**UNIT IV - FASTING FEASTING**

**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***](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/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.

**SUMMARY**

In a small town in India in the late 1970’s, Uma and her younger sister **[Aruna](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/fasting-feasting/characters/aruna)** are growing up in a traditional Indian household. Their parents, called only [**Mama**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/fasting-feasting/characters/mama) and [**Papa**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/fasting-feasting/characters/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](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/fasting-feasting/characters/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](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/fasting-feasting/characters/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**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/fasting-feasting/characters/mother-agnes) to talk MamaPapa into letting her back into school. Uma has her first [**seizure**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/fasting-feasting/symbols/seizures) on the convent floor after Mother Agnes says she is powerless to help her.

Uma’s beautiful cousin **[Anamika](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/fasting-feasting/characters/anamika)** has the opportunity to go to Oxford University, but her parents Lily Aunty and **[Bakul Uncle](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/fasting-feasting/characters/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](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/fasting-feasting/characters)**, 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**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/fasting-feasting/characters/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 Aunty and Bakul Uncle visit to distribute Anamika’s ashes in the sacred [**river**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/fasting-feasting/symbols/water-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**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/fasting-feasting/characters/mrs-patton) and Mrs. Patton and their children [**Rod**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/fasting-feasting/characters/rod) and [**Melanie**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/fasting-feasting/characters/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.