Mama's laments, and Aruna's little yelps of laughter were additional barbs (...) 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. There was cousin Anamika's example, the one no one wanted to see: but how could one not?

**Related Characters:** Uma, Anamika, Mama, Aruna

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 86

**Explanation and Analysis**

In this passage, Uma has been married off to an old, fat man, who immediately runs off with Uma's family dowry and never returns. Uma's Mama is humiliated by the experience; she mourns that she'll never marry Uma off to anyone. The experience is especially crushing for Uma because Uma's sister, Aruna, is beautiful, and has lots of handsome, wealthy suitors to choose from.

Uma's thought process is complex: she's both embarrassed by her experience with the old man, and relieved. Uma lives in a community where to be a woman *is* to be married: her failure to find a husband is treated as a hideous problem, almost a crime. And yet Uma recognizes that marriage, for all the emphasis that her culture puts on it, doesn't seem so great: even the beautiful Anamika had her life ruined when she married. Maybe the single life isn't so bad after all.

**Chapter 9 Quotes**

☝☝ When it was that she had plunged into the dark **water** and let it close quickly and tightly over her, the flow of the river, the current, drew her along (...) It was not fear she felt, or danger. Or rather, these were only what edged something much darker, wilder, more thrilling, a kind of exultation--it was exactly what she had always wanted, she realized.

**Related Characters:** Uma

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 111

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Uma is at one of her lowest points: she's been humiliated in her marriage offers; she has some kind of optometric condition that will require her to see a doctor; her sister clearly despises her, etc. In her despair, Uma jumps into the river while she and her family go out to bathe. Instead of trying to swim, Uma allows herself to sink to the bottom of the river while her family calls her name and tries to rescue her.

The passage could be interpreted as a description of a suicide, or just a call for change. Uma, it seems, wants to escape from her family and her community altogether; the only way to accomplish such a feat, it would seem, is to die. And yet there's a kind of exhilaration and *rebellion* in Uma's bold act: it's as if she's ending her life and yet also beginning a liberating new one (notice the way Desai describes the Uma's "exultation").

liberating women from repressive cultures is knowledge-- throughout the novel, we see women being barred from pursuing school and university, and therefore being barred from achieving freedom.

☛☛ She sloshes some milk into the coffee. 'Rosebuds. Wild Waltz. Passionately,' she screams at them silently. She tosses in the sugar. 'Madly. Vows. Fulfill,' her silence roars at them. She clatters a spoon around the cup, spilling some milk into the saucer, and thrusts it at Papa. 'Here,' her eyes flash through her spectacles, '*this*, this is what I know. And you, you don't.'

**Related Characters:** Uma (speaker), Papa, Mama

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 137

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Uma attempts a small but powerful rebellion against her family and her entire culture. Uma has been reading poetry; the words of the poem inspire her to celebrate her own experiences, instead of submitting to the authority of men in general and her father in particular. Here, in the middle of pouring coffee for her father (as is her duty as a daughter), she angrily thinks of (and perhaps also mutters aloud) words from her favorite poems. In doing so, Uma seems to be trying to demonstrate what has happened to her: like a character in the poem, she ended up wilting away because she tried too hard to find a suitable husband for herself. The passage culminates in Uma telling her father that she knows things that he doesn't--not just the literal practice of pouring coffee, presumably, but the general experience of being a woman, having to base one's entire life around men, etc.

Uma has often been meek and frightened around her father, but here she seems to be lashing out against him, even if mostly in her own mind and her domestic sphere (the only places she has any kind of control). Her father, she feels, doesn't understand the pain that she goes through: he looks down on her, and even feels ashamed of her for "failing" to get married. Uma, however, is learning to celebrate her own life: she seems not to see herself as a failure any longer. Her experiences have inherent worth, and her father needs to recognize that.

## Chapter 11 Quotes

☛☛ A career. Leaving home. Living alone. These trembling, secret possibilities now entered Uma's mind—as Mama would have pointed out had she known—whenever Uma was idle. (...) But Uma could not visualize escape in the form of a career. What was a career? She had no idea.

**Related Characters:** Uma, Mama

**Related Themes:**     

**Page Number:** 131

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Uma thinks about her parents' neighbor, Mrs. Joshi. Mrs. Joshi is everything Uma's parents aren't: tolerant, relatively feminist, etc. She encourages her children to pursue careers that give them financial independence from their families and from their spouses.

The passage is meant to illustrate the full extent of Uma's sheltered, isolated worldview. Uma is so "imprisoned" by her society's and parents' expectations (i.e., the expectations that she get married, be a docile, timid wife, never pursue her own dreams or career goals) that she can't conceive of what a "career" *is*. The passage also makes a more subtle point about language, knowledge, and education: the main reason that Uma doesn't try harder to achieve independence for herself is that she has no idea of how to go about doing so. The most powerful tool for

## Chapter 13 Quotes

☝ She had been married for twenty-five years, the twenty-five that Uma had not. Now she is dead, a jar of grey ashes. Uma, clasping her knees, can feel that she is still flesh, not ashes. But she feels like ash—cold, colourless, motionless ash.

**Related Characters:** Uma, Anamika

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 152

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Uma learns that her cousin, Anamika, has died a horrible death. Anamika is a symbol of her culture and family's repressiveness and sexism: in spite of her intelligence and potential, she was barred from studying at university, and ended up married to a brutal, cruel man. Now, Anamika is dead—whether from murder or suicide isn't clear (and there's no indication that anybody particularly cares about solving the crime, another symbol of the bias against women in Uma's society). No matter how Anamika died, her manner of her death could be said to symbolize the direction her life took: during her 25 years of marriage, she slowly lost her "color," her her warmth, her liveliness—she "burned out" under the weight of cruel oppression and abuse. And now Uma feels alone and depressed in a new way—she hasn't had to suffer under a husband like Amanika's, but she still feels just as "ashen" as Amanika herself.

## Chapter 16 Quotes

☝ 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.

**Related Characters:** Arun

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 172

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Arun comes to college in the United States—he's truly a fish out of water. Arun has grown up in India, and in a very repressed and controlling family at that. In college, however, Arun finds himself in an entirely different kind of place. Both because college is more diverse and because American culture (the culture that dominates college life, in

spite of its diversity) is more tolerant of independence, Arun feels isolated and lonely.

Arun has "freedom" from his family and his culture for the first time in his life—one would think that his freedom is a blessing (he doesn't have to worry about his parents hounding him to study harder, for example). And yet the passage makes it clear that Arun doesn't necessarily want this much freedom after all. After years of being pressured and bullied by his parents, he's internalized their values. Thus, when he comes to a place where, for once, he can breathe, he just wants to go home—he learns that freedom can also mean anonymity, and a stifling family is still a close family. The paradox of the novel is that Arun finds his own culture harsh and repressive, but ultimately comes to feel nostalgic for it.

## Chapter 19 Quotes

☝ 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 nourishment.

**Related Characters:** Arun

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 185

### Explanation and Analysis

Arun is living in the United States and studying at the University of Massachusetts. He finds his new life in the U.S. unsatisfactory, however. One would think that Arun would embrace his new freedom and independence—for the first time in his life, he doesn't have parents looking over his shoulder, telling him what to do. And yet Arun finds that he's still being supervised by various people, such as Mrs. Patton, the gracious host who invites Arun to stay with her.

The passage shows that Arun thinks of his time in the U.S. as a kind of extravagant but ultimately superficial "echo" of his time in India. In some ways, he prefers his home life with Mama and Papa because his parents seem more "real" than a gracious but somewhat vapid host like Mrs. Patton. His life in India was harder, but richer, while he sees the Patton family's life as easy but ultimately empty.

☝ When she finally brought herself to tell him that Arun was a vegetarian and she herself had decided to give it a try (...) he reacted by not reacting, as if he had simply not heard, or understood. That, too was something Arun knew and had experience of (...)—his father's very expression, walking off, denying any opposition, any challenge to his authority...

**Related Characters:** Arun, Mrs. Patton, Mr. Patton, Papa

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 186

### Explanation and Analysis

The more things change for Arun, the more they stay the same. Arun is staying with an American woman named Mrs. Patton—a gracious host who makes every effort to make Arun feel comfortable, even buying him vegetarian food. When Mrs. Patton tries to convince Mr. Patton, her husband, to consider vegetarianism, too, Mr. Patton ignores her altogether. Arun is immediately reminded of the way his own father would ignore his mother—many American families, it's implied, are just like their Indian counterparts: the men are harsh and authoritative, and the women are meek and submissive. Thus Desai rebuts kind of racist critique of Indian society as "inferior" by showing how the same sins exist in all cultures—here Mr. Patton finds it inconceivable that someone could decide to not eat meat.

Arun chooses to focus on the similarities between his life in India and his life in America, instead of focusing on the myriad differences (too many to name). While Arun may be *correct* to notice that Mrs. Patton is timid around the harsh, brusque Mr. Patton, it's indicative of his cynicism and joylessness that he sees only misery in Mr. and Mrs. Patton's relationship.

## Chapter 22 Quotes

☝ We don't sit down to meals like we used to. Everyone eats at different times and wants different meals. We just don't get to eating together much now that they're grown. So I just fill the freezer and let them take down what they like, when they like. Keeping the freezer full—that's my job, Ahroon.

**Related Characters:** Mrs. Patton (speaker), Arun, Mr. Patton, Melanie, Rod

**Related Themes:**     

**Page Number:** 197

### Explanation and Analysis

Arun is spending time with the Patton family, an "all-American" clan that celebrates sports, success, and competition. The problem with the Patton family, it's suggested, is that they don't have any real sense of community. Mrs. Patton tells Arun (she can't even pronounce his name right, emphasizing the distance between her culture and his) that her family no longer eats together—a pretty good metaphor for the breakdown of the traditional American family over time. Mrs. Patton is a mother, but she's lost any real connection to her children apart from her literal, material duty to give them things to eat. Once again Desai compares ideas of plenty to scarcity—the Pattons have plenty to eat, but little real connection, and the Patton children have plenty of freedom, but little happiness.

## Chapter 23 Quotes

☝ Mr. Patton ignores her. He is getting a can of beer out of the refrigerator. Opening it with a shark jerk of his thumb, he demands, 'Where are the kids? Are they going to be in for dinner tonight? What have they been doing all day? Are they doing any work around here?'

**Related Characters:** Mrs. Patton, Melanie, Mr. Patton, Rod

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 203

### Explanation and Analysis

Mr. Patton is a gruff, action-focused husband—a parody of the American masculine ideal. He's not a particularly considerate or kind man, either. When he returns from work, he doesn't seem to show any affection or love for his wife; he just asks her where his children are. By the same token. Mr. Patton doesn't really ask about how his children are doing; he just asks about what they've done all day (how many chores, etc.).

Mr. Patton is an unusually bullish, stern man, and yet Arun (who's witnessed the entire scene) seems to take him as a representative American husband. Based on Arun's earlier observations, it would seem, Arun thinks of Mr. Patton and Papa as similar kinds of people—basically dismissive of others' needs (particularly women), and too focused on actions. Arun notices that Mr. Patton ignores his family's feelings, and starts to dislike him for doing so.

☛ Arun gets out of the way, quickly: one can't tell what is more dangerous in this country, the pursuit of health or of sickness.

**Related Characters:** Arun

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 205

### Explanation and Analysis

Arun realizes that Melanie, Mr. and Mrs. Patton's child, has bulimia: she eats candy bars and then makes herself throw up so that she doesn't gain any weight. Worse, the Pattons--or at least Rod, who tells Arun about his sister--seem to know full-well that Melanie is bulimic, and not care. Melanie is the dark side of the Patton family's emphasis on deeds, outward appearances, and health (in such a way, Melanie seems to symbolize Desai's critique of superficial American culture itself). She's so obsessed with seeming healthy and attractive that she pursues an incredibly unhealthy lifestyle, in which she's constantly throwing up to avoid gaining the slightest amount of weight.

Arun gets at the contradictions in the Patton's worldview when he notes that he can't tell which is worse, pursuing health or pursuing sickness. Arun's point seems to be that an overzealous pursuit of health is unhealthy: it treats the body as a mere object, to be cynically tuned and distorted in the interest of appearances.

## Chapter 24 Quotes

☛ Why don't you ask me what I want? Why can't you make me what I want? What do you think we all are—garbage bags you keep stuffing and stuffing?

**Related Characters:** Melanie (speaker), Mrs. Patton

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 207

### Explanation and Analysis

In this chilling passage, Melanie has a fight with her mother, Mrs. Patton. Mrs. Patton sees Melanie walking into the kitchen, with her face looking oddly swollen (by this point in the novel, we know that Melanie is bulimic, and regularly makes herself throw up). Mrs. Patton gives Melanie some eggs and encourages her to eat them, prompting Melanie to yell at her mother for treating her like a "garbage bag."

Melanie's point, it would seem, is that in focusing so

exclusively on health and outward appearances, Mrs. Patton (and, for that matter, American culture as a whole) neglects her loved ones' feelings and spiritual lives. One could say that Mrs. Patton treats her daughter like a mere object that Mrs. Patton must keep looking pretty and healthy at all times. She never asks Melanie what she feels like eating; instead, she *gives* Melanie food. Melanie has become obsessed with her own health because Mrs. Patton is, too.

## Chapter 25 Quotes

☛ 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 protests.

**Related Characters:** Arun, Uma

**Related Themes:**     

**Page Number:** 214

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Arun walks into the Pattons' house to find Melanie eating an entire tub of ice cream when her parents aren't watching. Arun realizes that Melanie and his own sister, Uma, aren't all that different: they're both frustrated, repressed people who feel angry and misunderstood. Uma is repressed by her parents' emphasis on marriage and pleasing men; Melanie is repressed by her parents' emphasis on health and beauty. Both sets of parents, Arun seems to realize, err in focusing too exclusively on outward appearances, thereby neglecting their children's psychological stability and inner peace. (It's also no coincidence that Melanie and Uma are both women: in Indian and American culture, women are more harmed by the overemphasis on superficiality than men are).

☛ But what is plenty? What is not? Can one tell the difference?

**Related Characters:** Arun (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 214

### Explanation and Analysis

Arun has just seen Melanie wolfing down a bowl of ice cream in her mother's absence: the sight of Melanie, a well-off child from a good family, abusing her body prompts Arun to realize that the Pattons, much like his own family, are spiritually "starved." Although the Pattons are a prosperous American family, and therefore taken care of in every material way (food, shelter, money, etc.), they lack a certain kind of "plenty."

What does Arun mean by "plenty?" Arun seems to realize that one can be physically nourished and yet starved for any kind of spiritual meaning. The Pattons live sad, meaningless lives, in which their money and social status win them no real pleasure. The Pattons, one could say, are the stereotypical suburban American family with a lot of money but no inner peace. Material possessions, Desai suggests, can't make up for loneliness or self-hatred: in short, man does not live by bread alone.

## Chapter 26 Quotes

☝☝ Now that he is contributing to the din, he begins to feel pleased. Surprisingly, it is due to the water, an element that removes him from his normal self, and opens up another world of possibilities.

**Related Characters:** Arun

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 222

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Arun goes swimming in the ponds near the Patton's house, accompanied by Mrs. Patton and Melanie. Arun savors the feeling of jumping into the water and feeling weightless: he's so used to being bottled up and repressed that the slightest display of fun is a liberation.

There's a deeper meaning to Arun's experience in the passage: he's so used to pleasing other people, and being "swept along" in other people's visions (his parents, the Pattons, etc.) that he treats swimming as a rare case of living "for himself," and himself alone. Notice that the passage is meant to evoke an earlier passage, in which Uma jumps into

the river, seemingly because she wants to end her own life. Arun and Uma suffer from a similar sense of overdetermination: they wish they could break free from their parents. Still, we should note that Arun's situation seems a little freer and happier than Uma's. He's depressed and repressed, but he wants to keep living--for him, the water is like a liberating baptism, one that is less desperate than Uma's.

☝☝ 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 a real pain and a real hunger. But what hunger does a person so sated feel?

**Related Characters:** Arun, Melanie

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 224

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Arun--still by the ponds--finds Melanie in a pool of her own vomit, barely alive. Arun is shocked to see that Melanie continues to be addicted to purging her body in such an unhealthy way: she's so slavishly devoted to the ideal of seeming healthy and attractive that she's willing to cause herself incredible discomfort.

Arun's behavior--or lack of behavior, rather--is very telling. Arun puts his hand on Melanie's shoulder and imagines telling her "the perfect thing," just like in a movie. But Arun himself is so repressed and timid that he can't think of what to tell Melanie: in the grand scheme of things, Arun is just as devoted to his ideals (living for his parents, doing well in school, etc.), as Melanie is: they're in the same boat, really. Arun is insightful enough to understand Melanie's problem: she's spiritually malnourished, and lives in a bland, loveless household. And yet he's not wise enough to solve Melanie's problems for her: if he were, he'd have freed himself from his own sadness by now too. Note also that Desai once again frames personal issues in terms of hunger and "satedness"--Melanie literally has an excess of food available to her, but she still feels a spiritual and psychological "hunger" that, like Uma's similar hunger, is far from being satisfied.



## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## CHAPTER 1

The novel opens in the modern day with Uma, middle-aged and still unmarried, at home in India in the summer, taking orders from Mama and Papa, (or MamaPapa, as she thinks of them). At first, they are instructing her with great importance about how they wish to have their afternoon tea. This leads to them barking orders at her, very specifically, about how to do many different household chores at once. They anxiously debate with each other about how best to instruct Uma to prepare a box of care goods to send to Arun, who is attending University in America. They worry that he has a warm enough sweater, and enough tea. Uma grows very flustered trying to meet their growing and changing demands. Her parents show no concern or even awareness for how their way of ordering Uma around is making her feel.

Uma struggles to remember a time when MamaPapa had 'separate existences'. She recalls that Mama and Papa have offered few memories of their childhoods before their young marriage. Mama's recollections focus on family and include remembering little transgressions, such as the women of her house sneaking sweets to their daughters and nieces, as sweets were only allowed to boys in her household. Papa's recollections focus on the struggles of his boyhood in poverty and his hard work to overcome those deprivations so that he could go to school and become a lawyer, such as studying under streetlamps late into the night.

Uma remembers the only example of Mama having a separate life from Papa as being when Uma was young and Papa was still working as an attorney, and Mama would sneak off to play cards with the women in her neighborhood. Mama would laugh loudly at the card games with the other women and would show a coy, playful side to herself. When Papa would return from work, Mama would pretend that she had not left the house that day.

*Mama and Papa treat Uma, their daughter, very differently than they treat Arun, their son. They put a lot of thought into their package for Arun. Meanwhile, MamaPapa expect a lot from Uma, and their way of piling demands onto her shows that they give little thought to whether or not Uma can actually meet those demands. They expect her to have no other needs, desires, or priorities other than meeting their needs. It's as if they see their daughter as an extension of themselves and their will, rather than as her own person. Uma's use of the term MamaPapa to think of her parents shows that she imagines them to be an inseparable unit, without individual wishes.*



*This passage illustrates the importance of the collective family identity in rural India. Mama and Papa choose not to remember their past selves very much, because to do so may be challenging to their ideal of marriage and the family as the most important unit. Mama's recollections about sneaking the sweets betray the unequal treatment of girls and boys in her own family and the secret defiance of women against that inequality. Papa's recollections allow us insight into his own childhood poverty, and the values he places on education (at least for boys) and on very hard work.*



*Even Mama has a separate will and a separate self apart from Papa, but she only chooses to express it in small ways and only in the company of other women. At the card games, the women form a little secret world of their own. And even though a little card game might seem to be a fairly innocent transgression, it is the most rebellious that Mama can allow herself to be.*



Uma recalls that in Papa's younger days when he played tennis, he made a very serious ceremony about having the family and the household servants facilitate his games and provide an audience. Mama would observe the games proudly, and she would get angry if his tennis suit hadn't been washed perfectly or if his lemonade wasn't ready when the game was over. Uma remembers that when her father was still a magistrate and the family had to make appearances at social gatherings, he would tolerate joking with colleagues and inferiors who jabbed at him—but always in a way that was harsh, establishing his superiority and social status.

*Mama makes a big deal out of Papa's tennis games as if his success in tennis were some kind of reflection on her. There is a gender inequality in their marriage, which reflects on the standards of their society in general: Mama is not permitted to indulge her hobbies openly, while Papa not only indulges his interests but demands that everyone else serve as audience. Papa can never seem weak in front of anyone, and he isn't even free to enjoy social occasions, because every interaction must display his authority and superiority.*



## CHAPTER 2

Still in the modern-day, and Papa has had his car driven up to the front of the house. He declares that Mama and Uma need to get some exercise, so he takes them to the park. At the park, Uma is expected to walk with Mama, and the two walk slowly, Uma following Mama's pace, while Papa circles the park several times on his own. Uma hungrily smells roasted nuts and cooked gram, which is garbanzo bean flour, and watches interestedly at the crowd, while her mother criticizes passerby for their immodest dress or behavior. Papa decides when to order Mama and Uma to leave, and when Uma asks why they are hurrying, Mama says that Papa must have his lemonade.

*The fact that Papa mandates the trip to the park because he thinks that Mama and Uma need exercise shows how much he considers himself to be responsible for determining even the physical needs of the women in his household and for facilitating how they should be met. It is as if they are children. Uma shows a hunger, not just for the literal nuts and gram she smells in the park, but for the sensations, smells, and sights presented to her in the park. She wants to linger because she has gotten a taste for life outside the world of her family, and she's curious for more.*



The novel flashes back to the past, to Uma's childhood. Uma remembers when Mama became pregnant with Arun, and she recalls this as the only time she noticed a significant discord between her parents' desires. Uma remembers the secrecy and shame surrounding news of her mother's pregnancy. The narrator indicates that the secrecy ensued because pregnancy is a sign of sex – particularly female sex, which is shameful. When Arun is conceived, Mama is older and the pregnancy is painful, and she wishes she could terminate it. But with just two daughters, Papa wants a son. So Mama feels she has no choice but to go through with it, however miserable it makes her health. Papa is proud when the boy is born, and Mama appears to welcome the son and recover her state of harmony with Papa.

*Uma remains interested in searching her memory for instance of her parents as separate individuals. If she can recall these instances, it may mean that being a part of a family doesn't necessarily mean losing one's self. The memory of her mother's pregnancy speaks to the importance of sons. For Papa, the importance of having a son outweighs the risk the pregnancy poses to Mama. The shame surrounding Mama's pregnancy shows a contradiction in their view of women's sexuality. While Papa wants the child, the end result of sex and pregnancy, he cannot acknowledge the pregnancy publicly without also acknowledging Mama as a sexual being.*



The novel flashes back a bit further, and shows young Uma going to the catholic convent school. She is interested in everything she studies, but she gets failing grades in every subject. She loves the western Christian religious atmosphere of the convent school, delighting in the religious education, the music, and looks up to the nuns—who are for the most part American and British. The nuns focus on proselytizing, but Uma seems neither aware nor bothered by this. Her grades are failing worse than ever when Arun is born, and when the nuns start sending notes home describing her bad scores, Mama tells Uma that there is no point in going to school any longer. Uma refuses to let Mama soothe her shaking hands when Mama tells her that she must prepare herself for marriage, and that in the meantime it is her job to stay home with Arun.

*Uma's enthusiasm for going to school in spite of her failing grades reflects on her ongoing curiosity and interest in people, places and things. Unlike her father, who in Chapter 1 worked tirelessly to succeed in school to build his career, Uma's fondness for school is not goal-oriented. She enjoys the religious environment because even though the nuns have their own agendas, their perspective is different than her parents. When Mama tells Uma she must stay at home with Arun, she begins a pattern of sacrificing Uma's needs and her desires in order to build a better life for Arun. Uma's role, they believe, is at home, and her value is in her domestic abilities rather than her education or the development of her mind or spirit.*



## CHAPTER 3

The chapter opens with a scene in the modern day, in the summer in India. Uma's mother tells her to pass the fruit bowl to her father, but Papa remains still and silent and does not take it. Mama interprets this silence as his nonverbal demand that the women peel and part the fruit for him. Following her mother's instructions, Uma helps her mother to silently feed her father an orange in an elaborate, almost-ceremonial process, and when it is over, her mother sits back, proud and relieved.

*Papa feels so self-important that he does not even use words to express his demands. Mama accommodates Papa's sense of entitlement, and she considers waiting upon him to be a duty of not only herself, but also her daughter. Something as simple as eating an orange becomes a ceremony for Mama to proudly show her submission to Papa as patriarch, and to impose the same submission onto Uma.*



The novel flashes back to Uma's teenage years, after her baby brother Arun is born. While everyone else is napping during a hot afternoon, Uma runs away from home. She hires a rickshaw (a two-wheeled wooden cart, pulled by a man on a bicycle)—to ride her to the convent school. There, she goes in search of Mother Agnes, the head nun, and falls at her feet, begging her to allow her to return to school, telling of her unhappiness at home with the baby. Mother Agnes embraces Uma, then tells her that she has done everything she can to convince Papa, and that now Uma should try to learn home keeping. Uma shrieks, and has her first **epileptic seizure** on the convent floor. Mama blames the convent nuns for causing Uma's seizure, using the incident to justify her decision to keep Uma out of school.

*Uma is desperate to nurture a spirit of rebellion. She escapes to the convent school because it was the only place where she had her own separate daily existence and the promise of a future outside of MamaPapa, marriage and children. She sees Mother Agnes as an authority figure—who she believes has the power to stand up to her parents. Rather than find the support that she hopes for, however, she finds that not even Mother Agnes can advocate for Uma. She is left to face her fate, alone. Uma's seizure on the convent floor seizure represents the quiet rebellion of Uma's spirit and body against the life she has been assigned. Yet rather than help her to gain independence, the seizures only further hinder her.*



Uma settles into taking care of baby Arun. Mama and Papa attend nervously to Arun's care, worrying over his diet, his every step, his progress, and making sure he has the best of everything. Uma observes that Arun's birth is a great pride for Mama—who, to Uma's dismay, bases her happiness on her status as the mother of the son by an important politician. Uma forms the conclusion over the years that her mother and father appear to connect solely as partners in running their household, and not in any romantic way. Uma thinks to herself that she wouldn't like to have a marriage without love. Arun grows up to be sickly and weak, and he refuses even as a baby to eat meat. This greatly distresses his parents, who see meat as a sign of power and progress, and think of vegetarianism as rustic and old-fashioned.

The story flashes forward briefly a few years, to Arun as a little boy playing in the bushes outside with Uma. She is sneaking unripened fruit and salt to him as a snack, and she reminds him of a time when he bit her on the finger as a baby. He does not think it is funny, and he threatens to tell their parents that Uma is sneaking forbidden snacks to him. This scares Uma, who jumps up and gets caught in the bushes, but Arun just laughs.

## CHAPTER 4

In the modern day, Mama and Papa have left home to attend a wedding. With few chances to be home alone, the now middle-aged Uma relishes the opportunity. She is in her room, cheerfully going through her jewelry and her other trinkets, when Ayah, her family's servant, comes into her room and insists on brushing Uma's hair. Ayah is complaining to Uma about her rebellious daughter Lakshmi, whom Ayah beat after the girl ran away from her arranged marriage. Ayah says that Lakshmi is trying to find work as a servant to support herself, for which Ayah beats her more. Uma gets angry and scolds Ayah for beating Lakshmi. Ayah complains that she sacrificed everything for Lakshmi, and shows Uma her tattered clothing as an example. Uma angrily throws a handful of new *sari* garments from her dresser at Ayah, who thanks Uma, and leaves the room.

*Uma's independent way of thinking is evident in her differing opinion that love should be at the heart of marriage—contrary to the norm for arranged marriages. The care that Mama and Papa have for Arun is unequal to the care they put on their daughters, showing how they treat daughters as second-class children. Yet, they deny Arun self-expression, just as they deny it of their daughters, when at an early age Mama and Papa fail to accept his vegetarianism. His weak immune system and his dislike of meat set the stage for him to disappoint the high expectations of his parents.*



*Even as a little boy, Arun already knows that he has a more powerful place within the family than his older sister Uma. He uses his power as the boy child to threaten and scare Uma, as a way of manipulating her into keeping him happy. He is still a child and therefore playful, but the effect his threats have on Uma are real.*



*As a middle-aged adult, Uma no longer tries to escape by going into the outside world. Instead, she escapes by finding freedom in her solitude. When Ayah speaks of beating Lakshmi for escaping her marriage, Uma's anger must also include her own anger at her parents for not allowing Uma her own life. Because traditional Indian social rules dictate obedience to one's parents, Uma can't direct her anger at her parents. So, she channels it at Ayah, a servant. Uma's treatment of Ayah betrays her own social status relative to her servant. To Ayah, a good marriage for Lakshmi is better than a life in servitude such as her own.*



The novel flashes back to Uma's childhood again, to her memories of visits from her distant relative Mira-Masi. To Uma's great admiration, Mira-Masi, the widow of a disgraced family member, has dedicated her life to the god *Shiva* and spends her days traveling through the country, visiting different relatives and different Hindu temples. Uma loves Mira-Masi's visits, even though MamaPapa disapprove of Mira-Masi's traveling lifestyle, her vegetarianism, and her "old-fashioned" religious devotion. Uma recalls curling up around Mira-Masi's feet and listening to her recite epic myths about the adventures of Hindu gods. Uma remembers wishing that real life were as magical and wondrous as the myths of gods.

Mira-Masi carefully cooks her food separately in her own stone oven outside, and while MamaPapa frown, Uma feels honored if Mira-Masi lets her help in her food preparation. Every evening, Mira-Masi goes down to the temple of *Shiva* to honor her chosen god in ritual prayer and blessing. Uma longs to feel the spiritual connection and magic that she perceives around Mira-Masi's simple rituals, and she feels struck with emotion just hiding behind poles, watching Mira-Masi at the temple. One evening, MamaPapa reluctantly allow Mira-Masi to take Uma, Aruna, and Arun with her down to the **river** for her religious bathing. While MamaPapa have warned their children about the filth of the river and the danger of the big currents, only Aruna and Arun avoid getting in the water. But Uma fearlessly jumps into the water, eager to feel it wash over her, and nearly drowns.

## CHAPTER 5

In Uma's middle age, her rebellious cousin Ramu surprises the family with a visit after adventuring at sea. Mama and Papa are unhappy to see Ramu, for this son of Lila Aunty and Bakul Uncle is the black sheep of the family, but Uma is thrilled. Against Mama and Papa's angry protests, Ramu persuades Uma into coming with him into the city to have dinner at a restaurant for the first time in her life. He reminds Mama and Papa of a time when he collected Uma from her attempts to run away to an *ashram*, a temple where worshippers stay as pilgrims. Uma accompanies Ramu to the Carlton Hotel, where she drinks shandy wine, laughs at Ramu's jokes, and enjoys the live music. On the way home, she cries that the night is over, and when she arrives home, she tries to recount her happiness to her mother—who refuses to hear, calling Uma an "idiot" and a "hussy".

*Uma admires Mira-Masi because she leads the kind of life that Uma would like to have—free-roaming, untethered to either parents or husband. While MamaPapa see Mira-Masi as too old-fashioned in her religious fanaticism, she also represents to them the threat of female independence – which they see as too modern. Traditional ways aren't necessarily more acceptable to MamaPapa. Uma's love of Mira-Masi's magical stories shows her desire to have any other life than the one she has.*



*The invisible power Mira-Masi attributes to her god Shiva frees her from feeling obligated to earthly authorities. Uma is drawn to the beauty and magic of religious ritual, and it represents to her a freedom from the weight of earthly authorities and rules. Her desire to wade thoughtlessly into the river is just like her desire to be consumed with religious fever – she longs to feel swept up, swept away with feeling. She wishes to be transported to another place, not just physically, but also inside herself. Unlike Arun and Aruna, Uma experiences an inner freedom from fear of nature and of danger.*



*Uma's cheerful hospitality toward Ramu in spite of her parent's judgment of him as the black sheep shows that Uma has her own way of judging goodness. Uma soaks in every moment of her little adventure to the restaurant with Ramu. It's not just the luxury of the fancy restaurant that she enjoys, but the laughter, the wine, and the temporary freedom to be enjoy herself. Uma's desire to share her happiness with Mama is innocent and shameless. Mama further isolates herself from Uma's true self by reproaching her. Uma is back in the house with no solitude, but in her heart and mind, she returns to her loneliness.*



The story flips back to Uma's young adulthood. Mira-Masi has grown older and weak with fever. She comes to visit the family, and Mama urges her not to travel to an *ashram* in the foothills. Mira-Masi insists she will be okay if Uma can go with her. Feeling tricked, Mama lets Uma go. The perilous journey by beaten-down carriage and tough footpaths is all a big adventure for Uma. Once at the ashram, Mira-Masi focuses on her religious rituals, giving Uma the chance to wander freely all day through the **river** paths around the ashram. Uma realizes, while falling asleep on the stone floor beside Mira-Masi, that she has never been so happy as now. Uma has another **seizure** while there, but the pilgrims and worshippers respond to Uma's seizure with wonder and respect. Fellow pilgrims readily accept Mira-Masi's explanation that Uma seizes because she is chosen by lord *Shiva*.

After a month at the *ashram*, two unexpected visitors turn out to be cousin Ramu and Arun, a young boy at the time. Ramu tells Uma that he has come on Papa and Mama's instructions to reclaim her, for she has stayed much longer than they expected, and they are imagining her to have been kidnapped. Mira-Masi prepares herself to face down Ramu – who she sees as a hooligan for his bad manners and western, metropolitan ways. The two fight quietly all afternoon over Uma's fate, but in the end, Ramu wins Uma herself over by charming and distracting her with his laughter and warmth. Uma is already on the carriage out of the ashram before she sadly realizes what she is allowing to happen, and then she refuses to eat or laugh all the way home.

## CHAPTER 6

In the modern day, the local jeweler has come to MamaPapa's house to show his spread before Mama and Uma, as he does every year. He makes the same joke he has made to her since she was born, saying, "Am I to make Baby's wedding jewelry this year?" The joke still makes Uma blush, even though she is now middle-aged.

*Only when Mama and Papa feel cornered by social situations do they allow Uma to leave home. Rather than to see her epilepsy as a curse, as MamaPapa do, Mira-masi and the other pilgrims see Uma's seizures as a sign that she is holy. Their opinion represents a truth about Uma that MamaPapa cannot see—that Uma is special, that she has a spiritual plenty inside of her. As Uma wanders by herself at the ashram, she finds happiness because she is free to meander and find a kind of freedom that she finds only in solitude. Uma's ability to find happiness just in her own company makes her different than most other characters in the novel.*



*While there are huge differences in character between Ramu and Mira-Masi, both relatives at different times offer Uma the chance to have adventure. Yet, it is only Mira-Masi who refuses to cooperate with the authority that MamaPapa try to have over Uma. As a woman free of the authority of any man, whether husband, brother, or father, Mira-Masi seems to be immune to the power that male relatives have in their society. Uma's innocent love of Ramu keeps her from realizing the freedom that she is giving up, but when she does, she feels a great loss.*



*Uma's age is marked by many factors in the novel, and the jeweler must know that she is now past the typical marriageable age for her society. Still, he flatters her by pretending it is still possible for her to marry in their society.*



During Uma's teenage years, all the female cousins in her family are nearing marrying age. Everyone's favorite cousin, the gracious, beautiful and intelligent Anamika, wins a scholarship to Oxford, but her parents, Lila Aunty and Bakul Uncle, do not consider allowing her to go. Rather, to her private sadness, they stash her award off into a cabinet and bring it out only to show visitors. Anamika has many suitors, but her parents marry her off to a much older man because he "matches" her in degrees and prestige. The man pays no attention to Anamika, but rather appears to worship his own mother. Soon after their wedding, news floats to Uma's family that Anamika's husband and mother-in-law regularly beat her and that she is treated like a household servant. Soon, Anamika miscarries due to a beating, becoming infertile. Uma hopes that her husband will send her back home to her parents, but Anamika doesn't return.

*Anamika holds all the female virtues valued by traditional Indian society—she is beautiful and accomplished, yet humble and obedient. But Anamika's husband, chosen only for his status and not his character, cannot be pleased, and the abusive marriage destroys everything good in Anamika. Anamika enters into a marriage of prestige, and yet she becomes the most unfortunate character in the novel. The system of arranged marriage loses legitimacy in the case of Anamika. Her violent miscarriage is symbolic: Having no love for her, her husband destroys not only her spirit but her ability to have children—her potential to create life, to begin again.*



## CHAPTER 7

In the modern day, Uma is visiting the family's neighbor Mrs. Joshi, who offers Uma homemade ice cream. Uma quickly eats two cups of ice cream, and when she leaves, Mrs. Joshi comments that Uma is still just like a child, even despite her advancing age.

*Uma's life has not forced her to grow up, as the lives of many women around her have done. Yet, Uma's childlike nature, rather than being admired by those around her, becomes a point of scorn and reproach.*



Right after Anamika's marriage, Mama is sending pictures of Uma out to relatives and friends, who are all helping to find a marriage for Uma. Their neighbor, Mrs. Joshi, arranges for the Syal family from another town to come meet Uma. Against Uma's resistance, Mama makes Uma dress up in a fancy sari and powder her face, and plait her hair. Mama reproaches Uma for never having learned how to cook or housekeep because she was so busy playing. When the young man comes with his sister, he shows no interest in Uma. After hearing no word after weeks, Mrs. Joshi comes to tell Mama that the Syal's son would rather marry Aruna. Mama flares in anger at Mrs. Joshi and at the Syal family for the offensive offer to marry the younger daughter before the first is married. Nevertheless, Mama begins to notice that Aruna's appeal is worth cultivating.

*Mama thinks Uma has wasted her youth, because Mama judges the value of women only in the status of their marriage matches. Uma's childhood preference for learning at the convent school and playing allow her no space in her family or society. The fact that the young man notices Aruna instead betrays not only a difference in beauty between the two sisters, but also a difference in dispositions. Aruna is ready to grow up and get out in the socially prescribed way. Uma doesn't want to be treated like a child, yet she remains free and childlike, uninterested in society's expectations.*



MamaPapa respond to an ad in the newspaper for a family looking for a bride for their son. They meet the Goyal family, and the family makes an offer, asking that the dowry be given immediately to buy more property for their estate—which they promise to share between both families. Eager to marry Uma off, MamaPapa agree, and give the dowry. But a few weeks later, they receive word from the Goyal family that their son has decided to pursue his education instead. The dowry cannot be returned, for it has already been spent. Mrs. Joshi scolds Mama for not informing her sooner, as it is well known that the Goyal family routinely scams families. She tells Mama to be grateful that the marriage did not go through, for who knows what they might have done to Uma to get rid of her so they could scam more families.

*Just as Anamika's parents did not investigate her husband beyond merely his social status before marrying Anamika off, neither do MamaPapa think through their choice. Mrs. Joshi's comment that Mama should be grateful that the marriage did not go through underlines the similarities in situations, yet with different outcomes. In both instance, calamity threatens to befall the daughters because of the haste of the parents to fulfill society's expectations and customs. Yet, Uma never marries, and instead stays with her parents and remains safe, while Anamika does not.*



## CHAPTER 8

In the modern day, Mama wakes Uma to tell her that thieves are stealing *guavas* from their trees. Mama remarks that while everyone else sleeps, only she guards the house from danger. Back in time, marriage proposals flood in for Aruna, but Uma's unmarried state keeps MamaPapa from pursuing them. Aware of her own appeal, Aruna begins to act with greater confidence and undertoned sexuality, to MamaPapa's alarm and pride. Aruna starts to withdraw her sympathies for Uma and replace them with a feeling of superiority. Everyone in the house starts to withdraw from Uma, treating her like an outcast. Uma notices, and wonders if the family unit really can promise to love and protect its members. She thinks of the abuse and isolation that her cousin Anamika suffers, in the marriage that her own parents had arranged, as an example of the failure of family to do what it claims.

*Mama sees herself as the only one wary of thieves in the garden - a metaphor for Mama and Papa's confidence that they know best how to protect their children from trouble. Yet, in reality, they cannot protect Uma from false marriage proposals or from her isolation when she fails to meet their expectations of marriage. Uma begins to realize the hypocrisy of the family institution—particularly in the misplaced focus that parents have on securing the best marriages. MamaPapa and Anamika's parents are so concerned with marrying their daughters off, but in the process, their daughters become endangered or, in Uma's case, outcasted.*



MamaPapa make a last effort at marrying Uma off. The old man from the newspaper ad accepts the offer, but when he arrives for the wedding, Uma is horrified to find that the man is old, fat, and shows no interest in her. During the ceremony, the groom indifferently asks the priest to cut the ceremony short. Once at her new home, the husband leaves immediately, telling Uma that he has to work in Meerut. The women don't speak to Uma, but bark directions to her about cooking and chores. One day, Papa arrives, raging at the family, telling Uma that the husband has another wife and family in Meerut, and needed the dowry to save his business. Upon returning home, Aruna asks Uma if her husband touched her, and Uma says no, but privately wonders about the experiences she could've had. MamaPapa give up on marrying Uma, and Uma feels like she has lost all her value to her parents and family.

*Rather than treating her like a beloved child, MamaPapa deal with Uma as if she were a burden they are eager to hand off, indiscriminately. Yet, their desperate efforts to secure a marriage for Uma can be understood as a misplaced expression of love. MamaPapa are so sure that marriage signifies honor, status, and security, and that those are the only keys to happiness. In a society where women measure their worth by their husband's success and their mothering success, Uma becomes invisible. She is lonely, not because she pines for a husband, but because her community isolates her by failing to make a place for her in their world.*



## CHAPTER 9

Uma is at home alone in the modern day, while MamaPapa are out at a bridge game. Rarely by herself, Uma enjoys the opportunity to go into her room and go through her old Christmas card collection. Most of the cards are from the nuns and teachers at the convent school, and going through the collection makes her think of them. She gets the desperate urge to use her alone time to call a friend, but realizes she has nobody to call—Anamika is unreachable, Aruna is too busy with her own life, and Ramu is nowhere to be found. She gets the courage to call Mrs. O’Henry, a Christian missionary lady who worked with the school. Mrs. O’Henry is not at home, and Uma angrily slams the phone. When MamaPapa return, Uma pretends to be asleep. “Always sleeping,” her mother says, disapproving.

Back in time, Aruna chooses from among her suitors Arvind, the handsomest, richest young man from an urban background. They have a sophisticated, westernized wedding at the showy Carlton Hotel, which nobody in their town has ever done. Aruna insists on all of the wedding details, and arranges everything to stun both families and their community. During the cocktail party that Aruna arranges for the family and in-laws the night before, Uma has a **seizure** in front of a group of extended family. That night, Aruna yells at Uma for spoiling the event and Uma yells back. Aruna threatens Uma not to have a “fit”, as she calls the seizures, during the wedding ceremony. During Aruna’s wedding, Uma is ignored, and the only person who remembers to ask how she is doing is Dr. Dutt, the charismatic female doctor who helped her when she had her seizure the night before.

After the wedding, Aruna moves with her husband Arvind to a fancy flat in Bombay, visiting her family only rarely. When Aruna does come, she criticizes all of her family for their appearance, the appearance of the house, and their manners—calling them “villagers”. During her visits, Aruna takes no pity on Uma, but expects Uma to care for them as the “maiden aunt”. Mama and Uma unite against Aruna’s criticism, and on one occasion laugh together over Aruna’s suggestion that Uma shorten her hair like the women in Bombay. Uma and her parents take some comfort that Aruna also criticizes her husband for his dress and manners. Uma pities how she imagines Aruna must go through life—always upset over the failure of everyone, including herself, to be perfect. She dresses her children up, but Mama and Uma are appalled at how bratty little Aisha and Dinesh are.

*Uma devotes any free time to looking through cards and trinkets from her childhood, a very long time ago—representing how Uma herself is frozen in time, denied an adult life by her parents. Constantly with her parents, Uma hungers for solitude. Yet, when she is finally alone, she is lonely. She has no friends to call, for everyone she thinks to call is from her past. When she tries to call Mrs. O’Henry, Uma gets angry because it isn’t just Mrs. O’Henry who isn’t at home—rather, it is as if the whole world has become unavailable to Uma, and left her behind.*



*Aruna can be choosy in selecting her husband, in contrast with Uma, who was expected to accept whoever would take her. Unlike Uma’s modest, somber wedding, Aruna’s lavish wedding reflects the high value her parents put on her. The differences in the girls’ weddings reflects the inequality in wealth, opportunity, and social status which the two sisters will experience all their lives. Uma has no control over the differences in beauty and charm by which this inequality is justified, just as she can’t control the seizures for which Aruna blames her.*



*Although Mama and Papa took greater pride in Aruna when she was young, the good marriage they wanted for her has only taken her further away from them. Aruna, in her new life in Bombay, manages to do what Uma only wishes she could do—escape the life and family she was born into. Yet, Aruna’s escape does not bring her happiness. While Uma lost out on the chance to a glamorous life full of wealth and freedom from MamaPapa—it is she who feels sorry for Aruna. Uma allows herself to feel joy from simple things, to feel unconcerned by what other people think of her. If that is freedom, then it is Uma who is free, not Aruna.*



On one visit home, Aruna brings her in-laws to bathe in the holy **river** near the house. Uma visits the local optometrist, who says she has a bad condition and must see a specialist in Bombay. Papa gets angry and says that the doctor in their town should be good enough. Later, Mama tells Aruna about the doctor's suggestion, in an attempt to get her help—but Aruna only says that it would be too expensive, that the local doctor is enough for Uma. When both families go to bathe in the river, Uma impulsively jumps off the boat, without looking. She sinks to the bottom, letting the current wash over her, while everyone shouts her name and tries to find her to pull her up. After they rescue her, Uma realizes that the water rushing over her was what she had wanted most, and she wishes she hadn't been saved.

*Uma's family panics when she jumps, joining forces to try to save her life. Yet, ironically, refusing to address Uma's need to see a specialist, Papa and Aruna show no concern for Uma's health. It is surprising that Aruna, who shuns the village as beneath herself, would think the village doctor would be enough for Uma. Uma's family expects her to be content with less than everyone else. With nobody caring for Uma's needs, it is no wonder she jumps into the river, without even thinking, as if nothing in her life were worth staying in the boat for.*



## CHAPTER 10

In the modern day, Uma is invited to a coffee party thrown by Mrs. O'Henry, the Baptist missionary she admires. Mama and Papa say there is no good reason for Uma to go. Uma argues that Mama and Papa go out to see friends, but Mama say that they only go for Papa's career. Against their protests, Uma goes. At the coffee party, Uma stands out from the other Indian ladies, complimenting Mrs. O'Henry on the peanut butter sandwiches, strong coffee, and other American snacks. She shows interest in the cards that Mrs. O'Henry presses and stamps. Mrs. O'Henry sees Uma as having "potential"—perhaps to become Christian – and invites Uma to a Christian retreat in the mountains of Landour. Uma doesn't dare ask Mama and Papa if she can go. Instead, she returns home with a bundle of handmade cards, treasuring them as "tokens of a fairytale existence elsewhere."

*For MamaPapa, Uma can't leave the house just to enjoy herself or to make friends, because they don't recognize Uma's need for friendship or pleasure as legitimate. It is as if they view socializing as a bad thing, an evil that must be done only if one has no other choice. Uma calls them out on their hypocrisy, asserting herself by refusing to accept their excuses. What Mrs. O'Henry interprets as religious potential might be Uma's kindness and openness to new people and ideas. Uma treasures Mrs. O'Henry's handmade cards because they are relics of an exotic life, of the world outside, the world that Uma is hidden away from.*



The novel flashes to an overview of Arun's childhood, which centers entirely on school. Papa allows him no rest: All year round, Arun has a series of tutors hired to drill words, rules, facts and formulas into his brain. When finished each evening, his father urges him to go out and exercise, but Arun tiredly buries himself in comic books. When he reaches the end of his high school exams, Papa plunges him into applying for college, taking more tests, and applying for scholarships. When Arun's letter of acceptance to the University of Massachusetts finally arrives, Arun shows no excitement or relief, only exhaustion. Uma packs his bags while his father rests and his mother cries in pride, but even as he departs, Arun shows no joy. Uma is saddened, wishing he would be happy so that at least someone would be happy, even if she cannot be.

*MamaPapa dedicate all of their efforts into Arun's health and education, in contrast with their neglect of Uma in these areas. Yet, they force onto Arun the same high expectations as Uma. Just as Uma was never asked whether or not she wanted to marry or to live with MamaPapa forever, neither is Arun asked whether or not her wants to study hard and go to college in America. Arun can't enjoy his success because he isn't working for his own dreams, but rather for his father's. Even though he is given more opportunity and care than Uma, his emotional self is just as neglected as that of Uma.*



## CHAPTER 11

Uma is writing to Arun on behalf of MamaPapa, and Papa criticizes Uma for her slow writing and her inability to keep up with grammatical directions. The letter tells Arun that the sister of Mrs. O'Henry, Mrs. Patton, is inviting Arun to stay in her home in Massachusetts for the summer, since he won't have campus housing. Uma reminds her parents of how kind the O'Henry family turned out to be after all, but MamaPapa ignore her. Uma tells Papa she must be done writing because her eyes hurt, and Papa reproaches her for her weakness. She angrily reminds him that she has told him many times that her eyes hurt, and her mother supports her and says maybe Uma should see a specialist. Uma reminds Papa that he himself went to a doctor for glasses. Papa scoffs and exits the conversation, turning a deaf ear to any further pleas.

Still in the modern day, a phone call comes from Mother Agnes at the convent, inviting Uma to come to the Christmas bazaar to help Mrs. Henry run her Christmas booth. Against the complaints of MamaPapa, Uma goes, and she describes the entire event as heaven. The paper crafts, the treats, the company, and the many people, pique Uma's curiosity and make Uma feel alive and involved. At the end, Uma finds a book of poetry for sale, and brings it home as a souvenir to remember the event.

The novel tells the story of Mama's friend and neighbor, Mrs. Joshi—one of few people who Mama allows Uma to visit. Mrs. Joshi arrived to the neighborhood as a bride years before. Unlike most arranged marriages, Mr. and Mrs. Joshi were actually in love, and this sparked hatred from his mother, who punished the young bride. Mrs. Joshi often came running to Mama, and the two would end up laughing together. After the mother-in-law died, Mrs. Joshi took over her household, making it a cheerful place. Her children played freely and tried new things, and they all grew up successful in their marriages and careers. Uma remembers how one of Mrs. Joshi's daughters is pursuing a career of her own, and the thought makes her feel inspired and sad. She would like some kind of a career, but she can only dream vaguely of a life of wandering, unsupervised.

*Papa fails to take responsibility for his role in creating the problems Uma experiences as an adult. The needs which Uma's parents have denied her—the opportunity to basic education and to receive medical care for her eyes—have led to the struggles in reading and writing, for which Papa criticizes Uma for. His belief in his own rightness and his refusal to admit his own mistakes betrays the arrogance of his gender and social status. As the man of the house, he sees himself as godlike, infallible. Even when faced with the consequences of his neglect, he shuts down, fearful that he might be proven wrong.*



*Uma deeply yearns to have things that are her own, to be involved in activities of her choosing, to seek new friends and experiences. While the Christmas bazaar may be nothing more than a yearly community holiday event, the event is magical to her because it provides her an opportunity to meet her needs to be social, creative, and independent.*



*With many of the wives and mothers in the novel living lives of either joyless submission to their husbands and families or of becoming mean themselves, Mrs. Joshi stands out as a woman who finds freedom in her marriage and family, and who passes her joy onto her household. She has known tyranny, and she is determined not to be tyrannical herself. Because she is in a marriage of love, rather than business, she is free to feel and express love and keep her spirit. By allowing her children, even her daughters, to choose their own paths, she asserts her own personality even within the structure of a traditional female role.*



## CHAPTER 12

After MamaPapa have Uma write the letter to Arun, they begin ordering Uma to do many chores at once. Uma finally snaps and storms away from them, running to her room and slamming the door. She finds the book of poetry from the Christmas bazaar, and she feels her emotions stir as she reads the poems: one about a rosebud that once ‘passionately waltzed’, though now it has ‘wilted’; another in which a young man beckons to the girl he loves that she ‘fly’ away with him to see the world rather than remaining in the dark room where she stays. When Mama calls her through the door, Uma stomps out, throwing the book at her mother. She brings her father his coffee, while muttering to herself words from the poems. When she sets it down, she says to her father, ‘this, this is what I know. And you, you don’t.’

Mira-Masi makes one of her final visits to Uma’s family. Uma asks the now aged Mira-Masi whether she has found her “little lord”, a little statue of *Shiva* that she had lost, and Mira-Masi only wails hysterically. Some time after Mira-Masi leaves, Lila Aunty comes to visit, and tells Mama and Uma that after much searching, Mira-Masi did eventually find her little lord, in a bazaar in the south, and that she scared the shopkeeper into giving it to her through a great show of anger and loud prayers, drawing a crowd of people to follow her down to the sacred river to worship. Though Mama and Lila Aunty laugh, Uma reflects with sadness and joy that Mira-Masi finally found what she was looking for.

Dr. Dutt comes to visit Uma’s house. Papa disapproves of Dr. Dutt as an unmarried woman with her own career, but because of her social rank, he feels he must entertain her. A ‘no-nonsense’ woman, she tells MamaPapa that she needs a capable lady to run the boarding house for her nursing school. She invites Uma for the job, and Uma’s heart races with hopefulness. MamaPapa try to politely hide their anger at the invitation, and Mama sends Uma away to the kitchen. When Uma returns, Mama is seeing Dr. Dutt off. She overhears Dr. Dutt telling Mama something about coming to the clinic for hysterectomy tests, and how sorry she is that Uma must stay at home to care for her. Later, when MamaPapa aren’t looking, Uma calls Dr. Dutt, to tell her that Mama is lying. Dr. Dutt promises to call Mama, but Uma never hears anything more.

*Fed up with her parent’s demands, Uma is briefly driven by a built-up rage that tells her to listen to her own inner voice and to see her situation for what it is. While at some points in the novel it is unclear whether Uma is aware of how unique she is or of how unjust her life has been, in this passage, she is acutely aware that she has something her parents do not. The poetry she reads speaks to her own situation—she is like a rosebud that is in danger of wilting, but she never had the chance to waltz, she was never beckoned to fly away by anyone except herself.*



*The lost statue of Shiva is Mira-Masi’s object of desire—the one thing she can’t imagine living without, and without which she feels angry and incomplete. Everyone in the novel is looking for something that they think will make life complete – whether it is a good marriage for their daughters, a good education for their sons, higher social status, or in Uma’s case—her own life. Mira-Masi’s hysterics echo the hysterics that often stir in Uma when she is most aware of her own lack. She is both happy for Mira-Masi and sad for herself.*



*Dr. Dutt represents a new kind of woman in Indian society. Like Mira-Masi, Dr. Dutt has no authority figure in her life, and no family to look after. This leaves her free to pursue her vocation, just like Mira-Masi. Yet, Dr. Dutt is much more threatening to Papa. Because Papa relies on his dominance over women to reaffirm his importance, Dr. Dutt’s success disproves all of his convictions about male superiority. Knowing that their reasons won’t seem right to the progressive Dr. Dutt, Mama and Papa can’t even admit to her why they deny Uma her own career, so they lie, keeping Uma from the only opportunity for a new life she is ever given.*



## CHAPTER 13

It is the middle of the night, and the electricity has faltered. Uma fetches Mali, their elderly groundskeeper, who emerges from his small shack and goes into town to fix it. Before his return, another figure is seen coming in the darkness: a man with a telegram. Just as the electricity comes on and Mali returns, they open the telegram. It states simply: “Anamika is dead.” Soon after, they hear the full story: Anamika was found burned to death by kerosene, wearing only a cheap nylon sari, before dawn on the porch outside her in-laws home. Different versions of the story float around. The mother-in-law claims Anamika snuck out before the house awoke and lit herself on fire, while the neighbors say that the mother-in-law dragged Anamika out in the middle of the night, with help from the husband, and burned her alive. Anamika’s parents say whatever happened was destiny.

Lila Aunt and Bakul Uncle come to deposit Anamika’s ashes down the **sacred river** that runs alongside their town - the very one that Uma herself twice tried to jump into. Lila Aunt and Bakul Uncle do not speak, or eat; they only look down, while Mama and Papa try to cheer them up and to arrange everything. Uma cannot stop thinking about how Anamika is now only ashes, while she herself lives—and yet, she ‘feels like ashes’. The next day, the whole family boards a big wooden boat, and they float out into the river. Mama reaches for Uma’s hand, and Uma feels the solace that at least they have each other. She tells Mama that she has asked cook to make a special breakfast, and Mama is grateful for the little gesture, squeezing Uma’s hand.

## CHAPTER 14

It is summer in the United States now, and Arun is walking alone along a wooded lane in western Massachusetts. He is noticing the houses, all with trimmed green lawns and neat outdoor fixings, houses whose doors and windows are all shut and television lights flickering through the shades—the only sign of life. Cars come by and roll into the driveways, some almost running him off the road. The manicured, closed-up houses, the inhospitality to pedestrians, and the nauseating smell of barbecue—it all seems decadent, yet lifeless to Arun. He goes into the house to find Mrs. Patton unpacking the groceries, looking anxious about a can of stewed tomatoes, worried about what she and Arun will eat for dinner.

*The story of Anamika’s death tragically symbolizes the final loss of female freedom—the loss of life. Whether it is suicide or murder is unclear; yet either way, it is the worst-case scenario, the final consequence of a traditional social system in which married women are treated as the property of their husbands. While marriage does not always bring a loss of freedom—Aruna and Mrs. Joshi are both examples to the contrary—it illustrates how much power husbands and in-laws can have if they choose to exercise it. Anamika’s parents could have saved her at any point, but they chose to deny the reality of the situation to save face until it was too late.*



*Anamika’s death brings out the love in Uma’s parents, especially her mother. Witnessing the grief of Anamika’s parents makes Mama want to draw closer to Uma. For a little while, Uma isn’t alone—for her mother is cherishing her as she has seldom done. While it was Anamika who was supposed to have the best life, and Uma who once tried to die into the river, it is Anamika whose body will now be deposited there. Yet Uma raises the question—what is death? Is Anamika the one who is dead, or is it Uma, who does not feel alive?*



*Arun notices that unlike his village town in India, the American suburbs are full of flashy signs of wealth, of dedicated upkeep, and of what looks like an isolated existence. Americans seem to have more money, but they aren’t around to enjoy their luxuries. Where are they? Inside their quiet houses with their televisions, inside their fast cars. The individualistic style of American life allows little room for a sense of community, and reflects an inhospitality that makes Arun feel disoriented.*



## CHAPTER 15

At the Patton house a little later, Mr. Patton is outside grilling steaks on a barbecue. He calls the family to eat, and Arun goes looking for Melanie, the Patton's teenaged daughter, who sits sulkily at the bottom of the stairs, eating a bag of peanuts, and ignores Arun. Mr. Patton is angry that the two children, Melanie and Rod, won't come to the dinner that he made them. Mrs. Patton accepts the bloody, charred steak that Mr. Patton throws onto her plate, but Arun must nervously tell Mr. Patton that he is a vegetarian. Mrs. Patton mutters quietly that she is too, but Mr. Patton doesn't hear her. Mrs. Patton reminds Mr. Patton of Arun's religious beliefs, but Mr. Patton says he can't understand how anyone could refuse a "good steak". Arun reassures Mrs. Patton that he will have a salad and bun, remembering his own mother's sadness at his father's disappointment.

*While Arun has escaped his own family, the capacity of family to be oppressive has followed him even to America. Mr. Patton assumes the right to dictate when it is time for the family to eat, just as Papa dictated when it was time for the women to take a walk. Rather than making decisions together, Mr. Patton, like Papa, imposes his idea of what will be good for his family members onto them. Just like the manicured lawns with nobody to run around on them, Mr. Patton's steak is well prepared, yet there is nobody to enjoy it. Like Papa, he responds with anger when his authority is challenged.*



## CHAPTER 16

The novel rewinds to the months preceding the summer, to Arun's first days at college. He remembers his college dorm for its striking foreignness—the loud music, the weekend parties, the cigarettes, the careless attitudes evident in conversation and bumper stickers alike. He remembers scanning his classrooms for people, and finding all of them undesirable for companionship. An older student sits down one day to have lunch with him, and he quickly excuses himself after she begins discussing her cervical cancer and tries to ask him about his own life. He realizes that he has a "resistance to being included." When a group of Indian students try to involve him in their cooking nights and movie hangouts, he even rejects their company, preferring to be alone. After a life supervised by his parents, he thinks to himself that he desires solitude more than anything.

*Arun reacts very differently to new environments than does his sister Uma. Both Arun and Uma grew up surrounded by family, allowed very little solitude. Yet, Arun was the focus of much of his parent's worry and attention, unlike Uma, who was in many ways neglected. As adults, Uma craves human contact, and loves reaching out to new people and places in any setting. Yet, Arun rejects the efforts of others to get close to him. He doesn't want to be a part of any group—whether foreign or familiar. In his experience, being a part of a group always brings pressure and requires emotional energy. After years with his family, he has little emotional energy left.*



## CHAPTER 17

In the months just before Arun's first summer in America, he realizes he needs to search for summer housing. Having turned down the offer from his Indian classmates to join them in renting a house, he begins fruitlessly searching ads for a room to rent for the summer. Just as he begins to get desperate, he receives Papa's letter in Uma's handwriting, informing him that Mrs. Patton has offered her home to him for the summer. Disgruntled at his family's continual interference in his life, he arranges to come. On his first night at their house in the suburban countryside, he is given a nice room to himself, yet he is nevertheless upset at finding himself once again in a family unit. He asks Mrs. Patton if there are wild animals in the trees outside, and she jokes that the only wild animals around are the neighbor's children.

*As Arun has always been accustomed to having his need for food and shelter met by either his family or now the university, he hasn't developed the survival skills to make his own living arrangements. While Arun desperately desires to be independent, even in America, he must depend on family—both his own and someone else's—to help him meet his needs. Arun must accept the company of others for his own survival. He fears that even though he will have privacy, that more will be asked of him. For in his own family, his parents always wanted his obedience in return.*



## CHAPTER 18

Soon after Arun arrives to the Patton house, Mrs. Patton tells Arun that she hears from her sister that food in India is different, and that therefore she is sure he will want his own kind of food. He reassures her that he can get his meals in town when he works, secretly relieved that this arrangement will excuse him from having to sit down and eat with the family. It soon becomes apparent, however, that eating meals only in town won't be a good permanent solution. Mrs. Patton tells Arun that she would like to try vegetarianism, and that her only reason for not doing so sooner is her husband and her family's preference for meat. She gets excited about going vegetarian, and tells Arun that this will be a fun activity for them to do together, but he does not share her enthusiasm or desire to band together.

*Arun seeks any opportunity available to be alone, and the idea of eating by himself is preferable to eating with the Patton family and being forced to socialize. Mrs. Patton enthusiastically assumes that going vegetarian will connect her to Arun, but she is oblivious to his resistance to connecting with her or her family. Mrs. Patton has long conformed to American culture's tradition of meat eating, and only now does she feel empowered by the presence of a foreigner, whose difference she welcomes as an opportunity to assert her own differences as an individual.*



## CHAPTER 19

Mrs. Patton excitedly takes Arun to the grocery store to shop for vegetables. Arun marvels at the huge parking lot full of big cars and the pristine rows of brightly packaged foods, and at Mrs. Patton's expert knowledge of reading packages. At home, Mrs. Patton puts all the food away, and to Arun's surprise expects him to know what to do with it. He eats the packaged foods she gets unhappily, worrying that he will never break away from the cycle of women trying to mother him in unwanted ways. He feels that the American life is a "plastic representation of what he had known at home." When Mrs. Patton finally tells her husband that she is trying vegetarianism, Mr. Patton ignores her, continuing to buy meat and pretend like everyone else will eat it. Arun sees that Mr. Patton, like Arun's own father, ignores anything that "challenges his authority."

*America seems to Arun like the land of plenty—everywhere he goes, people have more and bigger material possessions than he's ever seen. The process of acquiring goods appears to be a big past time; Mrs. Patton is an expert at buying things, but once she brings it all home, she doesn't turn her purchases into food. America has all the same basic staples as India— food, family, home—but in America, it's all packaging with nothing nourishing. Mr. Patton's reaction to Mrs. Patton shows his inability to accept his wife's right to make her own choices. Even in America, men can still assert their will over women.*



## CHAPTER 20

After dinner the same night, Arun is on his way to his room, when he looks into the den to find Melanie sitting on the sofa, watching TV—commercials, dramatically and enthusiastically advertising everything from car insurance to dental wear. She is eating another bag of salted peanuts. When she sees Arun watching her, she stares him down, with an irritated and threatening look, until he goes away. Later that night, Arun hears noise and looks out his window to see the Patton's son Rod, eating leftover meat off the grill in the yard. A little while later, he looks out his window to see a raccoon foraging in the garbage. He leaves his bedroom to go outside, and on his way, finds Melanie on the bathroom floor, head over the toilet, throwing up. Her eyes are red and her makeup runs, and she tells him to go away.

*After all the effort Mr. Patton put into grilling the steak, the way that everyone in his house gets their dinner that night reflects the inability of the parents to meet the needs of each other and their children. Mrs. Patton nibbled at the steak reluctantly, Arun refused it, Rod came late at night and ate the remnants of the grill, and Melanie ate nothing but junk food, which she forced herself to throw up later. The foraging raccoon that Arun sees eating leftovers in the garbage is a metaphor for the members of the house—they are all foraging, trying to find nourishment through scraps.*



## CHAPTER 21

Returning from work at the university library, Arun passes Rod, who handsomely jogs by, inviting Arun to join him. Arun turns him down, feeling embarrassed at his lack of athleticism. Later that night, Rod and Mr. Patton are on the downstairs couch, watching a football game and eating microwave taco dinners. Arun wishes he could join, but doesn't feel welcome. Mrs. Patton, on the other hand, eagerly invites Arun to cook Indian food with her. Not knowing how to cook, he begins to mix together all the Indian-aisle ingredients Mrs. Patton bought. Melanie comes in and says that the food looks gross, and Arun agrees. He eats it anyway, to please Mrs. Patton. Later, he finds Melanie sitting on the staircase, eating Hershey's. He asks why she hasn't eaten, and she says it's his fault for making disgusting food. He feels somehow it is his fault, and wishes he could help.

*Rod and Mr. Patton seem to Arun like intimidating, brawny, sports-obsessed American guys. While he wishes he could be included in their men-only rituals, he feels inadequate, left out because he doesn't share their athletic world, or their culture. Even Rod's invitations scare Arun because he doesn't want to be face the possibility of ridicule. Arun doesn't want to spend time with Mrs. Patton, because she silently demands that he make her feel like a good mother. Melanie's accusation that she isn't eating because of Arun makes him feel guilty, even though it is an illogical claim. His guilt comes from his own family, where his sister did suffer neglect because his parents were so focused on meeting his needs.*



## CHAPTER 22

Arun is at the grocery store once again with Mrs. Patton. She is telling him that when her children were little, she would take them with her grocery shopping, they would fill up the cart together, and then the food would all be gone within a week. Now, she says, nobody in her family likes to eat at the dinner table or together anymore. Her job is to fill the freezer, and everybody can take out what they want when they want it. Arun thinks of telling Mrs. Patton about his concerns about Melanie's eating habits, but he is afraid to show too much interest in her. Mrs. Patton says that unlike her and Arun, nobody else likes anything that she cooks, and the intimacy of her comment makes Arun feel uncomfortable.

*While Mrs. Patton is blindly focused on exploring vegetarianism and her one-sided friendship with Arun, it is obvious to Arun that something seriously is wrong with Melanie, and that is what Mrs. Patton should be thinking about. He is especially turned off by Mrs. Patton's attempts to get close to him because he knows that she shouldn't be putting her energy into him, but into her daughter. Her family isn't just eating away from the dinner table; they are disjointed from each other in every aspect of life.*



## CHAPTER 23

Arun is jogging for the first time, so exhausted that he feels sick, through the suburbs surrounding the Patton's house. Cars zoom past him, and he reflects on all the ways America seems built to accommodate cars—gas stations, highways, motels off of highways. He thinks of it as a land so rugged that only cars can break through, while pedestrians can get nowhere. When Arun returns to the house, Mr. Patton is angrily putting away bags of raw meat, asking Mrs. Patton if she knows where their kids are. He is very concerned about whether anybody is "Doing work," and when Mrs. Patton says that Rod is working out, he responds, "And Melanie...What's she in training for, Huh?" He is angry that Rod works out all day, but does no visible chores when he returns home. He doesn't ask how they are—only what they're doing. Arun escapes silently to his room.

*Surrounded by the brawny, athletic Patton men, Arun begins to judge himself by the American ideal of manliness that they represent. By pushing himself to physical sickness the first time he jogs, Arun mercilessly pressures his body to meet the ideal. The roads begin to embody the impossibility of American standards: a human can't travel the roads without a car, a sign of American wealth and power. Mr. Patton's fixation on whether or not his children are "doing work" shows how much he values productivity as the symbol of a healthy household—instead of their mental or emotional health.*



That night, Melanie is in the bathtub, **water** running, with her cassette player. Arun is waiting outside because he needs to take a shower. When she finally comes out, she looks exhausted and pale, but says nothing. He hears her going into her room, and he thinks he hears her crying. Arun finds Rod, who is doing leg-lifts and stationary cycling in his room, and shyly tells him that he worries Melanie might be ill. Rod isn't surprised at all; in a matter-of-fact way, he tells Arun that of course Melanie is ill, because all she does is eat candy bars and purge them up. He criticizes her for using this way to maintain her body, instead of exercising like he does. Arun is shocked, and wonders to himself "what is more dangerous in this country—the pursuit of health, or the pursuit of sickness."

*The American obsession with thinness is foreign to Arun. It shocks Arun that Melanie would intentionally make herself sick, because in his country, sickness is something to be avoided. Arun is shocked by Rod's casual reaction because it shows how emotionally removed Rod is from Melanie's wellbeing and how commonplace girls starving and purging seems to him. Rod is as obsessed with his physique as Melanie, and the effect of this obsession seems to Arun to blur the line between health and sickness in a way that disturbs him deeply.*



## CHAPTER 24

It is August. Arun comes into the kitchen in the morning, to find Melanie sitting sullenly at the kitchen table while Mrs. Patton scrambles eggs. Mrs. Patton tells Melanie that her father thinks she should "go outside and play games," because she doesn't look well. Arun is pouring a bowl of cereal, and notices that Melanie's face is swollen. He wonders if Mrs. Patton notices. Mrs. Patton puts a plate of scrambled eggs before Melanie and tells her they will "do her good." Melanie gets up, crying, and yells at her mother for never asking her what she wants to eat. She tells her mom that everything she cooks is poison. After Melanie storms off, Mrs. Patton shrugs lightly and turns to Arun, saying she knows that he would never say anything "silly" like that.

*Mr. and Mrs. Patton mistake Melanie's swollen face and depressed attitude for simple, childlike needs: In telling Melanie to simply "go outside and play games", Mr. Patton assumes that Melanie's bad health can be quickly fixed with a superficial solution. Mrs. Patton is no better—she assumes that a few scrambled eggs will "do her good". They have both failed to take seriously Melanie's unusual eating habits, or to investigate what is really going on within Melanie. By continuing to treat her like a child, they show that they have failed to get to know her as a young woman.*



Mrs. Patton announces to Arun that it is time to go shopping again. Arun remarks that maybe they should finish the food in the house first, but Mrs. Patton says, "What would we do in an emergency?" When they get to the grocery section, she starts expertly filling up her cart. Arun feels sickened by the excess, and he wonders if that is what bothers Melanie. He tries to put back a tub of ice cream, but Mrs. Patton playfully tells him no, it's her favorite. At the check stand, the girl cashiering casually asks Mrs. Patton if she is pregnant, and at Mrs. Patton's offence, the cashier tells her she "just has that glow." The entire drive home, Arun is too embarrassed to speak, but Mrs. Patton drives fast and too carelessly, railing on about the cashier girl, asking Arun for his reassurance that she isn't fat, or old.

*Arun is losing his ability to remain indifferent within the Patton household. Aware that he is the only one in the house who is sufficiently worried about Melanie, Arun is able to see the family dysfunction with the clarity of an outsider who has experience in family dysfunction. Mrs. Patton's obsessive shopping seems gross to Arun, because it fails to address real needs in her family and he imagines it might be the adding to Melanie's problems. The comments of the cashier girl make Mrs. Patton snap, and she loses her façade of confidence, coming unglued with insecurity and self-doubt.*



## CHAPTER 25

Arun comes home the next morning from a trip to the library, to find Mrs. Patton in a bikini in a deck chair in the family's front yard, sunbathing. Arun is disturbed and scandalized. Avoiding her invitations to sunbathe with him, Arun runs into the house, to find Melanie at the kitchen table, scarfing down the tub of ice cream that her mother had bought with Arun at the store the day before. Melanie scoffs to Arun about the ridiculousness of her mother sunbathing. Arun notices in Melanie a familiar, silent anger, and it reminds him of his own older sister in India, who is bitter "against neglect, against misunderstanding, against inattention to her unique and singular being and its hungers." Arun is surprised that in the "land of plenty", he would still find this kind of hunger and neglect.

Mrs. Patton has stopped grocery shopping and cooking. Now, she does nothing but sunbathe. She calls to everyone in her household who passes by, inviting them to join her, but nobody does, as they are all bothered by her new hobby—even Mr. Patton bypasses her when he comes home, going straight for a can of beer and the television. The kitchen gets emptied, and messy, as everyone forages for what's left. Arun starts staying longer in town, eating sandwiches on park benches, and even seeing movies by himself. A plague of mosquitos has taken over the town, and, Arun thinks, something terrible has taken over the town and the house where he stays.

## CHAPTER 26

On an uncomfortably hot Saturday, Mrs. Patton persuades Arun into coming with her and Melanie to cool off at the swimming pond in the woods near their home. When they arrive, Arun feels very sweaty and overheated, and the water tempts him, but because of his timidity he hesitates. Melanie sits beside the pool, eating chocolate candy bars, while Mrs. Patton begins to shed the clothing over her bikini and prepares to sunbathe. The unsettling sight of Mrs. Patton's near-nakedness motivates Arun to jump right into the water. He finds himself feeling peaceful and content, enjoying the freedom of swimming far and floating, for the **water** "removes him from his normal self."

*Arun finally understands why Melanie's pain is so difficult to him to watch: it is the same pain that he saw in his sister, Uma. Like Uma, Melanie's emotional needs are unseen or minimized by her parents. Like MamaPapa, the Patton's fail because they never get to know their daughter as a woman—instead, they treat her like a silly child. All the food or money in America cannot feed Melanie's need for love and understanding. Melanie's eating disorder is like Uma's jumping in the river—both girls cry for help by tempting death.*



*After Mrs. Patton's experience with the cashier, she enters into a small mid-life crisis, becoming even more self-involved and neglectful of her children's needs. Mrs. Patton abandons the domestic chores she previously relied on to define herself as a good wife and mother, and now focuses her self-esteem on one superficial detail of her appearance—her suntan. The decay of the Patton household finally takes a physical form—but emotionally, it has been a long time coming.*



*Because Arun seldom relaxes or lets go of himself, this moment at the swimming pond stands out. His "normal self" that he feels removed from while he swims far into the pond may not be his actual self at all—but rather, the role he has grown comfortable playing. Because Arun quietly bottles his feelings and maintains consistently the role of good son and good student, his capacity to feel free or to feel inclined to explore, to test the waters, may seem foreign even to him.*



When Arun emerges from the water, he finds that Melanie is nowhere to be seen, a pile of candy wrappers left in her absence. He decides to explore the woods by himself to see what's around. Unexpectedly, he stumbles upon Melanie, lying face down in the ground, her face covered in her own vomit. Arun thinks she might be dead, but she speaks, telling him to go away, before thrashing her body and lifting herself just enough to gag her finger in her throat once more, purging. Arun puts a hand on her shoulder. Looking upon Melanie, he wishes he could be the hero, like in movies, and save her. But he knows that he cannot, for here he sees "real pain and real hunger." Mrs. Patton soon emerges, and when she sees Melanie, she says nothing but "Dear Lord, dear lord."

*Even as she is found thrashing, in a pile of her own vomit, Melanie continues to purge compulsively, ignoring Arun—the food is certainly out of her system by then, but the feelings that move her to this behavior cannot be purged. Arun wishes he could save Melanie—but stopping her purging won't save her from her pain, or her hunger. Melanie acts as if she were completely alone, because she feels alone—and it isn't Arun's attention she wants. Still, his care shows his sense of humanity. Like Uma, Arun knows things others don't, and sees things in people that others do not.*



## CHAPTER 27

It is autumn, and Arun is packing his bags to return to college. The return of students brings life back into the town that was so empty for the summer, and Arun enjoys the return to normalcy. At the Patton's house, Melanie has left to receive treatment at a temporary recovery home in the Berkshires, for teen girls with mental and emotional illnesses. Reports sent home tell the Patton's that Melanie is making friends, playing tennis, and beginning to eat again without throwing up.

*The Patton's may have fallen apart together, but they must find their peace individually. The solution to Melanie's sickness must be found outside of her family. By sending her to a facility for treatment, they show for the first time that they take her needs seriously, and that they are willing to make sacrifices to help her recover her health.*



Mr. Patton has taken on a night job to pay the bills for Melanie, and Mrs. Patton has stopped sunbathing, now letting the kitchen go bare while she tidies Melanie's room, on her knees, and seeks out new age spiritual literature and programs. Rod has won a football scholarship. Arun has just received the box with a brown shawl and a box of tea that his sister Uma prepared and sent to him, but he has no room in his bags for it. He gives both items as gifts to Mrs. Patton, wrapping the shawl around her shoulders, as he tells her that he is leaving now. Mrs. Patton warmly wraps the shawl around herself as Arun quietly sneaks out.

*Mrs. Patton cleans her daughter's room on her knees as an act of penance and atonement. Her newfound spirituality reflects awareness that she must also find a new way for herself, too, though she does so in a typically American consumerist way. The shawl and tea from Uma offer to weigh Arun down with strings from his heavy family ties in India. By giving the gifts to Mrs. Patton, he frees himself from carrying the weight of his own family guilt. It is also a sad symbol of Uma's unlived life. Arun will go on, but he will leave Uma behind.*





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