

FASTING , FEASTING

BY-ANITA DESAI

Overview

Author

Anita Desai

Year Published

1999

Type

Novel

Genre

Fiction

Perspective and Narrator

***Fasting, Feasting* is told from a third-person omniscient perspective by an anonymous narrator.**

Tense

***Fasting, Feasting* shifts between the past and present tenses.**

About the Title

Food plays a vital role in the novel, which is set in both India and the United States. The title *Fasting, Feasting* has cultural and religious implications. *Fasting* refers to the physical act of refraining from eating. *Feasting* refers to the consumption of food. In both the Christian and Hindu religions, fasting helps achieve spiritual oneness with God(s), and feasting is an act of religious celebration and gratitude.

Anita Desai | Biography

Early Life

Anita (Mazumdar) Desai was born June 24, 1937, in Mussoorie, India. Her mother was a German immigrant, and her father was a

businessman from the Bengali elite. Her parents met when her father was attending school in Germany, and their interracial marriage was unusual for its time. After their marriage, they moved to Delhi, where Desai grew up. Desai had two sisters and a brother. While Desai spoke mostly German in her family home, she was also fluent in Hindi and educated in English, which was the first language she learned to read and write. Desai has mentioned that although she "feels about India as an Indian," she considers herself an outsider because of her mixed heritage. She published her first story in a children's magazine when she was only nine years old. Desai told an interviewer of her early attraction to writing, "I have been writing, since the age of seven, as instinctively as I breathe."

Education and Family Life

Desai attended Queen Mary's Higher Secondary School in Delhi and went on to attend the University of Delhi, where she received a bachelor of arts degree in English literature in 1957. She published her first short story, "Circus Cat, Alley Cat," in her adult life the same year she graduated. After graduating, she married her husband, Ashvin Desai (c. 1933–2008). Desai and her husband had four children, including the novelist Kiran Desai (b. 1971), who won the 2006 Man Booker Prize for her novel *The Inheritance of Loss*.

Writing and Teaching Career

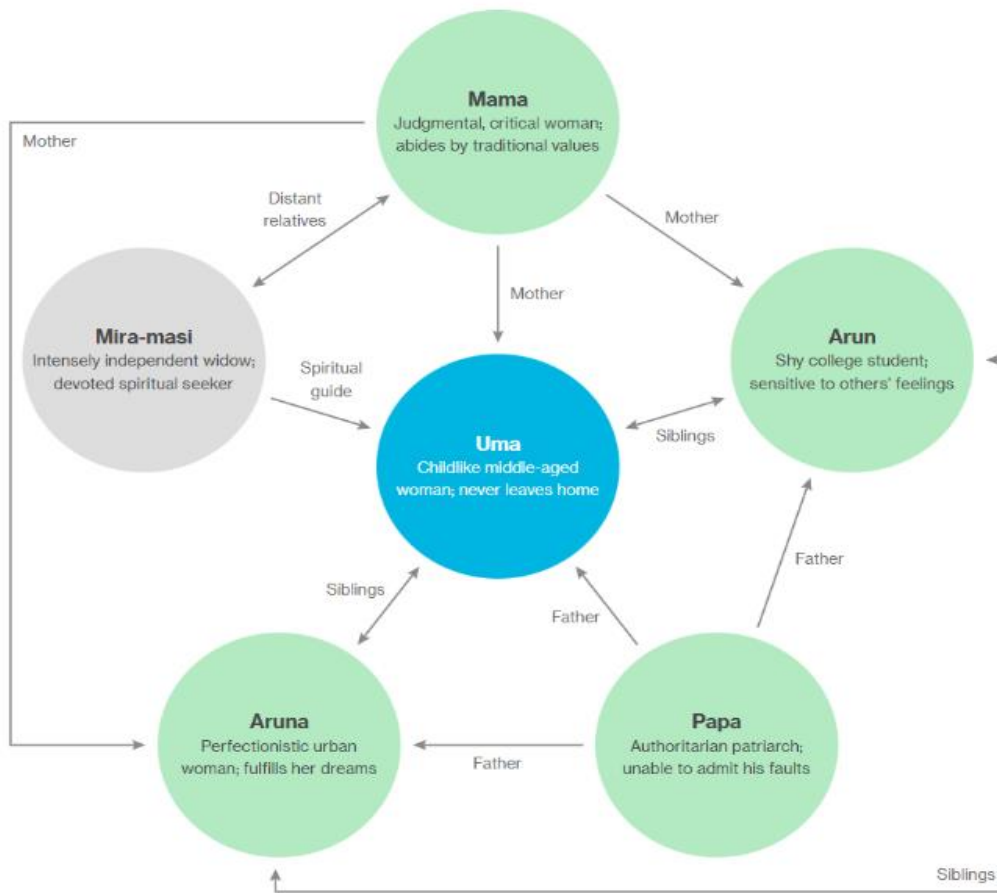
Desai published her first novel, *Cry, the Peacock*, in 1963. She went on to write additional novels, and she considers the coming-of-age novel *Clear Light of Day* (1980) to be her

most autobiographical work. Desai has also written short stories and children's books. Her 1984 novel *In Custody* was made into a film that was released in 1994, for which Desai wrote the script.

From 1986 to 1987 Desai was a visiting fellow at Girton College, Cambridge University, and then moved to the United States, where she taught at Smith College from 1987 to 1988 and at Mount Holyoke College from 1988 to 1992. In 1993 Desai became a creative writing professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), where she remained on the faculty until 2002. She has held faculty, research, and artist-in-residence positions at several other universities, including Barnard College, Baruch College, and the Rockefeller Foundation in Bellagio, India. She is a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature (UK) and an honorary member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

Desai's fiction covers a wide variety of themes, drawing on cultural clashes, women's oppression, identity, family, and traditions. Her rich use of imagery and visual detail has drawn comparisons to English novelist Virginia Woolf (1882–1941) and American writer William Faulkner (1897–1962). *Fasting, Feasting* was a 1999 Man Booker Prize finalist.

CHARACTERS



Full Character List

Character	Description
Uma	Uma is the childlike, curious, and unmarried middle-aged daughter who takes care of her parents.
Arun	Arun is the youngest child and only son of Mama and Papa. He is studious and shy, without much understanding of his own desires and needs.
Mama	Mama is a subservient, traditional woman who abides by the rules Papa provides.
Papa	Papa is the patriarch of the household, a traditional man who expects his family to do as he says.
Aruna	Aruna, the younger, prettier sister of Uma, makes a successful arranged marriage and fulfills her dream of moving to the big city. Still, Aruna doesn't seem satisfied.
Mira-masi	Mira-masi is a distant relative of Mama and Papa's. She is a devoutly religious widow who has a special kinship with Uma.
Mother Agnes	Mother Agnes is a teacher at the convent school Uma attends.
Aisha	Aisha is Aruna's daughter.
Anamika	Anamika is Uma, Aruna, and Arun's cousin, and she is Ramu's sister. She is a well-behaved girl who enters into an abusive marriage and dies.
Aruna's mother-in-law	Aruna's mother-in-law occasionally travels with Aruna to visit Uma, Mama, and Papa.
Arvind	Arvind is Aruna's husband.

Ayah	Ayah, which is the word for a nursemaid who is native to India, is Uma and Aruna's former caretaker. Mama calls her out of retirement to help care for Arun after his birth.
Bakul Uncle	Bakul Uncle is Anamika and Ramu's father.
Cook	Cook works for Mama and Papa, making all of the family's meals.
Dinesh	Dinesh is Aruna's son.
Dr. Dutt	Dr. Dutt is the unmarried female doctor in town who offers Uma a job.
Justice Dutt	Justice Dutt is mentioned in the novel as a friend of the family whose son brings a care package for Arun when the son visits America.
Father of the Goyal family	The father of the Goyal family, using his son as bait, tricks Uma's family into giving him a dowry. Then he backs out of the engagement, saying his son intends to go to college.
Harish	Harish is Uma's husband. He marries her, but Papa soon discovers he has another family. Papa has the marriage annulled.
Moyna Joshi	Moyna is Mrs. Joshi's daughter who strikes out to live on her own and begin a career.
Mrs. Joshi	Mrs. Joshi is the friendly neighbor of Mama and Papa.
Uncle Joshi	Uncle Joshi is married to Mrs. Joshi. They are Mama and Papa's neighbor.
Lakshmi	Lakshmi is ayah's daughter who left her husband and ran away.
Lila Aunty	Lila Aunty is Anamika and Ramu's mother.

Mali	Mali is a servant who lives with Mama and Papa. The word <i>mali</i> is a translation of "gardener."
Mother-in-law	Uma's mother-in-law, from the Goyal family, is impatient and abrupt with Uma. The mother-in-law helps trick Uma's family out of the dowry.
Mrs. O'Henry	Mrs. O'Henry is a Christian who befriends Uma. Her sister is Mrs. Patton, with whom Arun stays in America.
Panna	Panna is the driver's son who spends time with Dinesh when he is in town.
Melanie Patton	Melanie Patton is the daughter of the Pattons and is Rod's sister. She suffers from an eating disorder.
Rod Patton	Rod Patton is the son of the Pattons. He is athletic and all-American.
Mr. Patton	Mr. Patton is the head of the Patton household.
Mrs. Patton	Mrs. Patton is Mrs. O'Henry's sister who lives in America. She invites Arun to stay with her family.
Pilgrim	The pilgrim at the ashram helps save Uma after she has an epileptic fit.
Priest	The priest is involved in Anamika's ash scattering ceremony at the river. During the ceremony, the family forgets the priest and must go back to shore for him.
Priests	The temple priests at the ashram Uma visits with Mira-masi regard Uma with respect and reverence after she has an epileptic seizure.
Ramu	Ramu, whose full name is Ramu-bhai, is Uma's cousin and Anamika's brother. Ramu is considered the black sheep of the family.

School nurse	The school nurse rides back to Uma's house with her after Uma has a seizure at the convent.
Sister Teresa	Sister Teresa is a nun at the convent school.
Suitor	Uma's suitor is one of the Syals, a friend of the Joshi family. He is interested in Aruna, not Uma.
Mrs. Syal	Mrs. Syal is the mother of Uma's suitor.

Fasting, Feasting(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 Mama Papa, 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 Mama Papa 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 Mama Papa into letting her bring Uma with her to an *ashram*, or pilgrimage house. There, Uma wanders around freely and happily for a month, until Mama Papa 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 Mama Papa'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 Aunty 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.

CHAPTER WISE SUMMARY

Part 1

Chapters 1-2

The novel begins in the present day with Mama and Papa ordering their middle-aged daughter, Uma, to complete different tasks. Mama and Papa, married for decades as the result of an arranged marriage, have seemingly become one person. Papa sends for a car to take them to the park but scolds Mama and Uma for their slowness when they arrive.

The narration flashes back to the family's biggest secret, which is Mama's surprise pregnancy with Uma's little brother, Arun. The pregnancy is a shock because of Mama's age. Uma is a young woman, and her younger sister, Aruna, is already teenager. Because he still hopes to have a son,

Papa rules against terminating the pregnancy. Mama gives birth to Arun and tells Uma she will not be returning to school. Instead, Uma will help care for Arun. Uma is upset by this news because she loved attending school at the local convent. However, she is not a good student, and so Mama wins the argument.

Chapters 3–4

In desperation, Uma runs away to the convent to plead with her old teacher, Mother Agnes, to convince Mama and Papa to allow her to return. Uma weeps and, overcome, falls on the floor, having a fit or seizure. Mama blames the episode on the nuns and the school. Meanwhile, even though Aruna and Uma's childhood caretaker, whom they call *ayah*, or nanny, has returned to help with Arun, Mama continues to demand that Uma learn how to take care of the baby.

Uma's distant relative Mira-masi often writes to announce she will stop by the family's home on her way to visit somewhere else. Because she is a widow, she has a certain freedom to travel and be independent that other women do not. Mama does not like Mira-masi's religious devotion to the gods and goddesses, but Uma finds Mira-masi fascinating and inspiring. Much as Uma was curious about the convent's religious rituals, she is curious about Mira-masi's spiritual seeking. One day when Uma, Aruna, and Arun are still children, Mira-masi takes them to the nearby holy river. Uma wades in too far and has to be rescued before a current drag her away.

Chapters 5–8

The narration shifts back to the present tense with the arrival of Uma's cousin Ramu. Mama and Papa disapprove of Ramu, who is the black sheep of the family, but Uma

admires him. He offers to take Uma out to dinner, which scandalizes Mama and Papa. Ramu takes Uma to a hotel for dinner and drinks; when they return home, Mama scolds Uma for drinking in public. Soon afterward, Mira-masi comes for another visit and takes Uma to visit an ashram with her. Uma enjoys the getaway because she has no obligations. One day at the ashram, Mira-masi tells Uma she is the Lord's child, which sends Uma into another epileptic fit. Consequently, the seekers at the ashram believe Uma to be spiritually powerful. Finally, Papa sends Ramu to fetch Uma and bring her home.

As a teenager Uma observes her cousins who are preparing for marriage. Her cousin Anamika is the first to be married despite the fact that she has been accepted to Oxford College. Rather than anger her parents, Anamika accepts her arranged marriage. The bridegroom turns out to be an abusive man who doesn't love her. Anamika has a miscarriage after her mother-in-law beats her. Uma and Aruna hope Anamika will be sent home since she can no longer bear children. Mama tells Uma and Aruna that Anamika will never be sent back home because it would bring too much shame on the family. Soon after Anamika's marriage, Mama and Papa begin looking for a husband for Uma. Mama is frustrated with Uma's lack of interest or skill in getting married. When a suitor finally arrives, the family later learns that he is interested in Aruna, not Uma. However, Aruna is only 13 and not ready for marriage. Uma faces another failed attempt at finding a suitor, which angers Papa because he had already given her dowry to the man's family.

Mama and Papa finally find a bridegroom for Uma, and the day of her wedding arrives. Her new husband, Harish, seems uninterested in her. After the ceremony, she leaves

with him and his relatives to go to his town. Once they arrive at his house, Harish leaves, and Uma is expected to help the other women in the household. Harish is gone for weeks. One day, Papa arrives unexpectedly. He has discovered that Harish is already married to someone else and just took Uma's dowry. He takes Uma back home, which brings their family great shame. Mira-masi tells Mama that perhaps the Lord Shiva has chosen Uma for himself.

Chapters 9–10

Aruna, on the other hand, is able to make a successful marriage but is upset when Uma has one of her epileptic fits during the wedding. Aruna moves away and visits sometimes. But she never asks her family to visit her. When Aruna does visit, Uma notices that Aruna is not happy, despite her seemingly perfect life. On one occasion Aruna brings her husband's family to visit the holy river, where Uma dives in despite not knowing how to swim. She is rescued, which she finds disappointing.

As Arun grows up, Mama and Papa treat him much differently from how they have treated his sisters. He is given the best education and tutors and is forced to study around the clock. It is Papa's dream that Arun study abroad, but when Arun receives an acceptance letter to a college in America, Arun shows no emotion.

Chapters 11–13

In the present time, Dr. Dutt, a local female doctor, stops by Mama and Papa's to offer Uma a job. Papa does not like Dr. Dutt because she represents a progressive, Western way of life. Papa and Mama decline the job for Uma. Mama

feigns illness and claims that Uma needs to take care of her. Later, Uma calls Dr. Dutt and begs her to talk to Mama and Papa again, but Dr. Dutt declines. Soon after, the family receives a telegram saying that Anamika, Uma's cousin, is dead, and the rumour is that she set herself on fire—or her in-laws did. Her family visits to scatter Anamika's ashes in the holy river.

Part 2

Chapters 14–18

Part 2 of the novel shifts to Arun's experience in America, far away from his family in India. After a lifetime of being controlled by his parents, Arun enjoys the anonymity of college. Rather than seek out friends or a community, he stays to himself. He isn't even interested in befriending any of the other Indian students in the college community. However, Arun had not realized that the college dorm has to empty out each summer. He is forced to stay with the Pattons, who are relatives of a friend of the family, Mrs. O'Henry, back in India. Arun hates that his family is still planning his life from across the world. He had hoped to have a summer on his own with no obligations.

Chapters 19–20

Mrs. Patton knows Arun is a vegetarian, which her husband doesn't understand. Arun must also interact with the Pattons' teenage children, Melanie and Rod. Mrs. Patton

makes an effort to get to know Arun by buying him the kind of vegetarian food he wants to eat, and she joins him in his vegetarianism. She often takes Arun supermarket shopping, an experience he finds bizarre because of the overwhelming abundance of food Mrs. Patton buys at the market. As time goes on, Arun notices a few similarities between the Pattons and his own family. However, the Pattons are distinctly American and foreign to Arun, and he finds he is unable to express himself to any of the family members. He notices that Melanie eats only candy, which she then regularly throws up. Arun believes she might be sick but doesn't know how to ask her about it or whether or not he should tell her mother.

Chapters 21–25

One day Rod asks Arun if he wants to go jogging, which Arun declines. However, he decides to go jogging on his own one day, which is excruciating for him, given that he has asthma. Rod reveals to Arun that Melanie throws up her food to stay skinny, which shocks Arun. He has never encountered someone with an eating disorder in India. Arun wonders whether to tell Mrs. Patton.

Chapters 26–27

One day Mrs. Patton tells Arun that she and Melanie are taking him to a swimming hole. Arun reluctantly accompanies them but finds a sense of peace while swimming. After getting out of the pond, he walks for a bit and finds Melanie face down in the dirt, throwing up. Mrs. Patton soon finds them, exclaiming at the sight of Melanie lying on the ground.

A short time later, summer is ending, and Arun gets ready to leave the Pattons. Melanie has been sent to a hospital clinic for eating disorders, and Mrs. Patton has become interested in Eastern medicine and spirituality. Arun receives a package from his family the day he is due back to the dorms. He finds a packet of tea and a shawl inside. He doesn't have room in his suitcase, so he gives them as gifts to Mrs. Patton.

Themes

Family versus Individuality

Family is deeply important in *Fasting, Feasting*. Desai portrays two families from different cultures that seem as different as night from day. Mama and Papa helm a provincial Indian family, in which traditional customs dictate their marriage, roles, and expectations for their children. Mama and Papa enter their marriage not for love, but out of obligation. The marriage they build has a foundation based on the roles they play—Mama is subservient, and Papa is the maker of rules. Uma and Aruna work to fulfill the sole expectation placed on them: finding their own arranged marriages. While Aruna succeeds, Uma does not, which brings great shame on their family.

Uma struggles to assert her desire for individuality and freedom, needs that are continuously snuffed out by Mama and Papa in the name of family tradition. Her fascination with the people in her life who have carved an independent path for themselves shows how much she yearns for such a life with no hope of fulfilling it. Characters such as Miramasi, Ramu, and Dr. Dutt all serve as alternative models for Uma, yet she is frustrated because she knows she can

never live the kind of life she wants to live. Even though Uma avoids marriage, she is still expected to care for her parents, as is the custom. Uma's cousin Anamika is a cautionary tale of a woman who did what her family expected of her and met an abusive, tragic fate.

The Pattons serve as a mirror and counterpoint to Uma and Arun's family. The Pattons live the American lifestyle of freedom and independence. Their roles couldn't be more different from those in a traditional Indian family. However, Arun notices many similarities in their dynamics, from Mrs. Patton's subservience to her husband, to the neglect they show Melanie and the way they prize her brother, Rod. In contrast to Uma, Arun is afforded the opportunity to escape his family and live independently and anonymously in America. However, by living with the Pattons, he becomes entwined in another set of unhealthy family dynamics. He serves as the catalyst for Melanie's eating disorder to be discovered. Although the Pattons have different cultural traditions that make them more independent from one another, Desai highlights through Melanie's neglect that it may be to their detriment.

Roles of Customs and Traditions

Customs and traditions play a primary role in provincial India and, therefore, within Uma and Arun's family. Arranged marriages are expected, and so girls grow up groomed to be good wives and mothers. Mama and Papa are an example of an arranged marriage that seems more like a business than a romance. They each play their prescribed roles, and their

independent lives before they met one another remain a mystery to Uma. For her part, Uma upsets and disappoints Mama and Papa because she wishes to continue going to school at the convent and expresses bewilderment when it comes time for her to marry. The fact that she has two failed dowries and a failed marriage brings a great deal of shame for Mama and Papa because their family has been unable to fulfill this expected tradition.

On the other hand, Aruna is the family member who represents the approved path for women. She knows what is expected of her, and yet she also uses the opportunity to marry someone who can give her a more lavish, independent life in a big city. However, their cousin Anamika represents the dark side of what it means to blindly follow customs and traditions. Despite the brilliance that gets her into Oxford, she knows she must stay to marry and make her parents happy. However, her marriage is abusive, and it ends in her death. Arun is another character who does everything that is prescribed for him as the only son of the family. However, he is so removed from his own desires that the only thing that brings him relief is anonymity and lack of family obligation in America.

Throughout the novel, Desai pulls the thread of tension between what is expected from people in a society full of customs and traditions and what they desire. Often, it seems, the two do not line up. The fact that Uma's only other path in life after she fails at marriage is caring for her brother and parents shows how customs work to shape her identity even when it does not suit her. In America, Arun confronts a different set of customs and traditions while living with the Pattons. Although each member of the family is more independent than his own, Arun can't help but notice the American custom of buying more than what is needed and of placing a high value on physical appearance to the detriment of one's own health. By contrasting

America and India's customs and traditions, Desai paints a complicated picture of how they can sometimes serve to stifle individuality and desire.

Religious Influence

Spirituality is fascinating to Uma and is one of the natural outlets she finds for self-discovery while attending school at the convent. Although Uma is not a good student, she enjoys learning; what's more, she enjoys the mystery of spirituality she discovers through the nuns. However, Mama and Papa's resistance to the nuns introduces the tension between Western and Eastern forms of religious influence. Mama even chides Uma for being so eager to go to the Christmas bazaar, because she believes the motive of Mrs. O'Henry is to convert someone "simple" like Uma. Whether or not that is true, Uma is not allowed to investigate her own spiritual beliefs. Her only other outlet is the influence of Mira-masi, whose devotion to Hinduism instructs her every move as she travels from ashram to ashram. Uma is fascinated by Mira-masi not only for her unusual independence but also from her obvious spiritual connection with the divine. Mira-masi goes so far as to tell Mama that the Lord has denied Uma suitors because he has chosen him for herself. Uma doesn't entirely understand the insinuation but is both frightened and intrigued by the idea. Further, for Uma, no tension exists between the two religions. Desai portrays Uma as a person with a true religious calling beyond the confines of a particular practice or God.

The fact that Uma's "fits" seem induced in spiritual environments is implied as more than a coincidence, even if they are seizures. There seems to be some correlation

between the emotions she feels in spiritual places and the way her body reacts as though it is too much input for her. The fact that Uma jumps into the holy river and is disappointed to be saved shows a yearning to give herself up to the powerful feelings that spirituality instills in her. Her fascination with Mira-masi's devotion and life at the ashram also points her toward a different path that could be available to her instead of marriage, but it is one that she is not equipped to walk down alone because of her obligations to Mama and Papa.

Symbols

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 Mama Papa 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

The Shawl

Mama, Papa, and Uma send a care package to Arun in America, which arrives right before he departs the Pattons' home. Arun has been so immersed in American culture that the package from India seems mysterious and foreign, with strange yet familiar smells. Arun can tell that Mama and Papa have selected the contents of the package with great care, but he has no room for the shawl in his suitcase. In this light the shawl comes to symbolize a part of his identity that he has shed, the part that is governed by Mama, Papa, and Indian traditions and customs. The shawl does not make him homesick because he enjoys his freedom in America too much. The fact that he gives the shawl to Mrs. Patton also symbolizes that she is seeking a different way

to live spiritually in the aftermath of Melanie's illness and institutionalization. The shawl represents Mrs. Patton's movement toward the acceptance of another culture's beliefs and traditions.