

FASTING, FEASTING by Anita Desai

The main characters who struck me the most are Uma and her brother Arun; to them are dedicated the two parts of the novel.

Personally I think they have a lot of things in common and I'm not only considering the fact that they belong to the same close-knit family: they are somehow subjected to a reality from which they both want to escape.

Uma is the plainest character of the novel, I think: she always obeys her parents and makes everything they want her to do. This is not completely a negative point but, reading the first pages of the book, I admit that I would like to react for her to the commandments of her MamaPapa, as they are often mentioned..."Go to the cook"... "Prepare the packet for your brother"... "Write a letter"...but how can she manage to do all these things together?!

In my opinion Uma is also naïve, she seems to be somehow tied by a sense of duty to her parents, especially after the failure of her two arranged marriages, and what about the dowry she has squandered?! as her father reminds her.

The only "pause" of her life is given by the visits of Mira-*masi*, a particular woman who deeply fascinates Uma for the stories she tells her: she represents a ray of hope into the life of the girl, although her parents don't approve the complicity created between them.

Arun, whose birth was really longed for, is sent to the USA where he attends the college: being the only son of the family he has the honour of receiving a good education and he has also the possibility to live far from the oppressing reality of his homeland.

But his life remains very unhappy: also the family to which he lives while in America is a sort of weight for him. The second part of the novel seems to me a long digression about food, I think that the food itself is the only reason for a link between Arun and the new family, Mrs Patton in particular.

I think both brother and sister are oppressed voices who want to live in peace and to escape from the world they live in, although they aren't able to rebel against it.

For this very reason I would like them to write to each other, what does not happen in the novel.

Dear Arun,

Maybe for the first time in my life I admit that I'm very sad but what troubles me the most is the fact that I'm not able to find a way out...

Our cousin Anamika is dead. Everybody here is trying to give an explanation but...what for, she won't ever come back and there are no acceptable explanations for her death... I absolutely can't imagine that the urn in front of me contains her ashes...she is dead... but I'm dead too. Her awe for the family led her towards death, but what about me?

I will stay forever with MamaPapa, I can't abandon them, they are...my life!

When mama grips my hand I know, I feel that there is something strong between us and I can't, I can't leave...

MamaPapa is calling me...I have to go.

I don't know if I will ever send this letter to you: perhaps I will burn it.

Uma

Dear Uma,

A new semester at the college is beginning and my stay with the Pattons is over.

I'm happy because I can leave this strange family: it wasn't my place, I didn't feel comfortable with them, I felt oppressed and obliged to be part of it, maybe only because I felt sorry for Mrs Patton and I didn't want to disappoint her.

This is the reason why I gave her the presents you sent me (but please don't reveal anything to MamaPapa!): I didn't want her to be worried about me when I silently walked out of her life.

Arun

Anita Desai “FASTING, FEASTING”

The novel by Anita Desai appeared insipid to my eyes. If I were asked to collect all the emotions that the book has stirred in my heart, I would find myself in anguishing troubles, for I'm quite numb to it as well I am frustrated by each work of art dominated by a sense of heaviness. The characters are imbued with, or even better, they are emblems of this heaviness which reveals itself mainly in the temperament of Uma, who is the best-built character of the novel. Anita Desai succeeded in the enterprise of creating a character without personality, a woman deprived of her soul. She is the designated victim who is doomed to endure the burden of life, symbolized first of all by her parents. Uma doesn't strike my sensibility: I don't feel pity for her, nor would I establish a sort of sympathetic relationship with her; her ineptitude doesn't arouse my anger, nor would I shake her out of the status of torpor she experiences. I am quite interested in one of the psychological aspects of Uma, that of repression. Uma is not free to be what she wants to be, to do what she wants to do, so she is utterly repressed in her passions, in her feelings, in her personality; this last dimension is completely neglected to her. These inner forces run inside her veins and arteries, like water permeating through the cracks of a rock and when temperatures gets colder, it becomes ice and causes the explosion of the rock. The same happens inside Uma and the implosion is disguised as a sort of disease. Convulsions, nausea which leads to vomit, suffered cries, these moments are the most involving – and at the same time disturbing – moments and situations of the novel. I would have appreciated if Anita Desai had developed this edge of the prism of Uma. Sigmund Freud stated that mental patients are like diamonds, whose structure is based on its corners. In these lines the diamond would break in case it fell on the ground. Uma is like that. Her body seems possessed by a demoniac spirit, her limbs, her bowels are rocked by the unique act of rebellion which is allowed to her. I wonder why the writer has snobbed this issue, which probably assumes a religious and philosophical value and is strictly connected to Indian culture. The heaviness that haunts the book is expressed even by the settings. Concerning this point I would like to recall the image of Uma and her aunt who leave together on a spiritual trip. The bus they catch is incredibly crowded: this episode evokes the image of mingled noises and smells within the dusty and sandy air of India. The writer enables us to appreciate each aspect of the setting – thanks to her detailed language – so that the reader manages to broaden his sensorial perceptions and is caught by the use of synaesthesia.

(The description of the believers bathing in the Gange becomes meaningful in this sense).

Before starting reading the book I thought it would be quite precious for me in order to learn more about the Indian world, even appreciating it by means of the parallel Anita Desai draws with Northern America. But I was wrong: “Fasting, feasting ” doesn't seem so representative of India: the impression I get is that of a character – Uma – who might be possibly Irish or even Italian. Westerners share the same common imagery about India and this common imagery is banal and dominated by prejudices. The book is ambiguous, in the sense that neither supports this statement, nor deny it. The same ambiguity lies in the second part of the novel – that dedicated to Arun – which takes place in the United States of America. Anita Desai gives us tenets and traits of the American Society coming in the story of an American family. Here there aren't crowded busses or temples, but televisions, junk food, couches, barbecues, baseball matches and people who enjoy all these objects and events. The same dusty air is breathed by Arun when he goes back home walking on the boundaries of the street. The same atmosphere of heaviness which degenerates into disease. For these very reasons I state that Uma and her story are not so “Indian”. Moreover, I have some perplexities about the last chapter – really shorter than the first one – which doesn't find a proper literary justification. It is a sort of appendix, even if only almost at the end of the book there's the precise reference to the title “Fasting, feasting” and is embodied by the bulimic girl.

Alessandra Crimi 5 H

Liceo Scientifico “M. Grigoletti” Pordenone

Anita Desai – *Fasting, Feasting*

Fasting, Feasting is one of the most interesting books I have ever read.

Thanks to the brilliant descriptions and the elegant narration the reader has the opportunity to create an imaginary but precise setting where characters develop during the story.

I think that this novel is like a mirror because it gives the opportunity to reflect, in both meanings of the word. We can reflect ourselves in the protagonists (mirror-like effect) and we can reflect, think, about the different values and importance that people from different societies give to ideals they believe in.

In my opinion the rhythm of the narration is sometimes too slow, but I can understand that it is due to the fact that, once again, it mirrors the context where the story takes place.

In India, in fact, there is no frenetic life, no stress, no anxiety of living and for this very reason people can pay attention to little events that we probably ignore.

When the father asks for his drink, it seems to me that everyone in the family has to stop and be there for this event; when a guest arrives unexpectedly, all the attention is directed to him; even the choice of one kind of food rather than another seems to be one of the most important problems of the day. .

The character of Mumdad is what emotionally touched me most, maybe because to a certain extent I can detect in them some traits my parents have. The image of Mumdad on the swing describes their indissoluble bond.

Mumdad are a unique person/entity made up of two different souls. These two souls are always at unison, they never take opposite decisions, they argue but they always find a compromise, they are, in a word, complementary.

I always admired this ability to build little by little a life together even if, for a child, sometimes it's not so easy to accept their decision, or rather, their impositions.

Uma is my favourite character. In some parts of the novel I felt really involved in her problems, in her thoughts and desires. She loves school even if she isn't able to get good marks; she loves learning, she wants to try again, to spend another year at school, she's sure she will improve. She suffers when Mumdad decide she should give up her studies.

She suffers when she understands she is not as beautiful, intelligent as her sister Aruna, and so she is considered a lesser woman.

Uma suffers silently, she accepts her condition of inferiority, yet she is always looking for a moment of glory that, unfortunately, never comes. She is like the most humble flower that grows up silently, that is trampled from the gardener that gave her birth, because a rose is blooming next to the humble flower and he must be there to praise the perfection and beauty of the rose.

I'm not saying that I reflect myself in Uma, absolutely not, on the contrary, I'm saying that all my life I have been an Aruna, and I didn't know about it.

I'm an only child, there is no Uma in my family, but thanks to the juxtaposition of the two characters I have understood that I have always been loved and pampered and nursed and highly considered and I don't really know if I deserve all this.

This book has really been a great opportunity for me, it has made me reflect on my values and on the meaning of my "little" life: too often we don't realise what is around us. But now I want stop talking about me. I would love to write a few lines about arranged marriages.

In our Western society, marriage is generally viewed as a value strongly linked with the concept of freedom, the freedom to choose the person with whom we would like to spend all our life. We have this great opportunity and we often waste it. We are free to love a person for his peculiarities and not for his money and often people choose the partner for his richness, we get married and then we divorce and kids are treated as merchandise, we often get married for reasons that sometimes are far away from love and we claim to judge a society where parents choose a spouse for their children. I think that Western people are more contradictory than what they want to admit and perhaps less happy. Perhaps it is this very feeling that leads plenty of us to judge other cultures.

DA PIEVE LUCIA 5 H

Liceo scientifico "M. Grigoletti"

Anita Desai "Fasting,Feasting"

This is the first book by Anita Desai I have ever read. Her observations are astute whether they are on living conditions in India or USA. Anita Desai uses her words perfectly to convey exactly what she feels, but even if it could seem a contradiction, I think that the problem with the book is its dry, clinical approach in chronicling the lives of the characters, the book lacks passion. I was always on the outside, looking into the lives of people. The book offers few chances of getting involved with the characters, in fact while reading the book I didn't feel the compulsion of finishing it quickly.

The part I liked better is the first half of the book that deals with life in a small, slow town in India, with rigid parents and well-drafted routines. The "Indian half" is more detailed than the other half which deals with the "rule-less" life in suburban USA. In the first half there is a partly successful, proud father, who goes through life, with set patterns and no passion. A mother who goes along with her husband, doing what is supposedly right and expected of her, curbing and killing all her innate desires. Three children. The eldest, Uma, clumsy. The middle daughter Aruna, pretty, ambitious and smart, but eventually also a victim of her choices. The last, a son, Arun, on whom the parents put all their dreams and energies. All of them, along with members of their extended family, go through some form of deprivation (of will, of fun, of passion and of love).

I think that a merit of this book is the way it highlights the Indian traditions, cultures and mostly the place of a woman in an Indian family. I liked the character of Uma in the book because she is both willing to take a chance with life and at the same time dedicated to her family. She takes whatever happens to her life with such grace that she does not give me a chance to cry for her. I like her inner strength.

The story in itself is told from the perspective of the protagonist, Uma, who starts out as a wide-eyed child at a convent who shows an enthusiasm for education but with the birth of her brother Arun, Uma takes on the role of nanny. Here, one encounters the distinct preference parents have for the male child.

Desai next explores the conventional belief that ties a woman's worth to her physical appearance. A woman who lacks beauty is often rushed into the first marital offer she receives, only to pay a heavy price later on. Desai shows the challenges a single woman faces regardless of how successful she is. By contrast, Uma's cousin is portrayed as the ultimate success because she is able to marry well thanks to her looks. She makes the reader wonder how happy she truly is, when she eventually takes her own life.

Uma is the main character in the first half of the novel. She is a clumsy, uncoordinated woman who finds it difficult to succeed in almost everything she does - she fails in school, can't cook, spills food and drink and can't find anyone worthwhile to get married to.

Her father feels that Uma is incapable of fending for herself, as she is too clumsy, uncoordinated and proves a failure in almost everything she does. Uma fails in school, in the kitchen and she even fails to find anyone worthwhile to get married to.

The father asks Uma to interrupt her studies in the Christian convent when he finds out she is not doing very well at school. He feels that it was a waste of time and money to provide Uma an education; he has other plans for her. She will look after her baby brother Arun and take care of the household while her mother rests after giving birth. Uma's life is constantly planned by her father. Uma cannot resist her father's oppressive patriarchal ideology, as she is afraid of the consequences that would befall her if she angered the colonial characteristics of her father.

Uma's entertainment comes in the form of her cousin, Ramu. When Ramu is around, Uma feels at ease. But the father feels that Ramu is a bad influence on Uma. He does not want Uma to be influenced by other men who are capable of brainwashing her to resist the demands of his patriarchal nature.

As Uma grows of the age of marriage, Papa takes it upon himself to find a suitable candidate for her for she cannot find anyone worthwhile to get married to. However, Uma proves rather difficult to pair off due to her limited education and looks. When Papa is finally able to find a suitor for Uma, Papa is duped into paying a hefty amount in dowry only to be left dangling mid way with the cancellation of the marriage. Papa sees this as a terrible shame and inevitably blames Uma for bringing shame to the family. After a long search for more eligible suitors, Papa encounters the family of a merchant who asks for Uma's hand. Papa gets her married only to be conned once again when she finds out that she is actually the second wife of the merchant. Papa becomes furious not because his daughter's life is ruined but because he has once again wasted a large sum of money on Uma's dowry. It is evident that Papa never considers the feelings and emotions of his daughter, but is more distraught of the fact that he lost his money due to his worthless daughter. Papa's patriarchy is highlighted in this particular incident because instead of offering words of comfort for his daughter, he is more ashamed that his status is jeopardised and his personality disintegrated. She finds a way to depart from her father's hegemonic ruling when she is offered a job by Dr. Dutt to help as a nurse in the doctor's hospital. However, Papa once again dismisses Uma's advancement in life. She fails to break free because she is unable to refrain from the subjugation of her patriarchal father. This is because she is too afraid of him and also because his stand is too firm for her to defeat. In spite of the negative features of the book I listed at the beginning I think that this novel is anyway interesting and useful to get to know the manner in which Indian societal and cultural constructs contribute to female subjugation.

Gallo Giovanna

5H

Liceo Scientifico "M. Grigoletti" Pordenone

“FASTING, FEASTING”:

Appropriate or inappropriate title? That is the question.

“Don’t judge a book by its cover” claims a well-known English saying. But what about the title? That mere clot of words that should enclose, like a shell, the pearl of a book, its entire spirit proclaimed in a few essential terms. What can we find of that intriguing, metaphorical, enigmatic “Fasting, Feasting” in the novel by Anita Desai?

Something eludes me. I approached the reading with certain expectations. I thought that the two antithetical verbs of the title would mirror the two characters who play the central role in the novel. I believed there would be some coherence between the choice of such a title, and the partition of the book into two sections. But then, I couldn’t say which was fasting, and which was feasting. The syntax helped me with this riddle. The rhythm of the first part, dedicated to Uma, the firstborn daughter of a traditional Indian family, is exceedingly slow. The continuous present and flashback movement emphasizes the childish behaviour of this character, who, to the eyes of a Western person, seems just dumb and sometimes annoying. The phrases are long, the atmosphere is sultry and heavy, just like the stubborn oppression of the double identity mom-dad, who blame their daughter for choices she never made. This slow-paced context reminds me of the hard-to-keep-on fasting. Just like the brief, fragmentary language used in the second part of the book reminds me of the greedy, uncontrollable impulse to devour. But still, I doubt my assumptions are correct, because, although Arun is vegetarian and refuses the American eating habits, he does not fast, and neither does Uma. And although Uma appreciates Indian food -as a matter of fact she doesn’t know any other food tradition- she does not feast, and neither does Arun.

I can’t understand the choice of such a title, if food, all in all, doesn’t play an important role. Food is neither a means of communications for the characters, nor a bond that holds them spiritually together. But I can’t explain the title even in a metaphorical sense. Both the verbs refer to strong actions, determined either by a strong will or by an uncontrollable instinct. Neither Uma, nor Arun seem to be so extreme. On the contrary they are flat, boring, just like waves in the ocean, waiting for the tide to drag them along. They don’t move, don’t speak for themselves, don’t wish, don’t work out their problems, don’t react. So why did Anita Desai believe that the title was appropriate? Why the reference to two opposite wearing overreactions, if the protagonists of the story don’t react at all?

What emerges from the book is just a sorrowful sense of uneasiness and incapability to communicate. Silence is the common denominator. A denominator that appears to link all the XX century literary output, no matter the exact age, no matter the nationality. Solitude and silence, the hideous and comfortable idea of being a misfit are the main themes. Or the chronic anonymity that becomes a desire and a need, (“He was far from home for the very first time of his life [...] He was finally experiencing the total freedom of anonymity, the total absence of relationships, needs, demands, bonds, responsibilities, duties. He was Arun. He didn’t have a past, nor a family. Summer in America was before him, light and empty. He was willing to leave it as it was.”), the will not to leave a mark on the way, the passivity and indifference that lead to a fatal state of tediousness. To a state that the author describes with a very effective metaphor: “She feels like ash, cold, colourless, still like ash.”

And here I am, wondering why Anita Desai chose that title. Why after all the indolence that drives her two creations, Uma and Arun, she decided to raise her reader’s expectations and make him/her believe that eventually they will change, they will devour life or leave it tragically, they will take their lives in their own hands. Why such a title, Anita? Why?

Anna Pitton 5 H

Liceo Scientifico “M. Grigoletti” Pordenone

Fasting, Feasting by Anita Desai

In reading Anita Desai's book, I was struck by the way the writer presents two worlds that apparently have nothing in common: India and the United States. I think the title is very effective: the words fasting and feasting show the comparison, the similarity, between two sides of the world: both American and Indian people live under a form of slavery, even if this form of slavery is very different. Moreover, it seems to me that these two words of the title contain all the contradictions of our time and our society.

What I liked most of the book are the characters, even if I found them a bit too flat, apart from Uma and Arun: for instance the fact that mum and dad are always presented as mamdad gave me the impression that from the very moment they got married, they automatically lost their personality, adapting themselves to the conventions and traditions, and becoming incapable of thinking independently. Uma seems to react to this vision of life, she wants to study, and she doesn't want her parents to decide for her marriage; she's a sort of rebel, even if she cannot set herself free. She seems very weak and insecure, yet I think she has a great strength inside. Her life changes with the birth of her brother Arun, the only boy in Uma's family. From this very moment she has to abandon school to help her mum look after the newborn child. So her life is sacrificed, the most important thing in her family becomes the education of Arun, because he's a boy, and in India men are considered really important, surely more important than women, and so they must be guaranteed a good education. Aruna is the opposite of Uma, and more similar to mumdad: she gets married and has a "normal" Indian life. She seems strong, sure, and proud of herself, but she's not, she doesn't have the courage to react against the conformism imposed upon her, or she simply doesn't want to object to it. Through the eyes of Arun the writer presents the western world and society: Arun is sent to America to study, but he doesn't feel at ease in a society so different from his, where women and girls seem free, but they are actually slaves of the stereotypical successful and beautiful idols the society promotes, they are victims of a difficult relationship with themselves that leads them, in some cases, to anorexia, as happens to Melanie, the younger daughter of Arun's American family. So the writer presents us with a world of consumerism (USA), and a world of moderation (India), two seemingly opposing worlds in which people are not free, and most of all, in which women are somehow victimized, defeated either psychologically or physically, or both. I particularly liked two characters, Uma and Arun, because they aren't passive towards life, as it may seem, and they have a great desire: to live as they want to, to be free. But this is something difficult to reach for both. Through them I could enter their world, and live their lives for a while, and this was possible thanks to the richness of particulars the writer uses, which lets us share the characters' feelings and the emotions.

Sara Bidinost

5 H

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My Reflections on: "Fasting, Feasting" by Anita Desai

A woman, Uma. A man, Arun. So far away from each other but so close in their actions. Uma and Arun are sister and brother; she was born and raised in the suburbia of India while he, come to life for an accident, is sent to University in the U.S.A. because he's the only male child in the family and must be given and guaranteed a good education. Uma lived in India and Arun lived both there and in America; Arun was given the chance to discover a whole new different world while her sister was stuck in the place where she was given life. Uma is not a very active character; she does whatever she is imposed to do, most of the time she complains or speaks up his mind but in the end she just gives in and does what she's asked to do: the only strong reaction she has is when she locks herself in her bedroom and starts reading a book of poems, which makes her feel free and happier. She wishes she could be like Aruna (her younger sister), determined and free, or like her cousin Anamika, who's described as perfect; but both these two girls will not have a rosy life either: the former gets married with a man who feels too perfect and too superior to really fall in love with her and look after her and the latter ends up killed most probably by her own husband and his mother. Uma so realises that maybe having failed two marriages (even before they set off) may not only have negative sides: although she won't ever admit it, she'll live her life with her parents, protected by them, whom she has always been tied to. She's a sort of eternal child who's willing to grow up but actually does not really want to, she tries to "rebel", to free her inner feelings but she knows she's not strong enough to change things and she accepts (not so negatively!) the way things are supposed to be.

Arun is a lot like Uma but if she (at least) tries to "rebel" against external impositions and speaks up her mind, Arun instead prefers to keep silent; he watches the world with dumb eyes and does not object to anything. He totally fails in speaking his mind: he cannot tell Mrs. Patton what he thinks of the food, cannot tell her about Melanie, cannot speak with Melanie; maybe it's not that he CAN'T do all of that, he just doesn't even try to react, to show up. Arun is a sort of apathetic character: he wishes he could change things but as he perceives that all this is too difficult to be fulfilled he gives it up.

I think that the person who would have appreciated better the permanence in America would have been Uma; she would have appreciated more the open western mentality, maybe she would have tried to fix problems by talking or acting, but she wouldn't have remained passive.

A sharp form of criticism develops throughout the second part of the novel. The tones are smartly tart against the civilized western society: the American family is stereotyped, the kids rule over the parents, they offend and are offended: Melanie is rude and suffers from anorexia; Rod is concentrated only on his physical appearance and every time he appears on the scene he's jogging somewhere; Mr. Patton's only worry is about meat about how to cook it; Mrs. Patton's task is to keep the fridge full of food and to go shopping in order to get it.

By the end of the book the two American women turn into some hysterical creatures who yell and rave (Mrs. Patton start driving very fast and dangerously while Melanie complains about the food she is given at home, which she never eats).

The two men, instead, are represented as people who couldn't care less: Rod knows his sister keeps eating sweets and then vomits but he doesn't seem to worry; Mr. Patton doesn't care if their kids are having dinner with them or not, he'll eat his steak anyway.

This family portrait is really bitter: this bitterness reaches the top with the figure of the check-out clerk: she's really rude, she harms people's feelings, she doesn't feel sorry instead she keeps on being pitiless.

The western society is not only about rude and superficial robotic activities (watch tv-fill the fridge-eat-jog-sleep; watch tv-fill the fridge-eat-jog-sleep): it has its flaws as well as the Indian society has: the parents rule unquestionably over the kids (whether they're right or wrong), they choose the person their daughters "should learn to appreciate" and combine marriages (not based on love); they live in a not so well-off condition but they still have a cook, a driver; they give more opportunities to men than to women: Arun can study abroad while Uma (who loves going to school although she rarely succeeds...) is "advised" to stay at home and to learn how to change nappies because that is what she is asked to do.

In my opinion "Fasting, Feasting" is all in all a concealed critic of society and its loss of the values. What I ask myself is:

Couldn't we just TRY to find something positive in the world, in the only life we were given?

Prosdocimo Lucia V H

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“Fasting, feasting” : my emotional response.

Two people, trapped in a world that stifles them, ruled by their parents' will, forced to suppress their dreams: these are Uma and Arun, brother and sister, so distant, separated by an Ocean, but so similar in the way they “renounce life”. Uma, completely alone in the hot Indian summer, in the company of just her insensitive parents; Arun, disoriented in the mild American summer, confused in front of an exaggeratedly consumistic society. “ Fasting, feasting” can be considered as a novel that deals with the Indian culture and with the American opulence: India seems to be lost in a dimension completely detached from our western reality, full of tradition and habits that seem incomprehensible, and characterised by injustices and contradictions, but also charming and mysterious, pervaded by a mystic spirituality, so different from our indifference. America, on the other hand, has been depicted in a caricatural way, as the land of excesses and extreme solitude, of irrational consumerism and eating disorders, of obtuseness and material satisfaction. But this isn't, in my opinion, the most important aspect of the novel: this is first of all a book that tries to catch two souls' desolation. When I finished it, I felt really unsatisfied: I expected a rebellion, a dramatic turn of events, an escape. But nothing happened: Uma and Arun, despite their covert hatred, despite their unsuitability, they renounce to fight, renounce to change their life. Paradoxically Arun, who, as a man, is the one that could really change if he wanted to, seems the more apathetic: he accepts passively the life that his father has accurately prepared for him, studying all his short life, going to the U.S.A in order to attend university, spending the whole summer at the Pattons. He feels disappointed, exhausted, almost disgusted by what surrounds him: but why doesn't he react? Why doesn't he show curiosity towards a completely different way of life? Why doesn't he express somehow what he feels? The only act of rebellion that characterises him is his vegetarianism: he rejects both his father's habit and the American tradition of “garden barbecues”. But to me Arun has got all the means that can give him the possibility of changing his life: yet he remains passive, indifferent. He can be placed in Dante's circle of the slothful , because he decides to live an anonymous life, he doesn't try to change it. On the other side of the world, his sister Uma would probably do everything to change her life, would probably sacrifice her precious collection of greetings cards in order to receive something new from her monotonous and lonely existence. But Uma, as a female, hasn't obtained from her parents the privileges Arun has: her duty as a daughter is that of running the house, looking after her brother, and then getting married. But here she fails: she's an unmarried woman, and this represents, according to her father, a terrible guilt. So day after day she remains with her parents, dejected and considered useless, hopeless, strange. She can't cure herself although she has eye problems, because her father considers her problems not worthy of medical treatments: seeing a specialist would cost him too much. He has the money, but it seems he doesn't want to spend it on his daughter Uma, considered too plain and half-witted to allure a husband. she is compelled to run the house for her parents, cheered up only by the visits of her aunt Mira-masi and of her cousin Ramu: two people that for her represent individuality, freedom and experience. From them she learns that something different from her house, her garden, her limited reality exists: something that widens beyond her parents' orders, beyond the porch, the loneliness, the lack of independence.

She doesn't seem so passive as Arun: life still maintains some charm for her, although she doesn't have a lively social life. She would like to escape, and she finds a way out of her monotony in the Mrs. O' Henry's Christian mission: she represents for Uma a kind of joyful alternative and a “subversive” way of spending her time. But she has to face the prejudices, the ironic and evil comments of her parents, the prohibitions. Uma feels the impellent desire of demonstrating that she's still alive, that she has got her individuality, that she isn't the pale shadow of her parents: she wants to affirm herself. But she doesn't manage to escape, or to “carve out” a niche for herself. She remains a bit childish, probably because she hasn't experienced all the emotions, the responsibilities, the individual choices that make people grow up.

Uma and Arun live in a world that expected something very precise and determined from them: Arun had the privilege of “feasting” with life, of consuming the opportunities he has been given, but he decides to “fast”, to avoid human contacts, to be extremely controlled, to renounce the right of being filled with emotions; Uma had the duty of “fasting”, of putting aside her dreams and desires, of living silently, but she tries to “feast”, although she knows that she can only have a minute to taste life.