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Indian Writing in English Translation

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3. Senapati, Fakir Mohan. “Rebati”, <i>Oriya Stories</i> . ed. Vidya Das, tr. Kishori Charan Das, Delhi: Srishti Publishers, 2000.	Pages 36–54
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(i) Premchand: “The Shroud”

Kamayani Kumar

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1. About the Author

Dhanpat Rai better known by his pseudonym Munshi Premchand was born in Lamhi, near Varanasi in British India. Indisputably regarded as one of the foremost writers of Hindi Literature he first started writing under the pen name Nawab Rai. One of his early works *Soz-e-Watan* was banned by the British as seditious and hence he started to write under a new pen name Premchand from 1907 onwards. His early writings were in Urdu but he eventually wrote in Hindi to reach a wider readership. Right from his earliest writings Premchand focused on social issues such as corruption among temple priests, exploitation of poor people, drawbacks of feudalism, caste system, to name a few. A prolific writer he wrote 14 novels and around 300 short stories. A few of his famous works are *Godaan*, *Gaban*, *Seva Sadan*, *Karm Bhoomi*. His stories like *Idgah*, *Kafan*, *Sadgati*, *Thakur ka Kuan* have been critically applauded for the extremely touching representation of human dilemmas in relationships. Through his works he tried to articulate the pain of the people who have been subjected to exploitation and who are beyond the pale, be it because of gender, poverty, race, age, and are incapacitated by the same. His writings then became the mouthpiece for these people. He was deeply disturbed by India’s enslavement to British and in many of his writings he condemns the same. In fact, his writings were profoundly influenced by Gandhian philosophy. He also expressed his indebtedness to several philosophers and writers from the Western Canon. For instance, when *Godan* was published



Premchand wrote that he had been “influenced by Leo Tolstoy, Victor Hugo, Romain Rolland, Maxim Gorky and Rabindranath Tagore” (Seigfried, p.25).

He was a pioneer when it came to raising concerns about the plight of women in India, for many of his stories speak of taboos like the dowry system, the painful condition of widows, early age of marriage for girls, etc. His aim was to bring about a social revolution although often he had to face a lot of flak because of the moralistic fervour of his writings and also because the kind of changes he was espousing were radical for a society beset with taboos.

A firm exponent of using literature for a purpose, Premchand was the primary spokesperson of the Progressive Writers Movement when it started in India in 1935. His speech *Sahitya Ka Udyesha* became one of the finest pieces of literary criticism establishing firmly the tenets of socially engaged literature committed to refinement of human minds. Speaking of Premchand’s contribution to the aesthetics of Hindi literary tradition, Navrane writes, “Premchand created the tradition of the modern novel and short story in Hindi... the short story writers before Premchand were, generally speaking, caught up ...with the mysterious, the strange, the romantic, the sensational,...artificial and unconvincing.” (Navrane, 253). It is these aspects of his craft that have earned him “his place as one of the most important figures in modern Indian culture. His contribution is unique, substantial and many sided” (Navrane, 253). As Gajarawala writes, “Premchand’s writings appeared as harbinger of a new era...” and that when Premchand made the shift from writing in Urdu to Hindi then “realist writing in Hindi was effectively inaugurated” (Gajarawala, 274).

While his novels have won a lot of critical acclaim, his large oeuvre of short stories is not to be underestimated. His stories in fact can be divided into four different phases. While the earliest phase dealt with stories of historical episodes of chivalry and romance, the second phase has stories where his commitment towards social issues starts to take a strong hold. His growth as an artist in terms of craftsmanship is also evident in the second phase. The third phase shows a deep influence of Gandhian philosophy and his teachings whereas the fourth has stories that testify to his commitment towards the independence movement as well as his hate for instruments of social oppression be it caste, gender, feudalism, race, or colonialism. A literary giant, his writing has not faded into irrelevance with the passage of time but rather has become an invaluable asset to Hindi literary tradition. The stories offer a microcosm of the debilitating and impoverished lives of people suffering under the yoke of feudalism and colonialism. And of these “*Kafan/ The Shroud*” offers the most heart-rending account of how humaneness, (the essential defining quality of humankind) can be completely erased and highlights the baseness to which humans can fall in face of adversity.



(Image sourced from <https://www.hindustantimes.com/inspiring-lives/munshi-premchand-the-emperor-of-novels/story-1dk8mHjOSBarSCEaFl6VwN.html>)

2. Learning Objectives

The primary objective of this Unit is to assist students to learn about Premchand as an author through a close exegesis of the text and also assess the underlying themes of the short story “Kafan”. The story when analysed critically opens to a gamut of engaging ideas and tropes. This lesson will enable students to:

- ◆ Develop a deeper and nuanced understanding of the short story “Kafan”.
- ◆ Distinguish the main thematic points in the text.
- ◆ Understand the significance of Munshi Premchand as a short story writer.

3. “Kafan/The Shroud” – An Introduction

One of the last stories written by Premchand prior to his demise in 1936, “Kafan” refuses to be put to rest. It has been cited as one of the blackest short stories and one which has seen a fair share of literary criticism and controversy. In fact, over the decades the story has been adapted into radio and theatre performances in various Indian languages. While Premchand had always been criticised by the Brahmin community for his representation of the lower castes in his writings even to the point of being labelled anti-brahmin, what



is intriguing is that at the same time he was heavily critiqued by the Dalit writers for representation of the untouchables in a poor light. To be precise, Premchand was cited as ‘anti-dalit’ a term which seems difficult to relate to because many of his short stories (such as “Sadgati”, “Thakur ka Kuan”, “Mandir”) deal with the oppression and subjugation of the lower castes. “Kafan” has also been often read, and critically received as a Marxist text primarily because of the theme of the landless laborers that the story explores and the condemnation of the feudal system and the social inequalities that define the zamindari system.

In spite of the criticism it invited, the story has been cited by many critics, “as one of Premchand’s greatest stories because of its ‘realism’” (Navrane, 257). Some see the characters of Ghisu and Madhav as ‘aberrations’ (Navrane, 256), deliberately created by Premchand to communicate the hollowness of our social structures.

4. Critical Analysis

The story is set in a rural milieu and is divided into three segments. The first part of the story opens on a dark, cold winter night and brings to fore several thematic tropes – hunger, oppressive feudalism, gender inequalities in a patriarchal system, and caste-based discrimination through the two main characters – Ghisu and Madhav and a liminal character– Budhiya. Budhiya is the most marginalized of characters in this story suffering from the double bind of impoverishment, caste, and patriarchy.

4.1 Events of the Night

The story opens with the father and son roasting a few potatoes, (which they have stolen from a neighbour’s field hence showing them to be unethical) while groans of Budhiya writhing in pain rend the air. The father and son are indifferent to Budhiya’s agony. What we see instead is the two men losing patience with her. Her screams make Madhav uneasy but in a different sense altogether. He is not uneasy because he feels for Budhiya but because her incessant screams are making him uncomfortable, and when Ghisu tells him to go and check on her, he says in a peeved voice, “Why doesn’t she just die, if she has to? What’s there to see? Madhav whined piteously” (Premchand, “The Shroud” in Dhananjay Kapse, 225. Subsequent page references to the text are from the same edition). His reluctance stems from his lack of trust for his father for he fears that Ghisu will eat all the roasted potatoes by himself. So, he exercises a moral choice of staying there instead of being compassionate and humane enough to be with his ailing wife. Instead, the two selfishly focus on their ‘hunger’. Much of the narrative that follows between the two focusses on ‘food’ as Ghisu recounts nostalgically the sumptuous meals he has had in the



past. The perception that we draw is that these men are callous, indolent, and inhuman whose only concern is with satiating their own 'hunger'. Occasionally we hear the two refer to Budhiya as a fine woman who served them well while alive. This part of the story serves to develop in the reader's mind a perception of the selfishness and insensitiveness of Ghisu and Madhav, the sense of distrust when it comes to food that Madhav harbours and his complete disregard for his wife – Budhiya.

4.2 The Need for a Shroud

The second part of the story begins with the break of dawn and presents the two with another dilemma – Budhiya has died in childbirth. Without exhibiting a moment of remorse, the two engage in the task of asking for money from the Zamindar and the villagers to perform the last rites of the unfortunate woman. In death as in life she has experienced scant dignity or love from Madhav through which Premchand is pointing out the almost negated existence of women in the patriarchal world. The two manage to collect money to buy for Budhiya a shroud relatively easily, which goes on to show the trust deficit in the villagers regarding Ghisu and Madhav's ability to provide for Budhiya's last rites.

4.2.1 The Questioning and Rejection of a Custom

It is in the third part of the story that we get a glimpse into the most dehumanizing aspect of their nature. The two go to the market to buy a shroud and after searching the market for different materials for a shroud the two decide that it is worthless to spend money on a new shroud for a dead woman especially when she never had the privilege of wearing a new sari while she was alive. Instead, the two find it legitimate enough to spend the money by buying for themselves an abundant meal. Their logic being that Budhiya being dead would hardly benefit from a shroud while they with their bellies full would bless her and it would help ease her way unto heaven. While drunk the two express their gratitude for the woman who even in death as in life did not leave them unprovided for. The grossness of the situation brings home with great force the misery to which women are subjected, while the crassness with which Ghisu and Madhav behave demands deliberation. The focus of deliberation being that these two men are a product of the environment. Ghisu refuses to be exploited like scores of landless laborers who have exhausted themselves working on empty stomachs in the fields of landlords and suffer under two yokes – one of feudalism and the other of caste. His decision about not working in the fields of the feudal masters is a rebellion of sorts against an exploitative order. However, one cannot help critiquing the manner in which the two treat Budhiya. It is for the representation of Ghisu and Madhav as heartless characters that Premchand's story attracted a lot of flak.



As some critics have pointed out, one motif of the story is of hunger – one that gets an extended treatment in the last segment of the story when we see Ghisu and Madhav’s complicity in ending up in a tavern to have a sumptuous feast with lots of liquor using the money they had collected for Budhiya’s shroud. In his inebriated state Madhav expresses his gratitude for Budhiya, and it is in this state that for the first time in his life he feels empowered enough to give away the leftover food to a beggar. As in life, so in death Budhiya has empowered him.

4.3 Premchand’s representation of the Dalit Community

While literary critics uphold Premchand’s sensitive representation of the dehumanization of Dalit community because of feudal overlords and supremacist Brahmins, the slew of criticism from Dalit writers has been very rigorous. Writers like Om Prakash Valmiki were critical of Premchand’s portrayal of Ghisu and Madhav as inhumane, selfish beings. While it cannot be denied that Ghisu and Madhav are all of these it would be a very reductionist reading of the text to perceive Ghisu and Madhav as the sole perpetrators of injustice towards Budhiya. Rather Premchand wants to point out that the three of them are victims of a socially exploitative order. Also, rather than generalizing, Premchand has represented only these two characters as lazy and inclined to shirk work, whereas the larger community of outcasts (including Budhiya) is shown as hard working and morally upright.

4.3.1 The Shroud as Symbol

“Kafan” literally refers to a shroud that is a material necessity for the funeral rites of a deceased person. It therefore becomes symbolic of the social custom that dictates such a ritual. Ghisu and Madhav though living a hand-to-mouth existence are expected to follow the ritual. The events of the story, however, show how the shroud becomes a means to expose the hypocrisy of this exploitative system that expects care and reverence for the dead rather than the living. The Zamindar and the villagers readily contributed to pay for a shroud for Budhiya but had turned a deaf ear to her cries when she was writhing in pain. They come forward to help only once she is dead because her corpse signifies trouble. The whole village knows that left to their means the father and son would never provide for a funeral. The Zamindar’s act of charity therefore stems not from compassion or contrition but rather out of self interest of the village community. The shroud thus becomes symbolic of the hypocrisy of the prevailing social structure.

Ghisu and Madhav cheat Budhiya even of her right to a dignified burial. The denial of a shroud thus becomes symbolic of the fate of women like Budhiya in a patriarchal society. At the same time the shamelessness of the father-son duo is laid bare. This



coupled with Ghisu and Madhav's decision to spend the money for the shroud for their gratification makes one wonder if the 'shroud' here connotes a death of – humaneness, values, and ethics. It also serves to reiterate the subaltern, liminal position of Budhiya who while alive never had a new piece of cloth and who is cheated of her right to a 'shroud' by her own 'family'. The sense of betrayal and dispossession is extremely powerful as it communicates the pathos of her unsung life and death. The title of the story thus resonates with the many meanings and innumerable issues that Premchand has tried to address here.

Check Your Progress

- Write in your own words the events of the night.
- Why is there a need for a shroud?
- Can we say that Budhiya is a victim of gender and caste-based discrimination? Give a reasoned answer.
- Discuss the relevance of the title of the story "Kafan".
- Critically comment on the flak that Premchand had to face because of his representation of Dalit community in "Kafan".

5. Themes

5.1 Caste Based Discrimination and Subjugation

Of the multiple themes, the story addresses the predominant one is caste-based discrimination. The discourse that emerges most is Ghisu and Madhav's rejection of a caste based hierarchical structure - a structure that has been socially sanctioned, is discriminatory to the core, and legitimizes oppression of one human by another in the name of Brahminical hegemony. In fact, Ghisu and Madhav's callous and animalistic behaviour can also be read as an act of rebellion and defiance against a social system which can provide money to them for buying the 'shroud' for Budhiya but not medicines while she was suffering. In not buying the shroud the two highlight the futility of the act. They reason that when Budhiya could not afford a piece of cloth while alive what justification one has in buying a shroud for when she is no longer alive. Some critics have read Ghisu and Madhav's rejection as embracing the Marxist ideological framework and rejecting a feudal and capitalist ideology. It is evident that Ghisu, Madhav, and Budhiya are victims of caste-based exploitation in their own ways and that Premchand's aim is to create a social consciousness.



5.2 Gender Based Discrimination

“Kafan” was the last short story that Premchand penned and one which has courted a lot of controversy. Premchand has been heavily critiqued for what is seen as depreciatory and derogatory representation of the two Dalit characters – Ghisu and Madhav. However, a deeper and nuanced reading of the text suggests otherwise. While Ghisu and Madhav are shown as lazy, indolent, content with going hungry, thieving, or even exploiting Budhiya one cannot deny that they too are victims.

However, if Ghisu and Madhav are victims of a caste-based hegemony, Budhiya is the character who suffers the most. She is a victim of caste, feudalism, and patriarchy. She is subjugated under the yoke of caste-based oppression, an exploitative feudal system, and is vulnerable to gender-based discrimination even by her own family. Ghisu and Madhav exploit her while she is alive for, she is the sole bread earner for a family of three, and we ‘hear’ her cries of pain as she suffers the agony of childbirth and dies an unlamented death. Even in death her exploitation doesn’t end when the money the two men collect for her cremation is splurged to satiate their hunger. Budhiya is a liminal character of whom we only hear through Ghishu and Madhav’s reminiscences. She lives and dies the death of a subject who is victim to gender, caste, and feudal structure. Towards the end of the story, we see Madhav expressing a bit of shame about his conduct where he failed to be fair in his treatment towards Budhiya and we see his sense of loss, but this too is explained away by Ghisu in a philosophical manner when he tells his son not to contemplate too much on Budhiya’s fate, “Don’t cry, my son? Be happy that she’s been liberated from web of maya, from all fetters. She was very lucky she could snap all ties so soon” (232).

5.3 Theme of Hunger

One of the sub themes of the story is evidently ‘hunger’. The story opens on the note where we are told of the ‘hunger’ which has made Ghisu and Madhav so self-focused that they are absolutely oblivious to Budhiya’s pain. They have no qualms even to steal, if need be, to satisfy their hunger. We witness Madhav’s reluctance to be at her bedside for he is afraid that his father might eat the roasted potatoes all by himself. The lack of trust between the father and son when it comes to food and the callousness both display is extremely repulsive and thought provoking. Even the talk the two are engaged in is regarding food, as Ghisu tells Madhav of the sumptuous feast he has had in his youth. The story ends on the two splurging the money on food. The question is whether the physical ‘hunger’ for food is a way of referring to other forms of hunger that plague the characters – the ‘hunger’ for freedom from an exploitative class structure, caste structure, poverty, and for Budhiya patriarchal hegemony, a hunger for equality?



The themes are all focused on pointing out the diseased mind-set that assails our social structures. Premchand had an agenda of using literature as a vehicle of social reform. As Navrane writes, "He did not hesitate to put the floodlight on the darkest spots in Indian life" (255). Instead, Premchand made sure that in every line he wrote he was able to address some of the social injustice and generate a compassionate current for "the helpless widow, the insulted untouchable, the starving peasant" (255).

5.4 Theme of Subaltern Resistance

Subaltern resistance is a dominant theme in the story "Kafan". Ghisu and Madhav are represented by Premchand as work shirkers and dehumanized beings whose behaviour is almost animalistic. While this cannot be denied that Ghisu and Madhav are inhumane, equally valid is the argument that this 'opinion' about Ghisu and Madhav comes from the custodians of the upper caste. As Banik writes, Ghisu's "value in society is measured in terms of his utility to the dominant class," (Somdev Banik, 182), and for them he is useless. Ghisu chooses to resist the feudal system and his oppressors, unlike other outcasts who choose to labour for the Zamindar in return for two scant meals. Rather Ghisu and Madhav choose to go hungry and resist 'efforts' at "appropriation by the dominant forces of production" (Somdev Banik, 183). Yet it is these two subalterns who appropriate the rights of Budhiya and become her oppressors in a similar vein as the feudal lords. While she is alive Budhiya is exploited by Ghisu and Madhav and after her death the 'shroud' becomes the site for further exploitation. The manner in which the two characters use her death as a means to an end lends the story its haunting power and critical acclaim. The confidence that Ghisu has that they can always wrest more money from the custodians of upper caste comes from his experience that social norms can be negotiated. As a subaltern he has learnt how to defy the authority of his oppressors if not wrest himself free from this hegemonic code. The saddest point being that while Ghisu and Madhav are themselves subject to oppression they do not feel shame at exploiting Budhiya.

Check Your Progress

- a) Budhiya as a marginal character represents gender subjugation in a patriarchal social structure. Critically comment.
- b) Discuss the theme of 'hunger' in Premchand's "Kafan."
- c) Ghisu and Madhav are victims of a caste ridden hierarchical social structure. Comment.



6. Characters

6.1 Ghisu

Ghisu, on the first reading of Premchand's "Kafan" comes across as a landless agricultural labourer, a 'chamaar', a frail old man who is striking because of his laziness, slackness, lack of ethics, and absolute lack of empathy for Budhiya. A shirker who we are told would rather choose to go hungry than earn his bread through hard work, and who has no qualms in using the money collected to buy the shroud for Budhiya for his own gratification. We are constantly made aware of his laziness, his shamelessness, his scheming nature too, and how kindness is wasted on him. It is but natural that Ghisu generates a sense of repulsion even bordering on horror. It is for this animalistic representation that Premchand has had to face so much of criticism from Dalit writers, but a more nuanced reading allows one to counter the anti-Dalit charges levelled against Premchand.

Ghisu is not a 'flat' character which the first reading may suggest. On the contrary, Premchand has given us in Ghisu a complex figure. If one goes beyond the deprecatory portrayal, one sees not a transgressor but rather a victim of caste and class oppression, whose choice to shirk work is a reactionary response against an unjustified system. Ghisu is a strategist who refuses to succumb to the trap of feudal landlord's relentless exploitation and instead as observed by Sadanand Shahi, he uses the strategy of being a work shirker as, "a manoeuvre to escape the trap of exploitation" (Shahi, 258).

For Ghisu, death is immaterial, as he callously recounts how he has fathered nine sons but only Madhav is with him. For him what matters is his survival, everything pales in comparison. Materialistic to the core, he comes across as someone who understands the true connotations of utilitarianism where spending money on a shroud for a woman who never had a piece of new cloth for herself comes across as a hollow expression, one designed to pander to rituals of a social structure which never had any empathy for Budhiya while she was alive and hence Ghisu feels no guilt in spending the money for satiating his hunger. Though he does express his gratitude for Budhiya whom he praises for the selflessness with which she served the interests of the father and son and condemns a social structure that would give money for her shroud and none while she was alive. Indeed, as Sadanand Shahi observes, "Ghisu had diagnosed the ills of his society. He had recognized the system of exploitation. He had his own way of fighting this system" (Shahi, 258).



6.2 Madhav

Madhav, son of Ghisu, goes beyond his father in exhibiting laziness, lack of shame, and guilt. The story opens with the representation of Madhav growing impatient as his wife's cries rend the chilly and dark night. For him his hunger is more important than grief for his wife. For him the task of sitting with Budhiya to give her a sense of comfort is arduous. In fact, one can contend that when it comes to lack of ethics he is worse than Ghisu for when his father remonstrates him for his callousness Madhav responds with irritation hardly able to mask his lack of interest in sharing Budhiya's agony. One can sense not only a lack of compassion, sense of commitment but also surprisingly lack of trust that Madhav has in his father, Ghisu regarding the potatoes he is roasting in the fire. Madhav does not experience any uneasiness in using the money he has collected to buy a shroud for 'Budhiya' in spending on a feast in a wine house even while Budhiya's body lay cold in the hut. It is only in a state of intoxication induced despair one sees Madhav express his grief, as he laments the fate of Budhiya who lived a life of deprivation and oppression and died a painful death. This almost inhuman lack of feeling gives voice to the debate that can Madhav's lack of humaneness be attributed to his 'caste' as some suggest or to the inhumane treatment and oppression, he has been subjected to by virtue of his birth as an 'untouchable'.

There is perhaps, only one redeeming aspect of his character – when we see him pondering about the legitimacy of his decision to spend the money for the shroud on a feast. He wonders how he is going to respond when Budhiya in after-life questions him why she did not get a shroud. The joy of giving his plate of leftover *puris* to a beggar is immense for Madhav. For the first time in his life, he has experienced the joy of giving, the pathos of the situation is profound.

6.3 Zamindar

The landlord in the story "Kafan" is shown to be a 'compassionate' man. Premchand is at his ironic best. This compassionate man does not feel shy of either exploiting the 'voiceless' 'simpleton' landless laborers or even beating Ghisu and Madhav for their rejection of the feudal order which legitimizes class and caste hegemony. The Zamindar however, does help Ghisu by giving him a princely sum of two rupees to enable them to hold the funeral of Budhiya. An act which stems neither from compassion nor prudence for he has no sympathy with the two and moreover he knows that the two would never return the money. Neither is it out of a sense of grief for the hardworking woman Budhiya nor an act of charity. The zamindar gives the money because he is sure that Ghisu and Madhav could never arrange for a funeral for the deceased. Premchand, who strongly condemned



feudalism for he found the system oppressive, uses the persona of the ‘benevolent’ Zamindar to critique ‘feudalism’.

6.4 Absent-Presence of Budhiya

Budhiya is an absent present character in this story, it is around her that the story revolves yet she is the most liminal, marginalized, and exploited character in this story. We hear about her through the protagonists Ghisu and Madhav – how she has been a good woman, providing these two work-shirkers, shameless men with whatever meals she could put together by grinding grain, cutting grass or whatever work she could get. She becomes a victim on both gender-based and caste-based inequities. Feudalistic as well as patriarchal structure have rendered her incapacitated and inarticulate. We hear her ‘articulate’ only through painful moans, writhing, in cries of pain. She dies with the unborn child dead in her womb, uncelebrated in life as in death. It is through the accounts of Ghisu and Madhav that we learn of the selflessness of Budhiya, as Ghisu says “Yes, she’ll go to heaven. She hurt no one, harmed no one. In death she fulfilled the greatest wish of our life. If she doesn’t go to heaven who will?” (232)

Premchand has been credited to create women characters in his stories who are remarkable for their courage and the manner in which they resist oppressive social norms – be it Gangi from “*Thakur Ka Kuan*,” Dhanika from *Godan*, Anandi from *Bade Ghar Ki Beti* to name but a few so it does make one wonder why Budhiya has been created by Premchand as a vulnerable victim of the social order. It is through her liminality and the pathos of the situation that Premchand is aiming to highlight the multiple levels of oppression that women like Budhiya are subjected to in the name of caste, gender, patriarchy and poverty.

Check Your Progress

- a) The Zamindar is a compassionate man. Critically comment.
- b) Examine Madhav’s character with special reference to his sense of guilt towards the end of the story.
- c) Ghisu’s refusal to work is a reaction against an exploitative social order. Comment.

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(ii) Ismat Chughtai: “The Quilt”

Dr. Neeta Gupta

Structure

1. *Learning Objectives*
2. *The Author and Her Milieu*
3. *“The Quilt”: An Introduction*
4. *Detailed Analysis*
5. *The Lihaaf as Metaphor and Symbol*
6. *The Theme of Female Sexuality*
7. *Characters and Style*
8. *Works Cited*
9. *Suggested Readings*

1. Learning Objectives

The major objective of this study material is to introduce students to the author and her times and help them understand her short story “The Quilt” through a detailed analysis of the same. This lesson would enable students to:

- ◆ Place the story in its context and familiarize themselves with the controversies that surround it.
- ◆ Identify the underlying themes of the story.
- ◆ Understand the narrative technique and the skillful use of the child narrator to deal with a taboo subject.
- ◆ Comprehend the deft use of images and metaphors.
- ◆ Get to know about the position of women in Muslim households at that time.
- ◆ Experience a whole way of life, a culture that is built through visual details.



2. The Author and Her Milieu

Krishan Chander, Rajinder Singh Bedi, Saadat Hasan Manto and Ismat Chughtai are rightly considered to be the four stalwarts of Urdu Literature. Of these, Chughtai's name stands out as being an author who led her readers into the secret world of women and scratched the surface of respectability to lay bare their agonies, their frustration, their longings, their exploitation especially in Muslim households. Radical in her views, outrageously bold in her choice of themes Chughtai talked about subjects which had been forbidden hitherto. She brought into sharp focus the sexual exploitation of women that was rampant though hidden under the guise of middle class respectability. Though it could be the topic of conversation even amongst women, yet it was not anything that one could write about. In case a woman wrote about these things, it was considered to be an outrageous transgression of the bounds of morality and respectability. Appalled by the state of things, undaunted by social opinion, Chughtai courageously took up the cudgels against the oppressive, stifling, and exploitative patriarchal structure that had determined social patterns and behaviour for centuries and chose to write about these forbidden topics.

In Chughtai's writings, a woman's voice expresses a woman's point of view about women issues – not timorously or hesitatingly but with boldness and with full faith in her endeavour. She writes about a young girl who is sexually teased by her cousin during the summer vacations in "Fasaadi" ("The Laggard"). Then in "Gainda" she writes about the servant girl who becomes pregnant by her employer's son but when the fact is discovered she is punished and badly beaten up while the son who is responsible and guilty is merely sent away to Delhi. She also writes about a middle-class girl whose mother's effort to get her married reduces the family to absolute penury while the prospective suitor simply enjoys the hospitality and unashamedly leaves to marry another girl. The wedding garment ultimately turns into a shroud for the unfortunate girl in "Chauthi ka Jora." While stories like "Badan ki Khushboo" expose the sham respectability of Nawabi families and the sexual exploitation of servant girls in these families, those like "Til" focus attention on female sexuality and the sexual needs of a woman.

In deciding to write about such subjects and such themes Chughtai understandably invited the wrath of the so-called custodians of public morality. She was dismissed as a sex-crazed writer and declared indecent. But Chughtai fought against this censure and doggedly pursued her efforts to expose the seamy reality beneath the mask of apparent respectability. Her personal circumstances, right from the childhood days, when she fought and opposed her entire family in order to be educated was enough of a preparation to take the world head-on when the need arose.



Born in Badayun, a small town in western Uttar Pradesh, Ismat Chughtai was the ninth child of her parents Mirza Qasim Baig Chughtai and Nusrat Khanam born on August 21, 1915. Ismat's family name was Ismat Khanam Chughtai and her siblings and other family members called her Chunni.

Ismat grew up in a household teeming with a number of aunts and uncles and cousins in addition to her immediate family. She had six brothers and three sisters. Since her sisters were all much older to her, Ismat's playmates were often her brothers and their friends. Thus, her past-time was never playing with dolls or doing embroidery but riding bicycles, playing football or climbing trees and so on. At times when she was on her own she sneaked to the servant quarters in the compound of her rambling bungalow. This is how she came in close contact with women from the lower strata. Her close acquaintance with the servant girls opened her eyes to a different world that existed alongside her own with all its trappings of tradition, religion and respectability. Listening to the experiences of the servant women she realized how deceptive the professed respectability of their polite society was and she drew upon her memories and her experiences later to write about them in her stories to peel off the mask of decency and expose the seamy reality.

Right from her childhood Ismat learnt to demand her rights and fight for them too. She ingeniously evaded being married off at the age of fourteen and despite opposition from her family joined the Aligarh Muslim University. As against five thousand boys in the university there were just six girls. It was here that Ismat read the path-breaking, radical, almost scandalous stories of the thin volume book, *Angare* that shook these girls out of their complacency and forced them to rethink and relocate their notions about sexuality and obscenity. It was a hard-hitting book that exposed a reality one did not want to acknowledge. Ismat knew from her early conversations with her friends from the servant quarters and from her recollection of gossip she heard in the women's quarters, that events that occurred in the stories were actually happening in households. They could neither be denied, nor be wished away but could only be brushed under the carpet as had been done for so many years. The radical writers of *Angare* had been courageous enough to challenge the taboos and talk about forbidden things with brutal frankness and unnerving honesty making people squirm in their sham respectability. Rashid Jahan, who was one of the four writers of *Angare*, was to become Ismat's role model for writing.

After Aligarh, Ismat moved to Lucknow to Isabella Thornton College to complete her bachelor's degree. Ultimately however, she obtained her degree from the Aligarh Muslim University. Having worked briefly as a teacher in Bareilly she went again to the Aligarh Muslim University to train as a teacher. Even here she found she had to face gender discrimination. She and six other girls had to persuade the principal to let them do the B.T.



course. The course had no provision for girls but seeing their determination the principal agreed only on condition that they attend classes behind the purdah. Thus Ismat, along with six other girls sat behind a curtain at the back of the class. Ismat completed her B.T. in 1939 and joined the Raj Mahal Girl's School at Jodhpur where she taught for two years. In 1941 she moved to Bombay as the inspector of municipal schools and the same year she married Shahid Latif whom she had known from Aligarh. He was a short story writer who wrote stories and dialogues for films. He introduced Ismat to the film world. The couple had two daughters Seema and Sabrina. Around this time Ismat had taken up her writing once again. She wrote the story "Lihaaf" two months before she married Shahid Latif. Her play *Fasaadi* and her short stories "Gainda" and "Neera" had already been published some time before. As she got increasingly involved with her writing and with her growing family, Ismat gave up her job as inspector of schools and made writing a full-time career. She even wrote stories and dialogues for some films like *Ziddi*, *Buzdil*, *Arzoo*, *Fareb*, *Soney ki Chiriya* and the famous *Garam Hawa* on the theme of partition.

Ismat belonged to The Progressive Writers' Movement and considered herself a part of that group. The movement was formally launched in 1936 and aimed at being non-conventional and reactionary focusing on issues of immediate relevance. Of the group of these writers it was Rasheed Jahan who proved to have a lasting influence on Ismat and who in Ismat's words 'shattered all the marble images' that she had idolized thus far and 'made life stand before her in its stark nakedness.' (Chughtai, *A Life in Words*, 18). A doctor by profession, Rasheed Jahan was immensely interested in writing about women from a woman's point of view and was equally critical of husbands who treated their wives either as glorified servants or as child-bearing machines and also of those women who adhered blindly to traditions and allowed men to swamp their personalities in the name of religion or superstition. She always made time for her writing from her demanding schedule and wrote a number of short stories and plays. Ismat remained under her influence throughout her writing career.

Though Rasheed Jahan was a member of the Progressive Writers' Movement, Ismat was soon disillusioned and disenchanted by it when she saw that the same patriarchal oppression of female sensibilities sought to stifle her point of view and her manner of expression. At a conference which declared that only those who wrote about farmers and workers were the real writers, Ismat had the temerity to ask whether she was not a writer because she did not write about this class? She was told in an off-hand manner that she was not a writer anyway! The movement had become too uncompromising and rigid for Ismat's liking and being by nature a spontaneous and uninhibited person she refused to be dictated to and carved her own path. She drew her themes from middle class family



life and explored its oppressions and the workings of sexuality in common homes. She foregrounded the issue of female sexuality in most of her stories and highlighted women's oppression and exploitation related to it. She recreated a whole way of life of middle-class Muslim households complete with its customs, its religiosity its superstitions in all their minute details. At the same time however, in story after story she exposed the hypocrisy of this apparently respectable society and revealed its cruelty, its inhuman treatment, and its unjustified suppression of the female sex. All this she did with a razor-sharp wit and an unmatched aggressiveness. Ismat was even hauled off to the courts for obscenity in her writings but she fought her battles to the finish and won. The end came for her on October 24, 1991. She remained controversial even after death as she had expressed a wish to be cremated rather than be buried as per Muslim practice. Her family honoured her last wish.

Check Your Progress

1. What does Chughtai generally focus on in her writings?
2. What was the Progressive Writer's Movement?
3. Why has Ismat been called an 'ethnographer's delight'?

3. “The Quilt”: An Introduction

“Lihaaf” or the “Quilt” was written in 1941 and published sometime later in 1942 in *Adab-e-Latif*. The story brought immediate notoriety to Ismat because the theme around which the whole narrative revolved was not just taboo but something that was never even acknowledged an existence, never mentioned in polite society. Not only did it focus sharply on female sexuality foregrounding the sexual needs of a woman, but it also went many steps further in making a deliberate and conscious choice of an alternative sexuality. To write of such matters at a time when sex was discussed among women only in whispers was Ismat's expression of the revulsion she felt for those women who suppressed their sexuality and meekly submitted to the oppressive male. Commenting on this particular aspect of her writing Ismat once wrote: “I detest the wailing, spineless women giving birth to bastards and detest the faithful, sentimental and cringing wives with exemplary eastern values. Girls committing suicide, crying their hearts out, or begging for love from their lovers are taboo in my books” (Quoted in Hameed & Mehdi, “Introduction,” iv). “Lihaaf” was a courageous exploration of the alternatives available to women in a sexually repressive patriarchal world. It was a frontal attack on that world which in turn was understandably shocked out of its self-absorption.



Ismat was summoned to the court on charges of obscenity. The case dragged on for two years in Lahore. While attending the case proceedings Ismat met Saadat Hasan Manto who was facing a similar charge for his story 'Bu.' Ismat recalls how the judge expressed a grudging admiration for her work. She writes:

The judge called me into the ante-room attached to the court and said quite informally: "I've read most of your stories. They aren't obscene. Neither is 'Lihaaf.' But Manto's writings are often littered with filth."

"The world is also littered with filth," I said in a feeble voice.

"Is it necessary to rake it up then?"

"If it is raked up, it becomes visible and people feel the need of clean it up." I replied.

(Chughtai, *A Life in Words*, 37)

It was Ismat's desire to bring out into the open the unspeakable realities of the hypocritical society. Such things did exist even though people conveniently turned a blind eye to them. In fact, Ismat had drawn on autobiographical material (as she did for most of her stories) for "Lihaaf" and based it on a real-life experience. She recalls how as children, she and her brother often used to hear women gossiping about a certain woman and her affair with a maidservant. As soon as the children were caught eavesdropping they were shooed off, making them aware that this was a forbidden topic. She recalls that the narrative is about the wife of Nawab Swale Khan of Aligarh who himself was a homosexual. So, it wasn't as though the theme was merely a figment of Ismat's overactive imagination. It was a sensitive rendering of a childhood experience whose correct import was understood by Ismat only after she matured into a woman herself. When questioned about the obscenity in her stories and in "Lihaaf" in particular, Ismat said in an interview:

In my stories I've put down everything with objectivity. Now, if some people find them obscene, let them go to hell. It's my belief that experiences can never be obscene if they are based on authentic realities of life. These people think that there is nothing wrong if they can do things behind the curtains.... All of them are halfwits.

I wrote about a woman's loneliness who had all worldly comforts but who was deprived of her husband's company. I wanted to portray her tension and desperation. (Quoted in M. Asaduddin. *Makers of Indian Literature*, 89)

People with filth in their minds saw it reflected in the story but missed the essential point that Ismat was making. After a two-year trial Ismat was acquitted because her lawyer argued that only those people who know that lesbianism exists can recognize its presence in the story.



Check Your Progress

1. What is the underlying theme of "The Quilt"?
2. Why was Ismat summoned to the court?
3. What was her stand?

4. Detailed Analysis

"Lihaaf" is a story about Begum Jan, the beautiful wife of the Nawab who despite being surrounded by material comforts, fawning relatives and hordes of servants, nevertheless leads a lonely existence as her husband remains preoccupied with 'young fair-faced boys with slim waists' (Chughtai, "The Quilt" in *Modern Indian Literature: Poems and Short Stories*, p 117. Subsequent page references to the text are from the same edition). She yearns for her husband's love and attention but getting none withers and wilts away like a neglected plant till she finds solace in the arms of her maidservant Rabbu and blossoms once again. Narrated through the eyes of a young precocious girl of nine, this story about sexual bonding between two women, achieves a remarkable balance between 'reticence and suggestiveness' (Tharu and Lalita, 128) The choice of a young narrator who sees a lot but understands nothing, gives Chughtai an opportunity to deal with a theme that was even forbidden a mention in any social circle. To consider the story as being just about lesbianism, however, would be an incomplete understanding of the author's purpose. It is a woman-centric story narrated from the woman's point of view and despite the child narrator it sensitively and very skillfully portrays the sheer loneliness and desperation of the frustrated wife on the one hand and locates the reason for that frustration in her sexual deprivation simultaneously. By doing so, Chughtai boldly highlights the issue of female sexuality in the story, forcing people to recognize and acknowledge its existence. That a woman could have sexual desires was a far cry for a society that believed only in male desires and woman's submission to them. But as Asaduddin puts it "Chughtai was the first significant writer in Urdu ... to acknowledge female sexuality and to portray it in a courageous and convincing way." Her endeavour is "directed towards illustrating that it is one of the most important and potent facts of life and the prime pivot of many human actions" (76). In "Lihaaf" she effectively portrays the fact that women too have physical needs and urges. If denied a legitimate fulfillment, a likelihood of alternative sexuality can become an actuality as it does in the story.



The theme of “Lihaaf” is thus an inter-linked one where female sexuality, its suppression, the resulting loneliness and then lesbianism all exist in a logical sequence. Though the major thrust of the story falls on the above-mentioned aspects of a woman’s existence in an oppressive and claustrophobic society, yet as is the case with almost all of Chughtai’s stories “Lihaaf” also gives us a taste of a whole culture in its brief though vivid glimpses of the Nawabi way of life. It is a life full of luxuries and comforts with a surfeit of material things. Only Chughtai could think of supplying such details as Begum Jan’s fine spun Hyderabad lace kurtas or her elaborate toilette when she would have herself rubbed with “all kinds of oils, perfumed unguents and lotions” (119). What went on in this luxurious household behind the *chilmans* and closed doors is another story altogether - one of deprivation, of loneliness and frustration and abnormal patterns of normal heterosexual behaviour. All this is surprisingly achieved through a nine-year-old narrator and through a deft use of the *lihaaf* as a metaphor as well as an object. Something which conceals and cloaks things so that one does not know what strong undercurrents, may lie beneath the apparently calm exterior. Let us take the story step by step to see how Chughtai is able to achieve this remarkable feat.

Check Your Progress

1. Who is Begum Jaan?
2. What kind of household does Ismat portray in “The Quilt”?
3. What is implied about the Nawab?

4.1 Narrative Style

The first few lines of the story introduce us to the first person, the ‘I’ of the story, who is going to take us through the narrative and at the moment we are not aware that it is a nine-year-old girl. In fact, we sense that the story is going to be a flashback in the narrator’s life since there is a mention of the past memories which are revived the moment this narrator makes use of her quilt in the winter month. The introductory lines also link up the story with the title since the narrator not just mentions the *lihaaf* but hints at the crucial role it will play in the narrative both as an object as well as a metaphor and symbol. Its shadows assume identities that set the narrator’s imagination racing. It is evident that the innocent object has played same significant role in the past for it to leave a lasting impact on the narrator’s mind. Our curiosity is suitably aroused and we move quickly onward for the mystery to unravel.

The second paragraph builds up the suspense as the narrator tells us in a chatty tone that it is no romantic tale that she proposes to tell, rather a frightening one where ‘the



rocking shadow' of a *lihaaf* on the wall can still send shivers down her spine. Notice that the language used is simple, every day, speech and the tone is conversational into which the metaphor of the *lihaaf* has been woven with a seemingly effortless ease. The next step is to bring us up to date with the time and there is the first hint of the autobiographical element of the story when the 'I' begins to assume the identity of the author. The first-person narrator then is probably the author herself who is also going to be a participant in the story as it is clearly stated that she is going to draw upon memories of her childhood which go into making up this story. The mention of her childhood quarrels with her brothers and their male friends is a reference lifted directly from Chughtai's own life. As stated earlier Chughtai's own admission about the story was that it was based on a real-life experience when whispers about such a woman and her affair with her maidservant were a recurrent topic of the gossip in the *zenankhana*. Despite the strong autobiographical relevance of the story, however, the narrator could be any woman relating a childhood experience.

The young narrator seems to be a far cry from the docile and submissive girls one would normally come across in a conservative Muslim household. Her unconventional tomboyish behaviour sets her apart from other girls who at her age were busy securing admirers while our narrator was occupied most of the time with fighting every boy or girl that came her way. It is this which prompts her mother to leave her with her 'adopted sister' (*'munhbolī behan'* in the original) Begum Jan, for the time when she would be away on a visit to Agra. In Begum Jan's household there was not a single child with whom this narrator could gratify her quarrelsome tendencies and so her being packed off to the Nawab's house seems like a 'punishment.' It is this same Begum Jan's *lihaaf* that has etched itself in the memory of our narrator and "is to this day preserved in it like a scar from a red-hot iron" (117).

Till this point in the narrative the child's perspective has still not surfaced. We are being given a recollection of events from the perspective of the same person but who is now a grown-up woman and who can therefore make connections between observed facts and prepare the ground for the narrative to unfold. Thus, we are informed how Begum Jan came from an impoverished family and are also told that her destitute parents had given her in marriage to the Nawab Sahib because "although somewhat "advanced" in age, the Nawab was a very pious man" (117). He had never been known to indulge in decrepit habits like visiting prostitutes and had even performed the Haj and helped others to perform it to.

**Check Your Progress**

1. Who is the narrator of the story?
2. Why does the narrator come to stay with Begum Jan?
3. Through whose perspective is the narrative being unfolded? What is the advantage of doing so?
4. Who is Rabbu?

4.2 Position of Women

As the narrative progresses we can see that the narrator is merely observing and reporting what had happened but Chughtai here is affecting a simultaneous exposure of a certain society and culture. It is a society where marriage seems to be the ultimate goal of a woman's existence and somewhere money too plays a part or else why would the parents of a young and beautiful girl marry her off to a man much older than herself? At this point one might recall Chughtai's other justly famous story "Chauthi ka Jora" in which Kubra, the daughter of a poor widow is unable to find a groom for herself despite her mother's frantic efforts which push this family to the brink of absolute penury. Unable to bear the humiliation Kubra dies but one wonders had such a person as Begum Jan's Nawab come along at that time, would not have Kubra's mother gladly given her daughter in marriage to him? Rich old men marrying poor but beautiful young girls was a common occurrence in a society where marriage was essential for a girl's survival but poverty often became a hindrance to it. Thus, we begin to get a glimpse not only into the life of Begum Jan but also into a culture which pressured such mismatched unions.

The next step is an unmasking of the pretentiousness, the hypocrisy, and the pseudo-religiosity of the Nawab and by extension of the society to which he belongs. This pious and religious man has a "mysterious hobby". Unlike others of his status, he does not indulge in pigeon or cock fights. His interest and his only pleasure is "to have young fair-faced boys around him with slim waist whose expenses were generously borne by the Nawab Sahib himself" (117). On the face of it there seems to be nothing wrong in helping students. But Chughtai's choice of words and her tongue-in-cheek manner hints at the seamy reality underneath this apparently virtuous behaviour. The boys are no robust, naughty quarrelsome children but "fair-faced" and "slim-waisted" and, as we are told later, dressed in "translucent kurtas, their well-formed legs in tight fitting churidars..." (118). The description has an unwholesome ring to it and our suspicions are confirmed as the narrative progresses.



For the Nawab, Begum Jan is nothing more than a piece of furniture in his house. Having married her and installed her as his wife he forgets all about her, leaving her to pine away in loneliness while he has his rendezvous with the young boys he prefers to surround himself with. Once again Chughtai is hinting at the position of women in Muslim household. They seem to have no agency, no voice of their own in which they would register protest at the oppression that they are made to experience every moment of their existence. Begum Jan has some legitimate rights as a wife but it is not for her to demand them. They can come her way only if the husband wishes it so, otherwise she has merely to submit to her fate.

Thus, all her dreams of spending a happy married life come to naught. She is relegated to living her life on her canopied bed, pining and yearning for her husband's love. She burns with envy as she watches the boys through the chinks of the drawing room door. Like any conventional woman she takes recourse to prayers and vows in order to reclaim her husband and then to practicing her womanly charms on him but all her efforts fail. Using an apt simile Chughtai describes it as applying leeches to a stone. The Nawab does not budge an inch. The Begum then turns to books but available literature only fans her romantic dreams and heightens her realization that they would never come true, pushing her further into despondency. She finds no solace anywhere and begins to lose sleep and health. Understandably she does not even feel like dressing up or wearing fine clothes for who is there to see and appreciate?

The next paragraph continues an exposure of the Muslim culture, especially a Nawabi household. There is a steady stream of relatives and visitors who come fawning on the Nawab and most of these people are Begum Jan's poor relatives, who come to eat the Nawab's rich food, to enjoy themselves at his expense and have their winter needs provided for. This was a very common occurrence in such households and Chughtai's own father's house was just such a place where relatives and visitors felt free to come and enjoyed the hospitality. Chughtai's exploration into a culture continues through a simple documentation of observed reality.

Though the poor relatives warmed themselves at the Nawab's expense, Begum Jan's life remained empty and cold and she shivered in her loneliness even though her *lihaaf* had been "freshly stuffed with cotton which had been teased out into a fluff" (118). The use of the *lihaaf* as metaphor begins as early as this. It is unable to provide Begum Jan with the warmth that she needs and none of its shadows on the wall hold any promise for her. In other words, Begum Jan remains cold and lonely and her frustration grows day by day. She almost ceases to live till one day Rabbu comes on the scene and pulls her from the brink of despair back to life again.



The narrator recalls how Begum Jan blossomed under the hands of Rabbu. Her dried-up body began to fill and her beauty burst into bloom. To unsuspecting eyes, the secret lay in the oil massage that Rabbu gave her mistress and Chughtai ends this section of her story with a characteristically tongue-in-cheek comment that “the best medical journals.... Will not give the prescription for this oil” (118).

Check Your Progress

1. Why is there so much loneliness in Begum Jaan’s life?
2. Who pulls her from the brink of despair?
3. What is implied in the story about the position of women in Muslim households at that time?

4.3 Visual Details

Having thus laid the ground for the action to take place Chughtai now takes us to that time in the past when the events of the story actually happened. The narrator is a young girl of nine or ten and she begins by immediately recalling how Begum Jan had looked when she first saw her. Through minute details a complete picture of Begum Jan is sketched before our eyes in such vivid strokes that she comes alive for us. Reclining on the *masnad*, with Rabbu ‘kneading her back and body’ (119) she looked like a grand queen. There is innocence in this description which hints at the attraction that such a figure can have for a nine-year-old child. Notice that in this description of Begum Jaan there is an emphasis on the physical details. We are told about Begum Jan’s dark, luxuriously oiled hair and her immaculate parting, her black eyes and her carefully plucked eyebrows which looked like drawn bows; her distended eyes with heavy eyelids and thick lashes and her lips which were often reddened. The downy upper lip with the faint suggestion of a mustache makes her look sometimes like a young boy. In the midst of a beautiful description this single line immediately individualizes Begum Jan for us and at the same time alerts us to the fact that something might be amiss here.

The narrator continues in the same vein telling us about her smooth skin, her glistening legs, tall figure and well-proportioned body. For a nine-year-old girl to have observed and noticed the above is nothing unusual but it also hints at the young narrator’s incipient sexuality, which prompts her to observe these physical details. In contrast to Begum Jan, Rabbu is just the opposite. In fact, she has been presented as a perfect foil to the Begum and is as dark as the Begum is fair, ‘as flushed in the face as Begum Jan was snowy white.’ She is almost ugly, with a pock marked face, ‘a robust solid body, small nimble hands, a small, taut belly and fat, always moist lips’ (120). She was forever



massaging Begum Jan and the narrator is fascinated with the speed with which Rabbu's hands moved. One moment they were at her waist and in a trice they were at her thighs and then racing down to her ankles.

4.4 Suggestive Nature of the Details

Rabbu's job was only to be Begum Jan's constant companion; to be forever scratching her back, massaging her legs or her head, or various other parts of her body. The bewilderment of the child narrator is brought out effectively as she wonders at all this kneading and rubbing. At the same time since it is a child who is reporting these goings on, it is done without any awkwardness that might have accompanied such descriptions. The child narrator does not understand what is happening and naively states that her body would have simply "disintegrated under so much pounding" (119). Begum Jan's elaborate toilette too gives us a glimpse of the Nawabi lifestyle but the closed doors, lighted braziers and Rabbu being Begum Jan's only companion inside, raises our suspicion. A little later we are told that Begum Jan required this endless massaging because of a permanent itch on her skin which the doctors and hakims had been unable to cure. The suggestive nature of Rabbu's comment and her sly smile when she says that it is merely the Begum's hot blood that causes the itch puts things in perspective and alerts the adult reader though it leaves the child narrator naively accepting the reason for the massages.

The narrator now a grown woman recollects how Rabbu and Begum Jan were a topic of amused conversation at social functions and gatherings. There were bursts of laughter the moment their names were mentioned. Innumerable stories had been coined about the poor lady. Notice how things are left vague even when the mature narrator could have spelt them out for us. As a mature woman she knows the nature of relationship between Rabbu and Begum Jan but chooses to let it remain at the level of suggestion. Consequently, we are taken thus far and no further albeit the recollections of a child narrator are being filtered through an adult consciousness. The second section of the story ends at the point when the child narrator recalls how she was left with Begum Jan for a week while her mother went to Agra.

Till this point it is as if the narrator was preparing the ground on which the events would unfold. The stage is set, the situation has been explained and the characters have been introduced and described. There have been enough suggestions and our curiosity has been aroused. Along with the child narrator we too enter the world of Begum Jan. The child narrator's bed is placed in Begum Jan's room next to the latter's bedstead. Things move in a normal fashion with the two playing a game of 'Chance' till ten or eleven after which the narrator goes off to sleep. The events of the night, however, send



her into a tizzy when the rocking and heaving of Begum Jan's *lihaaf* jolts her out of her sleep. The innocence of the child on the one hand and the unspeakable goings on inside the *lihaaf* on the other are thrown into high relief in the exchange that follows. She hears two people whispering and thinks that there may be a thief but on hearing Rabbu's voice sternly telling her to go to sleep the child ducks into her own *lihaaf* for comfort. The next morning, Begum Jan's *lihaaf* looked absolutely innocent.

4.5 The Child Narrator

You must observe how the story continuously progresses with a restrained suggestiveness. The use of the child narrator proves an effective device to deal with a forbidden subject. Though the events that are happening indicate a lesbian relationship in the offing yet the same is never explicitly stated or described, as the child understands almost nothing of the events. She naively conveys what she sees and feels. She has merely observed Begum Jan's *lihaaf* heaving and rocking and her child's imagination is limited enough to think that a thief has broken in somehow and is lurking somewhere. The next night, however, takes us a step further and we now experience Chughtai's phonetic use of words to convey sense through sound. At first the narrator can hear only Rabbu's convulsive sobs and then noises 'like those of a cat licking a plate' (121). The child narrator, though frightened, doesn't call out and goes back to sleep. There is enough provocation here to set an adult's imagination racing but Chughtai is able to cloak it all by narrating it through the eyes of a nine-year old girl. Apparently, nothing has happened but at the same time plenty has been implied.

Rabbu's visit to her son, who is a good-for-nothing and had rejected the hospitality of the Nawab once, never to come back again, gives a nasty turn to events. The inclusion of Rabbu's son into the narrative happens for two reasons. Firstly, it is because he becomes the reason for Rabbu's absence from the house which leads the unsuspecting narrator into the arms of the beguiling Begum Jan. At the same time, however, Rabbu's son comes as a reminder of the Nawab's weakness for young boys. It is mentioned that he too had taken up the Nawab Sahib's service for some time and received many gifts of clothes from him but then no one knew why, he fled and never turned up at the house not even to meet his mother. Knowing the Nawab, we can only conjecture as to what might have happened to drive the young boy away but once again things are left at the level of suggestion and nothing is explicitly stated or described.

Rabbu goes away; Begum Jan is distraught and dejected. Her body aches at every joint till our child narrator in all naivete offers to scratch her back. What follows is something which goes from innocent playfulness to unspeakable dread as Begum Jan presses the



child narrator tightly to herself even when she tries desperately to escape. Instinctively she knows that something is awry. She begins to weep inwardly while Begum Jan hugs and squeezes her like a plaything. She is like one possessed and the child narrator feels like a trapped animal who could neither scream nor cry. Once again a line is drawn. We are taken thus far and no further. This holding back at the right time is what makes Chughtai avoid eroticism and pornography. Hints are strategically placed at our disposal to enable us to make our own assumptions.

It is ironic that the narrator's mother had placed her daughter in Begum Jan's care safe from the loafing boys who roamed the place. And here was her daughter more scared of Begum Jan than of all the loafers in the world. Instead of admiration, Begum Jan now generates a feeling of disgust and dread in the narrator. When the child narrator becomes adamant about being sent home, despite the Begum's cajoling, Rabbu acidly comments "Unripe mangoes are sour, Begum Jan" (125). For the adult reader such an observation places things in a clear perspective as far as the Begum's designs on the young girl are concerned. At this the Begum throws a fit which transforms her from a gaudy, nauseatingly beautiful woman to a ghoulish nightmare. It is only Rabbu who can calm her nerves and she sits massaging the Begum's body when our narrator tiptoes into the bedroom.

One more time the *lihaaf* sways like an elephant that night. There is once again a reliance on the phonetic use of words to convey what is happening inside the *lihaaf*. Even at the moment of disturbing revelation, Chughtai is able to deal with the subject with a freedom which comes to her through the use of the child narrator who reports things without any inhibitions or prior knowledge of what might be happening. For her the sounds are simply due to some feast that the Begum and Rabbu were enjoying in hiding and according to her this was entirely possible since Begum Jan had not eaten anything the whole day. But it was the consistent bloating up of the *lihaaf* that once again sends the narrator's imagination working overtime. In an entirely credible way Chughtai describes how a child's imagination can conjure up most nightmarish images in the darkness of the night. But today the narrator has decided to unravel the mystery of the elephant inside the *lihaaf*. She summons enough courage to step down from her bed and switch on the light. As the light comes on the *lihaaf* does a somersault and collapses. But in doing so, a corner of the *lihaaf* is lifted by a foot revealing something for which the narrator is not prepared and she can only cry 'Allah' and dive for her bed (126).

4.6 The Ending

The ending of the story as it exists in the later versions of it is markedly different from how Chughtai had originally written it. In the first version of the story there was an ex-



tra line after the narrator dives into her sheets. It said, “What I saw when the quilt was lifted, I will never tell anyone, not even if they give me a lakh of rupees.” Manto objected strongly to this sentence observing that the last line is “not artistic at all.” When he spoke to Ismat about the story he said: “I liked your “Lihaaf” very much. It is truly the distinctive feature of your style to use words in a judiciously economical fashion. But I was surprised that you wrote a pointless sentence at the end of your story” (From notes in *Modern Indian Literature: Poems and Short Stories*, 128). In all subsequent editions, the story was published without the last sentence. The line was superfluous and inartistic because the suggestiveness in the story had already successfully conveyed the real importance of the events that had happened. Moreover, by implying that the nine-year-old child actually saw something disturbing inside the *lihaaf* would be hastening the process of a sexual awakening, which would strike a very false note. Moreover, as Tahira Naqvi has observed. ‘At the time she wrote the story her knowledge regarding the subject of lesbianism was meager; what she could not “tell” was actually what she did not know’ (Tahira Naqvi, *The Quilt and Other Stories*, xii).

Check Your Progress

1. What does Begum Jaan sometimes look like to the narrator?
2. How is Rabbu a contrast to the Begum?
3. Why is Rabbu’s son drawn into the narrative?
4. Give two examples of suggestive details that Chughtai uses to deal with a taboo subject.
5. Comment on the use of the child narrator as a narrative device.
6. How does the story end?
7. Why has Manto called the ending inartistic?

5. The Lihaaf as Metaphor and Symbol

At the end of the story the quilt has been put to an ingenious and nimble use to work both as an object as well as a metaphor. Its interpretation as a metaphor, hinges on the *lihaaf*’s ability to conceal and hide things and to put a cover on reality. It becomes operational on many levels in the story. On the one hand we see how Begum Jan becomes a “*lihaaf*” for the Nawab’s own proclivity about young boys. He uses his wife as a cover for his own nefarious activities. On the other instance we find that as an object the *lihaaf* becomes a cover for Begum Jan’s and Rabbu’s nightly activities. It prevents the narrator from



seeing what actually is happening inside but at the same time it makes her imagination run wild. Thus, the *lihaaf* is cloaking as well as provoking. In yet another sense the quilt or '*lihaaf*' becomes a cover for a woman's suppressed sexuality. That is why though we are never told what might be happening inside the quilt yet we have been given enough hints to imagine what might be happening and the reason why it was happening. On a very important level, the child narrator becomes the '*lihaaf*' of the narrative technique to deal freely with a forbidden subject. Nothing is stated categorically, nothing inferred. Merely factual descriptions of observed reality are placed before the reader along with hints and suggestions. The child narrator is able to provide a '*lihaaf*', a cover for the narration of a story on a subject that was taboo. She becomes the '*lihaaf*' of the technique. As observed by Majnuh Gorakhpuri, "her artistry is like the *lihaaf* which reveals by concealment" (Kumar and Sadique ed., *Ismat, Her Life, Her Times*, 231).

The *lihaaf* is also used to indicate "the contrast between the speciously calm external aspect of things and the treacherous undercurrents" (Asaduddin, 88). Begum Jan's *lihaaf* looks utterly innocent to the narrator in the morning, but as the night advances it is the same *lihaaf* that fills her with dread as it hides an unspeakable reality from her.

6. The Theme of Female Sexuality

It has been observed that Begum Jan manages to evade explicit criticism because she doesn't break the heterosexual chastity code by inviting another man into her bed. In this context, lesbianism is chosen as an alternative to oppressive heterosexuality. The narrative, however, neither idealizes nor embellishes lesbian or homosexual relationships.

As mentioned earlier, the story succeeds in effectively foregrounding the issue of female sexuality. It hints at the physical needs of a woman and moves from recognition of these needs to a delineation of how they are either suppressed or exploited. Thus, the story is also about suppression and oppression which leads to frustration, loneliness and despair. What leads Begum Jan to find solace in Rabbu's arms is her unfulfilled desires and her utter loneliness. Thus, loneliness is another equally significant theme of the story and intimately connected with the theme of female sexuality and its suppression. The answer is sought and found in alternative sexuality, in a physical bonding between two women which in turn ultimately comes to dominate and overshadow the other issues. In fact, it will be interesting for you to know that the first book on lesbianism that was published in England in 1928 was called *The Well of Loneliness* by Radcliffe Hall. The title links up the issue of lesbianism with loneliness that women might face in their lives.

**Check Your Progress**

1. How has Chughtai used the quilt as a metaphor and symbol in the story?
2. What is meant by the observation that Chughtai's art is 'lihaafi'?
3. How does the story foreground the issue of female sexuality?
4. What is the other significant theme of the story?

7. Characters and Style

The characters in “Lihaaf” as in all of Chughtai's stories are culturally rooted. Begum Jan, Rabbu, the Nawab are all products of a particular social milieu. If taken out of their context they lose their force but placed within it they make a whole culture, a whole way of life come alive for us. As observed in the course of our analysis, character delineation is done through minute observation and details which enliven these characters for us. They almost walk out of the pages to stand before us as real flesh and blood figures. This part of Chughtai's artistry prompted Varis Alvi to observe that in her characters she creates 'tactile word pictures' (Kumar & Sadique, 214). Yet Ismat almost never ventures into the inner recesses of her characters' minds. She prefers to dwell on external, observed reality and leaves the reader to interpret the psychology.

All this is achieved in a style that is simple, uninhibited, and straightforward with a sense of freedom and spontaneity. She takes the readers through her stories in an easy uncomplicated way without taking recourse to complicated stylistic devices like “flash back, flash forward, ellipsis, stream of consciousness and so on” (Asaduddin, p. 78). She is a storyteller first and foremost and never experiments with form. Her narratives are almost like a conversation with her readers and are therefore all informal with the tone remaining chatty never reflective. One reason for the colloquial tone of her stories was located by Ismat herself in the fact that she never could write in solitude. She lived in a house brimful of people and while she sat in a corner writing one of her stories or plays in the same room there would be children quarrelling, servants wanting to know what to cook, her elder sisters discussing clothes and make-up or her mother and aunts indulging in some neighborly gossip. Thus, her style too assumed this racy pace with which she was surrounded. The conversational tone established an immediate rapport with the reader. It became another reason for her to opt for colloquial, everyday speech in telling her stories rather than sophisticated, stiff and ornate Urdu that would make her characters seem unreal.

Ismat drew upon idioms, images and metaphors from the everyday world and made a deft use of them to impart a richness to her stories, making them fit into the narrative



with complete ease and an effortlessness that can only belie the truth - just as we see happening in the case of the use of the *lihaaf* as metaphor in our story. Krishan Chander, a noted stalwart of Urdu literature and Chughtai's contemporary, remarked in his preface to a volume of her stories: "What one is reminded of by these stories is horse race, i.e., speed, movement, briskness and acceleration, to the extent that the reader is left behind cursing the writer in his mind. Not only does her story seem to be running, but the sentences, images, metaphors, the sounds and sensibilities of the characters and their feelings - all seem to be moving along in a cluster with the force of a storm" (Qtd in Asaduddin. p. 78).

In her novel *Terhi Lakeer* Chughtai explored the question of women's friendship further and the same was attempted in "Zaroorat" another story on a similar theme.

To think that "Lihaaf" is the final comment on Chughtai's writing would be to dismiss her writing without understanding the full import of her work. She has written not just "Lihaaf" but many more hard-hitting stories that peel off the mask of respectability, expose the hypocrisy in society and lay bare the agonies, the struggles underneath apparently calm exteriors. "Chauthi ka Jora", "Jadein", "Kallu", "Hindustan Chor Do", and "Beghar" are just a few of her many stories that deal with themes and issues affecting men and women equally. She talks not just of women but of the socially oppressed, the weak, the poor and her work stands testimony to the fact that her explorations are wide ranging delving deep into issues which disturb and agitate us and jolt us out of our self-assuredness.

Check Your Progress

1. How does Chughtai succeed in making a whole culture come alive for her readers in this story?
2. Comment on Chughtai's narrative style.
3. Which other stories of Chughtai explore the question of women's friendship?

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‘Rebati’ Fakir Mohan Senapati

P.K. Satapathy

Structure

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1. Introduction

This is a paper about Indian Writing in English Translation. You might be wondering why students of B.A (Hons) in English need to study literature written in the vernacular that is only accessible in English translations. The answer is very simple. Ours is an incredibly multilingual and multicultural country and this diversity is our strength. If you travel long distances on a train in our country you will come across, apart from different geographies, different languages, dialects, dress, food, and culture every two three hundred kilometers and sometimes even less than that. However, you can also see subtle commonalities in our way of life, in our myths and stories, in our shared pasts, and most importantly in our human experiences that bind us together. Since literature is one of the privileged ways for people to communicate these experiences, they also become privileged sources in our study of peoples and cultures. Hence studying literature in the vernacular becomes important to understand not just the great diversity that marks our country but also the oneness that underpins it all.



But then there is a small difficulty there. Not many of us know more than a couple of Indian languages. The only way we can get over this difficulty is by turning to translations. Translations, especially from vernacular to vernacular, though useful, would still be limited to the areas speaking the language. However, translations from vernacular to English fares better in terms of its reach. Though translation has its own peculiar difficulties, it facilitates the sharing of diverse cultural narratives, ideas, and perspectives across linguistic boundaries. It helps make the rich literary heritage of various Indian languages accessible to a broader audience, fostering cross-cultural understanding and appreciation. Translation plays a crucial role in preserving and promoting the cultural diversity present in Indian literature, contributing to a more inclusive literary landscape. It serves as a bridge, enabling the rich tapestry of regional languages and diverse narratives to reach a wider audience. Additionally, translation facilitates the exploration of different perspectives and encourages a cultural dialogue that transcends linguistic barriers and promotes mutual understanding.

2. Learning Objectives

After going through this lesson, you will be able to:

- ◆ Understand the contribution of Fakir Mohan Senapati to Odia Literature and language.
- ◆ Appreciate the socio-political and cultural context that ushered in a new kind of writing in Odisha.
- ◆ Write a critical appraisal of the tensions between tradition and modernity that underpin the story of “Rebati”.
- ◆ Write a critical note on the dynamics of social exchange and negotiations that prevailed in the rural areas of Colonial Odisha.

3. Fakir Mohan Senapati and Odia Literature

3.1 Odia Literature: A Short Introduction

Odia literature has a long history dating back, perhaps, to the 6th or 7th century. But it is not the long history that concerns us here. What concerns us here is the general characteristic of Odia literature, if it had any, as it developed over the years. Mayadhar Mansinha, a leading historian of Odia literature, is of the view that Odia literature, more than anything else, is essentially a literature of the common man, a product of the felt need of the people (Mansinha 9). Unlike literature in other parts of India, Odia literature neither received any royal patronage, save for brief periods during the medieval period, nor was



it indebted to any rulers of the land. When a literature has very little or no patronage it struggles to survive and grow because it has no independent means to sustain itself. After all, the poets and artists need an income to survive and create. But not having patrons or benefactors has its own advantages. The writers/artists have no obligations that need to be reflected in their writing/art. They are free to write and represent what they see and feel. Odia literature, thus, developed out of the felt needs of the common people of Odisha and reflected the socio-cultural world of the Odia people. And in that sense, it is truly democratic. Odia literature developed over time with specific Odia flavour, but it was not insular in character. Being democratic in nature, it was able to enrich itself by absorbing from other literatures like Sanskrit, Buddhist, and others.

Though Odia literature has a long history, it would not be unfair to say that it only attained a high level of maturity in the medieval period with the emergence of poets like Sarala Dasa who composed the *Mahabharata* in Odia. The Sarala *Mahabharata* remains, perhaps, the most significant achievement in Odia literature in terms of its influence on the Odia people in general and the literary landscape in particular. The standout feature of this epic is that it is not a mere Odia rendering of the Sanskrit *Mahabharata*. It is, rather, a completely new way of telling the story which reflected the people and culture of Odisha. Further, it was composed in the language used by the common rural folk making it easily accessible to the common rural people. Since Sarala Dasa was essentially self-taught man with very little or no knowledge of Sanskrit, he wasn't burdened with the weight of the Sanskrit Tradition and could mould the story to suit his needs. For instance, he didn't want to burden the common people with the high philosophical discussions of the Gita while the armies waited for battle. For him those long passages were an unnecessary diversion from the main plot and action. So, he passed over those portions in a few lines and took the reader straight into the action. We will restrict our discussion of Sarala Dasa and his *Mahabharata* because space does not permit us to dwell anymore on the subject. However, those who wish to pursue further may find the book, *A History of Oriya Literature* by Mayadhar Mansinha (1962) very useful.

Sarala Dasa was followed by several poets who left their mark on Odia Literature. The most important of them all, in a historical sense, are the group of five poets, collectively known as the *Pancha Sakha*. More than anything else, the term 'Pancha Sakha' is used to denote a continuity of themes, styles, and ethos in their respective literary journeys. That is why this period (15th and 16th century) is also regarded as the age of the *Pancha Sakha*. The Pancha Sakha consisted of Jagannatha Dasa, Balarama Dasa, Ananta Dasa, Achyutananda Dasa, and Yasovanta Dasa. Each member brought a unique perspective and talent to the group, and collectively produced a body of important work that emphasized



the essence of devotion. This was followed by a whole host writer of Puranas, *Vaishnava* poetry, and the ornate court poetry of Upendra Bhanja and others. (Mansinha, 1962) Most of them dealt either with devotional themes or courtly love poetry. Two significant writers do need a mention here. The first is Brajanatha Badajena (1730-17995) who occupies a unique position as the writer of *Chatura Vinoda* a prose work that can be term as completely original. The second is Bhima Bhoi, a tribal poet who is considered a prophet of Alekha cult that rejected caste system of the Hindus.

However, it was in the 19th century that Odia literature underwent a significant transformation with the works of Fakir Mohan Senapati, often regarded as the pioneer of modern Odia literature. Senapati’s writings, including the groundbreaking novel “Chha Mana Atha Guntha,” laid the foundation for a new literature. His biggest contribution to Odia literature was the use of a de-Sanskritised colloquial Odia. This was a deliberate act not just to make literature available to the common masses but to prove that Odia had a distinct and separate existence from other languages and especially Bengali language. Fakir Mohan also introduced what is known as social realism that would take Odia literature on a new trajectory. He, along with Radhnath Roy and Madhusudan Rao laid foundations for not just modern Odia literature but also initiated the search for an Odia linguistic identity that would finally culminate in the formation of the state of Odisha.

Check Your Progress-I

- i. Why is translation important?
- ii. What is a distinctive character of Odia literature?
- iii. How did Fakir Mohan Senapati give a new direction to Odia literature?

3.2 Fakir Mohan Senapati: Brief Biographical Notes

Fakir Mohan Senapati (1843-1918) had an extraordinary life. Though his family had considerable landed property, it had declined substantially by the time he was born. The departure of the Marathas and the arrival of the British in Odisha around 1803, had a profound impact on the land holding pattern and administration in which the traditional land holding class lost their fortunes to a new set of people, mostly from Bengal. So, in a sense, he was born into a poor *Khandayat* family (an intermediary caste) in Malikashpur near Balasore town in Bengal Presidency (Present day Odisha). To compound matters further, he was orphaned at a very tender age and was brought up by his doting grandmother. His grandmother slowly lost whatever little property they were left with. Consequently, his education was interrupted and the boy, a sickly child, started working at various jobs



quite early in life to earn a living. But the desire to acquire an education burned bright. So, he taught himself to become quite an expert in many Indian languages including Sanskrit. He also became quite adept at English. In his autobiography, *My Times and I* (1985), he explains the circumstances under which he acquired his Islamic name. Fakir Mohan was born Braja Mohan Senapati. He fell ill in his early childhood and his grandmother tried out everything possible to nurse him back to health but without much success. All her prayers before the Hindu gods and goddesses remained unanswered. Out of sheer desperation she approached two Muslim saints, who made her promise that she should give up the child once he gets well. But, after Fakir Mohan recovered, the grandmother developed cold feet about giving him up. So, as a tradeoff, he was named as Fakir Mohan in a symbolic giving off. To add to this change of name, he was required to beg for alms during Muharram each year and sell whatever he collected. The money earned from the sell was to be sent to the pirs. (Senapati, 1985, 6) The reason we are recounting the story is to try and understand the socio-cultural, political, and individual circumstances that shaped the writer that he would go on to become in his later life.

That this orphaned and poor boy would go on to give a decisive new direction and usher in what is known as Modern Odia literature would appear like a miracle. But the beginnings of this journey towards literary greatness was fueled by, broadly speaking, three disparate and yet related factors that had a bearing on Fakir Mohan's life. They are:

- I. The first thing that had a direct bearing on Fakir Mohan's life, in the sense that it directly altered the family fortunes of his family for worse, was the new system of rent acquisition introduced by the British after they wrested control of Odisha from the Marathas. The new Zamindari system completely upset the older relationship between the Zamindars and the peasant tenants. Further, the colonial bureaucracy was headquartered at Calcutta and the language of transaction was either English or Persian. The net result of these new changes coupled with the policy of auctioning of Zamindaris in case of nonpayment of rent in time, was that most of the Zamindaris were sold off to non Odias middlemen staying outside Odisha. These absentee landlords created further layers of middlemen who collected, apart from the rent owed to the Zamindars, various amounts of rents from the tenants for the same land. This exploitative practice not only created a powerful and unscrupulous class of rent collectors but also further pauperized the peasants (Parida 735). To add to their misery, the restrictions imposed on certain kinds of manufacturing ensured that the economic engines of the district were firmly in the hands of non-Odias. This had a deep impact on Fakir Mohan (Senapati, 1985, 15).



- II. The splitting up of Odisha into three administrative units (Bengal Presidency, Madras Presidency, and Central Provinces) posed a unique set of challenges not just to its development but also to the identity and culture of Odia people. The immediate fall out was that the Odia speaking people of the province became a linguistic minority overnight with a damaging consequence for its socio-cultural capital. Like most minority cultures within broader administrative units, it suffered asymmetrical development of its educational (schools/colleges) and cultural infrastructure (publishing houses/newspapers and journals). There was the added risk of Odia being replaced by Bengali as the medium of instruction in schools, especially in Fakir Mohan’s own district.
- III. Fakir Mohan was acutely aware of the threat to Odia cultural identity in colonial Odisha. For much of his life he had worked as a teacher and an administrator with various Princely states in Odisha and the British administration. Fakir Mohan had developed close contact with the British officials during his work and understood the power of language to alter the social dynamics of a people and the authority and legitimation that issued from it. His experiences as an administrator had also alerted him to the various diverse and competing interests that operated in colonial Odisha. There were demands from the dominant Bengali middle class to introduce Bengali as the medium of instruction in schools as was done in Assam. Fakir Mohan soon realized that to protect the Odia culture, it was imperative to save the language. And to save the language, it must be made visible as the language most capable of serving Odia interests. So, his transformation from an administrator to a writer happened quite late in his life, spurred partly by his acute awareness of the possibility of Odisha being subjected to linguistic colonialism. This awareness would give rise to what is now known as ‘Odia Nationalism’. This nascent nationalism, ushered in by the trio of Fakir Mohan, Radhanath Ray, and Madhusudan Rao, in turn, ushered a kind of literary modernism that broke with the past to chart a new course for Odia literature.

Though a discussion of Fakir Mohan’s contribution to the revival of Odia language and Odia nationalism would help us in understanding the finer nuances of his work, space does not permit us to dwell any further on the topic. However, those of you who would like to explore his life and times further will find his autobiography delightful as well as instructive.

**Check Your Progress-II**

- i. How did Fakir Mohan Senapati get his Muslim name?
- ii. What are the three factors that shaped Fakir Mohan Senapati as a writer?
- iii. How did the splitting up of Odisha affect the Odias?
- iv. Why was it important for Senapati to save Odia language?

4. Situating 'Rebati'

'Rebati' was published in the pages of the literary journal *Utkala Sahitya* in the year 1898. This is widely regarded as the first modern Odia short story. This is the same journal that published Reba Ray's short story, 'The Sanyasi', which is, once again, regarded as the first modern short story by a woman writer. This was no coincidence. If you recollect, Basudev, the young schoolteacher in 'Rebati', was educated at the 'Normal School of Cuttack'. It is here that a small '*Alochana sabha*' (Study Circle), was formed by people like, Fakir Mohan, Madhusudan Rao, Biswanath Kar, Madhusudan Dash, and others in 1885. Madhusudan Rao and Biswanath Kar were the president and secretary respectively. This is the organization that subsequently became the *Utkala Sahitya samaj* in 1903 and played a stellar role in the struggle for the preservation and recognition of Odia language and culture. The ostensible purpose of the study circle was to make the educated Odias aware of their own literary heritage and to promote authentic Odia literature and culture. The group was quite conscious of the fact that modern Odia writing was becoming more and more an imitation of Bengali writings, and this posed a clear threat to the Odia cultural identity. So, as a corollary, the organization needed to promote literature with a distinct Odia flavor, both in content and style. To fulfil this objective, the literary journal *Utkala Sahitya* was established in 1897. The first issue.

Biswanath Kar, secretary of the '*Alochana sabha*', was the first editor of this journal. The journal, apart from publishing poetry by the leading poets of the times, prose pieces on the distinguishing features of Odia language and the need to explore further. Not surprisingly, Fakir Mohan contributed a poem and a prose piece on *Yoga Shastra* to the first volume. This was followed by a serialized form of the novel *Chamana Athaguntha* (Translated as *Six Acres and a Third*) in 1897 itself. So, by the time Fakir Mohan came to publish 'Rebati' he already had the experience of writing a novel. However, writing a short story, in the modern sense of the term, is different. When we say a modern short story, we are talking about, in the simplest of terms, a story with a single plot, few characters, and that which can be read in a single sitting. It is needless to say that this is only



a working definition but sufficient for our purposes. The short story was an innovation in the late 19th century India. Story telling in Odisha as elsewhere in India, was essentially confined to the oral tradition. Myths, legends, kathas, fables, parables, are a matter of everyday life for children growing up in both rural as well as urban settings.

In England and elsewhere in Europe, the short story had made good progress. Being a colony, India couldn't have remained immune to the literary influences of its powerful master. So, this new genre did certainly inspire Indian writers and our literature is richer for the same. The short story provided some advantages that its longer cousin, the novel, couldn't. The nature of the short story made it easier for the authors to reach a larger audience. It was easier to publish and disseminate (demanding much less space in journals than longer prose writings) and provided variety in literary journals. Further, its shorter length, single plot and fewer characters made the narrative move faster and held the attention of the reader who could finish a story in one reading. Senapati used these features with great control and would be counted among the greatest of short story writers along with Premchand, Tagore and others. ‘Rebati’, as the first modern short story in Odia, will remain a celebrated text not only because it was the first, but also because, unlike the first story, it displays a maturity of form and a dexterous use of colloquial Odia.

The Odia short story has travelled a long way from the publication of ‘Rebati’ in the pages of *Utkala Sahitya*. Generations of writers have taken inspiration from the achievements of Fakir Mohan Senapati and produced thousands of short stories employing a host of techniques. However, Senapati's achievements are unique. K.K. Mohapatra, in his introduction to the book ‘The Greatest Odia Stories Ever Told’ writes, “Senapati's stories and novels marked the emergence of a new literary form out of a long tradition of folklore and orality. The world of swooning princesses and swash-buckling princes living in enchanted castles gave way to an active engagement with the problems and preoccupations of a prosaic everyday world people with ordinary beings.” (Mohapatra xii)

Check Your Progress - III

- i. What advantages did the short story have over the novel?
- ii. Why is Rebati important as a short story?

5. The Plot Summary

“Rebati” is a poignant story about a young girl who wants to acquire an education and the misfortune that befalls her family. The story is set in Patapur, a small village in the Hariharapur subdivision of Cuttack district. Rebati's father, Shyamabandhu Mohanty, works



as the Zamindars's accountant and rent collector. His family consists of his mother, wife, and daughter Rebati. He has a house, a couple of cows, a backyard with two drumstick trees, and a patch of land for growing vegetables. Apart from this, he also has three and a half acres of rent-free land to cultivate, given to him by the zamindar. He earns well, and the cows, the vegetable patch, and the land ensured that the family lived comfortably. Shyamabandhu is a good man and is well liked by the peasantry. He, somehow, ensures that the Zamindar's musclemen never trouble the villagers. He is a man of refined taste and, in the evenings, would sing 'Krupasindhu Badan' and other bhajans and sometimes read out passages from the *Bhagavata* under the light of an oil lamp. Rebati kept her father company in the evenings, listening to the bhajans and the *Bhagavata*. She not only displayed an interest in the bhajans but actively participated in the activity by learning a few songs by heart and singing them in her mellifluous voice.

The narrative then winds back in time to introduce Basudev. Two years earlier, the deputy inspector of schools, at the request of the villagers, had helped in establishing an upper-primary school in the village. It is at this school that Basudev, a trained teacher, is appointed. He is a well behaved, polite young man of twenty. He is an orphan who was brought up by his uncle. Shyamabandhu likes Basudev, because they both belong to the same caste, and would invite him home occasionally. And as time passed by, these visits became more frequent, and a bond develops between Basudev and Shyamabandhu's family. Rebati also looks forward to these visits and she would sing the songs she had learnt, for Basudev.

It is on one such visit that the idea of Rebati's education takes shape. Shyamabandhu learns from Basudev that there is a school for girls at Cuttack and that girls could, additionally, learn crafts. Encouraged by Basudev, he contemplates the idea of giving Rebati an education. Rebati gets excited about the whole thing and rushes in to announce it to her mother and the grandmother. While her mother encourages her, the grandmother is quite skeptical. She is of the view that girls should learn household work like cooking and baking rather than read books. She decides to talk to her son and dissuade him from taking such a decision. At dinner time the same evening, she brings up the subject with her son, but Shyamabandhu is not convinced. He gives the example of one Jhankar Pannaik, whose daughter had an education and can read the *Bhagavata* and *Baidehsia Bilas*. Rebati, on her part, vents her anger on the grandmother. Finally, Shyamabandhu refuses to give in to his mother's backward looking demands and assures Rebati that she will indeed have an education. To set the ball rolling, Basudev brings Rebati a copy of Sitanath Babu's *First Lessons*. Rebati is thrilled to leaf through the book that had pictures, and at this point she is content with just gazing at the pictures. Predictably, the grandmother doesn't share her enthusiasm and slowly a bit of tension creeps into their relationship.



Rebati's education begins in a fairly traditional way on the auspicious day of Sri Panchami. Basudev starts giving her lessons at her home without missing a day. This goes on for about two years and Rebati progresses well in her studies. Shyamabandhu at this point contemplates taking the relationship between the teacher and the student a step further into the realm of marriage. One evening he broaches the subject to his mother and they both agree that it would indeed be a good match. Basudev earns well and more importantly, as the grandmother says, he belongs to the same caste. To make it even better, they believe that Basudev, being an orphan, would have no issues staying with their family. We must keep in mind the fact that Shyamabandhu doesn't have a son and hence he would like Basudev to take the place of a son in the family. These changes have an impact on Rebati's feelings towards Basudev. Her behavior henceforth suggests that she is experiencing the blossoming of a nascent love.

The story takes an unexpected turn at this point. Disaster strikes. There is an outbreak of cholera and Shyamabandhu comes down with the epidemic. There is panic in the village and the family is quickly isolated. Cholera in rural Odisha was considered as the weapon of the demonic deity to collect heads. This superstition had a strong hold on the imagination of the village folk and the village shut its door to protect itself from the disease. The household is thrown into turmoil. The news reaches Basudev at the school. Without caring for his own safety, Basudev rushes to Shyamabandhu's side and comforts him. Shyamabandhu passes away the same evening. The cremation is a tricky affair because Shyamabandhu's is the only *Karana* family in the village and no help can be expected from other castes. However, Bana, a fisherman, aids the family and the cremation and the last rites are performed. The very next day, Shyamabandhu's wife comes down with the epidemic and succumbs to it. It is said misfortune hardly ever comes alone. One misfortune follows the other and in a matter of three months after Shyamabandhu's demise, the Mohanty family stands on the verge of starvation. The Zamindar, finding the family in such helpless condition, expropriates the cows, takes back his rent-free land, and Rebati and the grandmother are left to pawn the household belongings to buy food. Basudev, however, stands by the family and tries to help in whatever way he could, including offering money, but the offer is firmly rejected by Rebati and her grandmother.

These misfortunes have contrasting effect on the two women of the house. While the grandmother raves and rants and holds Rebati and her desire for education responsible for the misfortune, Rebati withdraws into a shell. The once vivacious girl is now reduced to a shadow of her former self. In the meanwhile, the Zamindar continues to harass the family on one pretext or the other. Basudev tries to help as much as possible. Rebati revives a little when Basudev visits them but once the visit is over, she once again, recedes back



into the corners of the house. The downward spiral moves faster with the departure of Basudev to Hariharpur on official duty. Before leaving, he buys the family food items to last for about five days, the estimated time of his absence from the family. The farewell is rather touching. Basudev and Rebati, for the first time, look deep into each other's eyes with a rare longing mixed with foreboding. The five days pass and the schoolboys who accompanied Basudev to Hariharpur return to the village bringing with them the news of Basudev's death. He too becomes a victim of the epidemic at Gopalpur on his way back to Patapur. His death is mourned by the villagers. Although the grandmother mourns his death, she holds him partly responsible for their misfortune. Rebati sinks further and by the next morning she is down with typhoid.

The story now moves on towards its climax. The grandmother, not finding Rebati beside her the next morning, curses her, '*Lo Rebi, lo chuli, lo niaan*' (translated as 'Rebati! Rebi! You fire that turns all to ashes'). This rant, holding Rebati responsible, is now used as a refrain in the rest of the story. Grandmother finds Rebati burning with fever. Half-blind and helpless, the old woman gathers enough strength to pick up the only thing of some value left in the house "an old brass bowl with a hole at the bottom" and marches to Hari Sahu's store in the hope of buying some provisions. Hari Sahu, ironically, finds in this situation an opportunity to turn the deal to his advantage by initially pretending that the bowl is worthless. The refusal stuns the grandmother. Not knowing what to do or who to turn to, she sinks to the ground and sits there for hours. Finally, Hari Sahu relents and gives her some ration. The grandmother, by now, is exhausted and reaches home with great difficulty. Hoping that the girl is better, she calls out to her to fetch some water for cooking. But there is no response. This induces another bout of yelling, '*Lo Rebi, lo chuli, lo niaan*'.

In the meanwhile, Rebati, thirsty and feeling hot, crawls out to the inner courtyard for some cool air. Not finding any relief she rolls out on to the verandah at the back of the house and sits there propped up against the wall. Rebati is dying. As the night slowly settles, she sees her life pass in front of her eyes. She sees her loving mother calling out to her. After a bit of choking and wheezing, Rebati passes away. The grandmother, who is herself not in good health, goes looking for her and finally finds Rebati in the dark. She is angry and wants to give the girl a shake down. But after touching her, she immediately realizes that Rebati is dead. The night is pierced by her wailing. And then it is followed by the thud of two bodies falling to the ground. Her last words are, once again, '*Lo Rebi, lo chuli, lo niaan*'



6. Rebati’s Education: Between Tradition and Modernity

‘Rebati’, at first glance, is a story about the education of a young girl of ten. The plot revolves around Shyamabandhu’s attempt to break with the existing tradition of training girls in household chores and ensuring that his daughter Rebati gets a modern education. The fact that this story, written by a male writer, and published at the end of 19th century in colonial Odisha, is remarkable. What apparently looks like a poignant story of a young girl’s desire to get an education gets entangled in a host of other issues. The story has two movements. The first one begins on a happy note at the beginning and leads up to the beginning of Rebati’s education. And then there is a counter movement, that leads the readers to its tragic end. We know from our discussions in the earlier section that Senapati spent a considerable part of his working life as a teacher/educator/, administrator, and as a journalist. The experiences that he gathered, during the course of his work, had convinced him that if Odia society was to liberate itself from a superstitious and backward-looking condition then education had to play a major role in it. There were hardly any Odias in the colonial administration for the obvious reason that there weren’t enough educated Odias to take up the jobs. While the availability of education, generally, was scattered and inadequate, education for women was nonexistent. Whatever little that was available was primarily restricted to the women from the upper class and that too through private home tuition. It is the Christian missionaries who set up a few schools for the girls in Cuttack and elsewhere but these were patronized by only Christian families.

The story opens with a short description of Shyamabandhu’s family and the happy situation that they find themselves in. Located in a “...sleepy little village in Haripur sub-division, district of Cuttack” (Rebati 204)¹, Shyamabandhu’s family, a small Odia middle class family, is comfortably off. The choice of setting is quite deliberate. Cuttack happened to be the place where all the major changes, political and socio-cultural, including initiatives for women’s education, were taking place. Senapati had shifted to Cuttack because that is where the publishing infrastructure was located. The rapid urbanization of Cuttack under colonial administration made Cuttack a symbol of the march towards modernity. The hinterland on the other hand, a village like Haripur, represented the continuing hold of the values of a traditional Odia society. By locating the story at a place within the sphere of influence of a forward-looking town, at least in terms of the modern education that it offered, Senapati is able to focus on the dynamics of a troubled transitional phase in the history of Odisha. Haripur is far enough to continue its traditional ways and yet not far enough to escape the creeping movement of modernity. That is not to say that the

¹ All references to the text ‘Rebati’ are from the book *The Greatest Odia Stories Ever Told*, selected and translated by Leelawati Mohapatra, Paul St-Pierre & K.K.Mohapatra. Hereafter referred to as Reb.



villagers are against modern education. As we would have it, an upper-primary school was set up in the village following a request for the same from the villagers themselves. But then that school catered only to the boys. The girls had to wait for now.

Along with the choice of location, the choice of caste of the family is also significant. Shyamabandhu belongs to the *karana* caste. This is a caste that has traditionally worked as accountants and rent collectors with zamindars and were also, often, associated with education. The author/narrator takes pains to set up the character of Shyamabandhu in contradistinction to the general character of the rent collectors. In setting up the contrast, Senapati manages, very skillfully, to expose the exploitative underbelly of the zamindari system. Unlike others of his class, Shyamabandhu was a good man. “Shyamabandhu was a straightforward person, and the tenants respected, even liked, him.....; he never demanded a paisa extra from anyone.... He never let the zamindar’s muscleman cast his shadow over the village;” (Reb 205). True to his name, he is a compassionate man and, in a significant way, a savior of the peasants. He is, on the face of it religious, and is fond of singing Bhajans and reading the *Bhagavata*. It is, thus, not unusual for a man like him to entertain thoughts about his daughter’s education. The theme of education is slipped in very early in the narrative. While describing Shyamabandhu’s evening reading habits, the narrator inserts Rebati’s interest in learning. “Rebati always sat next to him, listening with rapt attention; soon she had learnt a few songs by heart.... There was one hymn which gave Shyamabandhu the greatest joy, and every evening he would unfailingly ask Rebati to sing (Reb 205)”. Rebati is not unaware of her father’s joy at her ability to learn. For her, her father represents the possibility, however tenuous, of getting an education.

The narrative continues with the theme of education by taking the reader back in time to the establishment of the upper-primary school. However, the flashback also achieves another narrative objective and that is to introduce Basudev, another name for Krishna, a young man of twenty, appointed as a teacher in the school. Not surprisingly, he completed his education at Cuttack Normal School. Basudev, once again, like his namesake Shyamabandhu, is kind, polite, and importantly from the same *Karana* caste. The introduction of Basudev into Shyamabandhu’s household must be an auspicious occasion so far as Rebati is concerned because he further solidifies the possibilities that could open up for Rebati. It is from Basudev that Shyamabandhu hears of the school for girls at Cuttack. “...Shyamabandhu learnt from Basu there was a school at Cuttack where girls could study and also learn crafts; instantly the desire to give Rebati an education welled up in his heart.” (Reb 206) Basudev, of course, agrees and Rebati’s is overjoyed with the plan. And yet things are not as they seem. Basudev’s entry sets up the stage for a conflictual encounter between Shyamabandhu and his old mother.



The counter thrust to Rebati’s education comes from the grandmother who finds the idea of a girl reading and writing preposterous. She asks, “What good will it do to you? How does book learning help a girl? It’s enough to know how to cook, bake, churn butter and make patterns on walls using rice paste” (Reb 206). The topic is discussed again at dinner time, a time generally reserved for taking important family decisions. Shyamabandhu’s response to his mother’s intervention is instructive in two ways. First, he, as the male head of the family can and does exercise his veto power and rejects his mother’s objections. The same may not have been possible if it was his father. Secondly, the justification that he provides now seems like a climb down. He cites the example of another man’s daughter who could read the *Bhagavata* and *Baidehisa Bilas*. The thrust of this justification seems to center around the assumption that learning devotional songs by girls poses no threat to the established order. The fear that educating girls could lead to the breakdown of social fabric and undermine patriarchal institutions is something that was quite widespread. The middle class, while welcoming education as such, were suspicious of colonial modern education. Since women were considered as the bearer, preserver, and transmitter of cultural values, it was considered risky to expose them to modern education. There was no dearth of well-meaning middle-class men, including Senapati, vigorously encouraging people to send their daughters to the newly established school for girls at Cuttack, the response had been, at best, lukewarm. The situation was so dismal that even a colonial officer like T. E. Ravenshaw had to assuage the fears of people by declaring that, “the purpose of female education was not to teach the girls European manners, but to make them good mothers and efficient housewives and enable them to maintain family accounts. He regretted that the Oriyas were in this sense lagging behind the Bengalis.” (Qtd. in Mohanty, 2004, 333)

Shyamabandhu gives in to the grandmother’s objection and works out a compromise that, he believed, would suit everyone. Rebati’s education is now curtailed to the more acceptable home tutoring. To further assuage the grandmother’s misgivings as well as legitimize Basudev’s recurrent visits, he introduces the possibility of a marriage alliance between Basudev and Rebati. This seems like an excellent compromise that satisfies his mother. Finally, in keeping with tradition, her education begins on the auspicious Sri Pan-chami Day. But is this what Rebati might have wanted out of her education? When Rebati is given a copy of Sitanath babu’s *First lessons*, the narrator tells us that, “The pictures of elephants, houses and cows thrilled her no end.... For Rebati it was enough merely to gaze at their pictures.” (Reb 207). For her the pictures promised her the possibility of escaping the confines of her limited existence. Incidentally, the narrative doesn’t even reveal the name of Shyamabandhu’s wife, confined as she is to the shadows. She wanted an education that was not confined to reciting devotional songs within the confines of her



home. It was supposed to be her window to negotiate with the world outside, a chance to have an identity. But then did Rebati have a real choice? Trapped between the competing claims of tradition and modernity she must give in to the compromise. Nevertheless, to her credit, in the very act of desiring a modern education, she had broken a wall.

Check Your Progress-IV

- i. Why does Senapati situate the story of Rebati in a village in the Cuttack district?
- ii. Why was women's education important? Do you think 'Rebati' makes a powerful case for the same?
- iii. Why were people hesitant about educating their women in 19th century Odisha?

7. The Beginning of the End

The compromise secured by Shymabandhu brings a twist in the tale. The fact that Basudev was now being considered as a prospective groom brings in a marked change in Rebati's behaviour. The relationship is sanctioned by the grandmother because Basudev is from the same caste and for the old woman, "Good caste counts more than wealth" (Reb 208). Ironically, caste would become the biggest stumbling block when the family would need help later in the story. Her education now seems to have taken a back seat with Basudev occupying her young mind more than her studies. She seems to be in love with the young man and the same might hold true for Basudev. But the narrator only hints at it and does not give full expression to this nascent love angle. Disaster strikes in the form of cholera epidemic.

The epidemic allows the narrator to lay bare the fault lines that lie beneath the apparent sleepy little Haripur. Caste divisions are quite sharp and rigid. In the opening introduction, the narrator did inform us that Shyamabandhu's house stood apart from the rest of the houses in the village. The physical separation is also symbolic, signifying the caste hierarchy. He happens to be the only *Karana* in the entire village. The news about him coming down with cholera spreads fast in the village and, "As always, the immediate response was to bolt the doors and windows and keep out of the path of the demonic deity, as though the evil hag was out with her basket and broom sweeping up heads." (Reb 208). The women of the house and Rebati are shown to be helpless. Basudev rushes in to help but nothing much could be done. The dying Shyamabandhu pleads with him to take care of the family. The family is now at the mercy of the villagers even for the funeral. But no one helps. The stranglehold of superstition is so complete that even a humanitarian gesture of helping the family to carry the dead body is not forthcoming.



The caste system provides the moral justification for this refusal to help. The ironic tone of the narrator reveals the undercurrents of this tension. “Shyamabandhu’s was the only Karana family in the village, and help was neither expected nor forthcoming;” (Reb 209).

A series of misfortunes follow that reveal the cracks and fissures of the zamindari system and the utter apathy of the colonial administration. Rebati’s mother succumbs to cholera within hours of her father’s cremation. Soon enough, the zamindar wreaks havoc with the family’s already desperate situation. The cows are taken away by the zamindar for some supposed dues. The narrator is quick enough to reveal the real reason though. “The truth was that for a long time the zamindar had his eyes on the cows.” (Reb 209). He only needed an excuse. Due to lack of education the women are unable to ward off the zamindar’s inhuman exploitation. The turn of events in fact, ironically, reinforces the need for educating the women. Basudev comes in as the savior here. He tries his best, but the downward spiral continues unabated. “The house was falling apart, the straw roof had worn thin, but try as he might Basu couldn’t get it rethatched;” (Reb 209). The land is taken away, the farm hands leave, the bullocks are sold off, and the family is pauperized.

The response to this crisis from Rebati and the grandmother, however, is a study in contrast. Rebati slowly recedes into a shell. The grandmother, on the other hand, cries day and night in the beginning but settles down to cursing Rebati. “She no longer cried as much and took to heaping curses and abuse on Rebati: the wretched girl was at the root of her misery and misfortune; her education had caused it all.... Rebati was the evil eye, the she devil, the ill-omened.” (Reb 210) Though the grandmother is now completely dependent on Basudev and looks forward to his visits, she holds Basudev equally responsible. “The grandmother held Basu equally to blame. If he had not been so eager to teach the girl, she could not possibly have gone and taught herself!” (Reb 210) The narrative now strikes a more somber note. The irony in the narrative tone now turns to pathos. Rebati, who was a vibrant presence at the beginning is slowly fading away from sight. “Rebati’s presence no longer filled the house; gone were the days when she would be heard mourning loudly. Nobody heard her voice, nobody saw her out of doors.” (Reb 210) Rebati losing her voice is symbolic of a larger failure within society at large. Her only hope out of this entrapment now rests with Basudev. He alone, like Krishna, could rescue her. But that again, ironically, is taken away.

Basudev has to visit Hariharpur on official duty. The deputy inspector of schools will take a test for the student at a safe distance from cholera affected Patapur. This is the closest we get to colonial administration in the narrative. There is no mention of any steps taken by the colonial administration nor any mention of any medical infrastructure to deal with an epidemic like this. The narrative silence about colonial administration is quite



apparent here. We will come back to this issue a little later in the section that follows. The departure is nothing remarkable except that there is a certain amount of foreboding in all the three characters. While the grandmother exhorts Basudev to take care of himself, the news hits Rebati hard. There is a feeling that the love that had just germinated between Rebati and Basudev was doomed from the beginning. A few days later Basudev succumbs to cholera and that is the end of the road for Rebati. She develops a fever. For the grandmother, this was nothing but divine retribution for an unpardonable transgression. Rebati had indeed tempted fate when she desired an education like the grandmother says, “What medicine can there be for an illness of one’s own making!” (Reb 212) The narrator adds, “Rebati had brought the fever on herself by daring to study.” (Reb 212)

Senapati, before bringing the story to its climax, finds a way to reveal the moral depredation of society around by counter-posing the grandmother’s struggle to stay alive with the capriciousness of Hari Sa. There is no food at home and no money to buy either. The grandmother finally finds enough strength to go to Hari Sa’s store to pawn a broken brass utensil for some food. Shockingly, Hari Sa has no qualms about cheating the old lady of her rightful due. Though she manages to get some food, she and her granddaughter do not survive the night. At the end of the story everyone is dead. By the end of the story, the progressive isolation of Rebati as well as the family is complete. And if we believe, along with the grandmother that it is all Rebati’s doing, then she did indeed pay too big a price for daring to dream.

Check Your Progress-V

- i. How did the people react to the news of Shyamabandhu coming down with cholera?
- ii. What does the complete isolation of Shymabandhu’s family in the village tell you about the society at large?
- iii. Compare and contrast the response of the grandmother and Rebati to the tragedy unfolding in their home?
- iv. Do you think it is fair to blame Rebati for the tragedy?

8. Concluding Remarks

Rebati’ is a powerful statement in support of women’s education and a critique of the superstitious and caste ridden Odia society under British colonial administration. The story is certainly a major example of Fakir Mohan’s famous social realism. The story, the setting, and the narrative style with an author/narrator blend in beautifully to create a believable



picture of a village in 19th century colonial Odisha. Having said that, we must admit that there are certain narrative silences in ‘Rebati’ that raise a few uncomfortable questions regarding Senapati’s attitude towards women’s education and colonialism. Senapati is long regarded as a pioneer of modern Odia literature, a champion of women’s education, and one of the leading lights of Odia nationalism. However, when it comes to the question of the status of women and British Colonialism in his writings, his critique seems muted and tempered. There is a certain ambivalence in Senapati in these matters.

Senapati’s attitude towards women was formed by his own life experiences as well as the influences that he absorbed in his work and in his interaction with British officials and other Odia and Bengali intellectuals. He was impressed by the struggles of women like Rassundari Devi and others for education. He was also impressed by efforts made by colonial officers to promote women’s education. He could see the progress made by Christians and to a lesser extent Bengalis in making education available to their women. His own personal experiences, that we can glean from his autobiography, had convinced him about the importance of education and particularly women’s education. And yet, ‘Rebati’ ends on a horrible note with the entire family wiped out as a kind of retribution for harboring a desire for an education. One could argue that the end was dictated by the demands of social realism and that Senapati was underscoring the fact that women’s education is fraught with the possibility of failure under the existing superstition ridden feudal social set up. But that doesn’t explain the ambivalence of the narrative voice that tends to privilege the grandmother’s perspective towards the end of the story. If we pay close attention to the story, we can see that the women in Shyamabandhu’s house have no identity of their own. They don’t even have proper names. Therefore, giving Rebati an education would amount to empowering her with an identity of her own. It’s not too difficult to imagine the complexities involved when we consider the fact that Senapati was writing primarily for a male audience towards the end of 19th century. The urban Odia middle class was quite suspicious of western education, especially in terms of the value systems that it offered. While they would not mind the women learning to read and write, they were concerned with the twin threats of western values and the dominance of Bengali language and culture. Senapati also shared these concerns and that is why ‘Rebati’ tries to strike a balance between traditional moral values and modern education. If we look at the story from this perspective, it is quite clear that Senapati, as a writer, did not want to transgress social limitations. In that sense the cholera becomes a narrative device that strikes a balance between desire and destiny thereby generating sympathy for Rebati.

Senapati is also ambivalent in his critique of the colonial set up. He had the opportunity to work closely with British officials all through his career. And a substantial part of



it dealt with education and the status of Odia language. The fact that the existing social fabric was damaged, and the peasantry was totally pauperized under the colonial system was not hidden from him. But in the prevailing circumstances the Britishers were widely perceived as bringing in some order following the chaotic Maratha rule. Moreover, in the latter half of the 19th century, the Odia intelligentsia was working closely with the British authorities to bring together the Odia speaking tracts into a single unit. Space does not permit us to discuss the issue in greater detail. However, it is sufficient for us to remember that Senapati's nationalism was primarily confined to a linguistic space. He was concerned with saving the Odia language and the attendant identity from getting swamped by the dominant Bengali push. Thus, it is not surprising that while being critical of colonial exploitation, his anti-colonial discourse was, at best, muted.

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Dharamvir Bharati, *Andha Yug*

Dr. Seema Suri

Structure

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4.1 Learning Objectives

A classic of the Hindi stage, Dharamvir Bharati's play *Andha Yug* was first published in 1953 and has been translated into many regional languages over the years. Alok Bhalla's English translation was first published in 2005. *Andha Yug* is one of the most regularly performed plays of modern Indian theatre and deals with the issues of war, righteous conduct, suffering, and faith. The main objectives of this study material are to;

- familiarize you with the play's historical and mythical context;
- draw your attention to the ethical questions it raises;
- underline its spiritual message; and
- help you appreciate its position in modern Indian theatre.

4.2 Introduction to the Author and His Work

Dharamvir Bharati (1926-1997) was a renowned Hindi poet, novelist, playwright, essayist and journalist. He was the editor of the immensely popular *Dharmayug*, from 1960-1987. His novels *Gunahon Ka Devta* (1949) and *Suraj Ka Satwan Ghoda* (1952) have been made into Bollywood films. Bharati wrote only one play, *Andha-Yug* (1953), for which he received the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award in 1988. He was honoured with many awards during his lifetime; most notably, the Padma Shri in 1972.



Andha Yug was first broadcast on Allahabad All India Radio in 1954. However, it wasn't performed on the stage till 1962, when it was produced by Satyadev Dubey; presented before a small audience on the rooftop of Ebrahim Alkazi's building in Mumbai. Since then, the play has been staged by some of India's most reputed directors: M. K. Raina, Ebrahim Alkazi, Ratan Thiyam, and Mohan Maharishi, among others.

If possible, do read the original Hindi play, before reading its English translation. You can also listen to the AIR production of *Andha Yug*, available on YouTube.

4.3 The Historical and Mythical Background

Andha Yug is based on events described in the *Mahabharata*; a major Sanskrit epic of ancient India. Compiled between 400 BCE and 200 CE, it comprises 100,000 *shlokas* and there are numerous versions of the epic. It is nearly impossible to provide a comprehensive overview of the narrative, but a brief synopsis of the events leading to the great war at Kurukshetra will help you understand the context of the play.

King Vichitravirya of the Kuru kingdom had two sons; Dhritarashtra and Pandu. Though he is the elder son, Dhritarashtra does not become king on his father's death as he is blind. However, because of a curse, Pandu renounces everything and retires to the forest and Bhishma, their grand uncle, makes Dhritarashtra king. Soon Pandu is blessed with five sons, known as the Pandavas: Yudhishtira, Bhima, Arjuna, Nakula, and Sahadeva. Around the same time, King Dhritarashtra's wife Gandhari gives birth to a hundred sons, known as the Kauravas. Duryodhana is the eldest, with Dushasana coming next. When Pandu dies, his sons are very young, so Kunti comes to live with King Dhritarashtra in the palace at Hastinapur. All the cousins grow up together, but there is constant and bitter rivalry between them. Yudhishtira, being the eldest, is the rightful heir to the throne, but the Kauravas believe otherwise. Disturbed by the discord, Vidura, the king's half-brother suggests that a separate palace should be built for Kunti and her sons. However, he is horrified to discover that it is made of wax and he secretly warns Kunti and her sons. The palace is set afire on their first day there, but they manage to escape through a secret tunnel built by Vidura, and hide in the forest. Everyone believes that they have perished in the fire. They have been living there for a long time, when they find out about the *swayamvara* for Draupadi, the daughter of King Drupad. They go there and Arjuna, after an archery contest, wins her hand in marriage. To honour his mother's wish, Draupadi becomes the common wife of all the five Pandavas. As they are now allied to the powerful king Drupad, it is the right time to let everyone know that they are alive and demand their share in the kingdom. In Hastinapur, the elders of the



clan discuss the matter and, in the interest of peace, they are given forest land, where they establish their kingdom, Indraprastha.

The Pandavas soon grow in prosperity, but this makes the Kauravas jealous. With the help of their maternal uncle Shakuni, they plot to take Indraprastha away from the Pandavas. Yudhishtira, who is known to be fond of gambling, is invited for a game of dice. The Pandavas go, but don't realize that the dice is loaded. Yudhishtira keeps on losing, but doesn't stop playing. Soon he loses all his material possessions, and then, one by one, all his brothers. Finally, he put himself at stake and loses. At last, he wagers his wife Draupadi and loses. Overjoyed, Duryodhana sends his younger brother Dushasana to bring her to the assembly hall, as she is now their slave. In the presence of all the elders in their clan, Draupadi is dragged by her hair and invited to sit on Duryodhana's thigh. Dushasana, on his elder brother's command, attempts to disrobe her, but Lord Krishna's divine intervention saves her from this humiliation. Enraged, Draupadi vows never to tie her hair till it has been washed in Dushasana's blood and Bhima vows to break Duryodhana's thighs and kill all the Kauravas. Frightened, Dhritarashtra asks her not to curse his sons and grants her three boons. Draupadi asks for freedom for her husbands and herself, and that all their possessions be restored to them. But as they are leaving, the Kauravas taunt Yudhishtira and he agrees to one final game to redeem his honour. Again, he loses and as per the terms of the game, goes into exile for thirteen years with his brothers and Draupadi.

After the end of this period, the Pandavas send emissaries to demand their kingdom back. On one pretext or the other, their appeals are rejected. Finally, Krishna goes to the Kaurava court, but cannot prevail, though he warns the Kauravas of their dishonourable conduct. Going against the warnings of the elders and ignoring sage advice, Duryodhana refuses to part with even a pinpoint of land. War is inevitable and at Kurukshetra, a great war is fought between the Pandavas and Kauravas, for eighteen days. The Pandavas win, but the bloodshed and destruction does not end there.

Dharamvir Bharati has chosen the last day of the war at Kurukshetra as the subject matter of *Andha Yug*. He doesn't focus on the victors, but the defeated in the battle. All the Kauravas, except Duryodhana, are dead and the battlefield is strewn with dead bodies. The setting is the palace of Hastinapur, where King Dhritarashtra and Gandhari are waiting for news of the final outcome.

Hindu Cosmology

In ancient Vedic texts, time is conceived of as infinite and cyclical; not linear, as in western science. Hindu cosmology is based on the notion that the universe follows a continual pattern of creation and dissolution. The basic unit of cosmic time is a yuga or world age,



of which there are four: *Krita*, *Treta*, *Dvapara*, and *Kali*. The names of the yugas are based on the throws of an Indian game of dice, popular in Vedic times. *Kali* is the throw with the lowest value, which is one point. It is a Sanskrit word, meaning ‘dark,’ and should not be confused with the goddess *Kali*. Together, the four yugas comprise a *mahayuga*, which is broken up in this way. Note that each yuga is shorter than the preceding one:

<i>Krita Yug</i>	:	1,728,000 years
<i>Treta Yug</i>	:	1,296,000 years
<i>Dvapara Yug</i>	:	864,000 years
<i>Kali Yug</i>	:	432,000 years

A *mahayuga*, therefore, lasts a total of 4.32 million years. A thousand *mahayugas* are believed to form one *kalpa* (eon), which is but one day in the life of *Brahma*, whose life lasts a hundred years. The *kalpa* is the basic unit of world creation, destruction, and re-creation. Mythic accounts speak of the universe being annihilated at the end of each *kalpa*, only to be created again, and the cycle is repeated. This is but an extremely fragmentary description of a complex cosmology that distinguishes the Hindu worldview.

It is important to remember that each yuga, which is but an infinitesimal part of the cycle of time, is characterized by a progressive decrease in ethics and morality; and diminished mental and physical capacities. It is believed that the *Mahabharata* narrates events that begin on the cusp of *Dvapara Yug* and *Kali Yug* begins at the moment of *Krishna*’s death. According to the Hindu belief system, *Kali Yug* began on February 18, 3102 BCE.

Familiarity with these basic tenets of Hindu cosmology will help you understand the framework underlying the references to *Kali Yug* in *Andha Yug*. The events in the play are firmly placed within this larger, religious context; compelling us to view human ambition and self-enhancement as inconsequential, in the face of cosmic time. Human existence is finite, reduced to nothingness in the end, only to be reborn again, in another form, in another universe.

A Note on the Translation

Although the English translation of *Andha Yug* contains the essence of the original Hindi play, you will observe that many Hindi words have been retained; such as ‘dharma’, ‘adharma’, ‘*Kali Yug*’, and ‘*maryada*.’ No translation can capture the cultural and religious associations of these words in their entirety. There are some other words that lose their power when translated. For instance, in the end of Act IV, *Gandhari* asks *Krishna* why he accepted her curse, knowing that she was in anguish:



GANDHARI:

I was bitter
heart-broken and forlorn.

I had lost all my sons! (124)

In the original Hindi play, the word Gandhari uses to describe herself is पुत्रहीना – roughly translated as ‘devoid of sons’; a word that carries within it, the immense importance given to bearing sons in ancient Indian culture. As you can see, such nuances are missed in translation. However, the overall philosophy of the play remains intact and even a reader unfamiliar with the mythical background will be able to grasp it.

4.4 Study Guide

All references to page numbers in this study material are to Alok Bhalla’s translation of *Andha Yug*. The Notes in the end provide additional information that will help you understand the play.

THE PROLOGUE

The Invocation

The play begins with the recital of a Sanskrit *shloka* which can be translated thus:

“Before narrating Jaya, you should offer
Namaskaras to Narayana, Nara – Narayana,
Saraswati Devi and Vyasa.”

‘Jaya’ refers to the *Puranas* and the *Mahabharata*; Narayan’ is the Lord of the Universe, and Nara-Narayan are twin sages reputed for their *tapas*, *tyaga*, and *vairagya* (self-control, sacrifice, and asceticism). ‘Saraswati Devi’ is the goddess of knowledge, whose body is made up of Sanskrit alphabets. ‘Vyasa,’ also known as Ved Vyasa, is believed to be an avatar of Lord Vishnu. The sage is credited with compiling the *Mahabharata*, and also appears as a character in it. In *Andha Yug*, he doesn’t appear in person, but his voice is heard admonishing Ashwatthama. Such salutations at the beginning of plays, known as *mangalacharana*, are a feature of classical Sanskrit theatre; meant to ward off any obstacles during narration.

The Proclamation

The Proclamation quotes from the *Vishnu Purana*, providing translations after each line. They speak about the collapse of dharma; the coming of a time when all that is noble and good will vanish from the earth. Those with wealth will be worshipped and morals



will decline. Tired of misrule, people will hide in caves. As if to emphasize the point, two dancers mime the physical movements of people in caves. The references to the onset of a dark age could be construed as the beginning of Kali Yug.

It is the last day of the war in Kurukshetra and in this dark age everyone is “depressed and confused/lost in the dark caverns of their souls” (26). Though the tone set in the Proclamation is grim, there is a glimmer of hope in Krishna:

Krishna alone was dispassionate and detached.

Krishna alone

could be the saviour

of their future. (26)

The story is about a blind age but also about “enlightenment/through the life of the blind” (26).

ACT ONE: The Kaurava Kingdom

The narrator assigns blame to both sides in the great war, commenting how both sides broke codes of honour, but with a small qualification: “the Kauravas perhaps more than the Pandavas” (27). Note how the word ‘blind’ is used repeatedly to describe the present age, Dvapara yug coming to a close.

The two guards who appear on stage serve as foils to the members of the ruling class, fighting the war of succession. Steeped in sorrow and fatigue, they do nothing except pace up and down the corridors of the palace at Hastinapur – “a blind and sick kingdom” (29). The desolation is further heightened by dim lighting and the sounds of an approaching storm; which turns out to be the sound of thousands of vultures flying over the battlefield. They are not visible to the audience, but the guard describes their presence.

At this point, Vidura enters.¹ He is waiting for news from Sanjaya,² who brings an account of the battlefield every day. Sanjaya is King Dhritarashtra’s charioteer, who has the gift of divine vision, granted by the sage Vyasa. The chorus sings of the anxiety of the King and Queen. Dhritarashtra is fearful, but Vidura doesn’t hesitate to remind him of the time when he didn’t heed the warnings of those who tried to dissuade the Kauravas from going to war. Even Krishna’s warnings were disregarded:

VIDURA: Bhishma did.

So did Dronacharya.

Indeed, in this very court

Krishna advised you:



‘Do not violate the code of honour.
If you violate the code of honour
it will coil around the Kaurava clan
like a wounded python
and crush it like a dry twig.’ (33)

Dhritarashtra refuses to take responsibility for his conduct; saying that he was born blind and was limited by his love for his sons. He expresses his inability to visualize how Bhima fulfilled his terrible vow to drink Dushasana’s blood and wash Draupadi’s hair in it. Vidura tells him that he is afraid because he lacks faith, but Gandhari interrupts him. She is angry with Krishna for violating the *kshatriya* code of honour in the battlefield and reminds Vidura of how he “lost his head completely”³ when he was struck by Bhishma’s arrows (36). Gandhari’s bitter words seem true: “dharma/duty and honour were illusions” (37). The list of codes of conduct⁴ prescribed for the battlefield is long and both the Kauravas and Pandavas break them. However, she is blind to the larger adharma perpetrated by her sons when they refused to return Indraprastha to the Pandavas, after they have spent thirteen years in exile. Her vision is limited by her love for her sons.

An old mendicant, who is an astrologer, enters. On an earlier occasion, he had prophesied victory for Duryodhana in the war. However, it has proved to be false. He attributes it to a man he saw in the battlefield, urging Arjuna to pick up arms and fight. The old mendicant doesn’t realize that it was Krishna he has overheard. It makes him realize that man has the potential to change his destiny, if he looks beyond his ego:

MENDICANT:

But that day
I suddenly understood
as if in a flash of revelation
that when a man
surrenders his selfhood
and challenges history
he can change
the course of the stars. (41)

His words echo those of Vidura, who spoke of Dhritarashtra’s responsibility for his own suffering. Gandhari still clings to the hope that Duryodhana will be victorious and gives the mendicant some coins. All of them exit and the two guards return to the stage. Again, they talk of the desolation and emptiness of their lives.



The chorus enters, singing of the shadow of defeat looming over the city. Note how the playwright uses an abundance of metaphors and similes to establish an atmosphere of gloom. As in Greek theatre, the chorus reflects on the events, assigning blame without fear: calling Dhritarashtra “a blind and self-deceiving king” (44).

In the first act, instead of looking at the imminent defeat of the Kauravas as a simple victory of dharma over adharma, the playwright depicts the scene at Hastinapur on the last day of the war. Gandhari’s bitter attack on Krishna questions his divinity; presenting him as a calculating strategist. Observe how she dwells on violations of warrior codes, instead of the ethical principles shattered by her sons. Gandhari has voluntarily blindfolded herself and is blind to the truth that her sons have lost the war; waiting for news of Duryodhana’s victory.

Check Your Progress

- i) Comment on the phrase: ‘age of darkness.’
- ii) Write a brief note on the two guards.
- iii) Why does Gandhari call Krishna “a fraud”?
- iv) Why does the mendicant call himself “a false prophet”?
- v) Identify at least three similes/metaphors in this act?

ACT TWO: The Making of a Beast

The chorus continues its observations about Sanjaya, who is lost at present. He appears, agonizing over how to convey news of the defeat of the Kauravas to Dhritarashtra. He comes across a soldier, Kritavarma, who fought on their side. Sanjaya describes the carnage on the battlefield and how he himself was almost killed by Satyaki, a Pandava warrior. The most significant events of the *Mahabharata* are not shown on stage, but described by other characters. Read how Sanjaya, with touching pathos, describes Duryodhana, in his moment of defeat:

SANJAYA: What shall I tell them?

That the bravest of warriors
stood next to his shattered chariot
barefoot
disarmed
bloodstained
defeated? (49-50)



Sanjaya exits and Kripacharya enters, looking for Ashwatthama.⁵ We learn that there are only three survivors from the Kaurava army: Kritavarma, Kripacharya, and Ashwatthama.

The scene changes and the light falls on Ashwatthama, sitting in despair with his broken bow. He wonders how he will now avenge his father Guru Dronacharya's "heartless murder"⁶ (51). You might be familiar with this incident from the *Mahabharata*. Dronacharya became the commander-in-chief of the Kaurava army after Bhishma fell, on the tenth day of the war. The Pandavas knew that it would be difficult for them to defeat him. Following Krishna's advice, Bhima kills an elephant named Ashwatthama, and Yudhishtira announces "Ashwatthama is dead" in the battlefield. A shaken Dronacharya doesn't believe the news and goes up to Yudhishtira to seek the truth, as he knows that the eldest Pandava never lies. However, in reply to Dronacharya's question, he confirms the news, adding: "The man or the beast" (52). In the din on the battlefield, Drona cannot hear the second half of his reply, which is muttered under his breath and, grief-stricken, sits down in his chariot to meditate. It is at this moment that Dhristadyumna, Draupadi's brother, jumps into his chariot and chops off his head (51-52). A warrior was not supposed to attack an unarmed man, especially when he was meditating. This is but one more instance of the many codes of righteous conduct that are broken in the war. Ashwatthama is furious with Yudhishtira for uttering a "half-truth":

ASHWATTHAMA:
 My father was invincible.
 Yudhishtira's half-truth
 killed him.
 That day
 Yudhishtira's half-truth
 ruthlessly slaughtered
 all that was good
 or gentle
 in me. (52)

Like Gandhari, who accuses Krishna of violating warrior codes, Ashwatthama's perspective is also skewed. He doesn't comment on the larger moral issues of the war: how he fought on a side that stood for injustice. Ashwatthama decides to become the beast that Yudhishtira speaks about. He pounces on Sanjaya, who enters at that moment, but Kritavarma and Kripacharya stop him. However, Ashwatthama is tormented by what he is becoming: "What should I do? /I don't think /it is a sin to kill" (56).

Sanjaya informs the others that Duryodhana is hiding on the floor of a lake. They all go to meet him and the mendicant enters. From his words, it is clear that he himself



doesn't believe that the future is fixed and can be predicted. The mendicant has heard Krishna's words to Arjuna on the battlefield and has understood that:

MENDICANT:
Truth resides
in the acts
we perform.
What man does
at each moment
becomes his future
for ages and ages. (58)

Though Krishna does not appear on the stage, his teachings are invoked to counter the half-truths and despair of Ashwatthama. Man always has a moral choice before him.

Ashwatthama enters and taunts the mendicant about his false prophecy. The mendicant tells him that the future is not fixed: Duryodhana can still be victorious – if he decides to give the Pandavas their rightful share. The implication is that he may have lost the war, but he will win over adharma by choosing to do the right thing. Angry with the mendicant's words, Ashwatthama drags him off-stage. From the sounds, it becomes clear that he has killed the mendicant.

Kritavarma and Kripacharya come and drag him away. Ashwatthama seems to be oblivious to what he has done and Kripacharya asks him to sleep. When Kritavarma expresses his despair at Ashwatthama's killing of an old and helpless man, Kripacharya reminds him how the Pandavas killed Dronacharya by deceitful means. He doesn't spare the Kauravas either, reminding Kritavarma how seven of them killed Arjuna's young son Abhimanyu⁷ in a dishonourable manner.

The chorus uses a powerful and disturbing simile to visualize the despair and destruction at the end of the war.

Check Your Progress

- i) Who is Sanjaya? Why is he immortal?
- ii) Why does Ashwatthama call his father Drona's death "a heartless murder"?
- iii) What is the "half-truth" uttered by Yudhishtira?
- iv) Where is Duryodhana hiding after his defeat?
- v) Comment on the significance of the title of this act: "The Making of a Beast."



ACT THREE: The Half-truth of Ashwatthama

The narrator speaks about the impact of Sanjaya's account of the last day of the war on the people of Hastinapur. Dhritarashtra enters, having felt the wounds of the defeated soldiers with his own hands. A mute soldier, whose tongue has been cut out, crawls across the stage, begging for water. This brief incident highlights, more than anything else, the atrocities committed during a war and the suffering of the nameless. The first guard brings news of an enemy soldier who has entered the city and there are rumours that he is "a sorcerer, a shape changer" (70).

The enemy soldier is Yuyutsu,⁸ Dhritarashtra's son from a slave girl. In the war, he chose to fight on the side of the Pandavas, but has now returned home. Though Vidura greets him fondly, Yuyutsu is worried that his father and Gandhari, whom he addresses as 'mother,' may not be happy to see him. Vidura advises him to seek comfort in the fact that he fought on the side of dharma, but Yuyutsu is disturbed by Gandhari's contempt:

YUYUTSU:
 In the final analysis
 whether you uphold truth
 or untruth
 you are damned.
 Vidura
 what did I gain?
 What did I gain. (75)

Vidura reproaches Gandhari for her unbecoming conduct and tells Yuyutsu to bear suffering with grace. The mute soldier crawls back and Yuyutsu offers him water, which he refuses to drink because it was Yuyutsu, whose fire-tipped arrows burnt his knees. Usually assured of his moral bearings, Vidura too feels lost: "I do not know/where righteousness ends/and falsehood begins" (77).

Suddenly, Sanjaya brings news of Duryodhana's defeat. The Pandava soldiers are seen celebrating at the back and the scene shifts to the forest, where Kritavarma and Kripacharya are hiding. Soon Ashwatthama joins them, bitter after witnessing the final combat between Duryodhana and Bhima. Kripacharya signals everyone to be silent as Balarama and Krishna are coming their way. Balarama⁹ is Krishna's elder brother and disturbed by the family feud, decided to remain neutral in the war. He scolds Krishna for Bhima's act, as it "violated dharma" (79). He is referring to Bhima's hitting Duryodhana on the thighs: a warrior was not supposed to hit an enemy below the waist. Balarama is disturbed by the conduct of the Pandavas:



BALARAMA:

But let me tell you
that despite your holiness
and your cunning
the Pandavas
who are celebrating
their victory
with conch shells
will also be destroyed
by adharma. (80)

It is important to note that the three Kaurava warriors cannot hear Krishna's reply. Ashwatthama latches on to the phrase adharma and is convinced that he alone carries the "burden of honour and dharma" (82). He agonizes over the manner in which Duryodhana was killed; describing the violence used by Bhima in painful detail. Swayed by his words, Kripacharya agrees to help him destroy the Pandavas. They both leave to go to Duryodhana so that he can proclaim Ashwatthama as commander. Kritavarma stays behind, not untouched by the absurdity of the situation: "a madman as the commander/of an army of two – old Kripacharya and cowardly Kritavarma!" (83). The others soon return and relate how a dying Duryodhana anointed Ashwatthama, promising to stay alive till he hears about the destruction of the Pandavas. Even in his final moments, Duryodhana is consumed by hatred for his cousins.

In the forest, Ashwatthama keeps vigil as the others sleep; the deception of the Pandavas rankling in his mind. On a banyan tree, he sees an owl attack and kill a crow. This scene is enacted by two dancers wearing masks. Borrowing from conventions of folk theatre, Bharati presents this episode from the *Sauptika Parva* (Book X: *Book of the Sleepers*) in the *Mahabharata*. Watching the owl's "tandava dance of death," Ashwatthama is inspired (86). He declares that he will kill the Pandavas while they are sleeping; just as the owl killed the crow.

Read the stage directions and note how Bharati uses light and sound to create a sense of foreboding. The owl throws the bloodied feathers of the crow on Ashwatthama, who begins to dance. The symbolism is unmistakable. He leaves for the Pandava's camp, with his two soldiers; declaring his intention to kill the child in Uttara's womb.¹⁰ Kripacharya tries to stop him, but he rushes out. The third act ends with the sound of chariot wheels and thundering horses, which heighten the sense of urgency.



Check Your Progress

- i) Who is Yuyutsu? Why do the people of Hastinapur insult him?
- ii) Why does Balarama scold Krishna?
- iii) What does Ashwatthama see in the forest at night?
- iv) Describe Duryodhana's condition, as narrated by Kripacharya?
- v) What is Ashwatthama's plan for revenge?

INTERLUDE: Feathers, Wheels, and Bandages

The old mendicant, who was killed by Ashwatthama, now appears as a “sad spectre” (89). To indicate his other-worldly status, light forms a web-like pattern on his face. In an oblique reference to the beginning of a dark age, he speaks of the turbulence around him. Read the following lines and observe how the playwright links the eerie images, through the colour white:

MENDICANT:
 In this age
 life is like
 a blind and turbulent ocean.
 White snake skins
 float on the surface of the sea.
 White bandages
 cover Gandhari's eyes
 and bind the wounds of soldiers. (90)

The mendicant explains that this interlude is not a pause in the narrative. With his powers, he has made time stand still, to understand the inner contradictions of some characters: Yuyutsu, Vidura, and Sanjaya. They appear, one after the other, as spectres on the stage; expressing their wavering faith through the common metaphor of a chariot wheel. Yuyutsu, who chose to fight on the side of dharma, like a “firm wheel,” feels he chose the wrong axle; Sanjaya, who remained neutral in the great war, calls himself “a small/useless/decorative wheel” that spins aimlessly; and Vidura feels assailed by doubt in his Lord, who is like a “useless axle” (91-92).

As if in response to their spiritual anguish, a peacock feather floats across the stage – a beautiful reminder of Krishna's divine presence. There are sounds of the bells on his chariot and the mendicant observes that the peacock feather must have fallen off Krishna's



crown as he was returning from Hastinapur. Do mark this imaginative use of sound and symbol to establish Krishna's divinity. Showing him in human form on the stage would only have diminished his spiritual stature.

The sounds of Ashwatthama's chariot, rushing to the Pandava camp become loud. Unable to stop the flow of the narrative, the mendicant describes how Ashwatthama has reached the entrance to the camp, but is prevented from entering by a dark entity.

Check Your Progress

- i) Explain the metaphor of the chariot wheel used by Yuyutsu, Sanjaya, and Vidura?
- ii) What is the significance of the peacock feather?
- iii) Where is Ashwatthama going?
- iv) Comment on the title of the Interlude: "Feathers, Wheels, and Bandages."

ACT FOUR: Gandhari's Curse

We learn that the dark giant standing at the entrance is Shankara. He is described in traditional iconography; with snakes encircling his neck and flowing matted hair. The chorus sings of how Ashwatthama attacks, but fails to subdue him. He begs Shankara for mercy and receives his blessings:

CHORUS: Easy to please
easy to appease
Shiva raised his hand
and blessed him.
'Ashwatthama
you will be victorious.
The Pandavas have lost
their sense of righteousness.
Because I loved Krishna
I protected them
gave them victory
renewed their confidence.
But they have violated
the dharma of war
and opened
the doors for their destruction.' (96-97)



This censure from a divine entity is significant. It is believed that Shankara himself provided Ashwatthama with the sword that killed his enemies. Like the Kauravas, the Pandavas too broke ethical codes of conduct and have to suffer the consequences.

The narrative is now picked up by Sanjaya, who tells Gandhari how Ashwatthama entered the camp of the Pandavas and killed Dhrishtadyumna first; and then Shatanik¹¹ and Shikhandi.¹² Shatanik is the son of Draupadi and Nakula, the second youngest Pandava. Shikhandi is Draupadi's brother who was responsible for Bhishma's death. According to the *Mahabharata*, Ashwatthama kills all of Draupadi's five sons, thinking they are the Pandavas; unaware that the Pandavas have been taken to a safe place by Krishna, the night before. That is why the Pandavas are pursuing him. It seems that Bharati has glossed over these details to keep the audience's attention on Ashwatthama's rage.

Gandhari does not baulk at Sanjaya's description of the violence. As if to draw her attention to the merciless killing of innocent children, women, and old people, Vidura describes how Kritavarma and Kripacharya's arrows caused havoc. She expresses a desire to see the destruction of the Pandavas with her own eyes and Sanjaya prays for a vision. Kritavarma and Kripacharya appear and notice Duryodhana lying in the bushes:

KRITAVARMA: (*Looks towards the wings.*)

There is Duryodhana.
I am sure
some wild beast
has dragged his half-dead body
under that bush. (102)

You must have noticed that most of the violence happens off-stage; described through the words of other characters. Kripacharya is telling the dying Duryodhana about Ashwatthama's revenge, when he returns after fetching his Brahmastra¹³ and talisman. Duryodhana dies as Ashwatthama begins to talk of his plan to kill Uttara's unborn child.

Gandhari is certain that Krishna will not spare Ashwatthama after his destruction of the Pandava camp and expresses her wish to gaze upon him. According to myths, Gandhari could transform whatever she gazed upon, to adamant. Through her supreme sacrifice, by blindfolding herself out of empathy for her blind husband, she had acquired this special power. However, at that very moment, Sanjaya loses his visionary powers, which were granted to him for the duration of the war and, with Duryodhana's death, the war is over.

Vidura reminds Gandhari of her duty to perform the last rites for her sons. As they leave, the chorus sings of the ruined city of Hastinapur, now overrun with wild beasts. It



is a sad spectacle: Dhritarashtra, Gandhari, Yuyutsu, and Sanjay walking in a procession to cremate the dead Kauravas. They notice Ashwatthama's chariot racing by and Gandhari leaves with Sanjaya to meet him. They return with the news that he is a transformed man, living in mortal fear of Krishna. There are noises in the background and arrows start falling around them. Ashwatthama appears; wounded and defiant. He is being pursued by Krishna and the Pandavas for the carnage at their camp. He challenges them and releases his Brahmastra. Immediately, Vyasa's voice is heard in the background, reprimanding Ashwatthama. Arjuna too has released his Brahmastra and Vyasa fears the consequences: "The earth shall become/a wasteland/of ash and stone" (115). One cannot miss echoes of descriptions of the impact of nuclear weapons in modern warfare.

On Vyasa's orders, Arjuna recalls his deadly weapon, but Ashwatthama doesn't know how to. His father Drona knew that his son had a foul temper and could misuse the Brahmastra if he knew how to recall it and use it again, so he didn't teach him the art. Ashwatthama is happy that his Brahmastra will find its target and kill Uttara's child. Vyasa curses him and departs.

As Gandhari and Sanjaya walk to where Duryodhana is lying dead, they can hear sounds of wailing for Uttara's child. Gandhari is overjoyed by Ashwatthama's revenge. Next, Dhritarashtra and Yuyutsu appear on stage. The blind king hopes that, in the absence of an heir, Yudhishtira may leave his kingdom to Yuyutsu. In spite of losing a hundred sons in an unjust war, Dhritarashtra wants his only surviving son to become king. Vidura brings news of Krishna saving Uttara's child, in exchange for his own life. However, Ashwatthama has been cursed to suffer till eternity.

Gandhari notices a hideous creature hiding behind the bushes; not recognizing Ashwatthama. In a lengthy passage, Vidura describes his pathetic condition:

VIDURA:

Every limb in his body
will be corroded by suffering
but the Lord shall not let him die.
He will become an abomination
but he shall live forever and ever. (121)

At the place where Duryodhana died, all that is left is a pile of bones. Gandhari grieves for her eldest son and calls out to Krishna. She accuses him of not trying to prevent the war and using his divine power for unjust ends. She forgets how Krishna tried to convince Duryodhana to end the dispute by giving the Pandavas only five villages, but he adamantly



refused to part with even a pinpoint of land. She curses him to die like a wild animal, after witnessing the destruction of his own clan. Suddenly, the gentle sounds of a flute are heard and Krishna's shadow appears on the rear wall of the stage. His voice is heard:

KRISHNA:

If I am life
then, Mother
I am also death.

I accept your curse, Mother! (123)

Even a god cannot escape the consequences of karma. Krishna played a major role in the destruction of the Kauravas, causing pain to Gandhari. Aware that he is subject to the same moral laws as other mortals, he accepts her curse. Hearing his words, Gandhari weeps. She wants to know why Krishna did not forgive her, knowing that she was in anguish over the loss of her sons. The chorus marks this moment when the stars began to grow dim: creating a sense of foreboding.

Check Your Progress

- i) Who stands before Ashwatthama, at the entrance to the Pandava camp?
- ii) Why is Ashwatthama unable to recall the Brahmastra?
- iii) How does Krishna punish Ashwatthama?
- iv) How does Gandhari curse Krishna?

ACT FIVE: Victory and a Series of Suicides

Note how the title of this act juxtaposes victory and suicide. The chorus sings of the Pandava's victory – one that does not bring with it a sense of accomplishment, joy, or hope. Each Pandava is presented as flawed; so different from the heroic pursuits they are associated with in popular myth and folklore:

CHORUS:

Bhima was proud by nature
and intellectually dull.
Arjuna had grown old and weary
before his time.
Nakula was ignorant
and Sahadeva retarded from birth. (127)



Bhima, who killed Duryodhana, is devoid of compassion, as he taunts Dhritarashtra and Gandhari. We learn that, tired of Bhima's insults, they have both retired to the forest, along with Kunti. All the brothers, except Yudhishtira, laugh at Yuyatsu's attempt to kill himself; forgetting how he went against his family to fight for their rights. The glory of victory is demolished. Yudhishtira is disenchanted and feels burdened by the crown: embedded as it is with the jewel from Ashwatthama's forehead. According to myth, after taking away the gem, Krishna gave it to Draupadi, who then gave it to Yudhishtira to wear on his crown.

Vidura comes in to complain about Bhima's behaviour towards Yuyatsu, who has lost his voice. The devout follower of Krishna has become an object of mockery. They go to console Yuyatsu and the two guards come on stage. They express their unhappiness with their king, who may be "a saint and a philosopher," but doesn't know how to rule (132). He lacks in authority and political acumen.

Vidura and Kripacharya return and see a crowd throwing stones at Yuyatsu. Vidura goes to help and brings him back. At this moment, the mute soldier whom Yuyatsu had injured in the war, throws a stone at him. Kripacharya snatches a spear to threaten the soldier, but Yuyatsu takes it from him and plunges it into his heart. He staggers offstage and the others go to help him. The guards comment sarcastically on the use of weapons.

Kripacharya is disturbed by what Yuyatsu has done; reflecting on "the ominous footsteps of a coming age" (136). He has been teaching Parikshit,¹⁴ Abhimanyu's son, all these years, but would like to leave now. We learn that Yuyatsu is still alive, and the kind and compassionate Vidura offers to care for him in his hut.

A bright light and smoke appear on the stage. The forest where the elders live is on fire. Old and weak, they cannot run, though Sanjaya tries to help them. In their last moments, they feel regret:

GANDHARI: Sanjaya
let those who have
spent their lives
wandering in darkness
at last die
in the fatal light
of this fire. (141)

Dhritarashtra and Gandhari urge Sanjaya to escape and start walking back towards the fire. Along with Kunti, they perish in the fire. Sanjaya, alone on stage, is in deep



distress when a burning branch falls on his foot. The chorus sings briefly of the reign of the Pandavas, marked by a decline in human values. As if to underline this, the two guards appear with the crown that Yudhishtira has put aside, weary of its weight on his head.

News of strife within the Yadava clan¹⁵ has reached Yudhishtira. He and Vidura recall Gandhari's curse and know that the death of Krishna is near. Yuyutsu's death, after performing the last rites of Dhritarashtra, Gandhari, and Kunti is a further cause for sorrow. Yudhishtira wants to renounce everything and die a slow death in the Himalayas. Vidura reminds him that it would "a sinful and cowardly act," but his reply strips victory of any glory:

YUDHISHTHIRA: And what is this
 victory then?
 Is that not also
 a long and slow act
 of suicide? (143)

The two guards talk about the ill omens all around. Yamaraj has been sighted and Krishna is about to abandon his followers. In the middle of all this hopelessness, the guards feel they are better off, not having to face pain or grief.

Bharati has condensed many events from the *Mahabharata* in this act. Dhritarashtra, Gandhari, and Kunti retired to the forest fifteen years after Yudhishtira's coronation, and died in the forest fire three years later. Krishna is believed to have died thirty-six years after the end of the great war. More important than fidelity to the epic, is the overriding sense of dismay that the playwright creates, by showing these events in quick succession.

Check Your Progress

- i) Why does Yudhishtira feel burdened by victory?
- ii) Describe Dhritarashtra and Gandhari's feelings before they are burnt to death?
- iii) How does Yuyutsu eventually die?
- iv) Comment on the title of Act V: Victory and a Series of Suicides.
- v) Would you agree that Gandhari and Dhritarashtra have committed suicide?

EPILOGUE: Death of the Lord

After the touching invocation to Lord Krishna, the chorus sings of his serene presence, reclining under a tree. Krishna is believed to have died thirty-six years after the end of the war at Kurukshetra, at Bhalka Tirth on the west coast of Gujarat:



CHORUS:

Under the shadow of a peepul tree
 Lord Krishna sat on the cool earth
 calm, silent, still, and at peace.
 His body, dark as the clouds
 seemed a little tired, a little weary
 the last petal on a lotus
 in a garland of flowers. (147-148)

Don't miss the slight suggestion of fatigue in the description. Ashwatthama appears and accuses the chorus of singing false praises. He wants to know why he is condemned to suffer while Krishna, who has slaughtered his own kinsmen, remains unscathed. He is still blind to his own responsibility for his condition. Sanjaya appears, dragging his paralyzed body towards Krishna. He sees Jara, the hunter, take aim and tries to stop him, but cannot. Three sharp notes of a flute are heard and fade away, marking the death of the Lord. Note how Bharati makes brilliant use of sound to mark this tragic moment:

CHORUS: The moment Krishna was killed
 Dvapara yug came to an end
 and on this god-forsaken earth
 Kali yug took its first step. (151)

Ashwatthama, who has witnessed the passing of Krishna, feels his pain dissipate and wonders: "Is this experience/the beginning of faith?" (13). Yuyutsu's spirit appears and ridicules his newfound faith. Disillusioned with his faith and unable to find peace after killing himself, Yuyutsu wonders who will save his followers, if Krishna couldn't even save Parikshit, who died of a snake bite.

At this point, the hunter Jara enters. He tells them that he is the mendicant, whom Ashwatthama killed. To free his soul, Krishna turned him into a hunter; so that Gandhari's curse could be fulfilled. Ashwatthama realizes that his deed was driven by blind vengeance, but now he feels free from pain: "I am condemned/yet free!" (157). He is touched by the divinity on Krishna's face at the moment of death: "a peaceful radiance" (158). In a long passage, the mendicant repeats Krishna's last words, his message of hope:

MENDICANT: At the last moments of his life
 the Lord said to me.



‘Yet there will be others
many others
who shall have
faith in me
and with that faith
in their hearts
find their way
past every difficulty.
They shall build a new life
on the ruins of the old.’ (159)

Though Sanjaya, Ashwatthama, and Yuyutsu still harbour some doubt, the mendicant cries out for others to listen to the last words of Lord Krishna and remain firm in their faith. The chorus sings of the dark age that has descended on earth. Yet, it is possible to tread a moral, righteous path in such times; dharma will give man a sense of purpose and direction.

Check Your Progress

- i) Why is Sanjaya unable to save Krishna?
- ii) Who is Parikshit? What happens to him?
- iii) What are Krishna’s last words to Jara?
- iv) How does Ashwatthama change after witnessing Krishna’s death?

4.5 The Structure of *Andha Yug*

Dharamvir Bharati has chosen the last day of the great war at Kurukshetra for his subject matter, as well as Krishna’s death thirty-six years later. Though the play is based on events from the *Mahabharata*, he has condensed them in many places, omitted some details, and made some changes to the original narrative. In the play, Yuyutsu commits suicide, but in the epic, he stays behind to guide Parikshit, who is crowned king after the Pandavas renounce everything. Ashwatthama kills all of Draupadi’s five sons, mistaking them for the Pandavas. However, in the play, only Shatanik’s death is mentioned as the focus is on the hatred inside Ashwatthama. Deviations from the original epic are intentional.

Bharati’s play concentrates on the defeated in the great war. His aim is to give us a glimpse into the anger, pain and lack of self-awareness in Ashwatthama and Gandhari; and the loss of faith in Yuyutsu. As Dharwadker comments:



The radical, inventive core of the play therefore consists in a three-pronged attack on the Pandavas and Krishna by Gandhari, Ashwatthama, and Yuyutsu, which makes these three characters central to a degree that is unique in modern Indian literature and theatre and, through intense poetic dialogue, presents them as embodiments of extreme states of being. (191)

The play has a structure that is different from the five act plays of western theatre that you must be familiar with. In *Andha Yug*, in addition to the five acts, there is a Prologue and Epilogue: a convention that Bharati borrows from ancient Indian theatre. However, the Interlude after Act III is his own innovation. Though there are frequent changes of location, the acts are not formally divided into scenes. A curtain at the back is moved to show a different location.

Stage props are to be kept at a minimum: maybe a broken chariot wheel or a shattered bow to symbolize ruin. The aim of the playwright is to keep the focus on the words and feelings evoked. Bharati believes that elaborate stage props could distract the audience. *Andha Yug* has been classified as a verse play and the stage directions indicate that the actors should speak their lines in a manner that lies somewhere between poetry and prose.

The play borrows many elements from Indian folk theatre. The *katha gayan* or chorus comprises one male and one female singer. In many respects, it is similar to the chorus in classical Greek theatre. The chorus helps maintain narrative continuity and, by reporting events, it reduces the number of actors required on the stage. It also functions like a moral indicator, through its uninvolved and detached perspective.

Bharati and many other playwrights after him went to the epics and mythology for their plots. They also tried to preserve classical and folk forms of theatre, in a conscious attempt to resist western influences. Known as the ‘back-to-roots movement,’ it aimed to create a distinct identity for contemporary Indian theatre (Awasthi 48). Ritual invocations, dance, miming, music, and a singing chorus are some of the elements of indigenous theatre that have been incorporated in *Andha Yug*.

In the prologue, the people of Hastinapur are described through the metaphor of a cave. At the same time, a dancer mimes the physical posture of a person in a cave. At a critical moment in the play, Ashwatthama is in the forest, searching for a way to avenge his father’s death. On a tree, he sees an owl attack and kill a crow. In the play, this episode is performed by two dancers, wearing the masks of an owl and a crow; with the owl engaged in “a tandava dance of death” (86). Inspired, Ashwatthama also dances with the bloodied feathers of the crow in his hand. The dance foreshadows, more than anything else, the violence about to be unleashed by him.



As with mime and dance; physical movements, gestures and sounds are used to heighten dramatic impact. In Act I, the two guards hear the sounds of a storm and look up:

GUARD 2: No, it's not a thunderstorm!
Look, there are thousands and thousands
of vultures
with their wings
outspread!

(The sound of flapping wings becomes louder as the stage grows darker.) (30)

The mute soldier crawling across the stage is an instance where physicality conveys the intense suffering of the innocents in war. In the Epilogue, Sanjaya drags himself across the stage to try and reach Krishna.

Bharati has made very effective use light in *Andha Yug*. The old mendicant's spectre has light, that forms a web-like pattern on his face and Ashwatthama is bathed in blue light as he plans to kill the Pandavas in their sleep. Lights are dimmed or brightened, in keeping with the mood of the scene.

The most creative aspect of Bharati's stagecraft is his use of sound. It is interesting that Krishna, whose divine presence and teachings form the moral centre of the play, doesn't appear on stage even once. We hear his voice, the bells on his chariot, and his flute. At a moment of crisis in faith, a peacock feather floats on to the stage – a visual reminder of his grace. When Gandhari, in her deep anguish, curses Krishna, all that is visible is his shadow. All these techniques sustain the aura of divinity around him. Like Krishna, Vyasa too doesn't appear on the stage. Only his voice is heard, warning Ashwatthama when he releases his Brahmastra. Balarama's voice is heard, but he doesn't appear on stage. Duryodhana is never shown on stage, nor is his voice heard. His piteous condition is described by Sanjaya, Ashwatthama, and Kripacharya. Sounds of conch shells, chariot wheels, weapons, and thundering horses bring the disquietude of the battlefield on to the stage. The wailing Kaurava widows, and lamentations for the killing of Parikshit establish the pain of the women in the war. Most touching of all, is the manner in which Krishna's death is described:

(The hunter releases his arrow. There is a flash of lighting. Three sharp notes of a flute are heard. As they fade away, Ashwatthama laughs wildly. Sanjaya screams and faints. Darkness.) (151)

The Epilogue gives concrete shape to the play's message, voiced by the mendicant. It is not left to the audience to search for meaning in the play: it is spelt out in clear terms here.



4.6 *Andha Yug* as a Political Allegory

Dharamvir Bharati's play derives its meaning from a specific cultural context, yet it is modern in its perspective on twentieth-century civilization. The pessimism, disillusionment, and nihilism that characterizes most of western literature, written during the first half of the twentieth-century, can be glimpsed in *Andha Yug* as well. No doubt Bharati was familiar with and influenced by modernist literature, which reflected a loss of faith in human values; having witnessed the rise of fascism, two World Wars and the Holocaust. Bharati has written about how our modern society is sliding into meaninglessness (*Manav Mulya* 180). Written a few years after the Partition and the ensuing communal violence, the play is replete with images of suffering. It has the potential to impact even those readers unfamiliar with the *Mahabharata*. The mute soldier whose tongue has been cut off; the thousands of vultures flying over Kurukshetra; the women and children crushed by elephants running in fear from Ashwatthama's arrows, are testimony to the human cost of territorial wars. No reader can miss the striking similarity of the Brahmastra to nuclear weapons. These images will surely find resonance in the pictures of war-ravaged Ukraine, Gaza and Israel flashed across TV screens in the recent past: streets lined with rubble, little children in refugee camps, and women weeping for their lost ones. In a war, there are no winners. In *Andha Yug*, blindness is a constant motif, pointing to the failure of authority and political powers to prevent such suffering.

To depict the human cost of strife, the playwright has focused on the inner struggles of Gandhari, Ashwatthama, and Yuyutsu. Ashwatthama, driven by anger, consciously transforms himself into a beast to avenge his father, Dronacharya's death. It is true that Dronacharya was killed by deceit, but he sided with adharma, out of a sense of obligation. Ashwatthama lacks the fine sense of morality and understanding that would enable him to see his own suffering in perspective. He stoops to the extent of trying to kill an unborn child. Vengeance is a vicious cycle from which it is difficult to escape. His character is a study in the pathology of violence.

Gandhari's visceral outpourings of grief touch the reader's emotional chords, as she rails against Krishna for breaking codes of honourable conduct in the war. Like Dhritarashtra, she is blind to the injustice of her sons. As Bhalla observes, "the voices of the defeated shouting for revenge," drown other voices, like those of Vidura (5). Even Duryodhana, who refused to part with a needlepoint of the land that rightfully belonged to the Pandavas, manages to evoke our pity; as in this description by Kripacharya:

KRIPACHARYA:

Two grim vultures



were watching Duryodhana
from the hollow of a tree.
Jackals and wolves
circled him
hiding behind one bush
or the other
waiting
watching with hungry eyes
hungry eyes
and drooling tongues. (84)

However, suffering is not reserved only for those who were unrighteous. Yuyutsu went against his family to side with the Pandavas, convinced that he was doing his moral duty. In return, he gets contempt from the people of Hastinapur, who attack him with stones. Even the mute soldier refuses to drink water offered by him, and Gandhari has nothing but bitterness for him.

Both the vanquished and the victors suffer. In his only appearance in the play, Yudhishtira is dejected and weary. Victory has brought no joy for him:

YUDHISHTHIRA: What is the cause of my sorrow?
 Though I won the war
 a ferocious war
 full of treachery
 and bloodshed
 and slaughter
 I am alone
 and defeated. (128)

The angst-filled speeches of the characters are mesmerizing, but it is important that we listen to the voices of wisdom as well. Though the depiction of suffering has its desired effect, the voice of Vidura can easily be missed. He is not afraid to chastise Dhritarashtra or Gandhari, reminding them of their blind love for their sons, which clouded their sense of justice.

Although Bharati has identified the loss of values, principles, and reason as characteristic of Kali Yug, the characters and events in the play transcend their specific historical



and mythic contexts to represent modern civilization. On 5th August 1994, a day before the forty-ninth anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima, *Andha Yug* was staged by Ratan Thiyam in Tonga, Japan: an attestation of its continuing relevance in modern times. Though inspired by an ancient epic, the play is surprisingly modern in its anti-war philosophy.

4.7 The Spiritual Context of *Andha Yug*

In an interview, Dharamvir Bharati's wife, Pushpa talks about how he originally ended the play at the point where Gandhari curses Krishna; perhaps convinced that, once the anguish of the defeated had been expressed, his dramatic purpose had been achieved (Sahapedia 27:20-32:35). However, a friend of his, Father Extros, pointed out that the absence of a reaffirmation of faith and spirituality may not be acceptable to his reader. After brooding and fretting over it for a long time, Bharati added the remaining part of the play; to ensure that the reader could find a connection to a centuries-old religious tradition. This anecdote draws our attention to the fact that Bharati himself was overwhelmed by the imagining of overriding grief and loss in *Andha Yug*.

One needs to look beyond the enthralling, poetic expressions of pain; to unravel the play's spiritual and moral core and to find answers to questions that verge on the existential: 'Why do we suffer? Why do the undeserving also suffer?' The events of the play are presented within the traditional Hindu worldview of cosmic time as cyclical. The yugas, as discussed in an earlier section, move along a predictable axis of progressive deterioration in human values. However, even within this preordained framework, individual responsibility has a place. The consequences of moral choices are clearly placed at the door of the human, not divine will. After the death of his sons, Dhritarashtra feels fearful and Vidura admonishes him; reminding him of his refusal to listen to wise counsel. When Gandhari is weeping for Duryodhana, Vidura tells her:

VIDURA:

Only virtuous actions
which man performs
by his own free will
can be his protection
his safety. (119)

Even the divine is not spared censure. Recall Balarama's words to Krishna; expressing his displeasure at his encouraging Bhima to smash Duryodhana's thighs. When Shankara blesses Ashwatthama before his slaughter, it may seem baffling at first, but makes sense



when viewed through the lens of dharma. The Pandavas too broke many ethical codes. Even Krishna accepts Gandhari's curse because he knows that, being a mortal, he is subject to the same karmic laws. He may have established dharma, by guiding the Pandavas to victory, but he has also caused pain to a mother.

Treading the path of righteousness or dharma is not easy and the causal link between goodness and reward is not a certainty. Yuyutsu, half-brother of the Kauravas, sides with the Pandavas in the war. For this, the people of Hastinapur humiliate him and Gandhari, whom he addresses as mother, refuses to acknowledge his respectful gestures. Unable to make sense of this, he falters in his faith. Even Vidura's words cannot soothe him:

VIDURA:
 If you had accepted
 the untruth
 your soul
 would have been
 scarred irredeemably. (75)

He commits suicide and his spectre, that appears in the Epilogue, says that even after witnessing Krishna's death he doesn't feel his faith returning. Even those who took no sides suffer. Sanjaya was neutral in the war and he finds no solace in choosing inaction:

SANJAYA:
 Far removed
 from the field of action
 I have slowly forgotten
 the meaning
 of existence. (155)

Though he is the "upholder/of the absolute Truth," it doesn't shield him from suffering. He too questions his position as a neutral observer.

In the beginning of the play, Gandhari is convinced that "dharma/duty and honour were illusions" and that each side in the war was "inspired by blind self-interest" (37, 38). It is only in a tragic moment, before she and Dhritarashtra walk into the fire, that she accepts responsibility for her conduct.

Ashwatthama's desire for vengeance blinds him to the repercussions of his actions. Angry at the manner in which Dronacharya was treacherously killed, he cites the violation of the rules of war to justify his violent revenge; blind to the larger context of adharma



that the Kauravas stood for. In the midst of these bitter outpourings, it is easy to lose sight of the ethical issues and ask ourselves why Krishna also breaks prescribed codes of conduct. As Bhalla explains, in his introduction to the play:

The sacred, after all, is not required to make sentimental compromises when it comes to restoring the just balance of the world in which we live. In the face of an annihilating power, the sacred may use all the available ruthlessness that it can muster up in order to survive. We may, in our mistaken and fallen world, accuse the sacred of hard-heartedness. But, how else will we sometimes learn that there are limits of *adharma* and *atyachara* beyond which we may not go without inviting the wrath of the sacred? (7)

It is left mainly to Vidura, to gently remind each character of their own responsibility for their suffering. The spectre of the mendicant cries out for others to heed Krishna's last words and keep their faith undiminished. The chorus ends the play with hope for the future. The world may be descending into a dark age, but there is a seed of hope buried in the mind of man:

CHORUS:

That seed is buried
without exception
in each of us
and it grows from day to day
in our lives
as duty
as honour
as freedom
as virtuous conduct. (162)

In the play, you must have noticed that the words 'dharma' and 'adharma' are not translated into English, as no translation can capture the religious connotations. However, it becomes abundantly clear that the word 'dharma' is linked to duty, justice, selflessness, compassion, and righteousness; all of which safeguard one from being pulled into a vortex of dishonesty, selfishness, greed, intolerance, and doubt. The play has a distinct spiritual and moral message, consonant with traditional Hindu philosophy, as elaborated by C. Rajagopalachari:

The *Mahabharata* has moulded the character and civilisation of one of the most numerous of the world's people. How did it fulfil – how is it still continuing to



fulfil – this function? By its gospel of dharma, which like a golden thread runs through all the complex movements in the epic; by its lesson that hatred breeds hatred, that covetousness and violence lead inevitably to ruin, that the only real conquest is in the battle against one's lower nature. (xiii)

As Dhritarashtra realizes, after losing his sons: “there is a truth/that lies beyond the boundaries/of my selfhood” (35). As a counter to this “nightmare of self-enhancement,” the play retains its message of hope for mankind in a “redemptive ethicality,” embodied by Krishna (Bhalla 14). He is presented as the upholder of dharma, detached and dispassionate; his words echoing the essence of his spiritual message in the *Bhagavad Gita*.

Bharati doesn't shy away from establishing Krishna's divinity through surreal means: a floating feather, the sound of bells, or his flute. The ritual invocation in the beginning of the Epilogue is a prayer to Krishna for guidance. If there is an anguished Gandhari railing against him, then there are Vidura and Sanjaya, who address him as 'Lord.' Sanjaya's devotion makes him drag his paralyzed body hundreds of miles for a chance to meet Krishna. Some readers may feel discomfited by the emphasis on the sacred in the play or the unquestioning faith of those who call themselves his devotees, but remember that Krishna also stands for the ethical; which emerges as the guiding principle in our relationships with others. In the Prefatory Note to the play, Bharati writes that the truth underlying the play is the realization that the distinction between the self and others is but a “superficial distinction” (17).

4.8 Summing Up

In this part of your study material, you have read about Dharamvir Bharati's classic play *Andha Yug*. Based on the events of the last day of the war at Kurukshetra, described in the *Mahabharata*, the play, in its depiction of suffering, draws the reader's attention to the inner turmoil, loss of faith, and despair of both: the victorious and the vanquished. Moral equivocation and violence are resorted to by both sides. Bharati views the events of the war through the lens of traditional Hindu cosmology, yet the play is transhistorical: moral decline and ethical decay are characteristics of the twentieth-century as well.

Though the picture of human nature painted in the play is stark, a path to redemption is pointed out, through the mendicant, Vidura, and the chorus. Faith, righteous conduct, compassion, and sympathy for fellow human beings have the power to save us from distress and despair. The universe may be moving towards annihilation, but faith and dharma will guide humans through dark times.



Questions

- (i) Comment on the significance of the title of the play, *Andha Yug*.
- (ii) Discuss Gandhari's character in the play. What change overcomes her at the moment of death?
- (iii) Who is Yuyutsu? Why, according to you, does he commit suicide?
- (iv) Why does Ashwatthama willingly transform himself into a beast?
- (v) Would you agree that *Andha Yug* is a pessimistic play about the consequences of war? Or does it hold out a message of hope for humanity.
- (vi) Discuss the structure of the play in detail.
- (vii) Write in detail about the role of the mendicant in the play.
- (viii) Discuss the significance of Krishna in *Andha Yug*.

NOTES

1. Vidura was King Dhritarashtra's half-brother. His mother was a slave girl, so he was of a lower rank than both Dhritarashtra and Pandu. He lived in a separate hut and ate there, never in the palace. He was an advisor to Dhritarashtra, who depended upon him. Karve observes that Vidura belonged to the class of the *sutas*, who were charioteers and warriors: "Extremely near to the kshatriyas, of the same blood as the kshatriyas, in a position to advise them without fear, they could never be their equals" (68). Vidura is considered one of the most wise and righteous statesmen of his time. Vidura's teachings to Dhritarashtra on the dharma of kings in the *Udyoga Parva* of the *Mahabharata*, are known as *Vidura Niti*.
2. Like Vidura, Sanjaya is also a charioteer and advisor to Dhritarashtra. Sage Vyasa granted him the boon of divine vision, so that he could narrate the events of the battlefield to Dhritarashtra, without prejudice. Sanjaya remained neutral in the great war and told the king everything: the deaths of his commanders and his sons. Devoted to the king, he follows him to the forest.
3. During the war, Krishna notices Arjuna's reluctance to attack his grand-uncle, Bhishma, who is the commander of the Kaurava army. When Bhishma shoots arrows at them, Krishna picks up a chariot-wheel and rushes towards him. Arjuna runs to stop him, and promises to kill Bhishma. What Gandhari believes is Krishna's failure to keep his vow not to pick up arms during the war is, in fact, a deliberate strategy to force Arjuna to act.



4. A *kshatriya* was supposed to follow prescribed rules in the battlefield. Some of these were: not to fight after sunset; not to attack an unarmed soldier, woman, or old person; not to hit the enemy below the navel; not to kill an animal; not to kill a sleeping enemy, and not to spread rumours. All of these are violated during the war.
5. Ashwatthama was the son of Dronacharya, who was the guru of both the Pandavas and the Kauravas. Drona was a devotee of Lord Shiva and blessed with a son after severe penance. Ashwatthama was born with a gem on his forehead, much like the third eye of Shiva. It blessed him with the power to withstand hunger, thirst, and disease.
6. After the fall of Bhishma, on the tenth day of the war, Dronacharya is made commander-in-chief of the Kaurava army. Knowing it would be difficult to defeat him, the Pandavas agree to Krishna's plan. Bhima, on his instructions, kills an elephant named Ashwatthama and announces on the battlefield "Ashwatthama is dead." A dejected Drona goes to Yudhishtira to verify the truth and he replies under his breath: "Maybe it was an elephant or maybe it was a man." In the noise on the battlefield, Drona doesn't hear the second part of the sentence and lays down his arms to sit in meditation, and is beheaded by Dhristadyumna, the twin brother of Draupadi. According to some versions of the epic, Krishna blew his conch shell to prevent Drona from hearing Yudhishtira's reply.
7. Arjuna's young son, Abhimanyu was a skilled and brave warrior. He learnt the art of penetrating the *chakravyuh*, a difficult battle formation, from his father Arjuna, while still in his mother's womb. However, he couldn't hear his father explain how to get out of it as his mother had fallen asleep by then. Though he enters the *chakravyuh*, he is trapped inside and mercilessly killed by several Kaurava warriors, who attack him simultaneously: Duryodhana, Dushasana, Kripacharya, Dronacharya, Kritavarma, Ashwatthama, and Karna. Abhimanyu was just sixteen years old and his death is one of the most tragic events in the *Mahabharata*.
8. Yuyutsu is Dhritarashtra's son from a slave girl. He is one of the few from the Kuru clan to object to their treatment of the Pandavas. When Draupadi is being disrobed, he protests, even as the elders remain silent. In the *Mahabharata*, he is appointed as a supervisor when the Pandavas hand over their kingdom to Parikshit and leave for the Himalayas. However, Bharati, in his play, shows him as committing suicide.
9. Balarama is Krishna's elder brother, who taught the warrior arts to both the Pandavas and Kauravas. When they decide to go to war, Balarama is distressed and chooses to stay neutral. He leaves for a pilgrimage and returns just in time to witness the



outcome of the final duel between Duryodhana and Bhima. He is upset because Bhima breaks the rules and hits Duryodhana below the navel. However, Krishna reminds his brother of the adharma practiced by the eldest Kaurava in his lifetime, which quietens Balarama.

According to myths, Gandhari was fearful for Duryodhana's life after losing ninety-nine of her sons. On the last day of the war, before the final duel with Bhima, she asked him to come to her after bathing, so that she could remove her blindfold for the first time after her wedding, and gaze on his body; turning it into adamant. However, Krishna stops Duryodhana on the way, and tells him that it is not appropriate for a grown man to appear naked before his mother. Duryodhana hurriedly covers his private parts with a banana leaf and Gandhari is dismayed when she gazes on her son, realizing that he will remain vulnerable in that part. During the final duel, Krishna slaps his thigh, in a signal to Bhima, to hit him there with his mace.

10. Uttara is Abhimanyu's wife, who is pregnant when he dies in the battlefield. It is her unborn child that Ashwatthama decides to kill, to avenge his father Drona's death. Ashwatthama has killed all of Draupadi's five sons and he uses his Brahmastra to try to kill her unborn child, in an attempt to wipe out the last heir to the Kuru dynasty.
11. Shatanik is Draupadi's son from Nakula. According to the *Mahabharata*, Ashwatthama killed all her five sons, also known as the *Upapandavas*; mistaking them for the Pandavas in the dark. He then took their severed heads to Duryodhana, who points out that the skulls belong to children. Dismayed at the tragic error, Duryodhana dies. The Pandavas escaped because, the night before, Krishna, suspecting a plot, took them away to a safe place. In other versions of the epic, Ashwatthama doesn't tell Duryodhana about his mistake, so that he can die in peace. However, these details are glossed over in the play. More than fidelity to the epic, Bharati wanted to present the self-destructive nature of anger and vengeance.
12. Krishna knows that Bhishma is destined to die because of a woman. So, Shikhandi, Draupadi's brother, is sent to the battlefield to challenge him. Born a woman, she had changed her gender with a Yaksha. A true *kshatriya* was not supposed to raise his bow against a woman and Bhishma refuses to fight with one born with a woman's body. At that point, Arjuna raises his bow and pierces Bhishma with hundreds of arrows.
13. The Brahmastra is a celestial weapon, created by Lord Brahma to uphold dharma. Only some warriors knew how to use it: such as Bhishma, Arjuna, Ashwatthama, Drona, and Karna. It is a potent weapon, whose power can only be unleashed



through the recitation of special mantras. From the descriptions of the impact of the Brahmastra in ancient Indian literature, it is apparent that the ancients possessed knowledge about how to create and use nuclear weapons. Modern scientists too have noted the similarities.

14. Parikshit is the son of Uttara and Abhimanyu, who is saved by Krishna after Ashwatthama's Brahmastra kills him. He was crowned king by the Pandavas, but was cursed to die of a snake bite. One day, tired after hunting, he had entered Rishi Sameeka's ashram and asked for some water. Deep in meditation, the rishi didn't respond to his request. Angry, the king threw a dead snake around his neck. The rishi's son Shringi saw this and cursed him to die of a snake bite within seven days.
15. Krishna belonged to the clan of the Yadavas and has to kill his kinsmen after a civil war on the beach near Dwarkapuri, similar to the war at Kurukshetra. Soon after Krishna's death, the city is submerged under flood waters.

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“When My Play Was With Thee” “Light, Oh Where Is The Light?” Rabindranath Tagore

Shruti Sareen

Structure

1. *Learning Objectives*
2. *Introduction*
3. *“When My Play was with Thee”- Analysis*
4. *“Light, Oh Where is the Light?”- Analysis*
5. *Tagore’s Idea of God*
6. *Summing Up*

1. Learning Objectives

- i) To understand and analyse the two poems by Tagore in the syllabus
- ii) To understand the main underlying themes of the poems, that is, Tagore’s conception of God and spirituality
- iii) To have a general overview of the poet and the context within which he wrote the poems

2. Introduction

Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) was a Bengali poet, writer, playwright, composer, philosopher, social reformer and painter. He reshaped Bengali literature and music as well as Indian art in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. His father Debendranath Tagore was closely involved with the Brahmo Samaj reformist movement. Brahmo Samaj tried to revive monistic Hinduism based on the *Upanishads*. He was initially home-tutored, and was sent to England for formal education, when he was seventeen. He however, did not complete his studies there. He returned to Bengal and started managing the family estates in Shelaidaha (now in Bangladesh). His interest in social reform was kindled here, because of his close interaction with the common people. He also started a school in Shantiniketan, based on ideals of education to be found in the *Upanishads*.



He was conferred the knighthood in 1915 by King George V, which he renounced in 1919 as a protest against the Jallianwala Bagh bloodbath. In 1913 he became the first non-European recipient of the Nobel Prize in Literature for his “profoundly sensitive, fresh and beautiful” poems in *Gitanjali*. *Gitanjali*, a collection of 156/157 poems was published on 4 August 1910. The poems were based on medieval Indian lyrics of devotion with a common theme of love across most poems. Some poems also narrated a conflict between the desire for materialistic possessions and spiritual longing. The English *Gitanjali*, a collection of 156/157 poems was published on 4 August 1910. The poems were based on medieval Indian lyrics of devotion with a common theme of love across most poems. Some poems also narrated a conflict between the desire for materialistic possessions and spiritual longing. The English version of *Gitanjali* or *Song Offerings* has 103 poems, 53 of which are translations from the original *Gitanjali* in Bengali and 50 other poems from his other works. The translations were done by Tagore himself, and it was first published in 1912 by the India Society in London.

Gitanjali (*Song Offerings*), *Gora* (*Fair-Faced*) and *Ghare-Baire* (*The Home and the World*) are his best-known works. The national anthem of India, “Jana Gana Mana” and Bangladesh’s national anthem, “Amar Shonar Bangla,” are Tagore’s compositions.

3. “When My Play was with Thee”

“WHEN MY play was with thee I never questioned who thou wert. I knew nor shyness nor fear, my life was boisterous.

In the early morning thou wouldst call me from my sleep like my own comrade and lead me running from glade to glade.

On those days I never cared to know the meaning of songs thou sangest to me. Only my voice took up the tunes, and my heart danced in their cadence.

Now, when the playtime is over, what is this sudden sight that is come upon me? The world with eyes bent upon thy feet stands in awe with all its silent stars.”

3.1 Critical Analysis

Line 1: As a child, when God was with him in his play, he never questioned who God is, where he can be found, what he symbolises. Not having any idea who God is, he had neither shyness nor fear of him. He lived an active, playful, boisterous life like any small boy lives. In some sense, in his childhood, even though he did not question or think about who God is, God was still with him, God is there in the play of innocent children. Children have some form of wisdom even without thinking much about it or analysing



it. Perhaps we can even say that children come straight from God and then get corrupted by this world.

Line 2: In the early mornings, God used to wake him up from sleep and call him like a friend and he would joyously run from glade to glade. Here again, the poet talks of his childhood. God comes to him like a friend, God is like his playmate. He has not learnt anything about fear, and awe, and worship of God. God is shown to come in the fresh, early morning, waking him from sleep. This can also be seen in a figurative, metaphorical sense as if God is leading him to some awakening, even though he does not realise it. He meets God in the glade, between the trees in the early morning light. It suggests as if God is to be found somewhere in nature.

Line 3: However, at that time, the poet never bothered to understand the meaning of what God tried to tell him, or reveal to him. God is compared to music. The poet dances to the music, to the songs, without understanding its meaning. His voice took up the tunes, he sang with God, and his heart danced to the tunes, but he never understood, or even tried to understand the meaning.

Line 4: This line is spoken by the poet in an older, adult, mature state. When his youth finishes, then he suddenly realises that the entire world, the entire huge, magnificent world with all its stars is looking in awe at God's feet. God's splendour is so stupendous that the entire universe with all its stars is still gazing at his feet and worshipping him. It cannot even look completely at God, the entire universe is still only at his feet. Such is the awe and wonder that God inspires. Now that he has understood who God actually is, he is overcome with awe and fear. He can no more play with God like his friend as he used to do in childhood.

Check Your Progress

- i) What is his relationship with God as a child?
- ii) Where does he find God at this time?
- iii) Why does he use the image of music to describe God?
- iv) How and why does his relationship with God change during his adult age?

4. "Light, Oh Where is the Light?"

"Light, oh where is the light? Kindle it with the burning fire of desire!

There is the lamp but never a flicker of a flame,-is such thy fate, my heart! Ah, death were better by far for thee!



Misery knocks at thy door, and her message is that thy lord is wakeful, and he calls thee to the love-tryst through the darkness of night.

The sky is overcast with clouds and the rain is ceaseless. I know not what this is that stirs in me, -I know not its meaning.

A moment's flash of lightning drags down a deeper gloom on my sight, and my heart gropes for the path to where the music of the night calls me.

Light, oh where is the light! Kindle it with the burning fire of desire! It thunders and the wind rushes screaming through the void. The night is black as a black stone. Let not the hours pass by in the dark. Kindle the lamp of love with thy life.”

4.1 Critical Analysis

Line 1: The repetition of “light, oh where is the light” creates a sense of urgency. The light is kindled with desire, desire is the strong flame or fire which feeds the light as it grows stronger. Our desire for this light is what makes this light grow. Desire is in any case compared to a strong fire which wants more and more. Now what is this light? ‘Light’ in the poem can refer to many things—it refers to the light within us, our spiritual journey of self-knowledge, self-realisation, and self-awakening which helps illumine our path and shows us the truth. Light is also the outward light of knowledge and education which dispels darkness and ignorance. Light is also love, the hope and desire for love that an emotionally troubled heart harbours. Finally, in the context of pre- Independent India, perhaps we can even see the freedom of the country as the light that is being talked about.

Line 2: The lamp is the human being, or the heart. The lamp is merely a container for the light. Of what use is a lamp which cannot be lit? The light has to be kindled, it has to be awakened within the human being, within his heart. He writes that if the lamp never has any flame, if this is the future of the man, of the heart, then death is better than this existence.

Line 3: Sorrow and misery knock at our door, and yet through this, the message that even our despair brings us is that, God /the Lord calls us for a love-tryst through the darkness of the night. The inner darkness of grief and hopelessness is here externalised through the darkness outside that is the night. Or perhaps even the colonial rule. However, even in the middle of the darkness, our misery /sorrow herself tells us that God is there, calling us for something better.

Line 4: The overcast sky and the unending rain, symbolise the dreariness of life, and the difficulties and adversities that one has to contend with in life. The “sky is overcast with clouds” because it keeps raining endlessly. Not a ray of sunshine can be seen. Thus, this



darkness outside is leading to darkness inside us. The poet does not know what all this means, or what it makes him feel. He does not even know what all this darkness stirs or kindles within him.

Line 5: Yet light and darkness do not have absolute meanings for him. It is not like light is always good and the darkness is always bad. A moment's flash of lightning can submerge him into deeper gloom, as the darkness is all the more stark by comparison. Sometimes we get used to our sorrow, but if we get a brief glimpse of happiness, our everyday hardships and toil seem greater by comparison. Similarly, the night is also not totally bad. He writes that the "music of the night" calls him. Even the darkness has some music within it that calls out to him. In the previous poem, we saw God being compared to music. In Line 3 of this poem, we saw that even misery tells us that God is calling us for something better.

Line 6: He again searches insistently for the light and tells us to "kindle it with the burning fire of desire." There is a repetition of Line 1. There is thunder and strong wind that are screaming through the void, the empty soul of the human. The human soul and spirit is lost in darkness. There is no sight of light, whether spiritual, intellectual, or emotional. Or perhaps even the light of the freedom struggle. The night here is as black as a stone. It is dark, hard, and impenetrable. It has neither music nor beauty. The poet tells us not to while away the hours, not to let the hours go waste in this darkness. He tells us to "kindle the lamp" of love with our life itself, if with nothing else.

Check Your Progress

- i) What is the "light"? What drives our search for it?
- ii) What is the "lamp"? What does he say of a "lamp" without the "light"?
- iii) What do the night and the thunder and the howling winds symbolise? Is there any connection between inner and outer darkness?
- iv) How does he show us something positive even within the darkness? How does he show us that even a flash of lightning can leave us sadder than we were before?
- v) What note does the poem end on? A note of optimism and light, a note of pessimism and sorrow/darkness, a note of desire, a note of the fighting/struggling spirit?

5. Tagore's Idea of God

Tagore had imbibed a feeling of personal piety from his father right from his childhood. In later years he began to lose interest in institutionalized religion and was in search of



a poet's religion. His close contact with nature became a spiritual experience for him. He had yearning for nature rather than inquisitiveness about her. In course of time, he came to subscribe to the pantheistic conception of the universe, i.e., the unseen spirit animates all the objects in the universe. However, he could not be satisfied with a vague God but wanted something more specific. So he visualized a personal God, stirring the soul and directing the inner being of men even as he was universally present. In his discourse on religion, Tagore repeatedly asserts the deep personal bonding with the Almighty. His rejection of conventional ritualistic worship is clearly reflected in his numerous proclamations in various works. In the poem “Fireflies”, he writes: ‘While God waits for his temple to be built of love, men bring stones. I touch God in my song as the hill touches the far-away sea with its waterfall.’ Writing to Mahatma Gandhi in March 1933 Tagore pointed out: “It is needless to say that I do not at all relish the idea of divinity being enclosed in a brick and mortar temple for the special purpose of exploitation by a particular group of people. I strongly believe that it is possible for simple-hearted people to realize the presence of God in the open air, in a surrounding free from all artificial obstruction.... The traditional idea of Godhead and conventional forms of worship hardly lay emphasis upon the moral worth of religious practices; their essential value lies in the conformity to custom which creates in the minds of the worshippers an abstract sense of sanctity and sanction.” (Banerjee, 2018)

Tagore did not hesitate to criticize the social injustice perpetrated in the name of religion. Writing to Mahadev Desai from Santiniketan (4 January 1937) Tagore vindicated his humanism by sternly criticizing the social injustices perpetrated throughout the ages in the name of religion. Much beyond conventional religion and practice of rituals, Tagore asserts the utmost importance in the espousal of the cause of altruism, humanism, love and philanthropy.

6. Summing Up

The two poems discussed above deal with Tagore's connection with the divine—whether he perceives it as nature or as spiritual light/knowledge/personal realisation or epiphany. It is an intensely personal connection, outside the bounds and confines of organised religion. This personal connection with god is also a kind of love. The second poem may also be interpreted in the light of the freedom struggle, keeping the colonial context of the country in mind.



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“The Void” “So Very Far” Muktibodh

Dr. V.P. Sharma

Structure

1. *Learning Objectives*
2. *Introduction*
3. “The Void” - *Analysis*
4. “So Very Far” - *Analysis*
5. *Further Readings*

1. Learning Objectives

- i) To understand and analyse the two poems by Muktibodh in the syllabus
- ii) To understand the main underlying themes of the poems
- iii) To have a general overview of the poet and the context within which he wrote the poems

2. Introduction

Gajanan Madhav Muktibodh (1917-1964) was a poet, essayist, literary and political critic. He is considered a pioneer in modern Hindi poetry. Although, Muktibodh started his writing career when the *Chhayavaad* movement was prevalent, he had serious differences with the manner in which the myths and legends from the Sanskritic tradition were used by them. He believed that contemporary issues could be addressed effectively in poetry, only by bringing about a transformation in the use of myths and legends from the Sanskritic tradition. One of his most lasting and influential works is the poem “Brahmarakshas.”

Muktibodh belongs to the Hindi school of poetry called *pragativad* which had a running battle with another modernist school called *prayogvad*—the two together belonged to what has been called *Nayi Kavita*. Muktibodh was ideologically inclined towards Marxism, and his work revolves around the working class and the dispossessed in general.



Muktibodh's poetry is also addressed to the middle class which knows that its interest lies with the working class, for both of them are being exploited by the capitalists, yet it will not identify itself with the working class because that will require it to give up its privileges-privileges that are the crumbs that the ruling capitalist class throws at it. His middle class protagonist is torn between what he is and what he should be. He is constantly engaged in a dialogue with himself. This self-criticism is the most significant feature of Muktibodh's poetry.

3. "The Void"

"The void inside us
has jaws,
those jaws have carnivorous teeth;
those teeth will chew you up,
those teeth will chew up everyone else.
The dearth inside
is our nature,
habitually angry,
in the dark hollow inside the jaws
there is a pond of blood.
This void is utterly black,
is barbaric, is naked,
disowned, debased,
completely self absorbed.
I scatter it,
give it away,
with fiery words and deeds.
Those who cross my path
find this void
in the wounds
I inflict on them.
They let it grow,
spread it around,



scatter it and give it away
to others,
raising the children of emptiness.
The void is very durable,
it is fertile.
Everywhere it breeds
saws, daggers, sickles,
breeds carnivorous teeth.
That is why,
wherever you look,
there is dancing, jubilation,
death is now giving birth
to brand new children.
Everywhere
there are oversights
with the teeth of saws,
there are heavily armed mistakes:
the world looks at them
and walks on,
rubbing its hands.”

(Translated from Hindi by **Vinay Dharwadker**)

3.1 Critical Analysis

The original title in Hindi is *Shoonya* which has several connotations—zero, nothingness, emptiness. The translation ‘void’ fails to recapture the pungent irony of *shoonya* which is ‘emptiness’ but is brimming over with terrifying jaws and carnivorous teeth and a pond of blood; it is nothingness and yet has the malignant power to spew out death all around.

‘*Shoonya*’ or ‘void’ also plays upon the Indian philosophical concept of emptiness as fullness, as ultimate reality. Muktibodh’s ‘Void’ too has fullness but of a negative kind—instead of being creative it is a frightening reality of violence and corruption and is ever growing, like the Frankenstein’s monster.

The ‘Void’ results from a state of intense self-absorption and an awareness of the meaninglessness of life brought on by the pain of failures, wants and suffering in an



individual's life. It eats him up from within. But it is infectious. Its domain like that of darkness extends everywhere. 'The Void' is a fantasy, which in its wider significance is a metaphor for the corrupt human state itself.

Lines 1-5: Lines 1-5 paint a picture of a terrible monster inside every one of us. It is a void in the sense that it is empty of all positive human attributes of kindness, compassion, love etc. It has fed and grown on corruption and violence, and like Dracula, it scatters it all around. It is all-consuming in its hunger, destroying life, spreading death. It is a void but it is not inert or passive.

Lines 6-14: The paradox of emptiness as fullness continues. But a negative fullness of violence and corruption. The fantasy of the void as a frightening, aggressive presence within us is extended further. 'The dearth inside is our nature' gives an idea of the warping of human spirit by this state of self-absorption. 'Black, barbaric, naked, disowned, debased'. These adjectives characterize the corrupted human spirit itself, for, it's synonymous with the void itself.

Lines 15-26: There is another paradox here. The void is 'completely self-absorbed' yet it exorcises a malignant influence on whomsoever it comes in contact with. The fantasy sucks up more horror as this void enlarges its domain of darkness and emptiness. Like an infectious disease, it creates more voids. Evil breeds more evil. Those that are infected by that diseased void infect others. And thus the terror and darkness of the void spreads further.

Lines 27-26: The evil inside us is far more active, lasting and productive than good. It only generates violence and destroys. But it overpowers us so that we are submerged in it. The void is no longer within us; we are *in* the void, which is present everywhere in all its manifestations—evil, violence, hatred. It becomes a state of being for the whole community. And its members enjoy it. The lines 'death is now giving birth to brand new children' underlines the paradox of life dying, and death thriving: death, not life, is producing children. Life and death have switched roles.

Finally, the poem projects a despairing picture of a spiritual void where wrongs and injustices are not only not challenged but are, in fact, countenanced. 'The Void' in the final analysis is an image of a dehumanized, fascistic society, which are a sum total of the voids that are there in each one of its members.

3.2 As a fantasy

The void is a fantasy that visualizes the individual's state of self-absorption and isolation as a monster that distorts the personality of not only the individual but of all those



he comes in contact with. In *Chand ka Munh Terha Hai*, the volume from which this poem and the other one ‘So Very Far’, have been taken, reality and fantasy merge in his surrealistic images. Muktibodh believes that art emerges from a synthesis of reality and imagination. Muktibodh makes extensive use of fantasy in his poetry because he believes that it helps him project a factual world without having to elaborate it. It excites the imagination and imparts vitality to the literary artefact. With Neruda, he believes that ‘the poet who is not a realist is dead, and the poet who is only a realist is also dead’. In fact, as with Dostoevsky, what people call fantastic and extraordinary is for him the very essence of realism. As it is, Muktibodh does not believe that art is a representation of truth. Literature, he says, gives only a perspective on truth, not truth itself but only, a dimension, a direction and a feeling. Again, it is Neruda who said that all the five senses of the poet should reach out to all the horizons. And it is through fantasy that the poet accomplishes this.

Check Your Progress

- i) Explain how the word ‘void’ does not capture the essence of the Hindi word ‘shoonya’?
- ii) What does the void represent in the poem?
- iii) What type of teeth does the void have?
- iv) Explain with an example how death is personified.
- v) What is the nature of the void?

4. “So Very Far”

“I am so very far from you people,
My fires are so very different from you,
That’s what is poison for you is food for me
Multitudes walk with me in my isolation;
In my loneliness, friendly hands
Of those you despise, but caught
But my troubled soul and held precious there.
And that’s why you rain your blows on me
In public and in private.



(Leaves of our blood-stained epics fly
In our fight.)
I covered myself with failure's trash
Finding heaps on the spiral staircase
Of corruption and cash
And though I 've gone straight
I 'm bitter in what I do, hate
The poison.
For whatever one has one wants something better
To sweep the whole world clean you need a scavenger
And I'm not him.
And though someone inside me roars each day
That no work is unclean if the man be true
The work's still grim.
Beyond the world and its end- products:
Refrigerators, vitamins and radiograms,
There's my famished daughter
In her intestines a gnawing nothing
In her lungs the shame of those who have nothing.
Only suffering imprisoned by the nothings
is true,
All else is unreal, untrue and delusion,
deceit.
The only truth is
A sequence of grief.
I am the split-eared, the underground
wretch
Correcting disorders
Under your Chevrolets and Dodges I
stretch,
Oil-covered, black,
Bowed by your orders."



4.1 Critical Analysis

‘So Very Far’ portrays the moral helplessness of the individual who knows where his place in society is yet does not have the courage to acknowledge it openly.

The speaker in the poem belongs to the underprivileged class of society and when he says he is so very far from them he is talking of his distance from the privileged and the powerful. Yet, ironically, and tragically because he knows this—he has maintained a greater distance from those with whom his real interests lie, those to whom he really belongs and who accept him—the poor and the dispossessed—than from those who have only given him contempt.

The speaker’s inner conflict and self-criticism notwithstanding, he cannot sever his relations with the rich. In many of his poems and short stories, Muktibodh’s protagonist is a member of the middle class and the intelligentsia. As in all avantgarde (progressive-modernist) literature in India, the underlying format of Muktibodh’s poems is dialogic in nature—a dialogue between the middle class and the other sections of society. The sense of helplessness, pain and anguish of the protagonist and his self-criticism are representative of the moral cowardice of the whole middle class. In *Andhere Mein* this self-criticism or the inner conflict finds an external manifestation in the dilemma of the protagonist when he has to decide whether to join a protest rally or not. He does finally resolve his dilemma by joining it. Not so the protagonist of ‘So Very Far’.

In ‘So Very Far’, the speaker learns through his dialogue with the self that he has distanced himself twice—from those who give him only contempt and only those who are eager to give him a ‘friendly hand’: In *Bhavishya Dhara*, the protagonist cannot break his link with the capitalists because he seeks petty comforts and protection from them. But in doing this he is sucking his own blood. In ‘So Very Far’, the speaker begins by confessing that there is nothing common between him and the rich and the powerful. But after all the arguments to himself he finds himself incapable of getting away from ‘under the Dodges or Chevrolets’ of his supposed patrons. He finds himself morally paralyzed. He has only discovered that he is “so very far” from the common people.

The isolation of the speaker in ‘So Very Far’ and the void in the heart of the protagonist in ‘The Void’ are only two different aspects of self-criticism in Muktibodh’s poetry. In fact, to a certain extent, the void is a sequel to the self-imposed isolation of the individual.

Even though he has run straight in life rather than climb up the spiral staircase of ‘corruption and cash’ and in consequence covered himself with failures, he has not been able to join the fight against exploitation. It has only been an isolated individual’s passive protest. And though he has suffered like others of his class—the exploited class—his isolation has only changed the pain of ‘nothing’ (*shoonya*-zero in the original) in his life.



In 'The Void' this 'nothing' has been transformed into a state of self-absorption that is far more terrifying than the passive isolation of 'So Very Far'. This void, the poet tells us, annihilates everything that crosses its path. It grows by swallowing others. In 'So Very Far' on the other hand, 'nothing' symbolizes silent, passive suffering and a sense of meaninglessness of life.

Lines 1-3: The protagonist begins by stating how there is a big social distance between him and the rich and the powerful. His desires, his emotions and his likes and dislikes are so very different from theirs.

Lines 4-11: These lines are a statement of the conflict within his mind. He values the friendship of his people—the common man. And yet he cannot completely identify himself with them and remains lonely. But his association with them brings him the contempt of the capitalist class. The protagonist finds himself in an unenviable situation. He rejects the company and friendship of his own class; he is despised and ridiculed by the upper classes. But this conflict between the two classes is nothing new; it has been there through ages. The reference to epics is significant: the epics describe the fight between right and wrong. And Muktibodh sees the class-conflict as such.

Lines 12-23: The speaker's dilemma continues but his sense of humiliation turns into anguish at his inability to act. He has lived an honest life and willingly chosen failure, over success through 'corruption and cash'. But even though the speaker prefers a meaningful life to a successful life his situation makes him bitter: Not only his failures but also his moral paralysis. He wants to live in better world but does not have the courage to fight for it. The bitterness that these lines speak of is drawn from the poet's own experience in life. In his personal life he faced failures, despair, humiliation and bitterness over and over again. And he finds himself distanced from the common people. A certain sense of meaninglessness in life sometimes overpowers him. But the speaker of 'So Very Far' is not just the alter ego of the poet. He represents the middle class psyche. The poet's introspection and self-criticism begins to give us a peep into the nature of the dilemma of the middle class. He sees the rich and powerful climbing up the crooked staircase of 'corruption and cash' even as he himself runs straight and remains only on ground. The metaphor of 'failure's trash' with which the speaker, alias the poet, covers himself, serves a double purpose: it gives us an idea of a wasted life, it also implies the humiliation that the haves pile upon the have-nots in the form of 'failure's trash'.

In order to clear up the garbage – the poet carries the analogy further – you need a scavenger. To clean up the world of corruption you need a great reformer. But the speaker knows he cannot be one. The symbol of scavenger once again serves a dou-



ble purpose. He is the symbol of the social reformer who would clean up the dirt and dust of society. But why can't the speaker be that social scavenger? Because it means sacrifice of the petty comforts and privileges he enjoys now in his life. But more because 'the work is still grim', that is, unpleasant. A voice inside him – the voice of his conscience – tells him that no work is unclean or unpleasant, but in his state of moral paralysis he will not heed it. The 'scavenger' now implies the lowest of the lowest with whom the speaker must completely identify if he wants to join the fight against social injustice and inequality.

Lines 24-28: And so 'failure's trash' must continue to cover him. In contrast to the luxuries of life that the rich enjoy he must suffer deprivation and hunger like others of his class. Notice that he blames himself more than the exploiters for his plight.

Lines 29-32: 'Nothing' assumes a different meaning here in contrast to its meaning in 'The Void'. It is not the frightful, terrifying presence of the earlier poem. It signifies meaninglessness or emptiness in life. This is the reality, all else is an illusion. The poet here counters the Hindu belief that this temporal world with all its joys and grief is an illusion (*maya*) and only the world of spirit is the reality.

Lines 33-37: The final lines are a stinging indictment of the self and a statement of total moral helplessness. He will continue to lie under the Chevrolets and Dodges of his exploiters which symbolize his abject surrender to his exploiters. His suffering notwithstanding, he cannot identify himself with his own people and fight alongside them against his oppression and theirs. He will not work with his own people because that work is grim; it means losing his petty comforts. But he will continue to work *for* his masters for these comforts and privileges. He realizes he has alienated himself from his own people and there is no bond between him and his masters. In a tone of self-mockery, he calls himself the 'split eared', the yogi who is different from the ordinary people. But it is a difference he has established not by *rising* above them but by debasing himself. He has established not difference but isolation for himself.

Check Your Progress

- i) What is the cause of the speaker's isolation?
- ii) Explain the speaker's dilemma.
- iii) What is the significance of 'Chevrolets and Dodges'?
- iv) What is the cause of the speaker's moral paralysis?



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“I Say unto Waris Shah” Amrita Pritam

Shruti Sareen

Structure

1. *Learning Objectives*
2. *Introduction*
3. *Waris Shah and his Story Heer-Ranjha*
4. *“I Say unto Waris Shah” - Analysis*
5. *Summing Up*
6. *Bibliography*

1. Learning Objectives

- i) To understand and critically analyse the poem by Amrita Pritam
- ii) To understand the themes and the historical and political context underlying the poem
- iii) To understand the literary references and devices used

2. Introduction

Amrita Pritam (1919 –2005) was born in Gujranwala, Punjab. After the partition of India in 1947, she was forced to migrate from Lahore to India. Her body of work constitutes many novels, poetry collections, folk songs, and essays, in both Punjabi and Hindi. In her lifetime she received many awards: the Sahitya Akademi award in 1956 for her poem, *Sunehade*; Bharatiya Jnanapith, in 1982 for *Kagaz Te Canvas* (“The Paper and the Canvas”); the Padma Shri in 1969 and finally, Padma Vibhushan, in 2004.

The poem prescribed for your study is her much acclaimed poem “Ajj Akhan Waris Shah Nu,” (“I Say unto Waris Shah”), an elegy to the 18th-century Punjabi poet, an expression of her anguish over massacres during the partition of India.



3. Waris Shah and His Story Heer-Ranjha

Waris Shah (1722–1798) was an 18th-century Punjabi Sufi poet of the Chishti order, known popularly for his contribution to Punjabi literature. He was born in Jandiala Sher Khan in Punjab, in present-day Pakistan. He is primarily known as the author of *Heer Ranjha*, one of the four most popular tragic romances of the Punjab. The other three are *Mirza Sahiban*, *Sohni Mahiwal* and *Sassi Punnun*.

Heer (Izzat bibi) was an extremely beautiful woman, born into a wealthy Muslim family of and Dheedo Ranjha belonged to the Ranjha tribe of Jatts. They lived in a village by the river Chenab in Punjab. Being his father's favourite son, unlike his brothers who had to toil in the lands, he led a life of ease, playing the flute. After the death of Ranjha's father, Ranjha has a quarrel with his brothers over land, and leaves home. In Waris Shah's version of the epic, Ranjha leaves home because his brothers' wives refused to give and serve him food. Eventually he arrives in Heer's village and falls in love with her. Heer's father offers Ranjha a job, herding his cattle. Heer becomes mesmerized by the way Ranjha plays his flute and eventually falls in love with him. They meet each other secretly for many years until they are caught by Heer's jealous uncle and her parents. Heer is forced by her family and the local priest to marry another man.

Ranjha is left heartbroken. He wanders the countryside alone, until he meets Gorakhnath, the founder of the "Kanphata" (pierced ear) sect of jogis at the Hill of Ascetics located in Punjab. Ranjha becomes a jogi himself, piercing his ears and renouncing the material world. While reciting the name of the Lord, he wanders all over Punjab, eventually finding the village where Heer now lives.

The two return to Heer's village, where Heer's parents agree to their marriage - though some versions of the story state that the parents' agreement is only a deception. On the wedding day, Heer's uncle poisons Heer's food so that the wedding will not take place, in order to punish the girl for her behaviour. Hearing this news, Ranjha rushes to aid Heer, but is too late, as she has already eaten the poison and has died. Heart-broken, Ranjha eats the remaining poisoned food and dies by her side.

Heer and Ranjha are buried in Heer's hometown, Jhang. Love-smitten couples and others often pay visits to their mausoleum.

4. "I Say Unto Waris Shah"

"Today I implore Waris Shah
to speak up from his grave
and turn over a page of the Book of Love.



When a daughter of the fabled Punjab wept
he gave tongue to her silent grief.
Today a million daughters weep
but where is Waris Shah
to give voice to their woes ?
Arise, O friend of the distressed !
See the plight of your Punjab.
Corpses He strewn in the pastures
and the Chenab has turned crimson.

Someone has poured poison
into the waters of the five rivers
and these waters are
now irrigating the land with poison.

In this fertile land have sprouted
Countless poisonous saplings
Scarlet-red has turned the horizon
and sky high has flown the curse.
The poisonous wind,
that passes through every forest,
has changed the bamboo-shoots into cobras.

The cobras mesmerised the gullible people
and bit them again and again
so in no time
the limbs of Punjab turned bluish.
the songs vanished from the streets
and the thread of the spinning-wheel snapped.

The girls fled the trinjan screaming
and the resounding whirr of the spinning-wheel stopped.



Ludden let go the boats
along with the wedding-beds.
The swing has snapped
along with the strong branch of the tree.
The flute,
through which blew the breath of love,
got lost in bewilderment.
The brothers of Ranjha
have forgotten
the art of handling this instrument.
Blood rained on the earth,
it seeped through the graves.
The princesses of the valley
called Love,
now weep in graveyards.
All the villains
now move about
as thieves of love and beauty.
Where shall we seek another Waris Shah?
Today I implore Waris Shah
to speak up from his grave
and turn over a page of the Book of Love.”

4.1 Critical Analysis

Stanza 1: Amrita Pritam had fled to India from Pakistan to escape the horrors of Partition, literally at a moment's notice. She had not even had the time to change the dress she was wearing. She had one red shawl which she tore in half and with which she tried to cover both her children. On reaching India, she sought refuge in Dehradun, but had travelled to Delhi in search of work. It was on her way back, in the train that, reflecting on the horrors of Partition, remembering Waris Shah, she wrote this poem.



Waris Shah here is a symbol of the love which went beyond the boundaries of religion. It symbolises a love which went against the dictates of society, a love where the lovers perished together, neither giving death, nor society, the power to separate them. In the communal violence that ensued after Partition, when brothers, people of the same country, mercilessly killed each other only on the grounds of religion, Amrita Pritam calls out to Waris Shah as a symbol of peace, love, and harmony. She asks him to rise from the grave and to see the condition of his land in the present day. He wrote an entire "book of love" (referring to Heer Ranjha) for the ill-fated lovers who were literally poisoned and could not survive. She asks him to look at the land today where there are thousands of such lovers. She tells him that people need his message today more than ever.

Stanza 2: She asks him to rise from the dead and to see the dead bodies and corpses strewn on the pastures of the Punjab. Blood runs in the Chenab. The same Chenab beside which Ranjha used to live. Some hand has poisoned the waters of the river, and as the waters irrigate the crops, the entire land has become poisoned. Nothing can grow here. The real poison, of course, is in the minds of the people. Venomous weeds have sprouted from this land. This is how much the "red" of the bloodshed has spread. She is trying to show how once the poison is sowed, it never ends. It spreads everywhere and it unleashes a never-ending cycle, which goes on and on.

Stanza 3: The poisoned air has blown into the woods and forests. It has polluted and contaminated the entire environment around for miles. The flute that Ranjha used to play has turned into poisonous snakes. Even the love and joy that the music of the flute spread has now been poisoned. These snakes first stung the charmers like Ranjha, then they bit and stung all that they could find, everything they could see. Now the entire Punjab has become blue with poison. Perhaps the blood which is poisoned now flows like the blue blood in the veins which is impure.

Stanza 4: Song was crushed in every throat. Music, like what Ranjha used to play, is left no more. It has been stamped out by the poison. The spinning wheel represents daily livelihood, it represents the continuity of life itself, like the long continuous thread which makes the cloth. Now, the thread of the spinning wheel is broken and snapped, just like thousands of lives have been torn apart and sundered. The fabric of daily life has been broken and torn. Friends are moving apart from each other. Perhaps the threads and ties connecting friends are now broken like the thread of the spinning wheel. The image of the spinning wheel forms a very Indian metaphor to show the breakage of simple, humdrum Indian life. With the Partition, this Indian way of life is getting sundered.

**Check Your Progress**

- i) What are Heer-Ranjha a symbol of? Why did Amrita Pritam address this poem to Waris Shah?
- ii) How is the title of the poem connected to the Partition theme of the poem?

Stanza 5: There is confusion, panic and chaos everywhere. The boats have lost their moorings and now float rudderless. Human beings are like these boats, they have lost their roots, their anchor, and are suddenly left directionless in life, not knowing where to go to, which place to call home. The swings on the peepul tree which would signify joy, play, recreation have now all crashed into the peepul tree. Even the swings are creating accidents and ruckus. There is only anarchy left now in this place. The image of the peepul tree again is a very Indian image.

Stanza 6: Music is lost in the place where Ranjha's windpipe once trilled its songs of love. All music has vanished. Love has disappeared. There is only noise now. Crashes. Harsh and jarring noise. The flute is lost. Nobody knows where and how to go, to find this music now.

Stanza 7: Blood keeps oozing out and dripping, even from graves. Even after death, there is no peace or escape from bloodshed. The pain and sorrow continues beyond death. Queens cry even in tombs, the way Heer must have wept after her uncle Qaido tricked her to death. Perhaps the poison that has spread is like Qaido's poison, who killed his own niece. Similarly, brothers are killing each other today. Here she writes that it seems like all people have become Qaidos, destroying all love and beauty. Tricking each other, spreading enmity, and killing one's own kith and kin. Where should she find another Waris Shah, she asks, among all these Qaidos? Waris Shah becomes a symbol of love, just as Qaido becomes a symbol of treachery.

Stanza 8: She calls out to Waris Shah to open his grave, come back from death, and to continue the story of Heer-Ranjha, to write one more page in the book of love. Waris Shah who wrote the immortal story of Heer-Ranjha was a Sufi saint and is therefore associated with love and harmony.

Check Your Progress

- i) She uses many metaphors: of the poison spreading in the water, fields and air, of the spinning wheel thread being broken, and of the boat being unmoored from its anchor. What do these signify?
- ii) Why does she connect love with music?
- iii) How does sorrow and violence endure beyond death?
- iv) What does Qaido symbolise? Why have all men become Qaidos today?



5. Summing Up

Amrita Pritam addressed the poem to Waris Shah— seeing him as a poet of love because he wrote about the Punjabi legend of Heer Ranjha, based on inter-religious love. It represents harmony between the communities and this is what Amrita Pritam longs for as she writes the poem in the aftermath of the Partition, witnessing the violence between brothers who have now turned into enemies and foes. She uses a number of literary references and allusions in the poem. Music is seen as a symbol of love here. It is important to note the many images and metaphors she uses in the poem to describe the animosity between the two communities which she bewails; these images are mostly taken from Punjab's own rural and agrarian life.

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**“Dali, Hussain, or Odour of Dream”
“The Land of the Half Humans”
Thangjam Ibopishak**

Shruti Sareen
Dipannita Ghosh

Structure

1. *Learning Objectives*
2. *Introduction*
3. *“Dali, Hussain, or Odour of Dream” - Analysis*
4. *“The Land of the Half-Humans” - Analysis*
5. *Summing Up*
6. *Works Cited*

1. Learning Objectives

- ◆ To understand and critically analyse the poems by Thangjam Ibopishak
- ◆ To understand the themes and the historical and political context behind the poems
- ◆ To understand the literary references and devices used

2. Introduction

Thangjam Ibopishak (born 1948) is one of the foremost poets from Manipur who ushered in a bold new era in Manipuri literature. This was accomplished by the publication of a collection of works titled *Challenge* in 1974, where Ibopishak along with Y. Ibomcha and Ranjit W. named themselves ‘angry young poets.’ This new style of poetry evoked much criticism for its so-called excesses and vulgarity. Ibopishak’s poetry has continued to deal with topical issues which plague the state of Manipur and its people. The issues of social unrest, State corruption and exploitation is expressed in his poetry in a hard-hitting manner. He won a Sahitya Akademi Award for his collection of poetry titled *Bhut Amasung Maikhum* (1997). He also won the Manipur State Kala Akademi Award (1986) amongst other major awards. Even though he began writing poetry from a very early age (his first



collection *Apaiba Thawai* (1969) was published when he was just 21), Ibopishak's style has changed and developed over the course of his life. The three collections of poetry that he has published- apart from the collaboration on *Challenge-are*, *The Wandering Spirit* (*Apaiba Thawai*, 1969); *Hell, Netherworld, Earth* (*Norok, Patal, Prithvi*, 1985) and *The Ghost and the Mask* (*Bhoot Amasung Maikhum*, 1994).

3. “Dali, Hussain, or Odour of Dream”

Shruti Sareen

I

“My uncle from Wangu asked me:
How many bushels of paddy
Have you stored for this season?
I asked my friend Kesho again:
How many kgs of poems have you written for this month?

Write and then tear up, write and then tear up;
A cashier counts old one rupee notes
A rotten, mouldy bundle of notes
One thousand ...
Seven hundred ...
Only eleven ...
Spending one hour two minutes and fifteen seconds.
Then after the final count, washing his hands clean with dettol
He eats up the notes, one by one.

II

True, the poet says:
Leaves do not move without a fleeting wind.
True, I also say:
Even if the wind blows or not, even if it rains or not,
Leaves never move



If there are no leaves
On the bare tree.

III

One knows man's thoughts from his speech
As for the mind's words of a tight-lipped man
One can read them from his eyes;
That is why to conceal my mind
I put on dark glasses;
Again, so that even the glasses cannot read
I keep my two eyes shut.
(Men who close their eyes can be seen inside a lockup
Or inside a sacred temple).

I've never seen fish flying in the sky
But I often saw ducks floating on water.
You say: you are wrong
I say: I am wrong
The Vedas say: 'In Brahma
Lies zero.'
You also say and I too declare: What they call 'you'
Is never me.

IV

Which is more fragrant
The report of guns or the scent of flowers?
The sound of guns lies on the nose,
The odour of flowers on the tips of flowers.
Blind men see colours on voices.

A love letter
A horoscope of my grandfather



A radio which belongs to our mother
A pair of tweezers of my son
Ten bottles of rum flying in air
One brassiere which belongs to my grandmother
A pair of lingams
A bird carrying a bunch of keys in its beak
One whistle
Two butterflies
A cake of soap
A Shakespearean sonnet
A pair of clogs
Tied up by women's hair. (What's left?
Add some of your own).
An egg
Sinks slowly
Slowly, very slowly...
Piercing my sleeping teenage daughter's
Hairless pate.
Then her two ears move lazily.

V

One day, wanting to own a peepal tree
I climbed atop a rich man's tall building, and,
Entering his bathroom, looked for one.
(I like peepal trees very much;
I would like to see every citizen of Imphal
Walking with a small peepal tree
Growing on his head).
Then inside that bathroom
I found my wife leaning:



Half her body, waist above turning into a peepal

Waist below her body without clothes.

I was not surprised

I was not worried

I did not cry.

Girish Karnad,

My wife metamorphosed into your Chelluvi!

How can I claim now

That I like peepal trees?"

3.1 Critical Analysis

"Dali, Hussain, or Odour of Dream, Colour of Wind" by Thangjam Ibopishak Singh is a dream sequence. Images here have multiple meanings, seemingly without coherence. It is like a montage or a collage of images, one piled on top of another. Each idea generates an image and then another idea takes its place. This creates an absurd atmosphere in the poem that somehow depicts the nihilism of the poet's mind. He is simultaneously awake and asleep. There is a significance behind choosing this style. After referring to the political situation of the North East states of India such as Manipur and Nagaland, it becomes clear the poet might be disturbed by the ongoing pandemonium outside. The restlessness of the poet's mind gets reflected in the shifting images of the poem.

Part 1

The narrator's uncle asks him how many bushels of paddy/rice he has stored for the season ahead. The narrator asks his friend Kesho how many kgs of poems he has written for the upcoming month. This seems to suggest that poetry is as essential and necessary for survival as rice.

A cashier counts a bundle of old one-rupee notes. They are rotten and mouldy. There is no use in counting such ancient notes, especially if they are rotten and mouldy. He keeps writing, and then he tears up whatever he writes. This act seems to have no meaning and does not lead to anything productive. He counts absurd figures like one thousand and seven hundred in one-rupee notes. It takes him one hour two minutes and fifteen seconds to do so. The minute exactness of this figure makes the whole activity even more absurd and meaningless. After this, he washes his hands clean with Dettol and eats up the notes, one by one. The stanza gets more and more absurd and senseless as it progresses. Perhaps this represents people's lives in Manipur.



Part 2

The poet-friend of the narrator says that leaves do not move if there is no wind. The wind is energy, a force, an impetus or trigger which makes the leaves move. Whatever the leaves may signify, it is something precious and significant. However, the narrator says that no matter how much wind or rain there is, leaves will not move if there are no leaves in the first place. It is impossible for leaves to move on a bare tree. No matter how much inspiration or force/energy or a stimulus there is for something, the substance is the most important. If there are no leaves, then there is no use of the wind and the rain.

Part 3

One can know a man's thoughts from his speech, and, in the case of tight-lipped men who are cautious and guarded about what they say, their thoughts can be known through their eyes. That is why the narrator wears dark glasses to conceal his thoughts. Moreover, he keeps his eyes shut. This is again senseless because one does not require wearing dark glasses, if one intends to keeping eyes shut. Perhaps he refers to mutual fear and suspicion among people in Manipuri society where people are very discrete about what they say. This is why he needs to wear dark glasses. Perhaps people may exploit him or trick him or make him a victim of some violence if they know his actual thoughts. However, keeping eyes shut can also refer to wilfully keeping oneself blind, wearing blinkers, and not looking at what is happening in the society around them. He says that only two kinds of people need to close their eyes, those in a lockup or prison, and those inside a temple. This is a very telling comment. Those in prison need to close their eyes because they cannot face the horrors of their own reality. People inside a temple however are so drunk on religion that they cannot see anything else. They are wilfully blinkered.

The second stanza in this part is a satire on religion. It moves from imagination—fish flying in the sky, to reality—ducks floating on water. Fish flying in the sky comes directly after the mention of religion in the previous stanza—which shows that religion always talks about fantasy, unreal things. Here the poet mocks people who deviate from reality into imagination. A non-conformist, the poet knows that his ideas will neither be understood nor accepted by the society around him. So he decides to agree with whatever the other person says and admits that he is wrong. ‘In Brahma lies zero’ is of course a fact in the Vedas, but here the poet is cleverly using it in a dual way to expose the hollowness of religion. The last two lines of the stanza stress his nonconformity—at the end, he remains different, he is not like the others. Perhaps that is also why he wants to conceal his thoughts, as seen in the last stanza.

**Check Your Progress**

- i) Why is poetry compared to rice?
- ii) Why does he want to conceal his thoughts? What does this show about Manipuri society?
- iii) How does he satirise religion?

Part 4

He asks what is more fragrant—guns or the scent of flowers? But the nose cannot smell any flowers. The odour of the flowers is only confined to the tips of the flowers. The nose can only feel the guns. But blind men see “colours” in the sound of the guns. Here he contrasts war and peace. But blind men are not able to see the colourful beauty of the flowers, and are only fascinated by guns and bloodshed.

After this, the poet presents us with a long list of images, seemingly unconnected and like an absurd, dream sequence. However, these are the objects which symbolise different facets of the Manipuri life and society. He begins with a love letter. Love letters perhaps exist everywhere but in Manipur, these letters would be written by girls to their lovers who are far away, fighting somewhere. The risk of death is also always imminent. The grandfather’s horoscope shows the desire to fathom their future, their destiny, they only depend on horoscopes for hope now. Among the list of objects is a radio belonging to his mother—this radio is perhaps their only means of communication with the outside world, their only way of getting news of what is happening outside. Ten bottles of rum flying in the air is of course an absurd and fantastical image. But perhaps the only way they are tolerating and surviving their life is being drunk on rum. Alternatively, being high on rum can itself make you delirious and more absurd. He mentions a brassiere belonging to his grandmother and a couple of Shiva-lingams--- both ordinary, everyday household objects, but the juxtaposition of lingams with bras again serves to satirise religion. It does not see religion as being sacred and sacrosanct. A bird carrying a bunch of keys in its beak—perhaps the poet tries to say that the answer, the solution to their problems lies outside in nature. Two butterflies also seem to symbolise the same flight and freedom. A cake of soap perhaps shows the need of the society to be cleansed, while a pair of clogs shows how clogged up society is and in need of cleansing. A Shakespearean sonnet--- the poet feels poetry is as necessary for survival as rice—as we saw in Part 1 of the poem. Women’s hair to tie everything up—he asks the reader to add their own hair. As if everything in society is falling or breaking apart. Perhaps the women are somehow managing to tie up everything with their hair. It suggests that the people are in need of help and support because he asks the reader to add their own hair. The stanza ends with an image



which can be considered absurd or disturbing. Perhaps both describe Manipuri society in different ways. An egg slowly sinks into his sleeping daughter’s head. It seems to cause her no pain or disturbance, she merely twitches her ears in her sleep.

Part 5

Here he ironically tells us that he likes the peepul tree very much. The peepul tree is here being seen as a symbol of religion. He likes it so much that he tries illegal means to gain it. He goes inside the house of a rich man, and inside his bathroom to look for it. Perhaps the poet is trying to ask whether we will find the sacredness or purity of religion in the private lives (symbolised by bathroom) of the rich people. He says he would like to see every citizen of Imphal walking around with a peepul tree in the middle of their head; perhaps this shows that he wants all citizens to be moral, righteous, pious, and religious.

Inside the bathroom, however, he finds something very immoral—he finds his own wife in that other rich man’s bathroom. Half her body, waist upwards, had become religious, turned into a peepul. The lower half was completely naked. Again, this juxtaposition of opposites is meant to satirise. Thereafter, the poet refers to the film “Chelluvi” directed by Girish Karnad. This film was based on a folk tale of Karnataka- ‘A Flowering Tree: A Woman’s Tale’. Chelluvi was a girl who turned into a flowering tree. Like Chelluvi, the poet’s wife also metamorphosed into a peepul tree. Finally, the poet says that his wife, by becoming the peepul tree, had in some sense, become an embodiment of religion. But how can he like religion after this, he asks, after seeing his wife in another man’s bathroom? Thus, he shows that religion is not always moral or good and is therefore not to be chased all the time.

We see metaphors and symbols in every stanza/part of the poem. We see contrasts as in the guns and the flowers, or the brassieres and the shiva-lingam. We see irony in his critique of religion. We see allusion in the reference to Girish Karnad’s film Chelluvi. There are allusions in the title of the poem as well. We see surrealism in the poem—a kind of absurdity in the dream like sequence which, on the surface, seems like nonsense.

Check Your Progress

- i) Why is the poem written in an absurd, dream like sequence? Give examples of the absurd and the irrational from the poem.
- ii) What is the significance of the title? What is the dream, what is the wind? Explain the references to Dali and Hussain.
- iii) How does he satirise religion?



3.2 Significance of the Title

Dali: Dali refers to Salvador Dali, the Surrealist painter in Spain, Europe in the 20th century. Surrealism was a movement in art and literature which sought to release the creative potential of the unconscious mind, for example by the irrational juxtaposition of images. This is something which we definitely see in the poem. The poem also is seen as a dream sequence, the juxtaposition of images by an unconscious mind, which seems irrational and absurd. Salvador Dali's most famous surrealist painting is *The Persistence of Memory*, or *The Soft Watches* which shows clocks as being soft and thin, like let's say clocks made of cloth or paper which are melting away, to show the fluidity of time, that time is not only linear, as is best seen by the title, *The Persistence of Memory*.

Hussain: M.F. Hussain (1915-2011) or Maqbool Fida Hussain was a famous painter from India. His paintings are Cubist in the style of French painter, Pablo Picasso. Hussain is also known as the Picasso of India. Cubism was a revolutionary new way of representing reality—it tries to show reality from multiple different perspectives with the end result that the images become fragmented and abstracted. As Ibopishak tries to show us different aspects of Manipuri society in a dream-like sequence, the images become fragmented and abstract.

Odour of Dream, Colour of Wind: True to the surrealist nature of the poem, this phrase too is seemingly meaningless. Dreams do not have any odour, nor does the wind have any colour. Perhaps the poem is about the poet's dream for his people, and the odour is like that of flowers, as mentioned in Part 4 of the poem. The same stanza also tells us that blind men see colours on voices. These voices referred to are the sounds of guns, the blind men are the power-hungry people fascinated by these guns who see the bright future in them. Perhaps the poet sees colour in the wind, this could mean that he sees colours in nature, but also that he sees colours/hope/promise in the winds of change that are sweeping through Manipur. Part 2 of the poem refers to the wind which is seen as a force of change or revolution.

3.3 Form and Content

The poet is talking of Manipuri society—it seems it has become senseless because of all the violence from both sides. There is no logic and meaning here. Life has become stale, stagnant, and unbearable. We saw Robin Ngangom depicting the same Manipuri society in a very different way in his poem. To depict this meaninglessness in the world around him, Ibopishak has incorporated this meaninglessness into the form of the poem itself, through disconnected images in a dream-like sequence which seem arbitrary or random at first glance and devoid of all rational logic, to depict the irrationality he sees around him



in Manipuri society. These fragmented images depict Manipuri society which seems to be falling apart and needs to be tied and held by a woman's hair. Again, woman is seen as nurturing and giving support for everything to stand together as also seen in Ngangom's poem.

4. “The Land of the Half-Humans”

(Translated from Manipuri by Robin S. Ngangom)

Dipannita Ghosh

“For six months just head without body, six months just body without head, has anyone seen a land inhabited by these people?

No? I have; it's not a folktale; I've not only seen but have been to that land.

For six months to talk and to eat is their job; like a millstone grinding. The following six months Bhima gorging and Shakuni suffering; for the headless body only shitting is its share. The head talks, eats, drinks; just talking, eating, drinking. While the body is working, laboring, shitting; work, labor, shit. To sweat, to be bone-weary. In the land of the half- body.

Do women live in that land? What does the species of women look like?

There are women; there are children. The same goes for women too, half-and-half body. They have long hair like the women of our land. They are big, tall, buxom, broad and well-proportioned. As for clothes, they hang them below the waist. The law of the land does not permit a body hidden by clothes. When the body dwells for six months it is springtime for them. (Since the bodies are headless when the men and the women meet, they are not fastidious). The head-only gives birth within six months. Besides talking and eating the mouths of the women also deliver babies. The women have more attributes than the men do. That is why the women have no teeth. God created them with ingenuity. When the head walks, its two broad, fan like ears, spread wide and it flies like a bird, beating its wings. When they speak, we can comprehend their language; they speak the language of men. But when the headless body speaks, a voice that no stranger can recognize emits from an orifice of the body. This voice is also accompanied by an odor. A land such as this one is in the news; a land much talked about. The moon shines at night; the sun shines in the afternoon. There is no predicament of poverty; dearth of food and clothes is unknown. Some men even surpass Kuber. And the earnings of the body's sweat of six months, the six month-old head eats up with a vengeance.



There are political rights; a government is set up in the land. Democracy functions with total success. An election is held every five years. But for the people in this land there are no names. So for the nameless citizens the nameless representatives govern the land of the half-humans. Because whether to give human names to the head or to the body — no one can decide. A land such as this is very much in the news, a land much talked about.”

4.1 Critical Analysis

The poem begins by giving us an image of a seemingly mythical creature. A creature that has only half an existence:

“For six months just head without body, six months
only body without head....”

The poet goes on to ask if the reader knows of these creatures and their place of residence. Ibopishak strikes a note of direct address to the audience by throwing up this question. He himself answers the question in lieu of the reader, further establishing a conversational tone. He asserts that he has been witness to these strange creatures, and in the same sentence he also asserts that what he is narrating is not a folk-tale.

This initial assertion is very significant. It shows Ibopishak’s awareness of the expectations people may have from Manipuri writing, that a Manipuri text may be expected to talk about folk narratives. He dis-associates his poem from being linked with folk-culture and thus makes us see these half-human creatures as symbolic. He also distances himself from one of the mainstays in the work of many Manipuri poets and their tradition, which is the element of folk and tribal culture. Ibopishak sets out to talk of people inhabiting Manipur as being half-humans. Thus, a political commentary is made evident by the poet and sets the tone for the rest of the poem.

The next stanza is taken up in describing these half-human creatures. Ibopishak tells us what these creatures do for each half of the year by making use of similes. In the six months when only the head exists, the head is seen as doing the tasks we associate with it, that is talking and eating. This head is likened to a millstone grinding, an image that gives us an idea of a repetitive action which is harsh. Following this Ibopishak makes a reference to two epic characters. These are *Bhima* and *Shakuni* from the *Mahabharata*, where the former is shown as indulging in excess consumption while the latter is suffering. The function of the half-human creature in the next six months is explained with an emphasis on defecation. The head-less body suffers, it works and is tired out. The unpleasantness of the body is intentional. It disassociates the half-human creature from any romanticized mythic ideals.



This primal existence is further described when Ibopishak answers his own question about the women of this strange species. He refers to the oppression of women by the State and the gaze of male eyes,

“... As for clothes they hang them
below the waist. A body, hidden by clothes is
not permitted by the law of the land...”.

He describes the six months of the body without the head as their springtime, wherein the bodies copulate indiscriminately. Significantly, he changes the anatomy of women. Women here, give birth through their mouths and have no teeth. After these descriptions, Ibopishak shows more contrasts between the unequal half of the bodies where the head is always better off. The head is enabled to fly, it eats up whatever the body has worked hard to accumulate:

“...and the earnings of the body’s sweat of six months, the six month old head eats up with a vengeance.”

Moreover, the body is voiceless whereas the head only talks and talks. The body emits an odour, this takes us back to the unpleasantness associated with the body that excretes and copulates without thinking, as seen in the previous stanzas. Through these images the poet comments about the state of society where the elites have a position of power and authority and in turn oppress the lower half of society. In the images of the head eating up what the body earns it almost seems as if the elites are sucking away the life blood of the masses.

The last two stanzas of the poem move away from the body itself to the state of the land that these creatures are living in. This description becomes an obvious parody of reality and the biting satire reaches its ultimate pinnacle. Ibopishak says how in this half-human land everybody is exceedingly rich, the government runs well and protects peoples’ rights. It is a land being given widespread attention by the media. The hyperbole and excess employed to describe the state of utopia in this land is a clear criticism by the poet. By stating exactly the opposite of how things actually are, Ibopishak launches a political critique through his poem. In the bizarre landscape that he creates, the final disturbing element is the complete loss of identity of the people.

“But for the people in this land there are no
names. So for the nameless citizens the nameless
deputies govern the land of the half humans. Because
whether to give human names either to the
head or the body- they cannot decide.”



While the half-humans are ‘citizens’, they are not given human status due to their half-dead existence. Ibopishak’s critique comes full circle as he describes the flawed relation between the people and their government.

Check Your Progress

- i) How does the poet symbolize the loss of identity of his people in “The Land of the Half-Humans”?
- ii) What are some instances of Ibopishak’s sarcastic style which amounts to a political critique?

5. Summing Up

We have seen how poetry has been variously utilized by the poets, depending on their place and time in history. This is also reflected in the use of different poetic forms by the poets in keeping with the different issues they deal with. We see the use of the satire form in poetry by Ibopishak to make a political comment and critique. Ibopishak’s works use the satiric form to highlight the plight of the people, through caricatures, irony and parodic utilization of traditional mythic/folk elements by turning them into symbolic representations of the oppression by the authorities. The poems reflect the issues which are relevant in their contemporary society.

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Joseph Macwan: *Angaliyat (The Stepchild)*

Dikshya Samantarai

Structure

1. *Learning Objectives*
2. *Introduction to Dalit Writings*
3. *About the Author*
4. *Introduction to the novel The Stepchild (Angaliyat)*
5. *Gandhian Way of Social Upliftment vs Ambedkarite Way Social Upliftment*
6. *Summary of the novel*
7. *Themes of the Novel*
8. *References and Further Readings*

1. Learning Objectives

After reading this unit, you will be able to:

- ◆ Learn the beginnings of Dalit fiction as a genre and its subsequent evolution in India
- ◆ Know about the origin of caste system and its current status
- ◆ Appreciate Joseph Macwan as one of the prominent regional novelist
- ◆ Gain some basic insights about Macwan's novel *Angaliyat (The Stepchild)* and its inception
- ◆ Familiarise yourself with the social, political and cultural background of the novel
- ◆ Understand the text through chapter-wise summary
- ◆ Critically analyse the themes in *Angaliyat (The Stepchild)*

2. Introduction to Dalit Writings

Dalit literature refers to the literary works produced by members of the Dalit community in India, who have historically been marginalized and discriminated against due to their caste. This genre emerged as a powerful form of expression and resistance against caste-based oppression, providing a voice to the experiences, struggles, and aspirations of the Dalit community. But the definition and existence of Dalit literature is marked by various complexities and challenges.



2.1 Origin of the Caste System

The origin of the caste system in India is a subject of considerable scholarly debate, with various theories proposed regarding its genesis and development. The caste system is a complex social hierarchy that has been a defining feature of Indian society for thousands of years. One of the earliest references to a system resembling caste is found in the ancient Hindu scriptures known as the Vedas, which dates back to around 1500 BCE. The Rigveda, one of the four Vedic texts, mentions in the *Purusha Sukta* (a hymn that describes the cosmic being Purusha) that the four varnas emerged from the various body parts of the *Purusha*: the Brahmins (priests and teachers) from the mouth, the Kshatriyas (warriors and rulers) from the arms, the Vaishyas (traders and agriculturists) from the thighs, and the Shudras (servants and labourers) from the feet (Doniger, 1981).

Another perspective is offered by scholars like Dirks (2001), who argue that the caste system as it is known today was significantly shaped during the colonial period by the British administration. Dirks contends that the British codified and solidified the caste system by using it as a means of social control, mapping and classifying Indian society in a manner that had not been done previously.

It is important to note that the caste system has evolved over time and has been influenced by various socio-political factors. The system has been subject to reform and criticism, particularly in the 20th century with the rise of anti-caste movements and figures like B.R. Ambedkar, who campaigned against caste discrimination and worked towards the emancipation of the Dalits (formerly known as “untouchables”).

Check Your Progress-I

1. What are some of the theories proposed by scholars regarding the origin and development of the caste system in India?
2. What fourfold system does the Rigveda, specifically the *Purusha Sukta*, propose that resembles caste in ancient Hindu scriptures?
3. How has the caste system evolved over time, and what socio-political factors have influenced its development and transformation?

2.2 Origin of the Term ‘Dalit’

In narratives depicting the struggles for dignity and the fight against caste-based inequalities in India, the term “Dalit” has become a prevalent descriptor for the erstwhile untouchables. The transformation of the term took a significant turn with the emergence of the Dalit Panthers’ movement in the 1970s, imbuing it with a radical redefinition of



self-identification and symbolising a newfound oppositional consciousness. K Satyanarayana and Ramanarayan S. Rawat have opined that while the Congress Party and several other organizations, inspired by Gandhi, continued to endorse the term “Harijan” (children of god) to refer to these groups, a pivotal shift happened in the 1970s with the widespread adoption of the term “Dalit” in academic discourse. This shift was propelled by Dalit activists and writers, particularly within the vernacular literary sphere, signifying a deliberate move away from the paternalistic connotations associated with “Harijan.” Since then, “Dalit” has become the preferred and widely accepted term in academic writings, reflecting the agency and assertiveness of the Dalit community in shaping their own narrative and reclaiming their identity.

2.3 Socio-Political Focus

Dalit literature, with its robust socio-political focus, actively addresses issues related to caste discrimination, untouchability, social inequality, and economic disparity. Positioned as a powerful tool for social transformation, it serves to challenge existing power structures, functioning as a catalyst for dismantling oppressive social systems. According to Gail Omvedt (2009), Dalit literature is not merely a reflection of social issues but a dynamic means of resistance and assertion. It plays a pivotal role in empowering Dalits to reclaim their identity, fostering a profound sense of pride and unity within the community. In doing so, it contributes significantly to broader social movements aimed at fostering a more just and egalitarian society.

The post-colonial era in India witnessed a surge in social justice movements, with Dalit literature emerging as an integral component of these struggles. Scholars like Gail Omvedt, as highlighted in her book *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution* (2009), assert that this period provided a platform for marginalized voices to articulate grievances and demand justice. Dalit writers played a crucial role in expressing the aspirations of the Dalit community within the broader context of social reform. Figures like B.R. Ambedkar, not only a political leader but also a prolific writer, laid the intellectual groundwork for the Dalit movement in post-colonial India through influential works such as “Annihilation of Caste.” Understanding the intersection of politics and literature becomes crucial in comprehending the pursuit of social justice during this period.

In the constitutional framework of India, enacted in 1950, significant steps were taken to abolish untouchability and promote equality among citizens. Affirmative action policies, including reservations, were implemented to uplift marginalized communities, including Dalits. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, a principal architect of the Constitution, played a pivotal role in articulating the need for constitutional safeguards to protect the rights of



marginalized communities. His contributions, such as drafting Article 17 that abolished untouchability, are integral to understanding the constitutional framework. Dalit literature delves into the realities of reservations, examining both their successes and challenges. Writers like Bama, in her work “Karukku,” and K. Satyanarayana, in his essays on Dalit literature, explore the complex effects of reservations on Dalit lives, education, and social mobility. The writings of Dalit authors consistently articulate the pressing need for broader social transformation.

Check Your Progress-II

1. How is the term “Harijan” different from “Dalit,” and why did the latter become widely accepted in the 1970s?
2. How does Dalit literature address socio-political issues, and what role does it play in challenging existing power structures?
3. Summarize the consistent message conveyed by Dalit authors regarding the need for broader social transformation and the pressing issues faced by the Dalit community.

3. About the Author

Joseph Macwan was a prominent Gujarati author, known for his significant contributions to Gujarati literature. Born on July 27, 1930, in Anand district, Gujarat, India, Macwan’s literary works often reflect the socio-political realities of his time, particularly the lives and struggles of the Dalit community. His writing is marked by a deep empathy and a strong narrative voice that brought to light the experiences of marginalized groups in Indian society. Macwan’s most famous novel, *Angaliyat* (1980), is considered a landmark in Gujarati literature for its poignant portrayal of the Dalit experience. The novel was later translated into English as *The Stepchild* by Rita Kothari in 2004 and received widespread acclaim for its powerful storytelling and social commentary. Macwan’s contributions to literature have been recognized with several awards, including the Sahitya Akademi Award, which he received in 1989 for *Angaliyat*. His work remains an essential part of the Gujarati literary canon, offering insights into the complexities of caste and community in India.

4. Introduction to the Novel *The Stepchild (Angaliyat)*

The Stepchild by Joseph Macwan narrates the story of the Vankars, a weaver community of Dalits, in Ratnapaar, Gujarat, from 1930s-1960s. *Angaliyat*, encapsulates the enduring



divide between the core and periphery within the realms of family and society in Gujarati culture. Stemming from the mother's remarriage, the child enters a new household while holding her mother's finger (Angali). In a conventional patriarchal setting, such a child would be pushed to the margins. Macwan expands this metaphor to encompass the entire Dalit community in the narrative. In a society where a woman's second marriage is deemed a social taboo, castes and communities permitting such unions may be labelled as either 'backward' or 'excluded.' Their community bears the brunt of constant shame and ostracism due to the Patels who belong to a higher caste and hold considerable economic and political power in the community. The novel's main characters are Teeha, Methi, and Valji, who share an extraordinary bond. Their love for each other is selfless and pure. Teeha and Methi's romantic love transcends into a platonic love that prioritizes their social cause over their desires. The author also introduces other major and minor characters from the Vankar community, such as the philosophical Bhavaankaka, the tender Kanku, the gentle Dano, and the noble Gokal, to showcase the community's integrity and high ethics. The story presents Teeha, Valji, and Methi as socially committed protagonists who stand firm against the caste system's injustices, representing modern India's socially conscious citizens.

4.1 Socio-Political Background of the Novel

The literary language used in Gujarati was distinguishable from the spoken language. Several complicated factors are usually involved in establishing any language as the official identifier of a particular region in India. Modern Gujarati language also went through such a process of evolution. Literature that was being written in the modern phase of the Gujarati language (1850- early 1900s) was involved in solidifying the position of a decorated and ornamental Gujarati language. The works of literature that made it to the mainstream discussion in the 20th century also had to be written in the established language which was considered as aesthetically pleasing. Consequently, Dalit literature was often dismissed as excessively unrefined and unsophisticated for the refined sensibilities of the Gujarati literary connoisseurs. However, this pervasive perception underwent a significant transformation with the publication of *Angaliyat*. This particular piece of literature succeeded in transcending the entrenched barriers and bridged the gap between the marginalized Dalit voices and the elite circles of Gujarati literature. It was ultimately embraced by these elitist literary figures, who lauded it as an authentic and poignant portrayal of the struggles and issues faced by the Dalit community. These issues had long been marginalized and overlooked, failing to find a place within the echelons of mainstream literary discourse.

Achyut Yagnik, in his introductory analysis of the novel (2012), says that the emergence of *Angaliyat* coincided with a burgeoning caste consciousness across India. During



the 1940s and 1950s, Gujarati literature, akin to other regional literatures, was primarily engaged with social ideals and maintained a non-confrontational approach. The literary scene transitioned in the 1960s towards introspection and individualism, which, coupled with a lack of literary activism, stifled the development of Dalit literature in Gujarat. However, the landscape shifted dramatically following the nationwide anti-reservation protests of 1981, which catalysed the recognition and integration of Gujarati Dalit writers into the mainstream literary canon.

The caste system in India is deeply entrenched, exhibiting regional variations in its structure. In Gujarat, the Vankar community, traditionally weavers, is classified under the category of Scheduled Castes. With the advent of textile mills and the consequent urban migration, this community emerged as an economically and socially robust Dalit group in urban spaces. Nevertheless, they continue to encounter persistent discrimination, both overt and covert. In rural spaces, Macwan, identifying himself as a Christian Dalit, has provided an exposition on his community in relation to Hindu Vankar families.

Macwan's novel is situated in the region known as Charotar, which is distinguished by its exceptionally fertile land. This particular area witnessed the transformative impact of modernization during the 1860s, a period marked by the significant arrival of railway systems. In such rural localities, the emergence of textile manufacturing facilities had consequences that were not favourable to the indigenous Vankar population. The Vankars were confronted with the prospect of losing their traditional means of subsistence, alongside an exacerbation of their social and economic marginalization. On the other hand, the agrarian community referred to as the Kanbi, capitalized on the opportunities presented by the nascent modernization efforts. This economic advantage enabled them to amass substantial profits, which in turn facilitated their ascent to become the influential and dominant Patidars, a community wielding considerable power and influence within the social hierarchy.

Check Your Progress-III

1. Who is Joseph Macwan, and what is his significance in Gujarati literature?
2. Explain the importance of Macwan's novel *The Stepchild (Angaliyat)* (1980) in the context of Gujarati literature and its impact on the portrayal of the Dalit experience.
3. How did *The Stepchild* contribute to bridging the gap between marginalized Dalit voices and the elite circles of Gujarati literature?
4. Describe the geographical setting of Macwan's literary work and its historical context.



4.2 Cultural Background: Fighting the Social Stigma

Achyut Yagnik (2012) has pointed out four principal strategies that the Dalit community in the state of Gujarat were actively employing to enhance and uplift their social position throughout the twentieth century, a period marked by a burgeoning awareness and critical examination of the caste hierarchy.

These strategies included:

- I. Actively engaging with and seeking the support of traditional caste-based governing bodies, known as caste councils, coupled with the strategic alteration of their caste names, which was perceived as a method to elevate their status, symbolically and practically, within the rigid caste structure.
- II. Embracing conversion to Christianity, which was seen as an avenue to escape the oppressive shackles of the caste system. The Christian faith offered an alternative social framework that did not traditionally adhere to the caste distinctions prevalent in Hindu society.
- III. Endeavouring to achieve social betterment through active participation in political movements that were aimed at societal reform; movements that were notably championed by Mahatma Gandhi. A quintessential example of this was the involvement of Dalit youths in the broader Indian freedom struggle, which sought to dismantle not only the yoke of British colonial rule but also the internal social inequalities that had long plagued Indian society.
- IV. Cultivating a robust sense of self-identity and self-respect through a deliberate and assertive stance, a movement that was vigorously promoted by Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar. Dr. Ambedkar's advocacy was centred on empowering the Dalits to recognize and assert their inherent human dignity and rights, thereby challenging and seeking to reform the systemic discrimination embedded within the social fabric.

The Vankar community in the Charotar region turned to mass conversions, which weakened the traditional caste councils that fought for representation and social justice in rural communities. This weakening is highlighted in the novel when the community fails to show solidarity in the face of the adversity that arises due to Teeha's actions.

5. Gandhian Way of Social Upliftment vs Ambedkarite Way Social Upliftment

Mahatma Gandhi was a strong proponent of integrating the Dalits and other marginalized groups into the Hindu society. He believed that the existing caste system was oppressive



and unjust, and that the upper-caste Hindus needed to transform themselves and accept the marginalized communities in a non-violent manner. Gandhi's approach to social reform was rooted in his philosophy of ahimsa (non-violence) and satyagraha (truth force), which he believed were the most effective means of bringing about social and political change. The Indian National Congress, the political party that Gandhi was associated with, used his integrationist approach to gain support for their caste-based electoral politics. However, this approach was not without its critics. Many argued that it perpetuated the existing caste system and did not address the root causes of discrimination and inequality faced by Dalits and other marginalized communities.

On the other hand, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, an Indian jurist, economist, and social reformer, insisted on asserting the self-identity of the marginalized communities through whatever means necessary. He believed that the caste system was deeply ingrained in Indian society, and that the only way to break free from it was to reject it completely and assert the identity of the oppressed. Ambedkar's approach to social reform was rooted in his belief that political power was the key to social and economic empowerment of the marginalized communities.

Check Your Progress-IV

1. What were the four principal strategies employed by the Dalit community in Gujarat during the twentieth century to enhance their societal position, as outlined by Achyut Yagnik?
2. Contrast the Gandhian way of social upliftment with the Ambedkarite way of social upliftment. What were the key differences in their approaches to addressing the issues of caste discrimination and inequality faced by Dalits?
3. Why did Gandhi's critics believe that his integrationist approach perpetuated the existing caste system without addressing root causes of discrimination?

6. Summary of the Novel

Chapters 1-5

The opening chapter draws us into the deep connection between Valji and Teeha, who are as close as two people can be and both reside in the village Ratnapar. Although Valji is married to Kanku, he is concerned about Teeha's prospects for marriage. Despite their open communication, Teeha remains elusive when it comes to discussions of marriage. Together, Valji and Teeha spend hours each day weaving, creating garments that sell well and contribute to their livelihood. Teeha, a successful and respected businessman without



vices, is considered an excellent match. Yet, despite efforts by Vala and Bhavanakaka, no one has been able to persuade him to marry.

In the second chapter of the story, Teeho and Valji, instead of going to the city to auction their clothes as they usually do, decide to travel to the nearby village of Shilapar. On their way, they come across a Thakore who informs them about the wicked nature of the Patels and then offers to help them by carrying as their bundles on his cart. However, he does not want his cart or himself to be defiled by the mere touch of the Dalits. So he instructs Teeho and Valji to walk behind him. Macwan observes “you could accommodate the woven cloth in the cart but not the weavers themselves. They were impure!” (Macwan, 9). Teeha’s craftsmanship was famous across the neighbouring towns and villages and he knew his worth. He was not someone who could be overpowered, his self-identity and valour were his strengths and he was not afraid to use it.

The third chapter shows us the conflict that will alter the fates of the characters of the novel forever. While the auction was going on, Teeho witnessed a group of upper-caste Hindu men violating Methi’s dignity, a girl from the Vankar community who belonged to Shilapar. Nanji, a young Patel, spots Methi carrying a water vessel atop her head. He hurls a rock towards the vessel, drenching her thoroughly. As she objects vocally, one of the individuals labels her promiscuous. “Their eyes roved over the woman’s nipples visible through her wet blouse. Flustered under their lascivious gaze she re-adjusted her wet pallav across her chest”.

In chapters 4 and 5 we see Teeho’s immediate objection being met with universal disapproval by the villagers. Individuals from his caste were among those who criticize his response. They admonish him for engaging in conflict with the Patidars, who hold significant power in the region. The Patels block all the exits from the village, but Teeha and Valji plan their escape with quick wit. They manage to escape, with some theatrical manoeuvres, and reach Ratnapar safely.

Chapters 6-10

The 6th chapter starts with the Patels ruining Heera Khana and Motibhai’s lands in Shilapar because they gave shelter to Teeha and Valji. They threaten the Vankar community in their area and order them to avoid Heera and Moti’s family or face problems and lose access to clean water. Valji learns about Teeha’s love for Methi and why he stood up for her and went to the auction instead of the city. Methi agrees to marry Teeha, but their different home districts and Teeha’s actions complicate things. Valji is trying hard to find a way to have Methi as his sister-in-law. The Patels, seeking revenge, reach out to Ranchodji Dehlavala, a Patel from Ratnapar, for support. However, Ranchodji tells them about a man known as Master, a smart teacher who could cause issues for the Patels by reaching out to the Congress and the British Government if they did anything illegal.



The Patels keep causing trouble for the Vankar community in Shilapar and are determined to retaliate against Teeha. They discover that Methi was married as a child to Chunthi, a drunkard and gambler from the neighboring village of Keradia. Nanji, the son of Meghji Patel, and his friends think it would be better to bring Chuntho back to Methi rather than harm her. At the same time, Dehlavala was plotting to have Teeha and Valji kicked out of the village. Following Bhavanakaka's advice, Teeha and Valji go to the town to ask for help from the Master. In chapter 8, the Master, Teeha, and Valji meet with the collector, who is a Saheb, and they receive a positive response. The next morning, they go to the police station and file complaints against the Patels of Shilapar. Nanji and Manji are taken to the police station, and Methi also files a complaint against them. Although the young men of the Vankar community in Ratnapar are happy about this victory, the rest of the community is anxious about what would happen next. They knew that once the Patels were released from jail, they would make life very difficult for them, both economically and socially. In chapter nine, Bhavanakaka travels to Shilapar to try to persuade Heera Khanna and Moti to agree to Methi and Teeha's marriage. Bhavanakaka was known in the surrounding villages as someone who was trustworthy, wise, and reliable. However, when he couldn't convince Heera Khanna and Motibhai, it was a letdown for everyone. As Bhavanakaka was about to leave Shilapar with no hope for Teeha and Methi's marriage, Methi approached him. She said she would wait for Teeha or someone else to rescue her from her village at noon on the next full moon day. In chapter 10, Bhavanakaka tells Valji about Methi's difficult situation. The Patels pressurise Chuntho to renew his marriage vows with her. The village leader of Shilapar had banned Teeha from entering the village, so marrying Methi was impossible for Heera. Bhavanakaka also shared Methi's risky plan to be taken away, which was considered a sin. Meanwhile, Dana, Valji's cousin, saw Dehlavala leaving Ramlo's house. Dana now knows that the rumours about Ramlo's wife and Dehlavala are true. Dehlavala gives him a ring and asks him to visit someday to request a favour in exchange for his silence about the affair.

Check Your Progress-V

1. What do Teeha and Valji go to Shilapar for?
2. Describe the pivotal event in the third chapter that alters the fates of the novel's characters.
3. How does the conflict with the Patels escalate, and what steps do Teeha and Valji take to seek justice?
4. Analyse the role of Master, the collector, and the police station in chapters 6-10.



Chapters 11-15

Valji ponders over Bhavanakaka's suggestion to abduct Methi, seeing it as the only option left. He often hesitated to make major decisions, usually depending on Teeha, Kanku, and Bhavanakaka for guidance. However, in Methi's case, he had to make up his own mind, which led him to doubt his own family background. Valji was the son of Bijal's second wife, Monghi, who had been married for a brief period before returning to her family shortly after. Bilal and Monghi wed a month following her divorce, and Valji was born seven months later. This timeline made people question whether Valji was truly Bilal's son. They labelled him an *Angaliyat*, a stepchild of Bijal. This label has always been a sensitive issue for Valji.

Dana and Valji needed Gola's car to save Methi, but Gola refused to lend it. So, Dana goes to Dehlavala to call in the favour he was owed. The Sheth agreed to help and gave Dana a written note to show Gola. The note surprised Gola. Neither Valji nor Dana could understand it, and they start worrying about what it said. Despite their doubts, they go ahead with their plan to rescue Methi. The note was actually for Meghji and Nanji, who were excited about it. Gola's real task was to help them kidnap Methi and take her to Chunthia as part of their plan to get back at Teeha.

On the day it happened, Dana and Valji were waiting for Gola, but their worst fears materialized when Gola sped past them. Nanji and Manji probably thought they had eluded Dana and Valji. Determined to protect Methi, Valji sprinted across the fields, leaving Dana behind, aiming for the car. Methi, already in the car, realizes that Manji and Nanji had kidnapped her. Khuslo Kont is also there, revealing their scheme to her. Methi felt shocked and powerless. Valji manages to latch onto the moving car, climbing onto the roof to stop them. He tried to break in by kicking at Gola. To shake Valji off, Gola drives under low-hanging banyan tree branches. A branch struck Valji's head, and he tumbled to the ground, his life slipping away. Valji dies.

Valji's tragic end leads to a police inquiry. After Dana gave his account, the police took Gola's car, detained Manji and Nanji, and set out to rescue Methi from Keradia. Khuslo Kont, a sly old man, is publicly shamed by the police and arrested. Valji's bravery became widely known, symbolizing the community's fight. Valji died heroically saving Methi from her kidnappers. The police caught and punished his killers in front of the Vankars. Valji's wife, Kanku, proudly called him a warrior. Grieving Valji's loss and seeking justice, the Dalits armed themselves and attacked the Patels of Ratnapar village, causing fear among the upper-caste Hindus and sparking a major uprising. At a political meeting, the Thakores claimed that Dehlavala's support for the Congress and the independence movement led to a conspiracy against him by the Vankars, influenced by the British. Another speaker



accused the untouchables of rebelling under the priests' influence. The Thakores were found to be in alliance with the Patels.

Kanku remains drowned in her sorrow, showing no signs of recovery even as several months elapse. Teeha harbours a sense of culpability regarding the events that befell Valji and consequently resolves to terminate any association with Shilapar, effectively extinguishing all potentialities of a future alliance with Methi.

Chapters 16-20

Kanku is on the mend, and Dana often stayed at her place to lend a hand with daily tasks. Jaggu, her son with Valji, spent his time with Teeha. Kanku worried that Dana's regular visits might stir up gossip. She feared her reputation could be at risk and wanted to prevent that. However, when she discussed marriage with them, she discovered they had chosen to remain single to care for her without the added responsibilities of married life. Typically, their community expects a widow to either remarry or move back to her family home. She observes, "These two were on their way to becoming ascetics for her sake." (Macwan 120)

Teeha suggests that Dana marry Kanku to preserve her reputation. Dana is enraged by Teeha's absurd proposal, as he holds Kanku in high regard. However, he eventually calms down when he realizes that Kanku is open to the idea. Kanku had previously experienced a period of intense grief, and she understood that marrying Dana was the only way to put an end to the rumours. She also reflected on the awkward sexual encounters that had occurred between her and Dana, and how her body had responded even though her mind was still consumed by grief.

The political climate was changing, and Dehlavala seized the opportunity. He is cleared of charges, and he joins the nationalist movement, and builds ties with the Congress party. He becomes a local politician with considerable influence. His goal is to appoint Meghji Patel as the leader of Shilapar to undermine Teeha and force Methi back to Chunthia. With the British District Collector on leave and a local replacing him, Dehlavala smoothed the way for Meghji Patel's appointment and had him pressure the Vankars to agree to Heera Khana's daughter's marriage with Chunthia.

In the meanwhile, Kanku and Dana's wedding is set. With life calming down, Teeha considers marrying Methi. Dana visits Shilapar to finalize plans with Heera Khana but is shocked to learn that Methi had been hastily married off to Chunthia in Keradiya. This is achieved through a deceitful letter produced by Heerbhai and Motibhai, claiming that Teeha chose Monghi. Dana suspects that Ramlo or Bhiklo, resentful community members, have orchestrated this under Dehlavala's influence. Dana feels betrayed and despondent.



Politics of revenge has Methi trapped in a marriage with Chunthia, a gambler and an alcoholic. Despite that, Methi carries out her marital duties, cooks, cleans, and tries to reform Chunthia. She is also a well-respected midwife. After getting pregnant, she leaves for her maternal village unwillingly. Chunthia relapses into his bad habits in her absence. Upon her return with her newborn, Chunthia assaults them, and in self-defence, Methi strikes him. Fearing that she had killed him, Methi flees. While contemplating suicide, Methi is rescued by Teeha, her true love.

Check Your Progress-VI

1. What internal conflict does Valji face and why does his lineage bother him?
2. Explain the events leading to Valji's tragic end and the subsequent police inquiry. How does Valji's bravery become symbolic for the Vankar community?
3. How does Kanku cope with grief, and why does Teeha decide to sever ties with Shilapar, impacting any future alliance with Methi?
4. How does Dehlavala manipulate the political situation?
5. What was Methi's predicament?
6. Examine the themes of asceticism and societal expectations in the context of Teeha and Dana's decision to remain single for Kanku's sake. How does this choice challenge conventional norms within the community?

Chapters 21-25

Methi narrates everything that had transpired within the last few days and why she had decided to end her life to Teeha. Teeha, on the other hand, had been feeling responsible for Methi's predicament. They go back to the village. Teeha sends Jeevan to inquire about the status at Keradiya and he returns with the news that Chunthia was alive and was keeping mum regarding the whole incident. The police were not going to be a problem. Kanku welcomes Methi with open arms while Dana wonders why "Teeha had to bring someone else's leftovers" (Macwan 176). As Methi did not have anywhere to go, she decides to stay in a separate house and serve Teeha as she owed her life to him. But technically, she couldn't marry him because she wasn't either a widow or a divorcee. She knows her status would incite gossip in the community but with Kanku's support she decides to go ahead with the plan for now.



Methi, despite her dedication to Teeha, keeps her distance. However, her reputation comes under a cloud until her skills as a midwife neutralises it and she earns her respect. Jeevan clashes with Ramlo, Dehlavala's driver, and flees to avoid persecution. To prevent Dehlavala from having Jeevan's arrested, Dana and Teeha seek the Master's aid, but are denied by the authorities. The Master criticizes the new self-rule: "...These are all signs of so called Swaraj for us.....Even I don't want foreign rule to last, for us it will be like the thugs are gone, and left the robbers behind" (199). He reports Dehlavala's corrupt politics to Gandhi's ashram prompting an investigation into his exploitation of the disadvantaged.

Dehlavala evades prosecution by fasting with Gandhi's photos and taking juice from Jeevan, thereby by portraying himself as a reformed man. He even convinces the Congress party of his transformation. He rises to prominence, moves to Bombay, and leads the flag hoisting in Ratnapar after independence, announcing the end of untouchability. The community sympathizes with Methi and Teeha, a couple who couldn't unite because Chunthia spitefully refused to divorce Methi. Methi, pressurised by circumstances, urges Teeha to marry and start a family to silence the rumours. Methi's seven-year-old son bears Teeha's last name, and yet Methi knows that her son would never have a recognized father. He is called *Angaliyat* by his peers at school. With a heavy heart, Teeha succumbs to the pressure of marrying.

Methi is warned about the risks of Teeha's marriage. When Teeha marries Vali, the problems begin. Vali, related to Kanku, quickly reveals her true colours. She clashes with Methi and Goka and forbids them from visiting. Teeha stays away from home to avoid conflict. Methi and Goka move away to reduce tension, but Vali remains hostile. Even Methi's support during Vali's pregnancy and after Mohan's birth doesn't soften her.

Teeha goes to the auction at the village square. Dehlavala's nephew, is now the mukhi and sarpanch. He is corrupt. Teeha always had a problem with him. During the auction, the mukhi tries to cause trouble for Teeha, who stands his ground. This leads to a confrontation, and Teeha is beaten up by the mukhi, a group of Patels, and two policemen. They leave him for dead. Efforts to get him medical help are thwarted by the authorities, resulting in his death. Master expresses his grief and says that this is what Swaraj had brought for their community. Teeha's passing away deeply affects Methi, who dies of grief eighteen days later. Eventually, Dana and Kanku move to the city. Goka manages the aftermath, arranging Mohan and Mania's marriages and providing shelter for Vali's mother, despite her ingratitude. In the end, Goka honours Teeha's memory by donating funds to a high school named after Teeha; Teehabhai Gopalbhai Parmar.



Check Your Progress-VII

1. Describe Teeha and Methi's decision to return to the village after Methi's traumatic experience. How does Methi navigate her precarious social status, and what challenges do they face upon their return?
2. Discuss the challenges faced by Teeha, Methi, and Goka in dealing with Vali's hostility.
3. Explore Teeha's confrontation in the village square auction, the violence he faces, and the authorities' response.
4. Reflect on the significance of the high school named after Teeha in the context of education and empowerment within the Dalit community. How does this act contribute to the ongoing struggle for social transformation and justice?

7. Themes of the Novel

7.1 The Issue of Caste Discrimination and Social Hierarchy in *The Stepchild*

In the beginning, we see a Thakore discriminating against Teeha and Valji when they leave for the auction. He converses with them and allows them to keep their bundles of clothes on his cart but does not permit them to sit on his cart; they walk alongside him. Several upper-caste Hindus practice untouchability against Dalits, which is associated with the idea of purity and impurity. Scholars like Dumont (1980) have emphasized the ideological aspects of the caste system, particularly the notions of purity and pollution, which are central to caste practices and the maintenance of caste boundaries. According to Dumont, the caste system is primarily a hierarchical ordering of groups defined by their degree of ritual purity, and this aspect is highlighted right at the beginning of the novel.

The next significant event that shows this unfair treatment is how the Patels responded when Teeha spoke up against their inappropriate remarks about Methi. It was very important to safeguard the honour of upper-caste women; a lower-caste person wasn't even allowed to glance at them. However, it was expected that lower caste women were there for the upper caste men to use whenever they wanted. The subsequent persecution of Teeha and the cowardly reaction of his caste members highlight the power that social hierarchy held over the community. Nearly all Dalits in small towns live in fear of the high-caste Hindus. Dalits like Teeha and Valji are rare exceptions. The rules of the caste system are harsh on Dalits, even though it's officially banned in India. It has been scarring Dalits since the caste system began in India. Higher caste Hindus often escape punishment using their wealth and power. What upsets Teeha is that even though he rescued a girl from his



own community, no one steps outside to support him. In response to Teeho's behaviour, the Patels burned down the fields of Heera Khana and Moti, taking away their means to make a living. They also threatened other members of the Vankar community by saying they would cut off their water supply. The upper caste men were controlling the lower castes, and everyone remained silent.

In the end, Teeha loses his life for not agreeing to make clothes for the Mukhi, a Patel. They beat him to death. The authorities, the police, and even the doctor at the charitable hospital refused to help him. The lives of Dalits are seen as disposable, whereas the lives of upper-caste individuals are not.

7.2 Evoking the Dalit Consciousness

In *The Stepchild*, Joseph Macwan brings to life moments that spark a sense of identity and fight in Dalits, pushing them to stand up against the unfair treatment they receive from the higher castes in their community. Teeho, a young man in his early twenties, is always aware of his Dalit identity, which fuels his constant anger towards the caste system and the injustices it brings. On the flip side, Methi's brother, Moti just puts up with the unfairness, thinking that Dalits can't do anything to fight back. Instead of standing up for his sister, Moti talks about getting her married, suggesting that challenging the status quo is too dangerous. Teeho, however, strongly disagrees with this idea, saying, "To hell with water and crocodiles... people like us either die out or we drain all their water... the British sun is still warm. Once we get independence, we'll be in trouble" (Macwan 23). While some Dalits just go along with what the Patels and caste-Hindus tell them to do, others like Teeho, Valji, Kanku, Methi, and more are filled with a sense of their own identity and actively fight against unfairness. The lack of this awareness among many Dalits is what gives the upper castes, like Dehlavala, their power. He tells his nephew, "...they can't come together for their own good... The day they realize their strength, we'll be done for" (Macwan 115).

The Master works hard to create a sense of awareness and the will to resist among Dalits, with a picture of Dr. Ambedkar on his table for motivation. He often talks about the challenges Dr. Ambedkar faced in trying to restore Dalits' self-respect. Following the Master's example, Valji tries to encourage his fellow Dalits by saying, "The Master is right when he says we're not really living, just going through the motions. Even when we're hurt, we just brush it off and keep going. Don't we feel the pain? If we have to fight among ourselves, we can be braver than the Rajputs! But when it comes to outside threats, we get as scared as little kittens (Macwan 42, 43)". Like Dr. Ambedkar, the Dalits in *The Stepchild* doubt whether Swaraj will be good for them. They think that political freedom without social freedom is



dangerous because they believe that Indian society isn't ready to rule itself fairly. They say that until the deep-rooted caste system is removed from the minds of the upper castes, the true goals of Swaraj won't be reached. Bhavankaka puts it this way: Don't blame Swaraj, Master! Blame people's hearts. As long as they hold onto the old ways, a fair and just rule is just a fantasy. I don't think the sacrifice of one Valji or Teeha will change things. We need many more like them to suffer before everyone really starts to see the reality (Macwan 263).

7.3 Kinship within the Dalit Community

S. Bharatiraja explores the profound and extraordinary bond that exists between Valji and Teeha, delving into the intricate layers of their relationship that extend beyond the conventional boundaries of mere friendship. In the nuanced narrative crafted by Macwan, these characters are depicted as individuals who make selfless sacrifices, willingly foregoing elements of their lives and personal joys to secure the well-being and happiness of others. This deep emotional connection becomes a central and poignant theme in Macwan's exploration of caste dynamics and social injustices.

Within the expansive tapestry of the novel, Macwan introduces an array of Vankar characters, ranging from the pivotal philosophical figure Bhavaankaka to the more nuanced yet impactful personalities such as the tender Kanku, the gentle Dano, the noble Gokal, and an assortment of others. This diverse ensemble of characters serves as a powerful testament to the overarching message of the narrative; that individuals from the marginalized untouchable community, marked by their unyielding integrity and elevated ethical standards, inherently surpass their oppressors and exploiters.

An exemplary illustration of this resilience is embodied in Teeha, whose valorous actions involve the courageous rescue of Methi from the predatory advances of upper-caste youths in the Patel's village. Despite seeking justice and fairness, Teeha tragically succumbs to the violence inflicted upon him by those who staunchly uphold the oppressive caste system. In the broader context of the novel, Teeha, Valji, and Methi transcend the realm of fictional characters; they emerge as symbolic figures representing a decisive response to the pervasive injustices perpetuated by the deeply entrenched caste system. Through their unwavering actions and steadfast convictions, they evolve into socially committed protagonists, serving as beacons of resilience and determination for individuals confronting the complex challenges posed by the rigid caste hierarchy in contemporary India. Their stories resonate as powerful narratives of resistance against social inequities, echoing the struggles faced by many others in their quest for justice and equality.



Check Your Progress-VIII

1. Describe instances of caste discrimination and untouchability depicted in the early chapters of *The Stepchild*. How do these events reveal the power dynamics and social hierarchy present in the novel?
2. Explore the role of identity and consciousness among Dalits in the novel, focusing on characters like Teeha, Valji, Kanku, and Moti.
3. Explore the broader themes of kinship and solidarity within the Dalit community. How do the relationships depicted in the novel contribute to the overarching message of resilience and determination in the face of social inequities?

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