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Indian Writing in English

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Clear Light of Day Anita Desai

Aisha Qadry

Part-I

Structure

1. *Introduction*
2. *Learning Objectives*
3. *Biographical Details of Anita Desai*
4. *Background of the Novel: Partition of India and Indian Literature*
5. *Summary*

1. Introduction

Clear Light of the Day by three-time Booker Award Finalist Anita Desai was published in 1980.

The novel is set in Old Delhi, India, and revolves around the Das family, focusing on the relationships and dynamics among its members. The narrative weaves through the past and present, exploring the complex emotions, memories, and secrets that bind and sometimes strain their ties. We also see the characters grapple with personal histories, cultural shifts, and the changing landscape of post-colonial India. Desai's novel, considered to be her most autobiographical text, is set in a neighbourhood that is strikingly like her own.

The novel has been appreciated for its evocative prose, character development, and exploration of themes such as family, identity, and the passage of time. The title itself alludes to the idea of clarity emerging from the shadows of the past, as the characters confront their histories and come to terms with their present selves. On being asked to describe the thematic focus of this text, Desai responds:

“....my preoccupation was with recording the passage of time: I was trying to write a four-dimensional piece on how a family's life moves backward and forwards over a period of time. My novel is about time as a destroyer, as a preserver, and about what the bondage of time does to people. I have tried to tunnel under the mundane surface of domesticity.” (India Today, 2014)



In this unit, we will familiarize ourselves with the author's background, the partition of India and its impact on Indian Literature and the summary and analysis of the text.

2. Learning Objectives

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

- ◆ Understand the life of the author and the context in which the work was written.
- ◆ Understand the genre of partition literature.
- ◆ Summarize and critically analyze the novel.
- ◆ Understand the literal depth of the work and be able to appreciate it.

3. Biographical Details of Anita Desai

Anita Desai is a highly acclaimed Indian novelist and short story writer known for her evocative portrayal of Indian middle-class life and the complexities of human relationships. She was born on June 24, 1937, in Mussoorie, India. Desai comes from a family of accomplished writers; her mother, Nomi Nimme was a German and her father, D.N. Mazumdar was a Bengali businessman and a prominent Bengali writer. Some of her notable novels include *Clear Light of Day* (1980), *In Custody* (1984), and *Fasting, Feasting* (1999). She has been shortlisted for the Booker Prize multiple times and has received various literary awards for her contributions to literature. Desai's writing is characterized by its keen observations, rich prose, and the ability to delve into the emotional lives of her characters.

4. Background of the Novel: Partition of India and Indian Literature

The Partition of India in 1947, a seismic event in the nation's history, unleashed not only political upheaval but also left an indelible mark on Indian literature. The division of the Indian subcontinent into two independent states, India and Pakistan, sparked a cataclysmic human exodus, communal violence, and irreparable cultural shifts. The scars of this traumatic period resonate profoundly in the Indian literary landscape, establishing the genre now known as Partition literature.

Partition literature serves as a poignant testimony to the collective trauma experienced by millions on either side of the border. While history textbooks may delineate facts and figures, literary works delve deeper into the intricacies of individual experiences—the



wrenching choices faced by people who, overnight, found themselves compelled to abandon their homes, leaving behind loved ones, memories, and a way of life. Additionally, writers explore the complexities of identity, belongingness, and the search for a home in a fractured land. Bhisham Sahni's *Tamas*, Saadat Hasan Manto's "Toba Tek Singh", and Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* stand as enduring literary monuments, capturing the tales of loss, grief, violence and more that unfolded during Partition.

Beyond personal narratives, Partition literature engages with broader social and political questions. It also critiques the arbitrary nature of borders drawn by the Radcliffe Line and interrogates the failures of leadership. These stories serve as tools that enable us to question and challenge the narratives presented about our histories in mainstream culture. Additionally, they depict tales of strength, bravery, and emotions, highlighting the indomitable human spirit that reminds us nation-building was and still is a complex process

Check Your Progress

- i) Describe the themes in Anita Desai's famous novels.
- ii) Discuss how the partition is depicted in Indian Literature.

5. Summary

The novel is divided into four sections, each presenting the Das family through the eyes of the four siblings named Raja, Bimla (Bim), Tara and Baba in the following sequence: adulthood, adolescence and early adulthood, childhood, and ultimately, a return to an adult perspective in the concluding chapter.

5.1 Section I

The novel opens with the eerie melody of koels echoing through the dark trees, reminiscent of a chorus of bells heralding the approaching dawn. Disturbed by their persistent calls, Tara steps onto the veranda, greeted by the harsh glare of the summer sun. The cane chairs stand empty, and an army of ants march down the steps into the garden. Spotting her sister Bim in the distance, Tara runs down to join her, shielding her eyes from the sun's intensity.

Bim, who resembles their mother, walks along the rose walk with Tara. Bim humorously remarks that the roses are getting "smaller and sicker every year,". Tara's elegant nightgown contrasts with Bim's shapeless handmade garment, highlighting their divergent lifestyles. As they are near the house, a distant noise becomes evident—Baba's old records booming. Tara, concerned about the loudness, attempts to introduce change with new records, but Bim dismisses it, claiming she doesn't hear it anymore.



Baba, emerges onto the veranda in worn pajamas and a frayed bush-shirt, presenting a ghostly figure with grey hair and a washed-out face. The family members respond with careful smiles, aiming to convey comfort rather than surprise. The narrative then delves into discussions about the day's plans, exposing differences and varied priorities within the family. Bim suggests that Baba should go to the office, though reluctance is evident in his demeanour. The opening scenes set the stage for the complex dynamics, contrasting lifestyles, and underlying tensions within the family, creating an atmospheric and introspective beginning to the novel.

As the narrative unfolds, Tara notices, Baba, in a distressed state, marked by tear-streaked eyes and a haunted demeanor. While the family prepares for an outing, Bakul, Tara's husband, remains oblivious to the situation. Tension arises as Tara opts not to join the outing, leading to a sharp exchange with Bakul, who criticizes her. Frustrated with Tara's apparent helplessness, Bakul contemplates taking her away, proposing a move to his uncle's place in New Delhi. But we see Tara resisting, feeling drained from conforming to Bakul's expectations.

Later we see the narrative delves deeper in helping us understand Tara. We learn of her parents' history and bridge-playing sessions. Her room, filled with artifacts from her childhood, becomes a symbolic repository of past traumas and unfulfilled desires, creating an oppressive atmosphere and a sense of entrapment for Tara. We are made privy to Tara's deep-seated fear of her father's actions, particularly concerning her mother's medication. There's a lingering suspicion that Tara's father might have been responsible for her mother's death.

An important trope in the narrative is the rooftop—a silent witness to the childhood memories between the sisters, Bim and Tara. Ascending the stairs with familiarity, Bim shows no trepidation of encountering specters from their shared past. The rooftop, once a canvas for their childhood escapades, stands beneath them, filled with memories of flying kites. There, on the rooftop, the sisters exchange recollections of their shared past. Tara reminisces about Raja's poetic recitations and their innocent childhood games. The conversation takes an unexpected turn when Bim discloses a letter from Raja, promising continued support and the preservation of their familial home. Eager to reconcile, Tara implores Bim to attend their brother's daughter's wedding in Hyderabad. However, Bim defiantly holds onto her grievances, resisting the idea. The sisters' exchange encapsulates the intricate dynamics of family relationships, where the past lingers as a potent force, and forgiveness seems elusive.

As the scene moves to the Misras' driveway, the sounds of music and dance lessons from the Misra sisters' evening sessions fill the air. Welcoming their neighbours, the Mis-



ra brothers rise immediately, but Bim stands apart, contemplating a half-malicious desire to witness the ecstatic song and dance of two rejected, grey-haired women inside. We see on the lawn, Tara and Bakul engage in a conversation with the brothers, discussing Delhi, Washington, politics, and travel. Meanwhile, the mournful voices of pupils and teachers practicing scales on a harmonium fill the air. The brothers insist Bim join them, inviting her into the garden for a drink, but she remains seated, listening intently to the old man's tales.

On a quiet night, Bim and Tara stroll through their neighbourhood, reminiscing. The atmosphere is serene, with Baba sleeping peacefully. Bim shares her thoughts about seeing the ghostly figure of Mira masi. The first part ends with a discussion about the significant summer of 1947, which was marked by India's partition. Bim reflects on its impact, while Tara expresses a desire to forget the emotional toll it took.

Critical Note:

This section is set in the present. Tara and her husband Bakul visit her older sister Bim and younger brother Baba, triggering a flood of memories. We see the narrative delve deeper in helping us understand Tara. We learn of her parents' history and bridge-playing sessions. Her room, filled with artefacts from her childhood, becomes a symbolic repository of past traumas and unfulfilled desires, creating an oppressive atmosphere and a sense of entrapment for Tara. We are made privy to Tara's deep-seated fear of her father's actions, particularly concerning her mother's medication. There's a lingering suspicion that Tara's father might have been responsible for her mother's death.

An important trope in the narrative is revealed to us, the rooftop, a silent witness to the childhood memories between the sisters, Bim and Tara.

Check Your Progress

- i) What is the significance of the eerie melody of koels at the beginning of the novel?
- ii) Discuss how do Tara and Bim's divergent lifestyles and priorities become evident in their interactions.
- iii) What tensions arise within the family when Tara decides not to join the outing, and how does Bakul react?
- iv) Discuss how the rooftop serves as a symbolic space in the narrative, especially in the exchange between Bim and Tara.
- v) In the scene involving the Misra's driveway, what emotions and desires does Bim experience as she observes the dance and music sessions of the Misra sisters?



5.2 Section II

During a tumultuous summer when the city was engulfed in flames, Bim lived in the tranquil Civil Lines with her family, navigating the eerie sounds of distant chaos from the rooftop. We see her brother Raja imploring her for updates on their neighbour Hyder Ali Sahib's whereabouts. Frustrated by confinement and desperate for news, Raja questions Bim about the situation. Bim, maintaining her composure, reassures him that it is too dangerous to investigate. As they discuss Hyder Ali's disappearance, Raja expresses frustration at being unable to do anything because of his sickness, revealing his past fascination with Urdu poetry and his unlikely friendship with Hyder Ali. Hyder Ali, a figure of wealth and refinement, plays a crucial role in Raja's intellectual growth, inviting him to explore his extensive library. Despite societal disapproval, Raja thrived in this new environment, finding intellectual stimulation and social vibrancy. The stark contrast between the two worlds become evident as Raja's interests evolve, culminating in his adoption of smoking as a rebellious act.

Awaiting his final school examination results, Raja reveals his intention to study Islamic studies at Jamia Millia, sparking heated arguments with his father, who vehemently opposes the decision. Despite initial enthusiasm, Raja retreats when his father highlights the potential threats he would face due to his religion. Reluctantly enrolling in Hindu College, Raja's immersion in college exposes him to a politically charged atmosphere. Drawn into political discussions, Raja finds himself at odds with his college peers' fanatical Hindu beliefs.

Raja's growing interest in politics does not go unnoticed by his family, especially his aunt Mira. Despite reservations, Raja continues attending gatherings at the Hyder Alis', facing a subtle change in reception. As discussions about Pakistan unfold, Raja aligns himself with the perspectives of Hyder Ali and his friends. This acceptance turns him into a target among Hindu College boys opposing the idea of Pakistan. Facing accusations of treason and threats, we see Raja becoming entangled in the perilous world of political extremism as some of his friends reveal to him their involvement in terrorist societies, urging him to join their cause.

Raja immerses himself in Lord Byron's works, crafting an image echoing his childhood hero, earning himself the college nickname "Lord Byron." However, Raja's world takes a darker turn when he gets diagnosed with tuberculosis. Weakened and frail, he becomes a target for college friends turned enemies who are involved in extremist activities. Despite his illness, Raja vehemently rejects their attempts to recruit him, leading to accusations of treason and police attention. Concerned about endangering the Hyder Ali family, Raja shares his fears with Bim.



Amid Raja's deteriorating health and escalating political turmoil, his family becomes distant. Aunt Mira, grappling with fears, succumbs to alcohol. Raja, confined to his sick-bed, yearns to protect the Hyder Ali family, envisioning himself as a heroic figure. As the threat intensifies, Raja pleads with Bim to check on the Hyder Alis. When Bim finds their house empty, Raja's anxiety peaks.

Tara introduces Bakul, a well-spoken young man, into their lives, bringing hope amid darkness. Aunt Mira reluctantly approves of Tara's budding relationship. The sudden death of their father occurs in a minor accident, resulting in a broken neck. The family pragmatically responds to the death, focusing on the continuous presence of the car. Raja sells the car, addressing Bim's unease. The family's financial matters come into focus, with Raja dismissing the responsibility of taking over his father's role in the insurance firm.

Later, Bakul's arrival and Tara's involvement in social events provide a glimmer of hope. The narrative captures the family's adjustment to the father's death, financial challenges, and Bim's growing responsibilities. When Tara arrives home with Bakul, discussions about Independence and partition unfold, with Bakul reassuring them of safety. Bim expresses concern for their Muslim neighbours, the Hyder Alis, who have disappeared. Bakul's reassurances fall on sceptical ears. Riots and violence erupt across the country following the partition. Raja receives happy news from Hyder Ali, ensuring their safety in Hyderabad. Bakul plans to take Tara away due to unrest, contrasting with Bim's independence. The narrative explores the abandoned Hyder Ali house, revealing the remnants of a life once lived.

In the sweltering heat of that summer, Dr. Biswas finds himself entangled in the chaotic affairs of the Das household. His frequent visits are a response to the constant challenges posed by Aunt Mira, who struggled with her vices and unpredictable behaviour, and Raja, whose fevered state swung between dangerous highs and profound lows. Bim, the relentless caretaker, navigates through the turmoil, darting from room to room. The cacophony of Baba's gramophone, blaring cabaret tunes, relentlessly accompanied the daily drama.

One day, as Dr. Biswas observes Bim against the backdrop of chaotic sounds, he couldn't help but wonder how she endured it all. In a brief moment of respite, he questions her ability to bear such a tumultuous environment. Bim, fatigued but resilient, explains that her mind was preoccupied with more pressing concerns, rendering the music inconsequential to her. The doctor, persistent and seeking connection, probed further into her relationship with music. Bim, somewhat indifferent, admitted to rarely hearing music, except for the persistent cabaret tunes.

Dr. Biswas, a lover of music, passionately argues that the joy of music could alleviate the burdens of life. Bim, intrigued, asks if music meant that much to him. His eyes



gleam with sincerity as he confesses that music was almost his only pleasure, a source of solace that made life bearable.

Their conversation takes an unexpected turn when Dr. Biswas, yearning for a connection beyond medical matters, invites Bim to a concert by the Delhi Music Society. Despite his genuine plea, Bim, overwhelmed by her responsibilities, declines, finding humor in the absurdity of the situation. Later, Bakul, returning with Tara, confronts Bim about her apparent amusement with life. In their banter, Bakul notices grey strands in Bim's hair, and the revelation triggers a conversation about worries and responsibilities.

Bakul, perhaps seeking to lighten Bim's load, proposes marrying Tara, sparking laughter and a light-hearted exchange. With Tara married, Aunt Mira's condition deteriorating, and Baba immersed in his records, Bim and Raja find solace in each other's company. Bim and Dr. Biswas go out to a restaurant. Lost in his thoughts, Dr. Biswas accompanies her to her bus stop, expressing gratitude for the evening. In an awkward exchange, he invites her to meet his mother.

In the tranquil embrace of winter, Raja's health improves steadily. Wrapped in Bim's pashmina shawl, Raja enjoys the outdoors, relishing oranges and nuts while engaging in correspondence with the Hyder Ali family and composing Urdu verses. While Raja flourishes, Bim faces challenges with Aunt Mira. Despite her commitment to completing a history course at college and volunteering at a clinic for refugee women, Bim struggles to manage Aunt Mira's growing difficulties.

Initially attributing Aunt Mira's behaviour to their father's leftover bottles, the siblings gradually realize she was obtaining alcohol from an unknown source. Aunt Mira's deteriorating condition reaches a point when they had to call Dr. Biswas for assistance. Dr. Biswas, displaying gentleness and compassion, tends to Aunt Mira's injuries, revealing a side of him that softens Bim's opinion. Outside, Dr. Biswas insists on accompanying Bim home. They part ways awkwardly, but Bim's bus ride takes an unexpected turn when news of Mahatma Gandhi's assassination reaches her. Panicking, she rushes to inform Raja, who is in equal disbelief.

The evening unfolds in a mix of emotions – from shock to relief as it is revealed that a Hindu, not a Muslim, had killed Gandhi. Amidst the chaos, Raja ponders the impact on the nation. The two siblings spend the evening contemplating the uncertain future, their earlier concerns about social events and trivialities overshadowed by the gravity of the news. Bim always convinces herself that the last time she saw Raja was the day Mahatma Gandhi was assassinated. However, there is one more encounter she never acknowledges. It was spring, and Raja's health had improved significantly since winter. The garden, though, was marred by dust, and the heat had made Raja restive. One late spring day, the persistent call of the



koel bird added to the oppressive heat, and Raja's impatience reaches a boiling point. He announces his intention to leave for Hyderabad immediately, citing work offered by Hyder Ali Sahib. Bim, engrossed in exam preparations, brushes off his outbursts until he threatens to depart that very day. Bim suggests he returns to bed, infuriating him.

Raja, in a fit of rage, begins packing as if to escape the confinement of the house. Amidst the commotion, Aunt Mira, distressed by the chaos, witnesses Raja's frantic packing. Bim tries to calm him, but Raja, exhausted, eventually collapses on his bed. The oppressive heat persists, and Raja's restlessness transforms into a fever. Bim, hearing chaos, intervenes to comfort Aunt Mira.

The situation reaches a breaking point, leading to a dramatic episode where Aunt Mira, in a frenzied state, runs naked through the courtyard, screaming about rats and lizards devouring her. The family, with the help of the doctor, manages to calm Aunt Mira temporarily, sedating her into a deep sleep. This event marks the beginning of Aunt Mira's decline. She descends into a slow deterioration, becoming increasingly dependent.

One night, in a fit of frenzy, she succumbs, not to drowning in the well as she had feared, but to the soothing effects of alcohol. Following Aunt Mira's death, the family performs the last rites. Raja and Bim witness the cremation, the pyre reducing Aunt Mira to ashes. Bim, haunted by vivid dreams and visions of her aunt's drowned body, struggles to shake off the images. The days that follow are filled with a surreal sense of Aunt Mira's lingering presence, but gradually, the visions recede.

Bim finds solace in literature, reading the Thodol Bardol and T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land."

As Raja fervently packs his bags, preparing to leave for Hyderabad, Bim remains composed, silently observing his frantic activity. Raja, agitated and defensive, accuses her of wanting him to spend his life confined to their home. Bim, maintaining her calm demeanor, responds stoically. As the tonga disappears through the gate, she becomes aware of Baba emerging, and together they sit on the veranda steps. Baba, engrossed in playing with pebbles, seems oblivious to the departure. Bim, in a tired yet relieved state, speaks aloud, addressing Baba.

Critical Note:

The tumultuous events in the country find a parallel in the atmosphere of the Das household.

Desai develops Raja as an intelligent and romantic individual, inclined toward poetry. His yearning for a life beyond his stagnant home becomes apparent as he compares it to the vibrant world of Hyder Ali. Despite occasional ignorance, Raja is portrayed as an impressionable young man, torn between family expectations and personal desires.



The narrative also delves into the coming-of-age struggles of the Das children. Raja desires affiliation with the Alis, embodying ease, money, poetry, and power. Tara seeks a life beyond the Das household with Bakul, while Bim asserts her independence, rejecting the idea of marriage. The recurring imagery of nature—the green well, bees, Hyder Ali’s white horse, and Aunt Mira’s deteriorating state adds depth to the narrative and adds to the complexity of human relationships and situations.

Check Your Progress

- i) What prompted Raja to inquire about their neighbour Hyder Ali Sahib’s whereabouts?
- ii) How did Raja’s fascination with Urdu poetry and his friendship with Hyder Ali contribute to his intellectual growth?
- iii) What were the consequences of Raja’s decision to study Islamic studies at Jamia Millia, and how did his family react?
- iv) How did Raja become entangled in the perilous world of political extremism, and what challenges did he face?

5.3 Section III

The narrative opens with Tara discovering a snail under the rose bushes. Thinking of showing it to her mother she tries to take hold of it but it falls off the leaf before she can do so. On the other hand, we see her pregnant mother, preoccupied with her own health concerns, continuing her walk in the garden, seemingly oblivious to young Tara’s discoveries.

We see the birth of Baba, a bonny baby born to aging parents. But soon, we are told that the baby exhibited slow development, much to the family’s concern. The mother, restless and yearning for old social life (her card games,) seeks help. The help arrives in the form of Aunt Mira, a distant cousin. Aunt Mira is a shabby but endearing figure. Despite Baba’s limitations, Aunt Mira’s patient efforts lead to surprising results as Baba learns to feed himself, do up his buttons, and even play games. However, we learn that he continued to struggle with verbal communication, speaking only single words.

The narrative then delves deeper into Aunt Mira’s life story. We are told that she was a widow, rejected by her deceased husband’s family. But to Tara, Aunt Mira was a source of comfort. Tara, having lost attention from the family after Baba’s birth, found solace in Aunt Mira’s embrace, wrapped in her white cotton sari or her knitted shawls. Despite Aunt Mira’s nervous and jumpy demeanour, the children find stability in her presence. To the children, Aunt Mira is like a tree, unyielding and dependable, the central figure around which their lives unfold. Aunt Mira’s presence in their lives became a source of comfort



and guidance, especially during moments of vulnerability. In one such moment, amidst their playful banter, she broaches the subject of their mother's illness — diabetes. Tara, haunted by a memory of witnessing her father injecting their mother, finally understood the reason behind the injections.

The narrative shows how the siblings grew up that summer. The monotony and inertia of life seems to press upon them like an impenetrable grey mass. It isn't just a passive existence; it is as if the very challenges they faced resonated with a deep, resounding clang, echoing their struggles against the dull metal bands that confined them. Bim discovers solace and purpose at school, where her organizational skills and leadership qualities flourish. She embraces challenges and actively participates in various activities. On the contrary, Tara finds school to be a source of dread, where she struggles to connect with her classmates and engage with her studies.

As the years pass in the school, the restlessness that characterizes Raja's nature begins to infect the two sisters, Bim and Tara. Bim, in particular, becomes more ambitious, striving to excel in her studies and becoming the head girl of the school. Tara on the other hand soon distances herself from Bim and Raja, who are engrossed in their studies, leaving her free to explore the Misras' vibrant household next door. The Misras, long-time neighbours, had a formal friendship with Tara's family, but the stark contrast in their lifestyles intrigued Tara.

Unlike Tara's family, the Misras are secure in their middle-class position and care little for societal expectations. Their home is chaotic, with string beds brought into the drawing room and meals served in an unstructured manner. The Misra girls, a few years older than Tara, respond kindly to her advances—forming a friendship that offers a stark contrast to Tara's lonely existence. She finds solace in the Misras' home, where she experiences a sense of belonging that is absent in her own family. The Misras' engagement party becomes a turning point for Tara. She witnesses a lifestyle vastly different from her own, from casual gatherings to impromptu outings. Tara, previously shy and sheltered, is introduced to new experiences and social interactions.

Critical Note:

In this section, Desai shows that the weight of childhood experiences continues to influence Bim, Raja, and Tara in their present lives, impacting their decisions and opinions.

Baba, mentally slow and autistic, stands apart as a character unaffected by the weight of the past. Desai explores his disability through a post-colonial lens. Baba, representing a dream of detachment from postcolonial negotiations of power, moves between identities, becoming a backdrop for Bim and Tara's negotiation of their identities. Once again,



we see the Das house in Old Delhi as an unchanging, dusty, and crumbling environment, emphasizing the mundanity of Bim's life.

Check Your Progress

- i) What role did Aunt Mira play in the lives of the children, especially Tara, and how did her presence become a source of comfort?
- ii) How did Bim find solace and purpose at school? Compare her experiences with that of Tara's.
- iii) What aspects of the Misras' lifestyle intrigued Tara, and how did her friendship with the Misra girls provide a sense of belonging and contrast to her family life?

5.4 Section IV

We see Tara, asking Bim, "You must come with Baba. It will be so good for you."

Engulfed in an air of defiance, Bim retorts that she is beyond worry, dismissing any discussion about Raja. Tara, undeterred, points out that, Bim's self-talk delves into Raja's life, his family, and the extravagant arrangements for his daughter Moyna's impending nuptials.

Bim, adamant in her foresight, criticizes Raja's lifestyle and the upcoming grand wedding. Tara, reading from Raja's letter, details the opulent arrangements, attempting to sway Bim's opinion. Yet, Bim remains unresponsive, absorbed in her thoughts. Tara, observing Bim closely, becomes increasingly aware of the peculiarities in Bim's management of the household. She notices Bim's frugality, scraping leftovers onto saucers for the next meal among other things. Despite Bakul's preference for dining out, Tara worries about the adequacy of Bim and Baba's meals. While strolling through the garden, Tara encounters a mound of unused manure, a stark contrast to Bim's claim of financial constraints for buying seeds. Tara, previously impressed by Bim's competence, now questions Bim's abilities to run the house. Tara reflects on her limited observations of Bim, realizing that her perception was clouded by personal biases.

In the dimly lit room, amid the relentless drone of mosquitoes, Bim's restless thoughts take on monstrous shapes. The letter from Raja, read aloud by Tara, intensifies the sense of exclusion, as it was not addressed to Bim, and her name was absent from its contents. The once-admired elder brother had turned his back on her. Bim feels abandoned. Folding her arms across her face, she yearns for their departure, wishing they would leave her in peace. They had descended upon her life like mosquitoes, sipping her blood and tormenting her. The narrative delves into Bim's reflections on the fading family pattern. She questions her own competence and the reputation she had once held.



Bim in a quest to find solace, reaches for a history book, the *Life of Aurangzeb*, only to chance upon an account of the emperor's lonely death. His words resonate with her, bringing a semblance of tranquility. Tears escape her closed eyes, leaving trails on her cheeks. Moved to introspection, Bim unearths a drawer laden with translations she had made of Raja's poems years ago. Contemplating whether Raja would want these poems, she grapples with the decision to keep or discard them. Her mind echoes the emperor's words, questioning the burden of accumulated sins. Bim spends the night purging her room of old papers, relics of a life burdened by memories and trivialities. The storm of emotions stirred by Tara's visit leave her drained, and she finally succumbs to sleep.

Bim wakes up to find her nieces and Tara, her sister, laughing and sitting on the edge of the divan. Tara proudly presents them, and Bim, overwhelmed, struggles to reach out and kiss their faces. It had been years since Bim held anyone so close. The nieces spend time with Baba, playing games and listening to old records. As the day progresses, discussions turn to the impending departure of Tara and the nieces. The family spends their last day in Delhi with subdued energy. As preparations for departure begin, Bim finds solace in the garden, seeking shade and quiet.

As the family gets ready to leave for Hyderabad, Bim frets about the possibility of Baba joining them. Tara, wanting to make amends, asks if she should talk to Raja about visiting. Bim eagerly accepts, expressing her longing to see Raja. Finally, Tara and the nieces depart, leaving Bim in the garden with Baba. The silence that follows, devoid of the family's bustle, brings a strange calmness. Bim asks Baba if he would have liked to attend the wedding, and he shakes his head. In the quiet aftermath, they sit together, allowing the light to envelop them. Jaya from Misra's household energetically announces her brother's musical recital in the evening, which brings them back to the present. Despite her complaints about being busy, she invites Bim and Baba to the celebration, reminiscent of old times. The invitation hangs in the air, breaking the stillness that had settled after Tara's departure.

The atmosphere is charged with the anticipation of the music that is about to unfold. The Misra's house in Old Delhi is filled with the noise and bustle of the returning old times, creating a hectic yet nostalgic effect. Bim and Baba find a spot on a cotton rug close to the lawn's edge, surrounded by the green combat of cannas, hibiscus, and oleanders. They strain to see the wooden divan, adorned with a white cloth and coloured bolsters, where the musicians are tuning their instruments. The *tanpura* player, with a disfigured face, strums in a mesmerized state, while the chubby *tabla* player eagerly awaits the performance. Mulk, the star performer, sits at ease, passing betel leaves to his accompanists. Mulk's brothers, initially sceptical, are soon swayed by the music, becoming an integral



part of the composition. The scene is vividly painted with the audience scattered on the lawn, some fanning themselves, others rolling betel leaves, and the quieter ones smoking cigarettes. The music weaves through this commotion, and finally the song reaches a climax, the sisters hurriedly set up an open-air tea shop. The joyous mood culminates in laughter, and joviality as tea is served to the audience.

Critical Note:

Bim and Tara confront their memories and contemplate what's worth leaving in the past. Tara undergoes a realization, acknowledging her previously skewed perception of Bim and attempting to push her sister toward recognition of their shared burdens. She also seeks forgiveness and understanding from Bim, acknowledging her use of Bakul as an escape. Tara's revelation includes the recognition that she and Bim, despite outward differences, share a deep connection.

Bim's journey towards forgiveness is challenging, involving a night of examining Raja's artefacts and re-evaluating her brother's identity. Furthermore, she reflects on the strain caused by Tara's visit. Despite the difficulties, Bim forgives Raja and welcomes him back into her life, signifying a profound transformation.

Check Your Progress

- i) What peculiarities in Bim's management of the household does Tara observe, and how do these observations affect Tara's perception of Bim?
- ii) What emotions and reflections does Bim experience as Tara reads aloud Raja's letter and discusses the upcoming wedding arrangements?
- iii) How does Bim find solace and tranquility during her night of introspection, and what significant decisions does she make regarding her past?
- iv) Describe the atmosphere and events on Moyna's wedding day.



Part-II: Characters, Background and Themes

Structure

1. *Introduction*
2. *Learning Objectives*
3. *Character Analysis*
4. *Themes*
5. *Let's Sum It Up!*
6. *References and Further Reading*

1. Introduction

In the previous unit, we familiarized ourselves with the background information of the author, partition literature, and the narrative of *Clear Light of the Day*. This unit will provide you with several access points into the text to help you formulate your own interpretations of the novel.

2. Learning Objectives

In this unit, you will learn about:

- ◆ The characters in the novel *Clear Light of the Day*
- ◆ How the text can be interpreted from various perspectives
- ◆ Significant themes and symbols that are knitted into the text

3. Character Analysis

3.1 Bim

Bim, the eldest daughter in Anita Desai's *Clear Light of the Day*, carries the weight of familial responsibilities and serves as a custodian of the Das family's complex history. As a history teacher, Bim's academic pursuits reflect her quest to comprehend the intricacies of her family's past. Her character is marked by emotional scars, notably the estrangement from her beloved brother, Raja, an event that permeates the narrative and shapes her relationships. Bim's introspective nature offers readers a window into the labyrinth of her



emotions, struggles with identity, and evolving understanding of herself and her family. Critic Prasad observes, “....it is Bim who sacrifices the pleasures of life, remains single and works hard, like a “snail” or a “Sisyphus,” to shoulder the responsibility of looking after her mute, retarded brother Baba and her widowed Aunt Mira.” [Prasad, 8] Bim then becomes not just a character but a symbol of post-colonial complexities, navigating the tensions between tradition and modernity, and embodying the broader quest for identity in a transforming society.

3.2 Tara

Tara, is a character whose life choices and values starkly contrast with those of her elder sister, Bim. As Bim’s younger sibling, Tara represents a departure from intellectual pursuits, embodying more conventional and societal expectations. Having married and relocated to the United States, Tara finds fulfilment in traditional roles as a wife and mother, navigating the challenges of assimilating into a new cultural context. Her return to the family home becomes a pivotal juncture, serving as a catalyst for a re-evaluation of familial dynamics and individual aspirations. Importantly, to us as readers, Tara’s character delves into the complex interplay between personal fulfilment and societal norms, providing a lens through which the novel explores the tension between traditional values and the evolving aspirations of women in post-colonial India. Through her character, Desai poignantly explores the choices individuals make in navigating cultural shifts, the impact of migration on identity, and the negotiation between personal desires and societal expectations. Tara’s character, while seemingly conforming to traditional roles, reveals nuanced layers of identity, offering a counterpoint to Bim’s intellectual pursuits and encapsulating the broader societal shifts and challenges faced by women in the changing landscape of post-colonial India.

3.3 Baba

Baba, Bim’s younger brother, becomes a symbol of the impact of trauma and loss. Mentally challenged he exists in a detached realm of his own. He finds solace in music and solitude. His perpetual engagement with Western classical music becomes a defining feature of his character, serving as a shield against the tumultuous reality of the outside world and, perhaps, as a form of escapism. The constant repetition of the gramophone music in the novel symbolizes a subconscious attempt to create a static, timeless existence. We can see beneath Baba’s seemingly aloof exterior, a deeper layer of vulnerability and unresolved emotions. His escape into the world of music can be interpreted as a coping mechanism to suppress the painful memories of the partition and the subsequent familial disintegration. Baba’s character serves as a metaphor for the enduring scars of the past, portraying the profound impact of history on an individual’s psyche.



3.4 Aunt Mira

Aunt Mira, also known as Mira masi, embraces a maternal role within the Das family, and becomes a guardian and source of guidance for the siblings. Despite the weight of losing her husband and being the target of the taunts of his family, Aunt Mira exudes resilience and stoicism, offering a stable presence in the ever-changing dynamics of the Das household. As a symbol of continuity and a connection to the past, she becomes a grounding force for the siblings. Mira masi's influence extends beyond mere caregiving; she shapes the worldview of Bim, Tara, and Baba, imparting a sense of duty and responsibility. However, her adherence to traditional values introduces conflict with the evolving perspectives of the younger generation, adding layers of tension to the intricate family dynamics explored in the novel.

Check Your Progress

- i) In what ways does the loss of Raja shape Bim's character, and relationships throughout the novel?
- ii) How does Tara's return to the family home affect the familial dynamics and individual aspirations?
- iii) What role does music play in Baba's character, and how does it reflect his coping mechanisms and relationship with the past?
- iv) How does Aunt Mira, or Mira masi, embody resilience and continuity in the face of personal tragedy and the complexities of post-colonial India?

3.5 Raja

Raja, Bim's younger sibling, shared a close bond with her during their formative years. Raja is characterized by his intelligence, romantic nature, and deep love for Urdu poetry. He greatly admires their Muslim neighbour and landlord, Hyder Ali. Despite possessing admirable qualities, Raja also exhibits traits of arrogance, irresponsibility, ambition, and occasional insensitivity.

3.6 Bakul

Bakul, Tara's spouse, is a diplomat with a tendency towards arrogance. He enjoys making an impression on others and can be characterized as a narcissist who dislikes not being the focus of attention. He holds a contemptuous attitude towards the Das household and is determined to shield Tara from its disorderliness and preoccupation with the past.

3.7 Hyder Ali

Hyder Ali, the proprietor of several residences in Delhi, including the Das's residence, is affluent and possesses charismatic qualities. Residing in a vast mansion adjacent to the



Das's, he exudes an appealing image as he travels on a white horse, particularly captivating the impressionable Raja. As a supporter of Urdu poetry, Hyder Ali actively encourages Raja's interest by inviting him to his private library and gatherings of distinguished intellectuals. When tensions escalate due to the Partition, Hyder Ali and his family relocate to Hyderabad.

4. Themes

Clear Light of Day by Anita Desai explores various themes, providing a nuanced and insightful portrayal of family dynamics, memory, and the impact of historical events.

4.1 Family Dynamics and Relationships

The novel explores family dynamics and relationships within the Das family in Old Delhi. The novel unfolds the complex interplay among the Das siblings—Raja, Tara, Bim, and Baba—whose lives are deeply shaped by their individual choices and experiences. Raja's estrangement, Tara's marriage and relocation, and Bim's central role as the eldest sister contribute to the intricate web of family connections. Set against the backdrop of post-colonial India, the generational shifts within the Das family reflect broader societal changes, with the older generation rooted in tradition and the younger generation influenced by modernity. The impact of historical events, such as the Partition of India, adds depth to the narrative, intertwining personal struggles with larger political upheavals. The novel also underscores the challenges of effective communication within the family, as unspoken tensions and misunderstandings contribute to the emotional resonance of the narrative.

4.2 Memory and Nostalgia

"Here in the house it was not just the empty, hopeless atmosphere of childhood, but the very spirits of her parents that brooded on—here they still sat, crouched about the little green baize folding table that was now shoved into a corner with a pile of old Illustrated Weeklies and a brass pot full of red and yellow spotted canna lilies on it as if to hold it firmly down, keep it from opening up with a snap and spilling out those stacks of cards, those long note-books and thin pencils with which her parents had sat, day after day and year after year till their deaths...." (Desai, 27)

Desai masterfully delves into the characters' reflections on the past, emphasizing the impact of memory and the bittersweet nature of nostalgia. One of the primary characters through whom we see this theme being explored is Bim. As the eldest sister in the Das family, Bim is deeply connected with the past and her family's history. Her memories become a lens through which the reader gains insights into the complex dynamics of the Das family. Bim's introspective monologues and recollections paint a vivid picture of a



time when the family home was lively, filled with laughter and shared experiences. The house itself becomes a symbol of the past, a repository of memories that Bim clings to as a means of understanding herself and her family. We will delve into greater detail about the home as a symbol a little later. Furthermore, the novel uses specific incidents and objects as a trigger for memories. For example, we can see that the kite-flying episode is a powerful scene where childhood memories resurface, offering a glimpse into the carefree days of the Das siblings. The significance of objects, like the gramophone, serves as a tangible link to the past and a source of both joy and sorrow for the characters.

Bim's narrative reveals to us the double-edged nature of nostalgia. While the past holds a certain allure, it is also a source of pain and regret. The gap between the idyllic memories of the past and the harsh reality of the present becomes a central conflict for Bim. The inevitability of change and the passage of time are themes intertwined with the exploration of memory, adding a layer of complexity to the characters' reflections. The novel's narrative structure itself contributes to memory and nostalgia too. The interweaving of past and present, with flashbacks seamlessly blending into the current narrative, mirrors the characters' mental landscapes. The juxtaposition of memories with the characters' current lives reinforces the idea that the past is not a static entity but a dynamic force shaping their present realities.

4.3 Partition and its psychological aftermath

".....Desai uses the family as microcosm for larger national concerns, In essence, the family dynamics as the sisters confront their differences and struggle to balance old and new worlds become a microcosmic exploration of larger national concerns, establishing a "parallel movement between British withdrawal from India and the progressive emptying out of the Das home ... [making] a distinct point about the erosion of cultural frames of reference." (Mohan, 49)

The novel delves into the profound impact of the 1947 partition of India on the Das family. As the novel unfolds, Bim, the eldest of the siblings, reflects on the personal trauma and displacement wrought by this historical event. The repercussions of the partition are not merely political but deeply personal as they affect familial relationships. Raja's departure becomes a manifestation of the familial disintegration caused by the traumatic event, and the house itself, once a haven of warmth, transforms into a dilapidated symbol of broken ties. The narrative is steeped in nostalgia for pre-partition days, with Bim's memories oscillating between joy and sorrow.

Desai skilfully weaves dialogues and inner reflections to capture the characters' struggles to reconcile with the changed socio-political landscape and the irreversibility of the loss, creating a powerful narrative that underscores the enduring scars of partition and the quest for meaning in its aftermath.

**Check Your Progress**

- i) What themes does “Clear Light of Day” by Anita Desai explore, and how do they contribute to the portrayal of family dynamics, memory, and historical events?
- ii) How does the novel depict the complex interplay of relationships between Raja, Tara, Bim, and Baba, and their lives shaped by individual choices and experiences?
- iii) How does the Partition of India, add depth to the narrative and intertwine personal struggles with larger political upheavals within the Das family?
- iv) What role does the family home play as a symbol of the past?
- v) How does Desai use dialogues and inner reflections to capture the characters’ struggles to reconcile with the changed socio-political landscape?

4.4 Grief and Loss

Grief becomes a lens through which the characters examine their own lives and choices. The exploration of loss extends beyond individual bereavement to encompass the collective mourning of a nation marked by the partition. The characters in the novel grapple with individual losses that reverberate through their lives. The partition of India becomes a backdrop for collective grief and loss. The memories of the traumatic events during the partition linger on, shaping the family’s relationships and individual psyches.

The novel explores the loss of childhood innocence through the characters’ memories of a time before the partition. The kite-flying incident, which had once symbolized joy and camaraderie, becomes a poignant reminder of the irrevocable loss of innocence and the disruption of a carefree existence.

The novel portrays the estrangement within the Das family as a form of loss. Raja’s departure to Hyderabad and his subsequent emotional detachment from the family create a sense of loss for Bim and the others. The broken relationships among siblings are a manifestation of the lingering grief that shadows their lives. The characters employ nostalgia as a coping mechanism to deal with their grief and loss. Bim, in particular, clings to memories of the past, using them as a shield against the harsh realities of the present. The nostalgia becomes both a source of comfort and a painful reminder of what has been lost.

4.5 Escapism

The Das siblings, driven by a desire for attention stemming from parental neglect, strive to break free from their immediate environment. Raja turns towards Urdu literary culture, contrary to his family’s wishes; Tara seeks solace in the company of Mira masi and the Misra sisters and eventually marries Bakul and leaves Old Delhi. Baba, in a more



subconscious manner, attempts to escape by incessantly playing the same music. These endeavours are fuelled by their shared need to suppress distressing childhood memories. Initially appearing as someone who doesn't want to escape, Bim, as the narrative unfolds, reveals vulnerabilities. Constantly wounded by her siblings, she, too, seeks an escape—ironically, into the past.

4.6 Representation of Old Delhi

“Old Delhi does not change. It only decays. My students tell me it is a great cemetery, every house a tomb. Nothing but sleeping graves. Now New Delhi, they say is different. That is where things happen. The way they describe it, it sounds like a nest of fleas. So much happens there, it must be a jumping place. I never go. Baba never goes. And here, here nothing happens at all.” (Desai, 11)

In *Clear Light of Day*, Anita Desai vividly represents Old Delhi as not just a physical setting but a symbolic landscape that mirrors the complexities of the Das family's history and the broader socio-political changes in post-colonial India. The Das family home in Old Delhi is a physical space where memories are preserved, and the passage of time is reflected. The house becomes a microcosm of the changing dynamics within the family, with its crumbling structure mirroring the fragmented relationships and shifting identities.

The partition of India and its aftermath become integral parts of Old Delhi's narrative, as the characters grapple with the socio-political changes that have left an indelible mark on the city. Furthermore, Desai skilfully contrasts Old Delhi with the changing landscape of modernity. As the characters navigate the traditional charm of the old city, they are also exposed to the influences of Western education and contemporary values. The cobbled city becomes a focal point for nostalgia in the novel, especially for Bim. Her memories of childhood, the courtyard, and the kite-flying episodes are rooted in the old city. The nostalgia, represented by Old Delhi, becomes a refuge for characters like Bim, offering solace in the face of present challenges and losses. Desai creates an atmosphere of desolation in Old Delhi that mirrors the emotional landscape of the characters. The decaying houses, the dusty streets, and the abandoned spaces reflect a sense of abandonment and loss. The once-vibrant city now stands as a backdrop to the characters' struggles with their personal histories.

4.7 Nature in *Clear Light of the Day*

In *Clear Light of Day*, Anita Desai masterfully employs nature as a multifaceted and omnipresent element that transcends mere backdrop, playing pivotal roles in shaping the narrative, reflecting the characters' emotions, and serving as a metaphorical canvas for their relationships. Nature first emerges as a source of entertainment and learning for the



Das children, offering them moments of respite from the confines of the house. Desai vividly describes the garden as an overgrown, neglected haven, a rustic space that contrasts sharply with the structured urban life, providing Tara with a nostalgic escape and showcasing the disparity in her life from that of Bim's.

Nature's second function becomes evident as it mirrors or complements the actions and feelings of the characters.

"....These [recurrent] images possess aesthetic rather than casual relevance, for the episodes used in the novel are like pieces of a thematic jigsaw puzzle which the reader has to piece together in order to obtain a clear picture of the family life in the right perspective. Here Desai has resorted but infrequently to her characteristic technique of using an image as an apparently independent artistic unit or as an objective correlative with a view toward vivifying the psychic state or emotion of a particular character." (Prasad, 369)

Examples such as the dog pouncing on a flea after Bakul's revelation to Bim or the koel's tentative call aligning with Bim's internal resolution highlight the seamless integration of nature with the characters' emotional states. The metaphor of the garden, once vibrant and alive, deteriorating with time and mirroring the evolving relationships among the Das siblings, becomes a poignant symbol of the passage of time and the impact of familial discord.

Moreover, nature in the novel is presented as both beautiful and perilous, with Desai using elements like mosquitoes and quarrelling mynahs to draw parallels with human relationships. The duality of nature serves as a warning and metaphorically aligns with the complexities of the characters' interactions.

In a final function, nature serves as a point of comparison with the characters themselves. Through extended metaphors, Desai likens Aunt Mira to a central tree, the source of life and stability for the Das children. The metaphor evolves as the children grow, illustrating their intertwined existence with Aunt Mira, but ultimately resulting in her becoming a passive element—a mere log, emphasizing the changing dynamics within the family. Additionally, the metaphor extends to Baba as a plant grown underground, underscoring his distinctiveness from his siblings. The comparison of the Das parents to the withering roses they planted further deepens the metaphor, highlighting the lack of proper care and understanding within the family.

Nature becomes a dynamic and integral part of the narrative, serving as a source of entertainment, a reflection of characters' emotions, a metaphor for relationships, and a point of comparison. Through these nuanced depictions, Desai crafts a rich and layered narrative that intertwines the natural world with the intricacies of human experience,



creating a novel where the setting is not just a backdrop but an active participant in the lives of the characters.

Check Your Progress

- i) How does grief function as a lens for characters to examine their lives and choices?
- ii) How do characters, especially Bim, carry the scars of Partition?
- iii) How does the novel depict the loss of childhood innocence?
- iv) Discuss the representation of Old Delhi in the narrative.
- v) Discuss the use of Nature as an active participant in the narrative.

4.8 The House as a Temporal Symbol

“Throughout, the house image figures as an ominous and threatening presence characterized by a detonating and a palpitating silence. This static image of the house symbolically projects Bim’s stifled anger and acerbity, her longing for silence and staticity. The house lingers long in the reader’s mind.” (Swain, 122)

Anita Desai employs the house as a potent temporal symbol, using its physical presence and the characters’ interactions with it to delve into the intricacies of time, memory, and the inexorable passage of the years. The house becomes a temporal anchor, a space where past and present converge, and the characters grapple with the complexities of temporal fluidity. The characters, particularly Bim, experience a blurring of boundaries as memories of their childhood intermingle with the current state of the house. Desai uses the physical setting to evoke a sense of nostalgia and to highlight the characters’ attempts to reconcile with the temporal dissonance.

Moreover, objects within the house become carriers of time, triggering memories and shifting attitudes— the gramophone, for example, becomes a poignant reminder of the past, amplifying the characters’ experiences of dislocation. We see how the physical decay of the house becomes a visible manifestation of the impact of time. Cracks and holes in the structure symbolize the erosion of the past and the inevitability of change. The characters confront the scars etched into the walls, floors, and corners of the house, mirroring their own internal struggles with the passage of time.

4.9 Poetry in *Clear Light of the Day*

The novel features a diverse array of poets, including T. S. Eliot, Lord Tennyson, Lord Byron, Sir Muhammad Iqbal, Algernon Charles Swinburne, and D. H. Lawrence. Desai’s meticulous selection of verses reflects the states of mind of the characters, societal contexts, and the timeless human condition. The incorporation of Iqbal’s lines into a song at



the novel's conclusion further demonstrates Desai's adeptness at using poetry to convey profound emotions and underline the significance of scholarship in the narrative.

4.10 Title of the Text

The title *Clear Light of Day* implies a moment of comprehension or epiphany. In the narrative, the title denotes the instances of lucidity that characters undergo as they contemplate their histories and reconcile with their collective past. This emphasizes the novel's scrutiny of time, memory, and the journey toward accepting one's identity and personal history.

Check Your Progress

- i) How does Desai utilize the house as a temporal symbol in *Clear Light of Day*?
- ii) What role does the house play in highlighting the characters' experiences of temporal fluidity in the novel?
- iii) How does the physical decay of the house symbolize the impact of time on the characters in the story?
- iv) Comment on the use of poetry in the text.
- v) Discuss the title of the text.

5. Let's Sum It Up!

In Unit I, we learned about how Anita Desai, born to a German immigrant mother and a Bengali father wrote poetic, evocative tales inspired by her own life. Then, we briefly looked at the plot while analyzing with careful consideration significant pieces throughout the tale.

In Unit 2, we looked at several ideas that interweave the fabric of the novel and give it its timeless appeal. Here, we looked at each character and their roles in the development of the text. Themes such as family, loss and grief, and nature were examined in great detail with the use of examples from the text to help you form an informed interpretation of this text.

Your study of Units 1 and 2 will provide you with a thorough understanding of the text that tells you the story of the Das family, that embarks on a journey through time and emotions.

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“Freedom to the Slave” “The Orphan Girl” Henry Louis Vivian Derozio

Mridul Kiku

Structure

1. *Learning Objectives*
2. *Introduction*
3. *“Freedom to the Slave” (1827) - Analysis*
4. *“The Orphan Girl” (1827) - Analysis*
5. *Bibliography*

1. Learning Objectives

- ◆ To critically analyse the poems prescribed with emphasis on the poetic techniques, themes, and literary devices.
- ◆ To understand Derozio’s poems from the perspective of the early nineteenth-century socio-political atmosphere.
- ◆ To understand the established cultural and social norms with reference to slavery, and orphan-hood; and the need to challenge and reform the same.

2. Introduction

Henry Louis Vivian Derozio (1809–1831) emerged as a notable and impactful poet within the intellectual and cultural milieu of India during the early 19th century. Born on April 18th, 1809, Derozio was brought up in the city of Calcutta, where he distinguished himself in the fields of journalism, poetry, education and social reform. Despite his tragically brief existence, he made a lasting impact on the intellectual and literary heritage of India. The upbringing of Derozio was characterised by a remarkable blend of Indian and Portuguese ancestry. His mother was of English descent, while his father was of Indo-Portuguese ancestry. Perhaps, as a result of his multicultural upbringing, Derozio possessed an expansive and progressive viewpoint that is reflected in his writings. Derozio demonstrated an early



inclination for literature and poetry from a very young age. His verses were infused with a passionate quest for social transformation, and a romantic sensibility.

Derozio emerged as a leading figure in the intellectual renaissance that was taking place in Calcutta around 1826. With his progressive worldview and radical ideas, he agitated the minds of his students during his tenure as a professor at Hindu College. His pedagogical approaches were atypical in that era; for he promoted rationality, independent thought and critical investigation. Beyond the confines of academia, Derozio's impact permeated the Young Bengal group, an organization comprising of independent-minded individuals who challenged established social conventions and advocated for progressive concepts. He made significant literary contributions and is considered to be one of the forefathers of English poetry in India.

Henry Derozio tragically passed away at the age of 22 due to cholera in 1831. Notwithstanding the brevity of his life, Derozio's influence persisted in the form of the ideas he passed on, the learners he motivated, and the literary heritage he transmitted. Presently, he is commemorated as a pioneer who put India on the intellectual map during the nineteenth century.

3. “Freedom to the Slave” (1827)

As the slave departs, the Man returns-Campbell

3.1 Background to the poem ‘Freedom to the Slave’

The poem “Freedom to the Slave” written by Henry Derozio is a poetic testament to the Abolitionist movement against slavery that gained momentum in the 19th century, particularly in Great Britain. Derozio, an Indian poet and educator, may not have been directly involved in the trans-atlantic slave trade, but his work reflects broader international sentiments and the specific characteristics of British anti-slavery attempts in contrast to their American counterparts.

There was a noticeable rise in anti-slavery attitudes throughout the British Empire at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The British government took significant steps in the direction to end the practice of slavery. These actions were motivated by both moral and humanitarian considerations, as well as economic concerns. Within the boundaries of the British Empire, the transatlantic slave trade was made illegal by the Slave Trade Act of 1807, which was a major piece of legislation. This marked the beginning of a series of legislative initiatives that were intended to eradicate the inhumane practice through the implementation of laws and regulations.



The poem written by Derozio during this time period resonates with the prevalent discourse on abolition of slavery that was taking place all across the world. In spite of the fact that the poet was born in India, a region that was not directly involved in the transatlantic slave trade, his work demonstrates a compassionate knowledge of the challenges that were encountered by people who were born into slavery. Through its emphasis on the universal yearning for freedom and human dignity, the poem transforms into a voice of sympathy with the larger international movement against slavery.

There was a considerable difference between the techniques that American abolitionists used, and the attitude that the British adopted to fight against slavery. The British abolitionist movement used a more gradual and legislative approach, in contrast to the American abolitionist movement, which was characterized by a more assertive and direct position. A significant piece of legislation that was passed in 1833 with the intention of freeing slaves in the majority of British colonies was known as the Slavery Abolition Act. This legislation, in addition to establishing a commitment to abolition, also established a system of apprenticeship in an effort to make the transition easier for both former slaves and owners of slaves.

This poem of Derozio can be comprehended when viewed through the lens of this subtle British approach. The poem reflects the intellectual and moral mood of the period, highlighting the common commitment to putting an end to the de-humanising practice of slavery.

The poem, in its essence, crosses geographical boundaries and becomes a part of the worldwide discourse against slavery on a global scale. The words of Derozio capture the zeitgeist of the age when abolitionist movements were gaining strength, echoing the calls for freedom and justice that were spoken throughout that time. In the pursuit of human liberation, the focus placed on freedom serves as a rallying point that brings together a variety of voices within the same cause.

Despite the fact that it is anchored in the specific context of British anti-slavery campaigns, Derozio's poetry also refers to the larger human struggle for dignity and equality. The passion for abolition that was prevalent in the 19th century was not limited to the borders of individual nations; rather, it resonated with the common humanity of individuals living in different continents. The work of Derozio contributes to this global narrative by highlighting the interconnectivity of anti-slavery movements and the universality of the search for freedom.

It may be concluded that "Freedom to the Slave" by Henry Derozio is a literary depiction of the anti-slavery movements that were taking place in the United Kingdom



throughout the 19th century. Despite the fact that the poem was written originally in an Indian context, it is consistent with the greater international attitude against slavery. The composition of Derozio becomes a profound reflection of the delicate strategy that the British government adopted for the abolition of slavery, which was by legislative measures and a slow disintegration of the institution. The poem transcends national boundaries and adds to the global dialogue about justice and freedom, as well as the effort to eradicate the scourge of slavery.

3.2 Critical Analysis of ‘Freedom to the Slave’

Derozio’s ‘Freedom to the Slave’ embodies the Romantic principles of freedom, equality, and fraternity that were strongly influenced by the French Revolution and integrated into English Romanticism. The poem exhibits elements of Byron’s thoughts on the concept of freedom. The concept promotes the intrinsic worth and value of human dignity. Derozio, describes the sense of freedom as the most sublime sentiment. A slave is confined to the authority of his master, but a liberated individual, who is aware of his freedom, no longer submits but elevates both his physical and mental faculties.

The sensation of liberation is also mirrored in the world of nature. The freedom exhibited by phenomena of nature such as trees, rivers, and birds is being contrasted to the freedom enjoyed by human beings. Nature served as a representation of liberty for the English Romantic poets. Derozio also adheres to these standards in order to emphasise the profound feeling of liberation experienced by the slave upon attaining freedom. This poem holds great significance in the realm of Indian English poetry due to its exploration of the themes of freedom and bondage, which were especially relevant during the colonial era in India.

Epigraph

And as the slave departs, the Man returns - Campbell

The epigraph, “As the slave departs, the Man returns” is from Thomas Campbell’s long poem “The Pleasures of Hope”. Thomas Campbell, was a Scottish poet from the 18th century. The poem is about the loss of Warsaw and the downfall of Poland at the hands of oppressors, and a fight for liberty and freedom. Derozio’s use of a line from Campbell’s poem as an epigraph suggests that the present poem is also centred around the theme of freedom from oppression. Derozio uses this phrase as an epigraph to underline the patriotic theme that is present throughout his own collection of poems. The phrase “And as the slave departs, the Man returns” offers a suggestion of the co-existence of two identities within the same human body. These personalities are the imprisoned self and the free self.



As the imprisoned self of the slave disappears, he reclaims his humanity and emerges as a liberated individual. Thus, as soon as the slave fades away within the heart, the free man is able to regain his position.

Stanza 1

“How felt he when he first was told
A slave he ceased to be
How proudly beat his heart, when first
He knew that he was free!”

The opening stanza establishes the core emotional character of the poem. The word “How” establishes a tone of intrigue and anticipation, encouraging readers to connect with the protagonist’s emotional experience. The transition from enslavement to freedom is characterised by a juxtaposition of emotions, ranging from the initial bewilderment to the sense of pride and joy that comes with newfound independence. The use of the poetic device of anaphora and the repeated use of exclamation, highlight the magnitude of these feelings. Derozio uses it to further emphasise the slave’s emotional bewilderment. The sense of liberation revitalises him. As he abandons his position as a slave, his former identity as a slave diminishes, and his true essence as a man is awakened.

Stanza 2

“The noblest feelings of the soul
To glow at once began;
He knelt no more; his thoughts were raised;
He felt himself a man.”

This stanza explores the immense spiritual change that occurs alongside physical liberation. The phrase “noblest feelings of the soul” implies a deep and elevated state of the individual’s core being. The act of ceasing to kneel symbolises the refusal to submit, while the affirmation of masculinity strengthens the method of restoring dignity and self-esteem. He rises to his feet, eliminating the necessity to kneel. Under the condition of enslavement, a slave is obligated to show deference and lower himself/herself before the masters. The act of bending down physically signifies the act of removing one’s own identity or pride in the presence of the masters. In the poem, once the slave attains freedom, he assumes an upright position. This action of standing on his feet signifies regaining his autonomy. As the enslaved individual stands, his ideas are elevated. The phrase refers to the psychological elevation of individuals who were enslaved. The individual, formerly known as a slave, is now liberated.



Stanza 3

“He looked above - The breath of heaven
Around him freshly blew;
He smiled exultingly to see
As the wild birds as they flew,”

In this particular stanza, nature emerges as a key element, serving as a metaphor for the link that the emancipated individual has to the broader world. The phrase “breath of heaven” alludes to a holy and revitalising power, while the imagery of wild birds flying in the air, reaffirms the concept of liberty. The joyful smile of the protagonist conveys both happiness and a feeling of being in harmony with the natural world. The slave raises his head and gets a sense of the wind from above. There is a joyous look on his face as he takes in the sight of the wild birds soaring above him and the stream that is flowing under him. They stand for the liberty that nature provides.

Stanza 4

“He looked upon the running stream
That ‘neath him rolled away;
Then thought on winds and birds, and floods,
And cried, I’m free as they !”

In continuation with an inquiry into the world of nature, a raging stream is interpreted as a metaphor for the passing of time. Derozio uses imagery to depict the emotional state of the enslaved individual. The contemplation of natural phenomena such as winds, birds, and floods broadens the scope and highlights the relationship that the liberated individual has with the elements. Through the triumphant cry, equality with nature is reinforced, and the universality of freedom is brought to attention. In addition to the breezes and the wild birds, there is another aspect of nature that contributes to his feeling of freedom, which is the stream found nearby; freedom is symbolised by the stream that flows without stopping.

The use of simile in the line “I’m free as they!” elucidates the analogy between the internal and external realms. The slave, like the refreshing winds, experiences a sense of liberation. The enslaved individual experiences great joy upon witnessing the wild birds because he now enjoys the ability to go about without any limitations, similar to those free birds.

**Stanza 5**

“Oh freedom ! there is something dear
E’en in thy very name,
That lights the altar of the soul
With everlasting flame.”

This stanza presents a contemplation that combines both emotional and philosophical aspects of the theme of freedom. The inclusion of the term “dear” implies a strong emotional connection to the concept of freedom itself. The imagery of an altar and an endless flame in the stanza conveys a spiritual aspect, symbolising freedom as a sacred and everlasting essence. The personification of freedom, illuminating the sacred place within one’s soul, strengthens the idea of its innate and timeless worth. He asserts that there is a peculiarity inherent in its very nomenclature. It ignites the sacred core of the spirit with an eternal flame. The mere mention of its name is sufficient to continuously invoke the fundamental core of humanity, the essence of the soul.

Stanza 6

“Success attend the patriot sword,
That is unsheathed for thee!
And glory to the breast that bleeds,
Bleeds nobody to be free!”

Derozio urges the patriot wielding the sword to succeed, stressing that freedom-fighting endeavours are worthy of victory. The word “attend” is used in a positive and encouraging way, as if to wish someone well or provide a blessing. A sword that is not sheathed represents readiness and dedication to the cause of freedom. The personification of freedom by “thee” suggests that the sword is drawn in defence of liberty. The link between the patriot’s deeds and the fight for liberty is highlighted. By evoking thoughts of greatness, the act of sacrifice is elevated, giving the impression that the freedom fighter attains a position of great honour. By centering on “breast” as the object of sacrifice, the text takes on a more intimate and personal tone, drawing attention to the mental and physical toll of the fight. The poem’s main idea—that dying for one’s freedom is an honourable and heroic deed—is echoed by the word “free” many times. The addition of the word “nobly” adds weight to the sacrifice’s noble character, highlighting the rightness of dying for freedom. Derozio gives the idea of fighting for one’s freedom and sacrificing one’s self a heroic and patriotic touch. An emotional charge permeates the language, which praises the bravery of those who fight for freedom with the patriot’s sword. The importance of



the fight against oppression and tyranny is emphasised in the poem, which calls for recognition and honour of the sacrifices made for the cause of liberty.

Stanza 7

“Blest be the generous hand that breaks
The chain a tyrant gave,
And, feeling for degraded man,
Gives freedom to the slave.”

Derozio honours the kind and sensitive spirit that supported the process of liberation in these lines, as much as the physical act of breaking chains. This stanza uses affirmative language to highlight the positive and noble character of freedom fighters. The poet’s diction and choice of words support the poem’s central topic, which is admiration and reverence for individuals who fight to end slavery and other forms of tyranny.

According to Derozio, a tyrant is responsible for providing the chains. The oppressor’s role in enslaving is emphasised by focusing on the tyrant. By identifying “a tyrant,” Derozio does double duty: he denounces oppression as an act and holds the oppressor accountable for the pain and suffering that is experienced by the enslaved. This statement defines the end goal, which is to set the slave free. The very definition of the word “Gives” is an act of kindness and generosity. The gift-like presentation of “Freedom” highlights its valuable and transformational character. The theme of the poem, which is the restoration of the fundamental right to freedom of the slaves, is summed up in this sentence.

3.3 Rhyme Scheme and Tone

The poem has 28 lines, which form a single stanza. Every four lines form a quatrain, and are devoted to one specific idea. The only exception, are Lines 9-16, “He looked above... free as they!” wherein 8 lines form a unit. The quatrains adhere to an ABCB rhyme scheme, as also the 8line stanza, when divided into two four-line units. The poem’s conventional rhyme scheme contributes to its rhythm, intensifying its impact on the readers. The regularity of rhyme enhances the sense of unity and coherence, providing an organised and harmonious quality to the poem. The conventional rhyme structure employed in most poems is prevalent in Derozio’s work, enhancing its over-all appeal.

The poet conveys a strong sense of pleasure and triumph in response to being freed. The poem maintains a consistent emotional intensity, particularly in its portrayal of the protagonist’s transition from being enslaved to attaining freedom. Derozio’s tone intensifies towards the conclusion, adopting a passionate and motivational tone, praising those who display the “patriot sword” and sacrifice, in pursuit of liberty.



3.4 Check Your Progress

- i) How does the poet convey the emotional journey of the liberated individual from enslavement to freedom?
- ii) What is the significance of the references to the breath of heaven, wild birds, and the running stream?
- iii) In what ways does the poem explore spiritual and philosophical themes related to freedom?
- iv) How does the poem transition to a more patriotic tone in the final stanzas?

3.5 Summing up

Henry Derozio's poem "Freedom to the Slave" praises the emotional and spiritual transformation of becoming free from slavery. The poem clearly depicts the protagonist's delight and joy upon learning of their freedom. The liberated man awakens spiritually by contemplating nature, especially heaven's breath, wild birds, and a flowing stream. The poem celebrates soul-awakening, rejection of slavery, and humanity. It examines the deep bond between freedom and nature.

The poem's latter portion is patriotic and exhortative, praising those who wield the patriot's sword and bleed nobly for freedom. Derozio honours the generous hands that break subjugation and emphasises empathy and compassion in freeing the downtrodden. The poem's joyful and emotive tone makes it both an individual's hymn to personal liberation and a reflection on the worldwide longing for freedom, particularly in anti-slavery efforts.

4. "The Orphan Girl" (1827)

Derozio, like the Romantic poets, was an idealist, who firmly believed in the profound ability of literature and education to bring about significant change. He employed his poetry as a means to examine and analyse social inequalities, much like the way in which the Romantics constantly addressed the socio-economic issues of their era. Derozio's poetry exhibits his humanitarian values, values which are centered primarily around freedom and dignity for the oppressed and the marginalized.

The poems often advocate for a society that is fair and just, where every person, regardless of their socioeconomic background, can live a life of dignity. Derozio's writings constantly probed societal norms and injustices, challenging ingrained hierarchies and authoritarian mindsets. His poems shed light on the hardships faced by less fortunate individuals and questioned the existing societal structure that perpetuated their pain.



Derozio, as an educator, strongly believed in the profound impact that education can have in bringing about significant changes and transformations. His works often underlined the importance of enlightenment and education as a way to uplift those who are marginalised and oppressed. Through his pursuit of knowledge, he recognised the capacity for societal transformation and the ability of individuals to triumph over repressive circumstances. His poem ‘The Orphan Girl’ can be read in this light.

4.1 Critical Analysis of ‘The Orphan Girl’

Derozio’s poems expressed profound empathy for the oppressed. His works frequently portrayed the human aspect of their challenges, eliciting emotions that aimed to establish a personal connection with readers. His literary efforts were driven by the intention of promoting understanding, empathy, and a shared feeling of unity with individuals who were marginalised or oppressed. He implored society to contemplate its shortcomings and aim towards establishing a more inclusive and empathetic social framework for oppressed individuals. His poems can be understood as an earnest appeal for constructive transformation and a fairer social order.

“She was yet young and fair--but oh she seemed
Marked for much woe in this unpitying world!
Poor friendless wanderer!”

The poet establishes the main character in the opening lines as a youthful and beautiful girl who, despite her external appeal, is depicted as destined for tremendous sorrow in an apathetic society. The tone exhibits empathy towards the protagonist, who is described as a “poor friendless wanderer.” The use of dashes at the conclusion of the stanza leads to a momentary withdrawal, compelling readers to reflect on the gravity of the situation. The juxtaposition between young age and attractive appearance, combined with the expectation of future troubles, establishes the framework for a story that delves into the difficulties experienced by those who are sensitive and vulnerable.

“Her hair was black as a raven’s wing,
Her cheek the tulip’s hue did wear,
Her voice was soft as when night winds sing,
Her brow as a moonbeam fair;
Her sire had joined the wake of war;--
The battle-shock, the shout, and scar
He knew, and gained a glorious grave--
Such is the guerdon of the brave!”



These lines include imagery that is influenced by nature in order to create vivid and romanticised description of the orphaned girl. Within the context of the tragedy, the comparison of her hair to the wing of a raven, and the colour of her cheek to the hue of a tulip brings up an element of beauty. Her voice had a soft and tranquil quality, comparable to the softness of a quiet and calm night wind. Her forehead gleamed like the moon's radiant beams. The initial portion of the poem is indeed gratifying; nevertheless, subsequent to the fifth line, the poet shifts his focus towards the gloomy truth.

A sense of sacrifice and heroism is conveyed through the mention of her father's participation in the war, and the phrase "gained a glorious grave" reflects the conventional glory of battle and valour. As a way of hinting at the unpleasant truth that the family must face, Derozio offers a subtle critique of the way in which society glorifies war and its horrific consequences.

"Her anguished mother's suffering heart
Could not endure a widow's part;
She sunk beneath her soul's distress,
And left her infant parentless."

In the above lines, the attention changes to the mother's suffering and subsequent death, portraying her as a figure who is unable to cope with the sorrow that comes with being a widow. It is important to note that the term "left her infant parentless" emphasises the fragility of the orphaned daughter and lends emotional weight to the story. Derozio explores the emotional toll of grieving and the impact on family dynamics in a sensitive manner, highlighting the persistent nature of pain in the process.

"She hath no friend on this cold, bleak earth,
To give her shelter, a home and a hearth;
Through life's dreary desert alone she must wend,
For alas! the wretched have never a friend!"

These lines intensify the feelings of alienation and hopelessness that the orphaned girl is experiencing because of her situation. The idea of abandonment is reinforced by the fact that she is repeatedly reminded of the harshness of the world and the fact that she does not have any friends. In the context of life, the metaphor of a "dreary desert" connotes a journey that is merciless and devoid of pleasure. The expression "the wretched have never a friend" is a broader remark on the negligence of society and the tendency to ignore the condition of those who are the most vulnerable.



“And should she stray from virtue’s way,
The world will scorn, and its scorn can slay.
Ah! shame hat enough to wring the breast
With a weight of sorrow and guilt oppress’d;
But oh! ‘tis coldly cruel to wound
The bosom whose blood must gush unbound.”

In these lines, a cautionary tone begins to emerge, which warns of the consequences that may occur in the event that the orphaned girl deviates from the standards of virtue that are expected by society. The poet offers a critique of the harsh judgement of society, drawing attention to the fact that its disdain can be fatal. Not only do the terms “shame enough to wring the breast” and “blood must gush unbound” convey a deep emotional and bodily impact, but they also underline the cruelty that is inherent in the act of societal judgement.

“No tear is so bright as the tear that flows
For erring woman’s unpitied woes;
And blest be forever his honored name
Who shelters an orphan from sorrow and shame!”

These concluding lines establish a thoughtful mood, affirming the beauty of tears shed for the troubles of an erring woman. Derozio expresses appreciation for individuals who offer refuge and safeguard orphaned children, highlighting the transformative influence of empathy. The inclusion of the term “blest” enhances the significance of providing refuge to an orphan as a morally upright and commendable action, providing a positive element in contrast to the prevailing themes of pain and neglect.

Henry Derozio’s poem effectively combines the themes of beauty, sacrifice, sorrow, and societal negligence, crafting a moving narrative that prompts readers to contemplate the terrible reality experienced by the orphaned girl. This poem is a captivating examination of human vulnerability in a harsh world, characterised by its rich imagery, emotional depth, and social satire.

4.2 Rhyme Scheme and Tone

The first three lines do not have a rhyme pattern. Lines 4-7 have the ABAB rhyme scheme. The rest of the poem has an AABB rhyme scheme, giving the lines a sense of music and unity. The use of rhymed couplets adds to the lyrical quality of the poem and helps to communicate feelings and thoughts.



The tone of the poem is a mix of sympathy, sadness, and an indirect attack on the way people act in society. The poet writes about the orphaned girl's situation in a caring way, focusing on how young and beautiful she is and how difficult life is for her. Words like "poor," "anguished," and "wretched" are used time and again, which makes one feel sorry for the main character. At the same time, there is criticism of a culture that does not comprehend her woeful situation, particularly in the lines that refer to the society's refusal to forgive her, and the wounds they inflict on her by their harsh judgement. Overall, the tone is emotional, and makes the reader feel and understand the young girl's predicament, and how society treats those who suffer misfortune.

4.3 Check Your Progress

- i) What kinds of feelings and images does the poet evoke through the use of imagery?
- ii) What aspects of societal norms does the poet criticize, especially in the stanzas that caution the orphan girl against deviating from virtue?
- iii) In what ways does the poem reflect Henry Derozio's broader progressive and philosophical perspectives?

4.4 Summing up

Henry Derozio's poem "The Orphan Girl" portrays the tragic fate of a young and beautiful orphan in a hostile and harsh world. The poem introduces the main character, a young girl who suffers despite her beauty and virtue. Her father's participation in the war results in his glorified death, leaving her in the care of a distraught mother who, unable to bear widowhood, succumbs to the misery and dies. The orphaned girl is characterised vividly and romantically as a "poor friendless wanderer" with black hair, tulip-hued cheeks, a sweet voice, and a fair brow. The poem emphasises her loneliness, lack of shelter, and the perilous trip through life's desolate desert. There is a forewarning tone regarding society's judgements, implying that deviation from virtue may result in disdain, with potentially fatal consequences.

The poem conveys the harsh reality of the orphan, who has no friends and receives no attention from society. It finishes with a reflection on the brightness of tears poured for an erring woman's sufferings, as well as an appreciation for those who protect orphans from grief and disgrace. Derozio uses vivid imagery, a cautionary narrative, and emotional depth throughout the poem to elicit empathy for the orphaned girl and to criticise societal neglect. With its romantic overtones, the poem serves as a profound meditation on human vulnerability in the face of societal harshness.



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“Introduction” “My Grandmother’s House” Kamala Das

Shruti Sareen

Structure

1. *Learning Objectives*
2. *Introduction/Biography*
3. *“Introduction” - Analysis*
4. *“My Grandmother’s House” - Analysis*
5. *The Importance/Role of Kamala Das Within Indian Poetry in English*
6. *Bibliography*

1. Learning Objectives

- ◆ To understand and critically analyse the poem in the syllabus.
- ◆ To know about Kamala Das’ life and to be able to contextualise the poem.
- ◆ To have a basic idea of Indian poetry in English, and how Kamala Das’ style of writing changed it.

2. Introduction/Biography

Kamala Das wrote poetry in English, and short stories and novels in Malayalam. In Malayalam, she would write under the pen name “Madhavikutty”, while in English, she wrote under her married name, Kamala Das. To her family and close-friends, she was “Amy”. Towards the end of her life when she converted to Islam, she changed her name to Kamala Surayya.

Kamala Das was born in 1934 in a Nair family in Kerala (Malabar). Her mother’s family was a Brahmin family, having royal connections to kings. They had a very big house in a small village in Kerala. Kamala Das’ mother was also a well-known writer and poet in Malayalam called Balamani Amma. Kamala Das grew up with the sense of being in a family without love or affection, as she was acutely aware of the lack of love between



her parents. She was strongly attached to her grandmother, and this comes through in the poem in the syllabus which is about the grandmother’s house. When Kamala Das was about six years old, the Second World War was still raging, and because of the dangers in Calcutta, her father sent her to live in the ancestral house of her mother in Nalapat in Kerala. For the next few years, Kamala Das grew up with her aunts, grandmother and great grandmother. In her autobiography and memoirs, she writes several times that nobody in her life loved her as much as her grandmother did. In later years of her life and her unhappy marriage, she would often remember this time of her life very fondly, living in the huge house in the village, the freedom it gave her to play, and the love she received from her grandmother.

When Kamala Das was fifteen years old, she was married to a man who was a distant relative. However, Kamala Das soon realised that her husband had married her only for status and financial gain. She felt objectified when a huge marriage with over a thousand guests was arranged with lots of food and dance and display of wealth. Her marriage was not a happy one. She had longed for a soulmate, a companion, with whom she could share intimacy, but was sorely disappointed. She decided that she could not go for a divorce and spoil the old long-standing relation between the two families. Kamala Das had thus decided to find love outside of her marriage. As a married woman, she stayed in many cities such as Calcutta, Delhi and Bombay due to her husband’s transferable job. With him, she had three sons, although their marriage was a loveless one. Kamala started writing poems and short stories, and getting them published. In her final years, she converted to Islam and became Kamala Surayya, for reasons that are not fully known. Kamala Das died in Pune in 2009.

The poem of Kamala Das that we will now read is autobiographical, which means it is based upon her life. This is why we will have to apply her life story in order to understand the poem.

3. “Introduction”

“I don’t know politics but I know the names
Of those in power, and can repeat them like
Days of week, or names of months, beginning with Nehru.
I am Indian, very brown, born in Malabar,
I speak three languages, write in
Two, dream in one.
Don’t write in English, they said, English is



Not your mother-tongue. Why not leave
Me alone, critics, friends, visiting cousins,
Every one of you? Why not let me speak in
Any language I like? The language I speak,
Becomes mine, its distortions, its queernesses
All mine, mine alone.
It is half English, half-Indian, funny perhaps, but it is honest,
It is as human as I am human, don't
You see? It voices my joys, my longings, my
Hopes, and it is useful to me as cawing
Is to crows or roaring to the lions, it
Is human speech, the speech of the mind that is
Here and not there, a mind that sees and hears and
Is aware. Not the deaf, blind speech
Of trees in storm or of monsoon clouds or of rain or the
Incoherent mutterings of the blazing
Funeral pyre. I was child, and later they
Told me I grew, for I became tall, my limbs
Swelled and one or two places sprouted hair.
When I asked for love, not knowing what else to ask
For, he drew a youth of sixteen into the
Bedroom and closed the door, He did not beat me
But my sad woman-body felt so beaten.
The weight of my breasts and womb crushed me.
I shrank Pitifully.
Then ... I wore a shirt and my
Brother's trousers, cut my hair short and ignored
My womanliness. Dress in sarees, be girl
Be wife, they said. Be embroiderer, be cook,
Be a quarreller with servants. Fit in. Oh,
Belong, cried the categorizers. Don't sit
On walls or peep in through our lace-draped windows.
Be Amy, or be Kamala. Or, better
Still, be Madhavikutty. It is time to
Choose a name, a role. Don't play pretending games.
Don't play at schizophrenia or be a
Nympho. Don't cry embarrassingly loud when



Jilted in love ... I met a man, loved him. Call
Him not by any name, he is every man
Who wants. A woman, just as I am every
Woman who seeks love. In him... the hungry haste
Of rivers, in me... the oceans’ tireless
Waiting. Who are you, I ask each and everyone,
The answer is, it is I. Anywhere and,
Everywhere, I see the one who calls himself I
In this world, he is tightly packed like the
Sword in its sheath. It is I who drink lonely
Drinks at twelve, midnight, in hotels of strange towns,
It is I who laugh, it is I who make love
And then, feel shame, it is I who lie dying
With a rattle in my throat. I am sinner,
I am saint. I am the beloved and the
Betrayed. I have no joys that are not yours, no
Aches which are not yours. I too call myself I.”

3.1 Critical Analysis

This poem was included in Kamala Das’ first collection, *Summer in Calcutta*, which was published in 1965. In ‘Introduction’, Kamala Das depicts or creates her own identity as a bilingual, dark-skinned woman of her times, that is, the 1960’s.

Being a woman, she writes that she does not know much about politics, but she has memorised the names of the politicians, she can repeat them like days of the week or like the months, beginning with Nehru. This shows the ‘good’, obedient woman according to patriarchy, she does not know anything about active politics and cannot participate in them, but she has dutifully learnt by heart the names of all the important figures.

She moves to other aspects of her identity. She is Indian, dark-skinned, and born in Malabar (Kerala). She knows how to speak three languages (English, Hindi, and her mother-tongue Malayalam), she writes in two (English and Malayalam), and she dreams in one. She does not attempt to pin down and describe the unfettered language of her dreams. They tell her not to write in English because English is not her mother tongue. She protests and asks everyone—critics, friends, visiting cousins why they can’t leave her alone and let her speak in whichever language she wants to speak or/and write. This was the time just after Independence and there were debates raging about whether English should be considered an Indian language or not, whether Indians should write in English or study English or not. They want her to write in her Indian mother-tongue which is



supposed to be her identity, instead of getting influenced by Western ideas. She claims and owns the language she speaks—she says it is her own and only hers, with its distortions, queerness—here she refers to her individual style of speaking, her tones, her pronunciation, her accent, and whatever is unique to her or may be considered weird. She writes that her language may be funny, half English, half Indian, perhaps she does not know it very well, (here she adopts the naïve persona of a partially-educated woman who does not know many things) but it is honest, and it is as human as she is, and therefore, her language is her. Her language is her voice, through which she expresses her dreams, joys, hopes, and longings which are the most intimate and personal things. To her, the language she speaks is personal and intimate and hers alone, because through it, she conveys her deepest and honest emotions. She writes that her language is as important and as necessary for her as cawing is to crows, or roaring to lions. It is human speech—speech that sees, hears, and is aware. Here, she tries to gain agency and to remove her passive identity as a woman who does not know much about either politics or language. She portrays herself as a thinking being, who sees and hears everything, and therefore, is aware. It is not like the deaf and blind incoherent mutterings of trees in the storm, or monsoon clouds, or the rain, or the blazing funeral pyre whose speech does not mean or convey anything.

She was a child, and then she became tall, reached puberty, her “limbs swelled and one or two places sprouted hair.” They told her that she had grown up. Again, she is the innocent, passive woman, she does not know anything about puberty. They tell her that she is growing up so she accepts it. When she asked for love, thinking that it was the normative thing to ask for, they “drew a youth of sixteen into the bedroom” and left her alone with him. She writes that he did not beat her but her body felt so sad as if it had been beaten. This is one of the most famous lines in all of Indian poetry in English. She felt crushed by the weight of her own breasts and womb—she is crushed by her own femininity and gender. It seems to be oppressing and punishing her. She shrank from him and retreated into herself. Here the difference is between love and sex—she asks for love, but he does not know how to give her that.

Next, she shows us the difference between who she actually is, and what role society wants her to play. She wore a shirt and her brother’s trousers, cut her hair short, and ignored the womanly, feminine role that society and tradition expected her to adopt. They told her to wear saris, to be a proper girl and a proper wife. They told her to do needlework and embroidery, to cook, to quarrel with servants like all middle-class memsahibs do. They wanted her to fit into the role or niche that they had carved out for her and which all women were expected to fit into, and to diligently do what they were supposed to do. They want her to belong somewhere within the categories that they have created.



They told her not to sit on walls or to peep in through curtained windows. These are things that a boy does or a child can do, but a grown girl is supposed to act dainty and polite, and to show decorum and decency. They told her to be Amy, or Kamala, or Madhavikutty, these are all different identities of Kamala Das—her intimate friends called her Amy, and in her writing, she was known by the name Madhavikutty; kutty meaning younger sister in Malayalam. They told her to take one identity and to stick to it—not to keep flitting between different identities. They told her to stop playing games and pretending as if she was crazy—schizophrenic—and did not understand what to do or what she was being asked to do. They told her to suppress her emotions and not to cry so much if a man abandoned or deserted her. This is the role which they want her to play, literally as if it is a role in a play, in theatre.

In the final part of the poem, she tells us that she met a man and she loved him. She writes that this man is every man, we do not need to give him a name. Like all men, he is hungry (sexually), he wants, and like all women, she desires love. He is seen as the river, flowing swiftly and rushing, while she is the ocean, which patiently waits for the river without tiring. Again, the woman is the passive ocean and her virtue is to wait patiently for the man, while the man has all the gushing speed of rivers, actively making his way towards the woman and pursuing her. When she asks these men who they are: they say it is ‘I’. ‘I’ shows agency, ‘I’ shows being an active subject, not a passive object, ‘I’ shows that you are so well known that you do not even need to name yourself. This is the identity of all men. The man is compared to a sword in its sheath. The pain is like a sword—pointed, sharp, hurtful, brutal, and, violent. However, all these properties are hidden as it calmly lies within its sheath. These qualities are not immediately shown to anyone but are safely packed away. Now, she says, she drinks ‘lonely drinks’ all alone by herself at midnight, in hotels, in strange towns. She is breaking free from the role of a woman. A woman is not supposed to drink, to travel alone to new towns, stay in hotels all alone, and stay up till midnight. She will be considered weak, incapable and fragile. Her character, morality and chastity will come into question. She defiantly breaks out of all these normative roles. She laughs, she loves, and she feels shame. She is in the subject position, she is active not passive, and expresses her own emotions. She is both the sinner and the saint. In different ways, she has both sinned and acted saintly, according to society. She accepts both these identities. She is the beloved and the one who is betrayed. Perhaps, there is no difference. She is both. She writes that all her joys and aches are universal, they are not just her own. She feels emotions unique to her, she is in the subject position, but she also feels the universality of these, how these are common to all human beings and bind us together. At the end, she says that she too calls herself ‘I’. Like all the men call themselves ‘I’, she does too, as she is equal to them and has her own agency.



The tension of the poem 'Introduction' lies in the difference between the identity that is given to her, and the one she wants to carve and create for herself. The entire poem is a constant tussle between the active and passive roles of a woman. How she must introduce herself is the question—what is her identity?

3.2 Themes

The main theme of the poem is the role of a woman—whether it is active or passive, whether it is something given and prescribed by society, or something that we create ourselves. Kamala Das constantly protests and tries to break free from all roles given to her. She shows us that society expects women to be innocent and naïve—who do not know anything about politics and who also do not have full mastery over language. She demands full agency in language—her right to choose her own language, speech, to express the way she wants to express herself, to depict her honest emotions. She says that nobody has the right to dictate to her what language she speaks in, writes in, or dreams in. Here, another theme is the debate between the usage of English that was prevalent in India at that time. They wanted her to give up Western influences, and to embrace her Indian identity. She then portrays the sorrow and hurt that men inflict upon women—this is another major theme of the poem. The woman wants love but the man only knows sex. He understands only the physical intimacy, not the emotional aspect. She then returns to the same themes in the stanzas that follow. The theme of role-playing and fitting in, the tension between what she wants and what is expected from her—from the kinds of clothes to wear to the kinds of activities she does. She is constantly policed—constantly reminded that she must be at all times obedient, dutiful, diligent and passive. However, she sees, hears, and is aware. The end of the poem sees her reclaiming her agency and the active subject-position of the "I", equal to that of any man. The man's agency is shown by the image of rivers, and the woman's passive role by the patient ocean. However, she breaks free of all conventions, she becomes a radical and liberated woman, drinking alone at midnight in strange places.

Check Your Progress

- i) What is the significance of the title 'Introduction'?
- ii) In what ways does she adopt the persona that society expects from her?
- iii) In what ways does she defy and go against the prescribed norms?
- iv) What are the different roles of men and women?
- v) How does she feel when left alone with the man and why?
- vi) Why are men described as "sword in a sheath"?
- vii) How does she reclaim the agency of the 'I'? Why is this important?



4. “My Grandmother’s House”

“There is a house now far away where once
I received love..... That woman died,
The house withdrew into silence, snakes moved
Among books, I was then too young
To read, and my blood turned cold like the moon
How often I think of going
There, to peer through blind eyes of windows or
Just listen to the frozen air,
Or in wild despair, pick an armful of
Darkness to bring it here to lie
Behind my bedroom door like a brooding
Dog...you cannot believe, darling,
Can you, that I lived in such a house and
Was proud, and loved.... I who have lost
My way and beg now at strangers’ doors to
Receive love, at least in small change?”

4.1 Critical Analysis

Which house does the poet talk about at the beginning of the poem? Who is the woman she refers to? The house she talks of is the Nalapat house, the ancestral house of her mother’s side of the family where her grandmother, aunts, and great grandmother all lived. It is clear from the introduction that the deepest love that Kamala ever received was neither from her parents, nor from her husband, but from her grandmother. Thus, her grandmother’s death was a bitter shock to Kamala.

Now, after her grandmother’s death, when the great grandmother has been shifted to another house, and the whole house lies empty and forlorn, she thinks of the snakes that must now be slithering through the books in those same rooms which she had loved, lived in; those same books which had formed such a big part of her as she grew up in a world of her own, away from family. She had been in this house from a time when she had been too young to know how to read. These books had formed who she was, her unconventional ways of thinking, her ideas about the world. Snakes were commonly seen as evil or as a bad omen in South India. Now, she thinks that snakes must be slithering among those lonely and desolate books.

Thinking about this makes her blood turn as cold as the moon. The moon is associated with cold, whereas the sun is associated with heat. Blood turning cold is also a sign



of death, so it is as if something dies within her, thinking of this beloved house where nobody lives now and where nobody goes. The windows of the house have been shut like the eyes of the dead are shut. It is as if the house itself is dying. Even the air outside the house is described as frozen. But she longs to return. The metaphor of the blood turning cold as the moon is a metaphor which Kamala Das uses to describe her feelings. Every image in the poem is symbolic; the shut windows of the house do not simply mean that windows are shut, they also imply how lonely and desolate the entire house is, as lonely as Kamala herself, after her grandmother's death.

She describes her own emotion at her grandmother's death as "wild despair". These are very strong and powerful words that she uses to portray her extreme desperation, loss and anxiety at her grandmother's death. She longs to go back to her grandmother's house because in her lonely life, in her loveless marriage, the house still is a symbol of warmth and affection and love. She wants to go and bring some darkness from that house to her present, married house. Even the darkness of that house is loved, it makes her feel comfortable. The darkness of that house, that is, the sadness and the emptiness and the loneliness—even that is precious to her. She wants to bring it to her present house like a "brooding dog". A dog is very faithful, loyal and attached to human beings. The same way Kamala is attached to her grandmother's house. She is even attached to the darkness of the house. The darkness of the house is also shown to be intimately attached to Kamala. Each image and symbol used is actually a metaphor to describe a feeling.

Now she ruefully and nostalgically looks back to the days when her life was good, when she was loved and cherished, and was proud of it. Now, it is even hard for her to believe that once she was so loved. She was so precious to someone. Now, she has lost her way, and things in her life have changed. Now her life is lonely and without love. Now she goes to the doors of strangers like a beggar for some love (this refers to her extramarital affairs with other men), and becomes happy even if she gets a little bit. She feels happy to receive love even in "small change", the way beggars receive their coins.

5. The Importance/Role of Kamala Das Within Indian Poetry in English

Poetry in the colonial era tried to imitate the British style of poetry in terms of language. Flowery, ornamental and clichéd words were used. The language as we generally speak it, was not the language of poetry. The language of poetry sounded very archaic and traditional. This kind of English was not spoken in India at all. So, for the first time, some Indian poets began to write in Indian English, in a language that was closer to the



language of the people. The earlier poems were very verbose—they used too many words for saying the same thing. The new poetry was tighter in terms of diction. Kamala Das was one such poet. She was the first major woman poet writing after Independence. In one of her main poems, ‘Introduction’, she has written of how the knowledge of three languages: English, Malayalam, and Hindi changed her poetry. Having stayed in Calcutta for many years, she could also understand a little Bengali. She said all these languages were her own and she regarded English also as her own Indian language, not as a foreign language. Some of the other main male poets were Nissim Ezekiel, Dom Moraes, Adil Jussawalla and A K Ramanujan. These poets also changed the subjects and themes of poetry, apart from the language. Earlier the themes were colonial or nationalist in nature. Women’s poetry was mostly about legends and religion, or singing the praise of peasants. When they talked about love also, it was clichéd, they did not explore the subject deeply.

Kamala Das is considered to be a game-changer and a path-breaker in many ways as a woman poet. She treated the subject of love with self-awareness and complexity. She went beyond the socio-realist mode of the earlier writers, and explored the lonely and tormented human mind—its guilt, pain, and lack of love. She travelled from the outer drama of social events to the inner drama of emotions. She longed for love all throughout her life as we have seen, and she was very honest about her guilt and pain in her writing. This mode of writing for which Kamala Das is known is called the “confessional mode” of poetry. She was uninhibited and wrote exactly what she felt.

As seen in her life, she loved her childhood in rural Kerala village much more than her urban life later in Calcutta and Delhi. This comes through in her poems. Like we saw in her poem ‘My Grandmother’s House’, she idealises childhood and is nostalgic about it. She loves the rural people in Kerala as compared to the adult urban world full of deceit, where no real depth of love or intimacy can be found. This can be seen in her writing also. In her poems as well as stories, urban women are mostly shown as being torn by conflict, and desperate for real love, whereas the rural and poor women are shown as being more open and frank, and openly critical of British racism, and also of exploitation by caste, class and patriarchy.

Despite the fact that she is mostly a poet of the heart, and talks of the lack of love and the pain, guilt and trauma surrounding it, she also has a social conscience. She writes that she speaks on behalf of millions who cannot, and who are silenced. She always has sympathy for the poor. She writes against patriarchy, rebelling against the roles of a wife and cook. She has an intense desire to identify herself with the silenced victims of oppression, both patriarchal and political.



Although she rejects the typical role of women as wife and cook and so on, she writes that she is not an extreme feminist because she cannot imagine a world without men, and she does not want to replace male supremacy with female supremacy.

Although she was against tradition in many ways, but poet, scholar, writer and translator K. Satchidanandan writes that Kamala Das was also influenced in her poetry in many ways: by the rebellious spirituality of the Bhakti women poets, and by the eroticism of Tamil Sangam poetry. In her empathy with the downtrodden and her hatred of violence, she was influenced by the poetry of her mother, Balamani Amma. The sadness and melancholy, and the larger vision of life seen in her poems may be an influence of her great-uncle (her mother's uncle Nalapat Narayana Menon, who was also a poet).

Kamala Das in some sense is known as the poet of the body, of eroticism. However, she also looks at spirituality and she often sees the body as an obstacle for attaining that spirituality. In this, she may have been influenced by the Bhakti poets. Towards the end of her life, she started writing on matters of death and spirituality. She felt she could gain spirituality and union with god through death, especially by drowning and immersing herself within the formlessness in water.

Check Your Progress

- i) Why is her childhood and her grandmother important to Kamala Das?
- ii) What is meant by the phrase “in small change” in the last line of the poem?
- iii) What are Kamala Das' main subjects of writing?
- iv) What is her writing style? Is it different from the poets who wrote before her?
- v) What is Kamala Das as a poet mainly known for?

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(i) “An Indian Love Song”
(ii) “In Salutation to the Eternal Peace”
Sarojini Naidu

Shruti Sareen

Structure

1. *Learning Objective*
2. *Introduction*
3. *“An Indian Love Song” - Analysis*
4. *“In Salutation to the Eternal Peace” - Analysis*
5. *Bibliography*

1. Learning Objective

- ◆ To critically analyse the poems prescribed with emphasis on the poetic techniques, themes, and literary devices.

2. Introduction

Sarojini Naidu (13 February 1879 – 2 March 1949) a poet, and a political activist, was born in Hyderabad in an affluent Bengali family. Her father Aghorenath Chattopadhyay was the principal of Nizam’s college, Hyderabad. She received her education from University of Madras, King’s College, London, and Girton College, Cambridge.

During her stay in England, she actively participated in the suffragist movement, and strongly advocated for the right to vote for women. Upon her return to India she was drawn to the Congress party’s struggle for India’s independence and became an ardent follower of Gandhi’s non-violent form of protest. She was appointed as the first Indian woman president of the Congress in 1925. She was imprisoned for her anti-British activities in 1930, 1932, and 1942-43. When India achieved independence, she became the first Governor of United Provinces (present day Uttar Pradesh) and continued to remain in that position till her death in 1949.



Naidu started writing poetry when she was only twelve years old. She was known as the “Nightingale of India” because of the colour, imagery and lyrical quality of her poetry. Her work includes both children’s poems and others written on more serious themes such as patriotism, tragedy, and God. Her most nationalist collection of poems is *The Bird of Time* (1912). Her other well-known collections include *The Golden Threshold* (1905), *The Broken Wing* (1917), and *The Sceptred Flute* (1928).

3. “An Indian Love Song”

“He

Lift up the veils that darken the delicate moon
of thy glory and grace,
Withhold not, O love, from the night
of my longing the joy of thy luminous face,
Give me a spear of the scented keora
guarding thy pinioned curls,
Or a silken thread from the fringes
that trouble the dream of thy glimmering pearls;
Faint grows my soul with thy tresses’ perfume
and the song of thy anklets’ caprice,
Revive me, I pray, with the magical nectar
that dwells in the flower of thy kiss.

She

How shall I yield to the voice of thy pleading,
how shall I grant thy prayer,
Or give thee a rose-red silken tassel,
a scented leaf from my hair?
Or fling in the flame of thy heart’s desire the veils that cover my face,
Profane the law of my father’s creed for a foe
of my father’s race?
Thy kinsmen have broken our sacred altars and slaughtered our sacred kine,
The feud of old faiths and the blood of old battles sever thy people and mine.

He

What are the sins of my race, Beloved,
what are my people to thee?



And what are thy shrines, and kine and kindred,
what are thy gods to me?
Love reckes not of feuds and bitter follies,
of stranger, comrade or kin,
Alike in his ear sound the temple bells
and the cry of the muezzin.
For Love shall cancel the ancient wrong
and conquer the ancient rage,
Redeem with his tears the memoried sorrow
that sullied a bygone age.”

3.1 Critical Summary

The poem “An Indian Love Song” by Sarojini Naidu explores the theme of love, and longing in the Indian context, wherein social divisions based on religion, class and caste play a very significant role. The passionate language is quite poetic and flowery, with lots of images and metaphors. It is also very sensuous. It is a little verbose, that is, it uses too many words, in keeping with the older style of writing poetry. Modern day poetry tries to be more economical with words. The poem is structured in the form of a dialogue between the speaker (He) and his beloved (She).

Stanza 1: The speaker pleads with the beloved to reveal her “luminous face” by removing the veil that hides her “glory and grace.” Her hair is the veil while her face is the moon. Naidu uses these symbols and metaphors throughout the poem. The speaker is madly in love, and in the tradition of all lovers asks for something which belongs to her, to keep as a token; such as the scented keora flower in her hair, or a silken thread from the fringes of her dress. The speaker’s soul is so totally bewitched by the scent of her hair, and the musical tinkle of her anklet bells that, he feels faint and asks her for a kiss which, like a flower with magical nectar will revive him. Sensuous or sensory images, that is, relating to the five senses, abound in this stanza: “delicate moon”, “luminous face”, “scented keora”, “silken thread”, “glimmering pearls”, “tresses’ perfume”, “song of thy anklets caprice”, “flower of thy kiss”. The rhyme scheme is ABCB where alternating line-endings: “grace” and “face”, “curls” and “pearls”, “caprice” and “kiss”, rhyme with each other.

Stanza 2: The beloved, in response, gives her reasons which prevent her from complying with his request. If she encourages his profession of love by giving him a “rose-red silken tassel” from her dress, or a “scented leaf from her hair” as a token, she would be betraying “her father’s creed.” She asks how, knowing that he is viewed by her people as a “foe” of her race, she can throw her hair in the fire of his desire/passion. This is literal as well as metaphorical. Throwing her hair into the fire is almost like burning or



destroying the hair. At the same time, it will fan the flames of his passion, as when we throw something in the fire to make it burn brighter and stronger. She reminds him of the historical conflicts and divisions between their communities. She asks him how she can go against the values and tenets of her community, her father's community, for someone who is an enemy of that community. She says that his people have broken the sacred altars of her religion and have killed people of her community. The old enmity between their faiths, and the hostility due to old battles separate her people from his. In this stanza the rhyme scheme is ABCBDED, ending in a couplet, FF.

Stanza 3: The speaker asks the beloved to look beyond the sins of his race and the differences between their cultures. He believes that love transcends feuds and divisions. He believes that love can heal past wounds and redeem the sorrows and unite them despite the historical conflicts. He asks her what sins the people of his race have personally committed against her, or why her gods or her people should matter to him. He asks her not to let the historical divisions between their communities tarnish their individual and personal relation. He says that love does not take feuds into consideration, whether of strangers or friends or family. The bells of the temple and the cry of the muezzin are equal in the lover's ear. He says that love will heal everything, it will cancel the ancient wrongs, and love will win over anger, rage, and enmity. The tears of the lovers will redeem past injuries. Here the rhyme scheme is ABCB, where alternating line-endings rhyme and this is maintained throughout the stanza.

3.2 The Love Poetry of Sarojini Naidu

Almost one-third of Sarojini Naidu's oeuvre (total written output) comprises of love poetry. She had knowledge of traditions of both Persian as well as Sanskrit poetry which have love as a major theme, and this influenced Sarojini Naidu. She asserts that love can transcend the boundaries of caste, creed, and colour. This is also autobiographical as it is well known that she married Dr. Naidu for love, despite family and caste opposition. He did not belong to her caste, he was a non-Brahmin. He was ten years her senior. Being a Bengali brought up in Hyderabad, she married a Hyderabadi, not a Bengali. Thus, the poem 'Indian Love Song' also has an autobiographical basis. Her love poetry also extends to the religious and to god. She deals with both the aspects of love—union and separation—in its various moods of despair, sorrow, hope, ecstasy, etc. She explores various love situations—separation, jealousy and suspicion. Her love poems are also connected to the mystical experience. Her love poetry is characterized by intensity and immediacy and draws both on the Hindu tradition of love-poetry and the Sufi Muslim tradition. Her attitude to love is typically feminine and is characterized by a total self-surrender of the beloved to her object of love. The beloved may be the divine, the supreme, or Krishna,



the Eternal lover. Her love poetry is also influenced by the classical and medieval love poetry, devotional and religious verse of India. Much of Sarojini’s love-poetry is rooted in Indian folk-lore, myth and legend. There is a mystic strain as well as a sensuous strain in her love poetry.

Check Your Progress

- i) Why is Sarojini Naidu’s language “sensuous”? Give examples from the poem.
- ii) Why is the beloved hesitant to respond to the lover’s advances?
- iii) “Or fling in the flame of thy heart’s desire the veils that cover my face”. This line is both literal and metaphorical. Explain.
- iv) What does the speaker say about love and enmity and how does he justify his love for the beloved?
- v) What were the influences behind Sarojini Naidu’s love poetry?

4. “In Salutation to the Eternal Peace”

“Men say the world is full of fear and hate,
And all life’s ripening harvest-fields await
The restless sickle of relentless fate.

But I, sweet Soul, rejoice that I was born,
When from the climbing terraces of corn
I watch the golden orioles of Thy morn.

What care I for the world’s desire and pride,
Who know the silver wings that gleam and glide,
The homing pigeons of Thine eventide?

What care I for the world’s loud weariness,
Who dream in twilight granaries Thou dost bless
With delicate sheaves of mellow silences?
Say, shall I heed dull presages of doom,
Or dread the rumoured loneliness and gloom,
The mute and mythic terror of the tomb?



For my glad heart is drunk and drenched with Thee,
O inmost wind of living ecstasy!
O intimate essence of eternity!”

4.1 Critical Summary

The influence of the British Romantics on Sarojini Naidu can be seen as she gains mystical experience of transcendental reality through the fleeting joys of Nature. Nature to her is a revelation of the cosmic being. Some of Naidu’s poems have the concept of Indian *Riti* poetry where every element of Nature bears the presence of the Infinite. The poem “In Salutation to the Eternal Peace” by Sarojini Naidu conveys a sense of appreciation for nature through which she finds spiritual connection with the eternal, and finds solace and joy in it. The poem comprises of six tercets (three-line stanzas). All the three lines of the stanza rhyme with each other, the next stanza employs a different rhyme. Thus, we can say the rhyme scheme is AAA BBB CCC DDD

Stanza 1: The poem begins with a belief that is shared by many people about the general condition of the world we live in; the belief that the world is filled with “fear and hate.” All the beauty of the world, like “ripening harvest-fields” must come to a cruel and dreary end. Fate is “relentless” and “restless”; it affects everyone, and it never stops. She employs alliteration, that is, repetition of the same sound: e.g., “r”, “l”, and “s” in “restless sickle of relentless fate”. We see a repetition of “f”, “r” and “l” in the first line “world is full of fear”. Similarly, we see a repetition of “r” and “l” in the second line of the stanza.

Stanza 2: However, the speaker addressing herself as the “sweet Soul,” expresses joy at being born in a world that is believed to be filled with fear and hate. She finds joy in observing the golden orioles of the morning from the “climbing terraces of corn.” There is a marked difference between the tone of doom and gloom in the first stanza, fields being cut, and the joy and rejoicing at the sight of the golden orioles in the second stanza. She calls her soul “sweet,” and uses imagery of sunrise, brightly-coloured songbirds and “morn.” This symbolizes her focus on the beginning of life, rather than the end. Instead of resenting the fact that she must die someday, she revels in the fact that she gets to live at all, “rejoicing” that she was “born.” Even the image of “climbing terraces” depicts a kind of ascension, rather than being downcast. Again, we see the repetition of “s” sound in the first line in “sweet soul and even in “rejoice”. We see a repetition of “c” and “r” in the second line, and of the “l” sound in the third.

Stanza 3 and 4: The mood of rejoicing in the beauty of nature, and experiencing the divine presence reflected in it, in the earlier stanza, continues in these stanzas as well. She is unaffected by the “world’s desire and pride,” and its “loud weariness.” Two beautiful images capture the divine presence in the evening. First, the image of homing pigeons



gliding against the backdrop of the setting sun, whose wings gleam silver in the fading light, and second, the “twilight granaries” blessed by “mellow silences.” We see the repetition of “d” in “world’s desire and pride”, “l” and “g” in “silver wings that gleam and glide”, and of “n” in “homing pigeons of thine eventide”. In “world’s loud weariness”, we see the repetition of “w”, “l”, and “d”, and of “l” and “s” in “delicate sheaves of mellow silences”.

Stanza 5: The speaker now poses a fundamental question, which is rhetorical in nature, and leads us back to the beginning of the poem. Is life all about “fear and hate”, “dull presages of doom”, “rumoured loneliness and gloom”, and the “mute mythic terror of the tomb”, or is there much more to it? The speaker contests this widely held belief, and says that, loneliness and gloom is only “rumoured”, and is not really so. She goes on to say that the terror of the tomb, that is, the fear of death, is mute and mythic. It is a myth, it is not real. It is mute, it cannot speak. This is how she makes the joy of life win over gloom and death, keeping her focus on the here and now, in the joys of this world, instead of worrying unduly about death and the negative aspects of life. Here too, we see the repetition of “d” in “heed dull presages of doom / or dread”, of “l” in “loneliness and gloom”, and of “m” and “t” in “mute and mythic terror of the tomb”.

Stanza 6: She experiences a living ecstasy through her connection with the divine as her heart is intoxicated and saturated with the divine presence. The fact that this ecstasy is an “inmost wind” shows that it is a spirit within her that she holds onto. She is “drunk and drenched” with it, with the divine as experienced through nature. It fills her “glad heart” up completely, and makes her grateful to be alive. The “intimate essence of eternity” is her private knowledge that death is not scary, but something we should view merely as an extension of life. Eternity has the same great feeling as life does, in her view, and it is a view that we can all embrace. We see the repetition of “n” and “d” in “drunk and drenched”, of “n” in “inmost wind of living. We also see the repetition of the “I” in the last two lines “O inmost wind of living ecstasy/O intimate essence of eternity” and of course the marked repetition of the “O”. In alliteration, when consonant sounds are repeated, it is called consonance, but when vowel sounds like “I” and “o” are repeated, it is called assonance.

Check Your Progress

- i) What is Sarojini Naidu’s attitude to life and death that comes through in the poem?
- ii) How does she experience the Divine, and how does this help her navigate life?
- iii) Explain alliteration and give a few examples from the poem.



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**“A Poem for My Mother”
“The Strange Affair of Robin S. Ngangom”
Robin Ngangom**

Shruti Sareen

Structure

1. *Learning Objectives*
2. *Introduction/Biography*
3. *Themes and Style of Writing: Robin Ngangom and Other North-East Poets*
4. *“A Poem for Mother” - Analysis*
5. *“The Strange Affair of Robin S. Ngangom” - Analysis*

1. Learning Objectives

- ◆ To understand Robin Ngangom’s poems prescribed in the syllabus.
- ◆ To understand the larger context within which he wrote the poem.
- ◆ To locate the themes and style of writing of major North East Poets.

2. Introduction/Biography

Robin Ngangom was born in Manipur in 1959. He writes that the Manipur where he spent his childhood was a very different Manipur in the sense that his mother protected him from all the violence and evil, and he grew up in his mother’s love, without much idea of the killings in the region and other problems. Ngangom’s poem which we have in the course is also written for his mother. He went to study English literature in Shillong, and later started teaching there in North East Hill University, a central university. Shillong is a town with very good schools and colleges set up by the Christian missionaries, and slowly there emerged what is called a “Shillong group of poets”. Some of these poets were Desmond Kharmawphlang, Kynpham Nongkynrih, Robin Ngangom, Ananya Guha. Anjum Hasan also lived and wrote in Shillong (at present in Bengaluru). All these poets were not necessarily from Shillong—but they all grew and blossomed there, got to know each other, and worked there.



All these Shillong poets wrote in English. The local language of Meghalaya is Khasi. Khasi was always an oral language and had no written script until the Welsh came and gave it a script. Thus, even vocabulary is not very developed in Khasi and unfortunately, Khasi poetry is not something very major. Also, because it's a local language and very few people speak it, many poets preferred to write in English. This also happened in some other states of the North-East.

3. Themes and Style of Writing: Robin Ngangom and Other North-East Poets

Although the North-East is home to hundreds of different tribes, and many different cultures, there is some amount of similarity in the poetry of this region. Some of the common themes are: 1.) there is love for their land and for nature, 2.) violence, war, insurgency etc., 3.) the myths and folktales and oral literatures of the region, and 4.) the corruption by government officials and degradation of the environment in the name of development.

Robin Ngangom initially used to write romantic poems during his teenage years, but soon he realised that he must face the violence and other issues overtaking his land. He later said it is not possible to write private or “confessional” poetry, talking only about oneself when the land you are living in is embroiled in political and socio-cultural issues with far-reaching ramifications. Thus, he can only write on the behalf of all the people of the land. This is also known as “the personal is the political”. When you talk about your reality, you talk about the reality of your whole community. The personal and the collective becomes one. It is not like the poet is sitting in some far-away ivory tower writing poems. No, the poet is very much connected to his land and his fellow human beings.

This is why it is also said that these Shillong group of poets and others from the North East of India write from the heart, from what they feel. The poets from North-East cannot write an intellectual poetry where they just show off their literary skills because of the reality that confronts them. The words most often used in Manipuri poetry, says Robin Ngangom, are- “bullets”, “blood”, “mother”, “the colour red”, and also “flowers”. Their poetry comes from a need to share their experiences and their reality. Nobody covers the news from the remote regions of the north east. Nobody is taught of their history in schools. The oral traditions of various tribes and their languages, myths and cultures are going to perish. The poet of the North East needs to voice their reality. Poets from the North East of India have often been neglected by poets of mainland India because their poetry is one of feeling, not of intellect or style, and also because their poetry is often



political. Just as the North East feels neglected by mainland India, so do the North East poets feel marginalised as compared to the mainland Indian poets. But in recent years, this division is slowly being erased.

- 1. Land and Nature:** Their beloved hills, forests, the rains and the natural beauty of the north east is intimately tied up with the way of life of the people. They are very attached to their land. They are aware of the natural beauty. And moreover, this is their land. The livelihoods, myths and rituals of these tribes are tied up with the natural surroundings. They do not want their hills and natural surroundings to be spoilt, not even because of “development”.
- 2. War and Violence:** There is a lot of violence in Manipur. On one side are the militant groups demanding freedom from India on the other side are the Indian Army soldiers. The common people are caught amidst the violence from both sides. As also mentioned above, bullets, blood, and red are the most common words in Manipuri poetry. Some women have tried to form groups and protest peacefully by trying to resolve the conflict between the militants and the army. But for the poets who have grown up hearing the sounds of guns and bombs and seeing bloodshed, it is necessary to write about it.
- 3. Myths and Folklore:** Many North-East languages such as Khasi had only oral traditions. All their myths, legends, and folktales, their traditions and cultural traditions had never been written. So, it became the task of the poets to preserve this. Robin Ngangom is Manipuri, but lives and works in Shillong, and has the advantage of dual outlook. Many times he mixes the Khasi and Meitei myths leading to new and innovative forms.
- 4. Corruption:** Another theme in the work of North East poets after Independence has been that of corruption amongst government officials, when they don't do their work properly and instead take bribes etc., and in the name of development, spoil their fresh and pristine landscape and hills.

4. “A Poem for Mother”

“Palem Apokpi, mother who gave birth to me,
to be a man how I hated leaving home
ten years ago. Now these hills
have grown on me.
But I'm still your painfully shy son
with a ravenous appetite,



the boy who lost many teeth after
emptying your larder. And
I am also your dreamy-eyed lad
who gave you difficult times
during his schooldays, romancing
every girl he wanted, even
when he still wore half-pants.

You told your children that
money and time do not grow on trees, and
I could never learn to keep up with them.
It isn't that I've forgotten
what you've come to mean to me
though I abandoned much and left
so little of myself for others
to remember me.

I know how you work your fingers to the bone
as all mothers do, for unmarried sons,
ageing husband and liberated daughters-in-law.
Worried about us, for a long time
your lips couldn't burgeon in a smile,
lines have furrowed your face and
first signs of snow are on your hair.

Today, as on every day you must have risen
with temple bells before cockcrow, swept
the floors and after the sacred bath
cooked for the remainder of us. I can see you
returning every dusk from the bazaar,
your head laden with baskets.

Must you end toiling forever?
I'm sorry Palem.
I've inherited nothing



of your stable ways or culinary skills.
Forgive me, for all your dreams
of peace during your remnant days
I turned out to be a small man
with small dreams, living a small life."

4.1 Critical Analysis

Stanza 1

In this poem, Robin Ngangom addresses his mother, half affectionately, and partly in guilt because he knows he had left home long ago for Shillong. He writes to his mother "Palem Apopki" who gave birth to him. He says that ten years ago, he hated to leave home (Manipur), but now the hills of Shillong have grown on him, he has become used to them now and likes them. But he reassures her that he is still the same- her very shy son who had a huge appetite and could eat a lot. He says he had lost many teeth after eating everything that was stored in the kitchen store-room at home in Manipur. Probably he is referring to his childhood milk teeth. He says, he is also the same dreamy-eyed boy, "romancing every girl he wanted" right from the age when he was still in half-pants, which means, when he was still a kid. His mother had a difficult time because of it.

Stanza 2

His mother always told her children that money and time were two very precious things, they did not just easily grow on trees. Still, the poet writes that he could not follow his mother's advice because he always finds that he has very little money and very little time. He somehow feels that he has betrayed his mother by not following the ideals she taught him in childhood. He reassures his mother again that although he has gone away from home and family, and has not left anything back home in Manipur by which his family can remember him, it does not mean that he does not love her. We continually see nostalgia, and also a kind of guilt and remorse in this poem.

Stanza 3

He says he knows how hard his mother works, as all mothers do, for all her sons, her old husband, and her daughters-in-law who are very modern and liberated. His mother used to be so worried about her family that for a long time, she could not even smile, her face got wrinkles, and her hair started to turn white. He shows us the self-sacrificing nature of his mother, and of all mothers. Though the poem is written for his mother, in a sense he is universalising the emotions of mothers, and also of the children who grow up and leave their homes behind.

**Stanza 4**

The poet sits in Shillong and remembers his mother. He addresses his mother and says, today like every day, she must have gotten up early, before the first call of the cock. She must have swept the floors, and after her sacred bath, must have cooked food for everyone in the house. He says he can see/imagine his mother coming back every evening from the bazaar, with baskets on her head. He feels bad and feels remorse that his mother has to always work so hard, even in her old age. He wonders whether her whole life would be full of hardships.

Stanza 5

He ends the poem by apologising to his mother. He has not inherited her stable ways of daily work routine or her cooking skills. He asks his mother to forgive him because he could not fulfil the dreams she had for him. He could not do anything to make her life better or more peaceful. He only turned out to be a small, ordinary man, with small dreams, living an ordinary life. He feels he could not live up to what his mother might have expected or hoped of, from him.

Despite having become a poet and a lecturer in a university, he still feels that he could not fulfil his mother's dreams for him, that he lived his life very unconventionally and did not earn good money, lead a stable life, with good habits of cooking, saving time and money. He feels remorse that he did nothing to make his mother's life better—his mother who has to work so hard even in her old age.

Check Your Progress

- i) Why does Robin Ngangom write a poem for his mother?
- ii) Apart from love and affection, why do we see guilt in Robin Ngangom's poem?
- iii) Why does he live away from his mother?
- iv) What are the main themes of Robin Ngangom's poetry and those of other Shillong poets?

5. "The Strange Affair of Robin S. Ngangom"

"Not once can I say
I am the captain
behind this wheel of fire.



I remember misplacing
a bronze bell
somewhere, sometime.
I left behind many untended hearths.
Rushing back I discovered
something had changed me.

I can say
I am this or that,
that I envied the character
of water and stone.
that I envied the character
of water and stone.
As a boy I was made a sheep,
now I am enchanted into a goat
that the townspeople
enjoy driving to the square
with a marigold garland
between my horns.

At twenty-four
I invited myself to Bohemia.
The kingdom of Art,
where people never grow old,
was my affable neighbour.

Moved by curiosity,
I found myself lingering
at backstages, where painted girls
and poor blind boys
came to do their parts.
In the evenings now,
I often mix my drink with despair.
Love, of course, made me entirely useless.

This is the story of my people.
We sowed suspicion in the fields.
Hatred sprang and razed the crops.



Now they go to gloating (glorying) neighbours,
begging bowls in hand,
fingers pointed at each other.
Their incessant bickering (backbiting)
Muffles (quiets) all pity.

Our intentions are clear.
Slash and burn,
let fire erase all traces,
so that suspicion cannot write
our murderous history.

Somewhere inside the labyrinth
we met, locked horns,
and went our feuding ways.
Our past, we believe, is pristine
even as we reaped heads and took slaves.
When we re-write make-believe history
with malicious intent,
memory burns on a short fuse.

As boys return to Christmas,
escorted by hate and fear,
they take a circuitous route
to outwit an enemy
who will revel too much in the birth
of a merciful son. When these boys
reach home, their dreams will come
dressed in red.

II

Hands filled with love,
I touched your healing breasts.
Like the beaten-up past
scars appeared on your body.
I ask, who branded the moonskin of my love?
Who used you like a toy doll?
And my hands returned to me
stigmatised with guilt.



When I turn with a heavy heart
towards my flaming country,
the hills, woman, scream your name.
Soldiers with black scarves
like mime artists
turn them in seconds into shrouds.
For the trucks carrying
the appliances of death and devastation,
for the eager rescuer in his armoured car,
for the first visitor to the fabled homeland,
the graves of youths who died in turmoil
are the only milestones to the city.
But the hills lie draped in mist.
Instead of the musk of your being
I inhale the acrid smoke
of gelignite (explosive) and pyres.

With cargoes of sand and mortar
Mammon came to inspect the city.
He cut down the remaining trees
and carried them away
like cadavers (corpses) for dissection.
Morning papers like watered-down milk
sell the same bland items:
rape, extortion, ambushes (traps), confessions,
embezzlement, vendetta (campaign), sales,
marriages, the usual.

There is talk on the streets,
in dark corners, in homes, words
caught by the ears of a restaurant.
We honour the unvarying certainty,
and pay routine homage to silence.
Everyone has correctly identified
the enemy of the people.
He wears a new face each morning,
and freedom is asking yourself
if you are free, day after sullen (morose) day.



III

Uprightness is not caressing anything publicly,
Integrity is not drinking,
Worthiness is contributing generously to a new faith
to buy guns for unleashing ideological horror,
Service is milking the state
and when you can lift no more
to start burgling each other
so that we can become paragons of thievery,
Chastity is forbidding our women
from exposing their legs,
Purity is not whispering
even a solitary word of love
so that it will not be mistaken
for unpardonable obscenity.

Nothing is certain:

Oil

lentils

potatoes

food for babies

transport

the outside world.

Even fire water and air

are slowly becoming commodities.

Patriotism is the need of the hour.

Patriotism is preaching secession
and mourning our merger with a nation,

patriotism is honouring martyrs
who died in confusion,

patriotism is declaring we should
preserve native customs and traditions,

our literature and performing arts,
and inflicting them on hapless peoples,

patriotism is admiring
the youth who fondles grenades,



patriotism is proclaiming all men are brothers
and secretly depriving my brother,
patriotism is playing the music of guns
to the child in the womb.

Stones and hills speak
when we finally fall silent.
History, hunch-backed friend,
why do we fear you,
why do we love, hate, lie,
conceal, merely to enact you
in the coarse theatre of time?

IV

Today, I stand alone and acknowledge
the left-handed gift of a man
without a woman, and
a tiny land bound by fire.
Slave to an unexamined life
all that I've done
I've accomplished blindfolded:
love, fear, anger, and old despair.

The penitent year wears sackcloth
and pours ashen leaves on its head,
the sky's dress is in shreds.
When stars appear, they hold up the sky
like nuts and bolts so that
the firmament will not fall.
But we who sleep under these stars
will not let each other dream
Love is also a forgotten word.
The ability to suffer, and the ability
to inflict the utmost hurt
on the person you love,
this is how I've known it.



The festival of lights
happened during childhood.
Today, I'm again with widows
who cannot light lamps anymore.

Maybe the land is tired.
of being suckled on blood,
maybe there is no peace
between the farmer and his fields,
maybe all men everywhere
are tired of being men,
maybe we have finally acknowledged death.

My love, how can I explain
that I abominate laws
which punish a man for his past
only the night seems to understand
that we must bear it again.

When I am gone
I would leave you these:
a life without mirrors, and
the blue ode between pines
between pines and the winter sky.

But where can one run from the homeland,
where can I flee from your love?
They have become pursuing prisons
which hold the man
with criminal words.”

5.1 Critical Summary

Part I

The wheel of fire can refer to the chain of torturous or dire consequences that result from a single action. This can be in the context of his own life as well as the deadlock in the state of Manipur between the tribal militants, insurgents and the Indian State. The poet feels that he is not the captain or in-charge here, which again leads to the question of who the captain actually is. The wheel is also a pastoral, agrarian image fitting the Manipuri society.



He remembers misplacing a bronze bell at some point of time in his childhood. It seems as if he carries the weight and guilt of this. This memory of wrongdoing is a burden. Manipuri tribes like the Kuki are also converts to Christianity, and Christianity has the concept of original sin. Linked to this is another image laden with a sense of guilt and wrongdoing—that of leaving the fireplace of the home. His guilt is related to not having looked after his home and family when he should have done so. Now, as he seeks to atone for his past mistake, he rushes back home, but realises that he is a changed man now. He no longer, is the man who had belonged to the traditional Manipuri society.

He envies the fluidity of water or the fixity of stone, and he sees neither quality in himself. He, who was once a sheep, treasured by the villagers and valuable to them, has now become a sacrificial goat—fit to be killed. This is a fall from grace. A general tendency of self-deprecation or self-denigration can be seen in the poem. The use of the word “enchanted” should be noted as it suggests tribal beliefs and superstitions. However, here it is not the tribal people who have done the enchantment, perhaps it is fate, or chance, or some other unknown force.

At the age of twenty-four, he “invited himself”—he was compelled by an inner urge due to which he set out to study English literature through which he discovered the world of art. This kingdom is seen as eternal and immortal, and is the elixir for all his problems of youth. Bohemia was an actual country in eastern Europe, thought of, by western people in the middle ages, as a fantastic land with outlandish people and strange laws. When artists began to be isolated from the mainstream of western societies following the Enlightenment of the 18th century, their manners and conceptions came to be called Bohemian due to contradiction with mainstream thought. Thus, Bohemia came to be associated with art and the ideal world it seeks to create. Along with immortality, it has several other charming ideas for the young mind – free love, irreverence for social norms, equality of all men, free flights into realms of imagination, liberation from the strictures of the workaday world.

His journeys in Bohemia took him to the back-stages of theatres. Manipuri theatre is a rich and popular form of art combining traditional dance forms, religious rituals, folktales and modern socio-political interpretations of traditional stories taken from epics. There he got to know the sordidness and drudgery of the world of art which looks so beautiful and glamorous from outside—poor boys and girls come from far away to earn a little money. He was disillusioned by this as well as by personal love affairs. Now he sits alone during the evenings and drinks to take his despair away.

Here he shifts from the personal to the life of the people. Seeds of suspicion are sown in the fields here instead of anything fruitful. This gives birth to the crop of hatred. Hatred is the crop harvest reaped. The actual agriculture of seeds and crops has been de-



stroyed. Some became richer and began gloating. The poor went to the rich with begging bowls in their hands. Because of the constant fighting and bickering between them, the poet does not feel any pity for either of the two sides.

He sharply and bitterly critiques the history of his own people. The intentions of the people, he writes, are clear, seeing whatever has been happening in the past—people just want to kill and maim each other. There is violence and destruction, and the people try to wipe away all traces of it. The destructive force of fire is at work here. The people then try to sanitise the history by not mentioning any of these atrocities in their written records—so the violence is hidden and all hushed up beneath an official history which covers up all traces of brutality. He may be referring to internal fractures and fissures in Manipur between different factions of people, or he may be referring to the bloodshed caused by the tussle between the militant insurgents and the Indian Army.

Different communities are locked in battle with each other like bulls lock their horns while fighting. There are constant feuds everywhere within the intricate, labyrinthine maze of society. People kill, behead, and take slaves, and then try to project their past history as pure and pristine. When we rewrite history with malicious intentions, when we forge and fake history and write lies and falsehoods, then it is easy for memory to quickly die away.

When the boys of hill tribes who have moved away from Manipur come back for Christmas, they are accompanied by hate and fear, instead of a joyful mood of celebration and merry-making. This is because the militants do not recognise differences between individuals and tribes: when these boys return, men will be waiting in hiding, ambush, to kill these boys in order to take revenge for what their tribes have done, even though the boys themselves are innocent. They try to find roundabout ways by which to escape death at the hands of these men. Ngangom himself was probably one of these boys as he went away to study. There is black humour and satire as he writes that “who will revel too much in the birth of a merciful son”. It is ironical that an occasion for birth has turned into an occasion for death. These militants celebrate the birth of Christ, the merciful son, by killing and murdering, the opposite of mercy. This is their idea of revelling—revelling in blood. The dreams of these boys will come in red—the red of Christmas and celebrations turn into the red of bloodshed.

Check Your Progress

- i) What is the wheel of fire the poet refers to?
- ii) The poet feels guilty about something. What is it and why?
- iii) What does he say about the state of Manipuri society?
- iv) Why has the meaning of Christmas changed for these boys?
- v) How do the personal and the political merge/intertwine in the poem?



Part II

The homeland here is personified as a gracious, and benevolent beloved who heals all wounds. The images of mother, goddess, beloved and motherland converge here. She is seen as having “moonskin”. He is shown to turn to the feminine when he needs support and succour. However, scars appear on her body when he attempts to touch her lovingly. Her reaction of fear is based on the past. Now, when he asks his motherland who used her like a toy doll, he realises that it is he himself. As in Part I of the poem, the guilt and shame of the poet are clearly seen here.

The woman referred to is the goddess, the spirit of the hills. The hills themselves are shown as appealing to this goddess. Soldiers from the national Indian army come hiding themselves beneath black scarves. They are shown as putting up a mime, an act, a pretence. They pretend to be saviours and rescuers of the hill people, but actually wreak death and destruction in the hills. There is a sharp taunt in the phrase “eager rescuer”. These soldiers from the mainland have no concern for development in the hills but only want to exploit resources and assert dominance. The mist covering the hills is symbolic—it is the ideological repression by the state. For the Manipuri youth returning home, the way home is dotted with the graves of their fellow brothers. These have become the milestones. Normal life has become stunted in the midst of this external as well as internal violence. Instead of the sweet smell of the hills, there is only the smell of acrid smoke and explosives.

Mammon is the Roman god of wealth. The capitalists from outside come to loot, plunder, and cut down the trees, and take them to the plains. They are shown to “dissect” the trees. The trees, apart from having a material and useful significance, also have a spiritual one—they form the homeland of the people. The trees are referred to as corpses, thus humanising them and investing their life with the same significance and importance given to human life. It shows the death of a traditional economy in the hands of a modern one. The morning newspapers sell rape, extortions, ambushes, confessions along with banal and trivial commonplace things like marriages and sales. They are such routine and commonplace occurrences that they have become banal. Rape and extortions have become commodities to be “sold”. This implies that people are making profit out of it and also want to consume it. The newspapers give this news like diluted, watered-down milk—the real truth and force of the incidents is not given in the newspapers, but the news is manipulated, diluted, and sanitised for publication in newspapers. The capitalists coming from outside pretend to rescue the hill people from militants but actually encourage them to serve their own vested interests and the people are helpless in the turmoil that has gripped their homeland.



People talk secretly- in streets, in dark corners, in homes, words overheard in restaurants. The air is full of suspicion and mistrust. Everyone has accepted that this state of affairs is not going to change: the violence, the secrets, the suspicions, the lies and deceit. Everyone has their own idea of who the “enemy” is, but none will speak it out in the open. The “enemy” also keeps changing every day, you do not know who the enemy is. That is why the atmosphere is one of fear and suspicion. There is a strong sense of satire—aimed at a spineless, hypocritical public, and yet a sense of sympathy for it as well. The only freedom you have is the freedom to question and ask yourself whether you are free.

Check Your Progress

- i) Who is the woman that the poet refers to? Why is she significant? What is her role, according to the poet?
- ii) What are the different roles and vested interests of the army, the corporates, and the insurgents in the region?

Part III

It begins by critiquing the repressive ideology of the militant groups, the insurgents, who have now taken over the state. In the society they have created, uprightness means not touching or showing any affection in public, while integrity means not drinking. These strictures in fact go against the way the hill people are used to living—they drink, and display affection quite freely. Donating generously to the revolutionary groups, so that they can buy guns has become the new definition of worthiness, while service or patriotism means exploiting the state. From the militants’ viewpoint of the new nation they wish to create, exploiting the resources of the Indian state becomes an act of patriotism. He points to the thefts taking place among the people of Manipur. For women, being chaste now means covering their legs, not showing them. The ideology of the militant groups is also patriarchal. Since even a mention of love is seen as obscenity and vulgarity, love is stifled now and no expression of love is possible. The militant ideology creates a restrictive, repressive atmosphere. But the meanings have all gone awry here—the meanings are changed and they have become absurd, as whispering a word of love actually has nothing to do with obscenity at all, and drinking has nothing to do with one’s integrity.

There is complete uncertainty from day to day. They do not even know if they will get basic necessities like lentils, oil, and potatoes. There is shortage of food and even the babies are starving. It is difficult to find transport. The food items and resources come from the plains but now the militant groups, plus state policies and ordinances, plus the greedy



capitalists have created a famine as they have blocked the resources from coming in. Here he leaves the grand overarching meta-narratives of the socio-political condition of the state and comes down to bare realities and facts of the common man's everyday life. The hills have become a wasteland. Even fire, air, and water will soon become rare commodities that one has to buy. The poet's dark, black, absurdist humour comes through here.

He then returns to critiquing the ideology of the militants and the patriotism which is coercively forced by them. People are not free, even in the state of the revolutionaries. These groups have their own version of what they call patriotism, just like they have definitions for integrity, chastity, uprightness, and purity. Patriotism here means preaching secession and the creation of an independent Manipur state. Patriotism means mourning the merger of the hill states with the Indian state. Before Independence, the North-Eastern states were separate kingdoms. They had never historically been part of the Indian state. Even the British could come to North-East a century after they had conquered the rest of India. Moreover, although many of the present states had at that time been a part of the greater Assam state, Manipur had always been separate and independent. Manipur was a princely state with its own monarchy. Even the British could never fully conquer it. Patriotism is honouring those martyrs who died for the sake of an Independent Manipur. In the name of patriotism, in order to preserve traditional Manipuri culture and heritage, customs, traditions, literature and performing arts are forced upon the people. Thus, their definition of patriotism is also very narrow and rigid. Patriotism is admiring the ones who handle grenades and guns. Patriotism is preaching that all men are brothers, and yet, depriving your own fellow country-men. This shows that the patriotism that they propagate is also self-seeking and treacherous. There is hypocrisy and fake duplicity. This patriotism is like sounding the guns to the child in the womb even before it is born. The guns already start ruling and controlling the child's life even before the child is born.

The language then turns lyrical and poetic as compared to the coarse directness seen till now. The poet says that the people lie, distort, conceal and forge a history which is actually untrue. Or rather, different versions of history are forged by different groups. Yet, in their heart, they all know the real, true history--- which is what the hills and the land speak, when all the people have fallen silent. Being agrarian, tribal societies, land has been very important and is a common trope in poetry from the North East. They feel close to their land, it is not merely a resource to be exploited for them. These hills know the true history of Manipur, of the tiny human midgets, and the people are afraid of it. In order to escape this, people have forged their own histories because they are afraid to confront the reality.

**Check Your Progress**

- i) How does he portray Manipuri society under the rule of the insurgents/ militants?
How has the meaning of words been manipulated and distorted?
- ii) What does he say about history and the writing and retelling of history?

Part IV

Here in the final section, the personal voice returns. The poet acknowledges that he has gone through his life unthinkingly, as if on autopilot, having no sense of direction or purpose. He has just gone with the flow without bothering to steer the boat in any direction. He has never had the company of a woman, a family or a home, which he refers to as a left-handed gift. Simultaneously his misery also arises from the fate of his land and the cycle of senseless violence that people are engaged in. The personal here converges with the political, and there is a bewildering sense of loss and disillusionment.

Nature and time itself seems to be repenting, as penitent as humans. It hides under a sackcloth. The people's dark depression is also mirrored in the grey ashen leaves, and the sky which seems to be tattered and torn. It is called pathetic fallacy when nature is shown to be mirroring human emotions. When night falls, it seems as if the stars are nuts and bolts holding up the sky, otherwise the sky itself will come crashing down and annihilate all life. But the people who sleep under these stars do not let each other dream of a better future. There is hatred all around. Love is a forgotten word. All that the poet has seen is his own suffering, and the suffering we inflict on those we love the most.

The poet remembers Diwali, the festival of lights from his childhood. The days of bright, light, joy, innocence, and the victory of good over evil. All that is gone now—the land has been darkened by violence, treachery and trauma, and now it seems as if he is among those widows who are traditionally barred from the festival of lights. Their lives and the lives of widows must be spent in perpetual sorrow.

Perhaps the land itself is tired of being irrigated by blood instead of water. This has led to a loss of natural productivity which has in turn led to the erasure of all life. The farmer has lost connection with his own lands and fields. The farmer is battling with the very fields that he is supposed to till and which would in turn, nurture him. The worker is alienated from his work. Humans are very tired of being humans. At last they have accepted that the rot of death has crept within their midst—living death, where everything is being destroyed. They have had enough of the unending senseless violence and might even perhaps prefer physical death to this death-in-life.



He addresses his ‘love’ who could be, by turns, his lover, mother, or the motherland. He says that he hates the unfair and revengeful laws of the land. People should not be punished for their past. But he is helpless. Nobody seems to understand. It is clear to him that the cycle is going to repeat itself, everything is going to happen again. It is only the night, the natural or the supernatural, beyond the human, that he can turn to. His tone here is filled with sorrow, darkness, pessimism, and gloom.

Once again, he returns to the poetic and the lyrical. Turning his focus from the society to the self, he wonders what legacy can he bequeath to his people. He wishes for them a life without mirrors – a life without the agony of self-reflection (mirror symbolises reflection) and also perhaps the greed, suspicion, and violence which increases exponentially when it is reflected by and in every man. Every person acts as a mirror to the other, it is the same story everywhere. He also wishes to leave behind the beauty of the blue sky visible between the pines, and the freedom of space between the pines and the winter sky.

After thinking of his legacy, he questions how he could leave the homeland, how he could run away from the love of the homeland. He also wonders how he could run away from the guilt which holds him captive—that he has been able to do nothing for his homeland. He can run away neither from the love nor the guilt, they have become a part of him inescapably, no matter where he goes. The individual self has merged with the homeland.

Check Your Progress

- i) He feels he can clearly see the future that awaits Manipuri society. What is this?
- ii) Why does he talk of leaving the homeland again? What will he leave behind him and why?
- iii) What is this love and guilt that hold him captive?
- iv) Do you notice two very different tones the poet uses in the poem? What are these?

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Short Stories

Salman Rushdie, “The Free Radio”

Dr. Seema Suri

Structure

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6.1 Learning Objectives

“The Free Radio” is one of the three stories published in the East section of Salman Rushdie’s collection *East, West* (1994). It was, however, first published in a somewhat different form, in the *Atlantic Monthly* in June 1983.

It is set during the National Emergency, a troubled period in the history of post-independence India, when civil liberties were suspended under Article 352 of the Constitution of India, from June 1975 till March 1977, by the then Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi. “The Free Radio” is a thinly veiled critique of the infamous mass sterilization programme, implemented during the Emergency. This part of the study-material will;

- provide a brief historical background to the story;
- familiarize the learner with Rushdie’s narrative style; and
- discuss “The Free Radio” as a political allegory.

All references to page numbers in this study material are to the following collection: *Interventions: Indian Writing in English*. Ed. Anand Prakash. Delhi: Worldview Publications, 2020.



6.2 About the Author: Salman Rushdie

Salman Rushdie (born 1947) is an Indian-born, British-American novelist of international repute. He has written fourteen novels, collections of essays and short stories, children's books, and screenplays. Rushdie has won many awards for his work; most well-known being the Booker prize for his novel *Midnight's Children* (1981). Most of his fiction deals with historical and political themes, written in a style popularly known as 'magic realism.' Rushdie believes in the freedom of literature to question the grand narratives we live with – nation, family, and religion; often courting controversy for his views.

6.3 Historical Background

In 1951, India's population was around 360 million and estimated to grow by 500,000 people every year. The same year, India became the first country to launch a national family planning programme, with the focus on rural areas. Door to door campaigning; TV, radio, and newspaper advertisements; and monetary incentives were some of the state-sponsored strategies used to encourage people to have smaller families. R. A. Gopalaswami, India's lead demographer, suggested mass sterilization to be the best method to tackle the problem of overpopulation (qtd. in Gupte, 40). Politicians began to link the idea of economic development to population control and the first two five-year plans in India had modest budget allocations for family planning. In 1965, a separate Department of Health and Family Welfare was established, with a substantial budget.

In 1975, the country was facing severe economic problems, compounded by low rainfall: record-high inflation, falling food production, and an international oil crisis. At the same time, the Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, who had won the Lok Sabha seat from Rae Bareilly in 1971, was accused by her opponent Raj Narain of violating many provisions of the election law. In a landmark judgement in 1975, the Allahabad High Court ruled against her. She was found guilty and her election to the Lok Sabha was declared null and void. She was further debarred from holding office for six years. In response to these adverse political circumstances, Indira Gandhi declared a national Emergency in 1975, under Article 352 of the Constitution, citing 'internal disturbance.' She justified it in terms of national interest; for rapid economic development and India's security. Individual and press freedom was curbed, and opponents were jailed.

The twenty-one-month period of the Emergency also witnessed the rise of Sanjay Gandhi, the Prime Minister's younger son. Though he did not hold any official position, he came up with his own five-point programme to combat poverty; namely, each one teach



one, abolition of caste, family planning, a ban on dowry, and tree planting. His compulsory sterilization campaign was part of a larger, poverty eradication programme. Before the Emergency, only states had the authority to take decisions in the area of family planning. However, on her son's insistence, Indira Gandhi amended the Constitution, and the Constitution Act of 1976 gave the central government the right to execute family planning programmes. The aim was to sterilize as many men as possible. Vinod Mehta explains the medical rationale for male vasectomies: given the limited medical infrastructure at the time, it was easier to sterilize males (114). The operation lasted only three minutes and could be performed with a local anaesthetic, without shedding a drop of blood.

Sanjay Gandhi allocated quotas to chief ministers, that they were supposed to fulfill. Disincentives, forced sterilizations, and coercion became the tools to meet targets. The forced sterilization campaign remains one of the most notorious episodes of the Emergency. Awareness of the historical and political context is essential to understand Rushdie's intention in “The Free Radio,” which is to satirize this period of India's history.

6.4 Study Guide

“The Free Radio” is set in a village in India, around 1976. It is a first-person narrative by a retired school teacher, who spends his time under a banyan tree in the middle of the village, watching things happening around him. He tells us the story of Ramani, the rickshaw puller and the thief's widow.

pp. 55-57

The first line piques our interest in Ramani's fate:

We all knew nothing good would happen to him while the thief's widow had her claws dug into his flesh . . . (55)

Ramani, the rickshaw puller, falls in love with a poor thief's widow, with five children. Her husband hasn't left behind a penny for her. From the beginning, the narrator disapproves of the thief's widow, who is ten years older than young Ramani.

Note how the narrator draws attention to his old age, reminding the reader of his concern for Ramani, whom he has known since he was a child in his school:

The widow was attractive, no point denying, in a sort of hard vicious way she was all right, but it is her mentality that was rotten. (55)

He believes all the rumours about her, doesn't hesitate to pass judgement, and insinuates that she is prostituting herself to earn money: “people saw men at night near her rutputty shack” (56).



The narrator is a witness to the first meeting between Ramani and the thief's widow and can sense the attraction between them. He comments that Ramani is a good-looking youth and assumes that the widow "had already decided to put her hooks into Ramani" (56). From a distance, he watches the affair blossom.

Around this time, Ramani has started to hang out with men from the Youth Movement and drink illicit liquor with them. It is an oblique reference to Sanjay Gandhi's induction of five million new members into the Youth Congress during the national Emergency. As the narrator observes:

This was the time of the State Emergency, and these friends were not peaceful persons, there were stories of beatings up . . . (57)

Ramani's new friends compare him to famous Bollywood stars and, taken in by their flattery, he pays for their drinks. The narrator is disappointed to note that Ramani's head is now "filled with movie-dreams" (57). He blames the thief's widow for shamelessly encouraging Ramani to dream.

- i) Identify some adjectives used by the narrator to describe Ramani?
- ii) Why does the narrator worry about Ramani?
- iii) Describe the first meeting between Ramani and the thief's widow.
- iv) Write a few lines about Ramani's friends from the Youth Movement.

pp. 57-59

The narrator decides to intervene and prevent Ramani from coming to harm. One day, he sees the widow visit the bania shop and calls out to her. He urges her to leave Ramani alone:

'Ramani the rickshaw boy is dear to me and you must find some person of your own age, or, better still, go to the widows' ashram in Benares and spend the rest of your life there in holy prayer, thanking God that widow-burning is now illegal.' (57-58)

You must have noted that, throughout the story, the narrator uses the deprecatory "widow's thief" and never calls the woman by name. His prejudiced thinking is exposed by his reference to the practice of widow-burning. The widow retaliates sharply, calling the narrator "mister teacher sahib retired" and taunts him with the news that Ramani has already proposed to her, but she has declined because she doesn't want any more children (58).

After the widow's angry outburst, the narrator shifts his attention to the big white caravan brought by the local health officer, and parked under the banyan tree. During the Emergency, forcible sterilizations were carried out in such mobile operating theatres: "every night men were taken into this van for a while and things were done to them" (58).



There is an ominous reference to the smell of ether – used as an anaesthetic in minor surgeries – surrounding the van.

Around the same time, Ramani starts bragging about receiving a battery-operated radio as a special gift from the central government. No one, including the narrator, takes him seriously because they all think it's another of his fantasies. Ramani goes around, happily awaiting his gift of the free radio and all the villagers humour him.

- i) What advice does the narrator give to the thief's widow?
- ii) What kind of things are done to men in the white van? What are the rumours?
- iii) Why does Ramani suddenly start talking about receiving a free radio?

pp. 59-62

Soon afterwards, Ramani and the thief's widow get married in a humble ceremony. Though the narrator was not present there, he suddenly understood everything. He is certain that the widow must have beguiled him, as she does not want to have any more children, and Ramani's free gift of a transistor radio is the promised reward for voluntarily undergoing a vasectomy.

At the first opportunity, the narrator calls Ramani and very kindly asks him why he has let the widow "deprive him of his manhood" (59). For the first time in the story, *nasbandi*, or vasectomy is mentioned directly. Ramani talks about its positive impact, parroting government propaganda:

'It is not so bad,' Ram said, meaning the *nasbandi* . . . It stops babies only and my woman did not want children any more, so now all is hundred per cent OK. Also it is in national interest,' he pointed out. 'And soon the free radio will arrive.' (59)

Don't miss the phrase "national interest," which echoes the words used in family planning campaigns at the time. The narrator is dismayed at poor Ramani's gullibility. The poor rickshaw puller believes that he too will receive a free radio, like the tailor Laxman did when he underwent a vasectomy many years ago. The narrator doesn't have the heart to tell him that the scheme was discontinued a long time ago. Poor, illiterate Ramani is unaware that the Emergency has been imposed in the country and that vasectomies are now being done forcibly.

Deluded into believing that he will soon receive a free radio, Ramani goes around town in his rickshaw, pretending to hold a transistor close to his ear and calling out "*Ye Akashvani hai*" or singing film songs (60). Ramani's mimicry is ironic as he is unwittingly parodying the state-owned All India Radio, that was an important tool of government propaganda during the Emergency.



It is unclear whether Ramani has been fooled by the widow or his Youth Movement cronies. But he keeps his belief in his imaginary radio alive. As the narrator remarks, Ramani had this “rare quality of total belief in his dreams” (60).

A year passes by and Ramani continues with his announcements and singing. But the narrator has begun to notice the strain it is putting on him, as his face has begun to show signs of fatigue and disappointment:

I had divined that Ram had poured into the idea of the radio all his worries and regrets about what he had done. . . (61)

The white van returns to the village and, as expected, Ramani goes to claim his gift. The narrator worries about the consequences for him.

- i) What kind of wedding ceremony do Ramani and the poor widow have?
- ii) Why does Ramani agree to undergo the vasectomy, as told to the narrator?
- iii) Why does the narrator call Ramani “a thief of a stupid and terrible kind?”

pp. 61-63

The narrator leaves his spot under the banyan tree when Ramani, accompanied by his wife, comes to collect his free radio from the van, as he cannot bear to witness the humiliation he is sure Ramani will face. He hears from other bystanders how Ramani was roughed up and unceremoniously thrown out of the van by his drinking friends. All this while, the thief’s widow remained seated in the rickshaw, with her five children. For the first time, the narrator is overcome with doubt and questions himself:

Yes, I know, I’m an old man, my ideas are wrinkled with age, and these days they tell me sterilization and God knows what is necessary, and maybe I’m wrong to blame the widow as well – why not? (62)

One day, the narrator sees Ramani selling his rickshaw. Coming forward, he informs the narrator that he is going to Bombay to become a film star, and that his family will accompany him. This is their last meeting.

The narrator receives many letters from Bombay. He is sure that Ramani gets them written by a professional letter writer. He talks about how he has been discovered by a big studio and is being groomed for stardom. There are references to well-known locations in Bombay, such as Juhu beach and Pali Hill. His life, he writes, is “filled with light and success and no-questions-asked alcohol” (63). Ramani’s decadent life makes him happy and his letters to the narrator are “brimming with confidence” (63). He informs the narrator that the widow is doing well and getting fat.



Ramani never gets his free radio, but his life takes a turn when, with a leap of faith, he sells his rickshaw and goes to Bombay. The story ends with the narrator's recollection of the days when Ramani went about on his rickshaw, with the imaginary radio in his hand. Read these last few lines very carefully:

. . . I remember the expression which came over his face in the days just before he learned about his radio, and the huge mad energy which he had poured into the act of conjuring reality, by an act of magnificent faith, out of the hot thin air between his cupped hand and his ear. (63)

There is a more than subtle hint that Ramani's tale is, perhaps, another of his fantasies. The story ends with a question mark over his Bollywood story.

- i) Describe Ramani's appearance after he is thrown out of the white van.
- ii) Why does Ramani go to Bombay?
- iii) What do you think about the letters Ramani writes to the narrator?

6.5 Narrative Technique in "The Free Radio"

In the short story "The Free Radio," the first-person narrator is a retired school teacher who has known Ramani since he was a child, as he has taught him. The narrator knew Ramani's parents too, who are dead now. He spends his time sitting under the banyan tree, looking at events happening around him.

From the first sentence itself, the narrator doesn't attempt to hide his low opinion of Ramani, calling him "a real donkey's child" (55). At other places, he comments that Ramani is "a stone-head" and "soft in the head" (56, 58).

As far as the thief's widow is concerned, the narrator is clearly prejudiced. He takes an instant dislike to her and describes her in predatory terms. Witness to the first encounter between Ramani and the widow, he is convinced that she has ensnared him. Throughout the story, he calls her 'the thief's widow' and never names her. Most of his statements are outright sexist: "And not many people will look twice at the widow of a good-for-nothing" (55).

He is uncomfortable with her sexuality; reluctantly admitting that she is "attractive, no point denying, in a sort of hard vicious way" (55). When he realizes that Ramani and the widow are having an affair, he calls her and advises her to "go to the widow's ashram in Benares and spend the rest of your life there in holy prayer" (58).

The widow is also blamed for encouraging Ramani to dream of making it big in Bollywood, although it is his drinking friends who flatter him. The narrator is convinced



that it is the widow who has taught him “not to be humble in the presence of elders” (62). Right from the time of their first meeting to their departure for Bombay, the narrator’s disapproval of the relationship colours the story.

It is impossible for the narrator to be objective and impartial. He has known Ramani since he was a child and his concern is genuine, in spite of his conviction that Ramani is a fool. When the narrator learns about his wedding, he immediately understands why Ramani has been talking about the gift of a free radio. It is because he has been brain-washed into voluntarily undergoing a vasectomy. He calls Ramani and very kindly asks him:

‘My child, did you go to the caravan? What have you let them do to you?’ (59)

When Ramani confirms that he has indeed had a *nasbandi*, the narrator feels anguished at the humiliation he has voluntarily undergone. He watches, with despair, the fatigue and strain on Ramani’s face as he waits for the free radio that never comes.

The retired teacher sits under the banyan tree, watching events around him. You must have noted how he switches to the collective pronoun ‘we’ at a number of places; speaking on behalf of the community, when commenting on Ramani’s life. Read the following passage:

Now then: we had always believed that our Ramani was a little soft in the head; with his notions of being a film star and what all; so most of us just nodded tolerantly . . . (59)

He includes rumour and hearsay in his narrative. Local gossip about the thief’s widow, though unsavoury, is reported. When the thief’s widow buys groceries from the bania’s shop he implies that she has acquired the money through dishonourable means: “I won’t say where the money came from, but people saw men near her rutputty shack at night” (56). The white caravan that is parked under the banyan tree gives rise to rumours that the narrator hints at, but never mentions directly: “I heard rumours of what was happening in the caravan . . .” (58).

To complete his narrative, the narrator depends on secondary sources. He was not present at the wedding of Ramani and the widow, but hears that it was a “poor affair by all accounts” (59). When Ramani goes to collect his free radio, he is thrown out of the white van and it is the other witnesses present there who inform the narrator about the incident:

And still – they tell me – the thief’s black widow did not move from her place in the rickshaw, although they dumped her husband in the dust. (62)

Feeling duty-bound to provide an ending, the narrator uses whatever information he can get from Ramani’s letters to complete the tale. He doesn’t miss the opportunity to underline the fact that he could never teach Ramani to write, and he is sure that the



letters have been written by a professional letter writer. As if to pre-empt any scepticism on the part of the reader, he says he still has Ramani’s letters with him.

The story doesn’t have a neat ending. The narrator, after talking about Ramani’s life in Bombay, very slyly reminds the reader about his ability to exist in a world of his own creation. Having known Ramani since he was a child, the narrator is not totally taken in by his letters, familiar as he is with the “mad energy” he possesses (63). Do ponder over this point.

In this section, I have discussed how the narrator’s account is dependent on multiple, secondary sources: gossip, rumour, oral accounts, and letters. Add to this, his cultural bias against the thief’s widow, and you get a story that is not wholly reliable. This is a characteristic feature of modern fiction where, in place of the omniscient, impartial, and objective narrator, we have a prejudiced and opinionated storyteller. It is important to remember this before forming an opinion of Ramani and the widow, as we see them through the narrator’s eyes.

6.6 Characterization

Most analyses of short stories, and even novels for that matter, are divided into discussions about character, theme, and narrative technique. Sometimes it is difficult to talk about one aspect without reference to the other. In this section, I will discuss Ramani’s character in the context of the major theme of “The Free Radio,” which is the common man’s resistance to state power.

Ramani

The poor, unlettered Ramani is a simpleton. The narrator constantly refers to him as a gullible fool and disapproves of almost everything he does. Ramani’s is an unconventional love story because, though he is young, good-looking, and attractive, he falls in love with and chooses to marry an impoverished widow with five young children. He breaks many cultural taboos through this act: marrying a woman who is older than him, is a widow with five children, and has a dubious reputation.

Ramani is, according to the narrator, manipulated by the thief’s widow into voluntarily undergoing a vasectomy because she doesn’t want to have any more children. When the narrator calls him to reprimand him for this act, the loyal Ramani defends his wife and his sterilization. After this incident, he becomes distant with the narrator. However, a few days later, the narrator sees Ramani selling his rickshaw. Coming up to his former teacher, he informs him that he is going to Bombay to become a film star.



What is remarkable about him, as pointed out by the retired school teacher, is his capacity to believe. For more than a year, Ramani waits for the free radio to arrive, going around with an imaginary radio in his hand. However, the strain begins to show. The narrator understands that “if the dream were to die, he would be forced to face the full gravity of his crime against his own body” (61).

Ramani is fooled by his cronies from the Youth Movement into believing that he will get a free radio; unaware that the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare has abandoned this scheme. Its place has been taken by a system of forced sterilizations to meet targets, where resistance is penalized through disincentives. During the Emergency, government officials, like block officers and revenue collectors, brought in men from marginalized sections of society – men like Ramani, who were least likely to resist. Offering an incentive to a poor man is also a form of coercion. In this backdrop, the free radio becomes a powerful symbol of coercion by the state. By the same logic, Ramani the rickshaw puller represents the common man and his ability to rise above the machinations of the state.

Ramani’s dream of a free radio may have been shattered when his armband cronies threw him out of the white caravan, but his dream of becoming a film star in Bombay is kept alive. After he is humiliated and thrown into the dust, Ramani, in an act of courage, follows his heart. He sells his rickshaw and goes to Bombay with his family. Ironically, it was his friends from the Youth Movement, who had filled his head with “movie dreams,” saying he was better looking than most film stars (57). Ramani’s migration to Bollywood is significant because, for Rushdie, Bollywood is a microcosm of a new, emergent India. Rushdie’s fiction, especially *Midnight’s Children* (1981), is peppered with references to Bollywood cinema, which he considers a dominant art form. Ramani’s shift to Bombay can be read as a snub in the face of state power. The poor, illiterate Ramani refuses to bow down, and it is significant that he relocates to a place whose vitality embodies, for Rushdie, new hope for a nation let down by its political leaders.

Ramani’s letters to the narrator are full of images about his lavish lifestyle, in preparation for stardom. As he is at a geographical distance and outside the narrator’s view, there is no way to know if the details about his life are true or not: “spending his days at the Sun’n’Sand Guest house at Juhu beach” and “buying a house at Pali Hill” (63).

Having known Ramani a long time, the narrator ends the story with his recollection of the “huge mad energy which he had poured into the act of conjuring reality” (63). It is clear that the narrator is not fully taken in by Ramani’s fairy tale, aware as he is of his capacity to imagine. But, in spite of the aura of disbelief surrounding the narrator’s conclusion, Ramani’s indomitable spirit is to be admired. A spirit that refuses to get crushed, even though he is an innocent victim of state manipulation.



Thief's widow

Ramani's wife, disparagingly referred to as 'the thief's widow,' is presented in misogynistic terms. The narrator uses the most unflattering images to describe her: she is a “witch” and a “black widow” (61, 62). Remember that it is the narrator who exposes his cultural prejudices when he disapproves of the affair between Ramani and the thief's widow. Most of his animosity against her is based on assumptions that it is she who has persuaded Ramani to undergo a vasectomy, holding him in no way responsible for his act.

Critics believe that, in “The Free Radio,” the thief's widow is a fictional embodiment of the then Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi. In his famous novel *Midnight's Children* (1981), Rushdie represents Indira Gandhi as the Widow, with a capital 'W,' where she is, according to Sunder Rajan, “the target of a misogynistic trajectory”:

The powerful negative connotations of Hindu widowhood, viewed in the popular imagination not merely as the misfortune of women but as their destruction of the male, are associated with a (widowed) Prime Minister whose defining act is the massive sterilization programme of the Emergency. (113)

These observations about Rushdie's depiction of the widow in *Midnight's Children* are equally valid for his depiction of the thief's widow in “The Free Radio.” Rushdie's demonisation of the thief's widow in the short story is a strategy to denounce Indira Gandhi and the Emergency.

At this point, I would like to share an interesting bit of information. Indira Gandhi had, shortly before her death, sued Salman Rushdie for libel, demanding a revised, expurgated version of *Midnight's Children*. She didn't ban the book in India and the only sentence that she wanted censored was the one that alludes to her responsibility for her husband's untimely death: Feroze Gandhi died of a heart attack at the young age of forty-seven. Rushdie lost the case in a London court and had to remove the offending sentence, which does not appear in subsequent editions of *Midnight's Children*. However, in “The Free Radio,” though Indira Gandhi is not named directly, the allusion is easily recognizable.

Rushdie's political imperatives have led to the creation of a character who is, throughout the story, vilified and snubbed by the narrator. However, in spite of the shadow of Indira Gandhi looming over her, the thief's widow is an interesting woman. She is not ashamed of flaunting her sexuality and establishing a relationship with a much younger man. She openly flirts with Ramani in public and, in a spirited manner, retaliates with curses when the narrator advises her to behave like a widow should:

Let me tell you, mister teacher sahib retired, that your Ramani has asked to marry me and I have said no . . . and stop your cobra poison. (58)



Though she is shown to us through the narrator's unsympathetic and biased eyes, the thief's widow breaks many stereotypes associated with widowhood.

6.7 "The Free Radio" as a Political Allegory

In this story, the free radio is a potent symbol of state coercion, used to manipulate poor individuals. In the early 1970s, men were given cash incentives, like a day's salary, to undergo a vasectomy or items like pressure cookers and plastic buckets at mass sterilization camps. But during the Emergency, under Sanjay Gandhi's leadership, the sterilization programme was implemented with force. It was justified as a necessary measure for population control and eradication of poverty. Government officials, at all levels, fell over themselves to fulfil quotas, sometimes falsifying figures. There are amusing accounts of men hiding in fields for days to evade forced sterilization. Men from the lower strata of society were especially vulnerable.

Ramani's gullibility offers a contrast to the Youth Congress workers in his village, who lure men into the van with the promise of a free radio, which they never get. In an extremely well researched article, Ahluwalia and Parmar comment:

The "gift" of a free radio has come to stand in for the sterilization campaigns in many popular narratives associated with the Emergency period. Indeed, a free radio was offered as an incentive to poor people, but in some instances the acceptors waited for a long time to receive their "prize," only to be disappointed and cheated out of a good faith deal they had entered into with the state. In a short story "The Free Radio," Salman Rushdie provides a moving illustration of the duplicitous state scheme. . . . Ramani embraces his contraceptive responsibility, linking his performance of unfer- tile masculinity, simultaneously, to conjugal obligation and to responsible citizenry. After his vasectomy, he patiently waits for his free radio, which never arrives. When he re-enters the caravan (many traveling clinics were used in rural areas to perform vasectomies) to claim his rightful reward, he is beaten up and sent out bleeding, without a transistor radio. This act of deceit captured in fiction was played out in numerous rural and urban settings as part of the forced sterilization initiative during the Emergency. (245)

Read the story carefully and you will realize that the ominous references to the presence of the mobile operating theatre and the political goons who befriend Ramani, mirror this reality. In 1977, the ruling Congress party lost the general elections and political analysts



believe that anger against the sterilization programme was one of the main factors contributing to its defeat.

Salman Rushdie believes that literature should question the fictions that are supplied to the people. In this story, it is the fiction of ‘national interest’ and ‘personal sacrifice,’ perpetuated during the Emergency, that is challenged. In this political allegory, Ramani symbolizes the innocent common man, who is manipulated by the political powers into undergoing a vasectomy, with the false promise of a free radio. However, even after his dream of owning a radio is shattered, Ramani doesn’t surrender to despair or cynicism. As Bahri comments: “At the heart of this story is the power of fiction. Ramani attempts to supplement an ordinary life with the magic of ordinary radios or fantasies of Bollywood stardom” (142). Ramani’s relocation to Bombay is a triumph of the common man’s imagination over an unscrupulous state.

6.8 Summing Up

In 1976, politicians went from promising free radios to men who voluntarily submitted to vasectomies to a policy of compulsory sterilization during the Emergency; a year when the police literally dragged men, in from the fields to the vasectomy table. It is estimated that more than six million people were sterilized that year, giving rise to violent protests.

Ramani’s love story takes place in this backdrop. He is not a conscious rebel against the state, but his endearing innocence is the counter to a shrewd state machinery. You have studied how “The Free Radio” is a critique of the Emergency and Sanjay Gandhi’s mass sterilization programme, based on coercive methods. In this context, the free radio becomes a symbol of state-sponsored intimidation. Ramani is taken in by the narrative of ‘national interest’ and undergoes a vasectomy. Though humiliated by the Youth Movement workers, he leaves for Bombay to become a film star; with faith in his heart. The short story depends for its meaning on the political and historical background: at the same time, it presents the triumph of individual imagination over suppression.

You must have noticed that Rushdie’s writing includes many Hindi words; such as *rickshaw*, *nasbandi*, and *bania*. These add a local flavour to his fiction. His English writing has a distinct style and he has never shied away from including Hindi words in his fiction. Compare it to the other two short stories in this unit, where the authors have not used any words from any Indian language.



Questions

- i) Discuss the narrative style of “The Free Radio.”
- ii) Write a detailed note on any one of these:
 - The narrator
 - Ramani
 - The thief’s widow
 - The free radio as a symbol
- iii) What is Rushdie satirizing in “The Free Radio?”

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Shashi Deshpande, “The Intrusion”

Dr. Seema Suri

Structure

- 7.1 Learning Objectives
- 7.2 Introduction
- 7.3 Study Guide
- 7.4 Narrative Style in “The Intrusion”
- 7.5 The Theme of Marriage
- 7.6 Summing Up

7.1 Learning Objectives

Shashi Deshpande’s short story, “The Intrusion” was first published in *The Intrusion and Other Stories* (1993). Read it before going through this part of the study material, which includes a detailed analysis of the story, a discussion of its thematic concerns, and an introduction to Deshpande’s narrative style. All references to the story are to the following collection: *Interventions: Indian Writing in English*. Ed. Anand Prakash. Delhi: Worldview Publications, 2020.

7.2 Introduction

Shashi Deshpande (born 1938) is an eminent Indian novelist of contemporary Indian literature in English. She has published numerous short story collections, novels, children’s books, and essays. Almost all her work revolves around the problems faced by urban middle-class Indian women in modern times. However, she does not want to label herself a feminist. In a deceptively simple narrative style, she explores the inner struggles of women against patriarchy and tradition. Deshpande has been honoured with many literary awards for her fiction; such as the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1990 for her novel, *That Long Silence* (1988) and the Padma Shri in 2009.

In “The Intrusion,” Deshpande deals with the sensitive subject of marital rape. She explores it within the context of arranged marriages; a cultural practice common in India, even amongst educated, Westernized sections of society.



7.3 Study Guide

The short story “The Intrusion” is written from the feminine perspective. The narrator is a recently wed young woman, on her honeymoon with her husband; who is referred to as “the man” throughout the story. The events take place over the course of a few hours, in the room of a guest house.

pp. 43-44

The woman describes the fishing village, which she and her husband are passing through. She is observant; commenting on the sights. The villagers, sitting around, stare at her, but she is shy and unable to stare back. Notice how she describes the fish left out to dry on lines: “looking at us with sightless, accusing eyes” (43). Can you identify the figure of speech used here? It is a metaphor. Such figurative language creates an overriding mood in the story. However, the woman is enchanted by the sight of the sea. Observe how the sea is a constant presence in the short story.

Pay special attention to the man’s conduct and the woman’s reaction. He has left her behind and she is annoyed. The reference to her high heels and heavy sari is the first indication of her newly-wed status and, also of her middle or lower-middle class origins. She is not dressed appropriately for a visit to the seaside. The woman documents every little thought that comes to her mind: “I was conscious of an unreasonable pang of irritation against him” (43). She stops to pick up a sea shell, but throws it away when she feels something alive inside. There is an ominous foreshadowing of what is about to happen.

She is uncomfortable in the man’s company and even when he does try to help her, she feels his grip constricting. Eventually, the man and woman reach their destination; a building on top of a hill. It is the place where they have come to spend their honeymoon. It is apparent that they are staying at an official guest house, not a hotel. She is disappointed with the room where the only noticeable thing is the “jumble of stale smells” (45). The woman is hypersensitive and imagines that the man who has shown them their room has a secret smirk on his face, knowing the purpose of their visit (45). Her husband’s words only add to her anxiety:

‘Complete privacy’, he smiled, emphasizing the words and I felt suddenly, completely sickened. (45)

She is quick to catch the sexual suggestiveness, which only worsens her sense of revulsion.

The man is smug, talking about their luck in getting this place to spend their honeymoon and he informs the woman that, at the moment, they are the only occupants in the



guest house. The narrator's mind goes off at a tangent, intuitively sensing that their room has been the site of many illicit encounters. She imagines "bold-faced and experienced women" who would be comfortable with their male companions; making her conscious of her own fear and apprehension (46). She is also afraid to ask the staff to change the dirty bedsheets, cringing at the thought of the bawdy jokes they would certainly make.

- i) Briefly describe the fishing village that the man and woman pass through.
- ii) What are some of the things that the woman notices in the room of the guest house?
- iii) Summarize the narrator's feelings towards her husband.

pp. 46-49

Overcome with fatigue, the woman sits down to have tea, listening to her husband moving around in the bathroom. She is suddenly overcome with the desire to eat the sweets her mother has packed in her suitcase, but is worried what her husband would think of her. The woman broods over the words of her mother-in-law, before her marriage was fixed:

'We are looking for a girl, simple but sophisticated . . . His wife must be able to entertain and mix with foreigners.' (46)

It becomes clear that hers is an arranged marriage and, as is common in Indian society, the woman is expected to fit to the specifications of the man. Note the gentle irony in the phrase "simple but sophisticated" (46). The narrator recalls how she had expressed her misgivings about the wedding to her father, though we are not told what exactly she objected to. However, she succumbs to her father's subtle pressure, when he reminds her that she has two younger sisters to be married.

The husband tries to engage her in a conversation, but she is unresponsive. When he puts his arm around her shoulders, she can only smell the sweat. Note the comic simile she uses to describe her awkwardness: "we looked like two marionettes, sitting side by side" (47).

The woman goes out to the veranda to look at the sea, avoiding the man's attempts to get intimate with her. She is acutely conscious that, "at present we were not friends, not acquaintances even, but only a husband and wife" (47). But the sight of the setting sun sickens her and she longs for physical sensations of a different kind: the sand between her toes and the waves against her legs. Whereas the woman yearns for emotional intimacy, her husband seems oblivious to her plight. It is at this point that we get to know that they have known each other for less than a month.

In another powerful simile, the woman expresses her aversion when the man puts his arm around her waist. The feeling is akin to being molested by strangers:



‘You don’t really want to go down, do you?’ It was said in my ear, almost a whisper, and it sickened me, like those furtive touches and glances from faceless, nameless men in crowds. (48)

In the room, the sheets have been changed. They remind her of the narrow bed back home, where she would lie and read books. Feeling suffocated at being with “a strange man in a strange room,” she goes out to the veranda (49).

Observe how she goes out to the veranda again and again, as if to escape the suffocation she feels inside the room. The husband has begun to openly hint at his intention to consummate the marriage, adding to her terror. He tries to kiss her, but she pushes him away. It is then that the man protests and demands an explanation for her cold behaviour. From his questions, it is clear that he is not entirely unaware of the woman’s efforts to avoid him. When the woman replies that she barely knows him, he replies in a peevish tone:

‘Know each other? What has that got to do with it? Aren’t we married now? And how will we start getting to know each other if you put on such a touch-me-nottish air?’ (50)

- i) What details does the woman give us about her arranged marriage?
- ii) List a few words that convey her sensations towards her husband.
- iii) What does the bed in the room remind her of?

pp. 50-52

The very different expectations from marriage are placed before us. The woman would like to know her husband better before any sexual union; be like old friends. She also has many anxieties about the problems that physical intimacy will bring with it:

And there were all those fears crouching in me – would his breath smell, and were his feet huge and dirty with uncut toenails, and did he chew his food noisily and belch after meals? (50)

She tries to put her feelings into words but can only manage to stammer. This only angers the man and he lies down on the bed, with his back turned to her. The woman begins to doubt herself, wondering if she is “a frigid woman, incapable of love” (51). Even the erotic images that crop up in her mind, from books she has read, fail to move her. An imagined sense of shame and the certainty of social disgrace trouble her. She worries about what will happen to her sisters if her frigidity is exposed. Angry at being expected to submit to the sexual demands of a man she barely knows, she is troubled by guilt. With these thoughts flashing across her mind, she falls asleep.



The woman wakes up from, what she thinks, is a dream where she feels she is being “pounded” by the waves (51). Soon she realizes that her husband has forced himself on her. Using the metaphor of the ocean, the narrator describes the marital rape. Without giving specific details, Deshpande depicts the forced, violent sexual union. You must appreciate the very reticent manner in which the author has dealt with the sensitive subject matter.

The woman is relieved when it is over. What should have been a tender experience for her is a painful one but, more than the physical pain, she is humiliated by “the intrusion into my privacy, the violation of my right to myself” (52). No words are exchanged between the man and woman. While she is lying there in a state of shock, she is woken up by the sound of her husband snoring.

- i) Describe the man’s reaction when the woman avoids him?
- ii) What thoughts go through the woman’s head when she is lying next to her husband?
- iii) Identify the images and metaphors used by the woman to describe the sexual violation by her husband.

7.4 Narrative Style in “The Intrusion”

The story is told in the first person and no names are given to the protagonists. This is a characteristic feature of Shashi Deshpande’s fiction. Not naming her characters allows her to make them representative of middle-class, urban Indian men and women. It is, however, a subject of debate whether this literary device is effective. It sometimes causes confusion in the reader’s mind. For instance, in the passage where the couple are shown to their room in the guest house, both the husband and the bellboy are called “the man” (45). Perhaps, giving a name and specific cultural identity would have enriched the characterization. To appreciate Shashi Deshpande’s craft, it is important to understand that this type of characterization is in keeping with her artistic purpose. As a writer, she is more concerned about exploring the inner lives of women, rather than creating an aura of reality.

This narrative strategy allows her to explore the woman’s psyche in a common enough situation – the first day of her honeymoon. Pause for a moment and try to recall popular images of newly-wed couples in mass media in India, especially films. The pictures are invariably rosy; with young brides in fine clothes, shy and coy, and the marriage consummated with passion and romance. This short story shatters such stereotypes, which permeate our collective consciousness.

The narrator is a young, educated girl who has an arranged marriage, fixed by her parents. Her opinion is not sought before the match is finalized and when she expresses



her indecisiveness, the father reminds her of her obligation to get married for the sake of her younger sisters. In a patriarchal setup, without financial independence, she is not in a position to assert her independence.

The protagonist is very observant and expressive. From the start, she notices small details and describes them in poetic language, such as the drumstick trees, “outlined sharply” against the sky on her way to the guest house and the aura of melancholy in the room there (44). She is acutely conscious of her emotions on her honeymoon and these form the crux of the story. Like most of Deshpande’s short stories, “The Intrusion” explores emotional incompatibility in marriage.

The focus of the narrative remains unrelentingly on the woman’s inner conflict. She is a well-read woman, who has an arranged marriage, but finds it difficult to openly discuss her feelings with her husband. When he tries to get intimate with her, she feels incapable of responding. Her anguish is captured and presented in realistic detail.

The man works in a foreign company, but most probably, in a mid-level position. Read the description of the room in the guest house: dirty pillow covers and bed sheets, and the tea tasting of kerosene. The guest house is meant for official visits and not a honeymoon. No wonder, they get a rather indifferent welcome, though the man feels that they are lucky to get a room there. The woman, however, senses the sordid atmosphere of the place. The man also shows signs of nervousness, but doesn’t attempt to reflect on the reasons for his wife’s behaviour. When she moves away from him, he reacts with anger to her fumbling and does not communicate further:

The eager look in his eyes died as I spoke, and finally he turned away from me, violently flung himself on a bed and lay there still. I felt as if I had committed a crime, yet there was a light-hearted sense of escape, too. (51)

For the man, getting to know his wife better means one thing – sexual intimacy. Convinced of the legitimacy of his action, he forces himself on her while she is asleep. He believes that familial and societal norms grant him the authority to assert his marital rights. The woman’s desire for friendship and consideration are thrust aside, setting the tone for the marriage.

7.5 The Theme of Marriage

At the end of the story, the marriage is consummated with violence. There is an uncomfortable implication in the story; that this is a common occurrence in our society. In an interview with Lakshmi Hölmstrom, Shashi Deshpande admits that:



It's a story that was really difficult to write where a man forces himself on a woman. Something that I know happens, that I wanted to write about . . . for an Indian woman writing, there are all sorts of inhibitions which you have to learn to get past. (Pathak 243)

The author presents the anguish of the Indian middle-class woman, crushed under patriarchy and tradition. Though educated, she is not granted the autonomy to take major life decisions. Deshpande's protagonist is uncomfortable in her situation, but remains passive.

Though standing between tradition and modernity, the woman is bogged down by tradition. She is educated, but without financial independence or a vocation; sceptical about marrying a relative stranger but, conscious of familial obligations, goes ahead with it nevertheless. Though squeamish about the sexual act, she is unable to articulate her feelings to her husband. The female protagonist is neither a rebel nor a feminist. Outwardly, the protagonist of "The Intrusion" conforms to social norms, but seethes with torment inside.

Shashi Deshpande believes that feminism, as it is understood in the West, cannot be applied to the reality of our daily lives in India. Our socio-cultural ethos is different and, as a writer, it is her concern to chronicle the degradation faced by women. In her essay, "Of Concerns, Of Anxieties," she writes: "My idea of feminism came to me out of my own life, my own experiences and thinking" (108).

The achievement of the story lies in its honest, uncompromising depiction of the woman's inner psyche; for example, when the man tries to put his arm around her, she feels as if she is being molested. The language is rich in simile and metaphor, creating an ominous mood. The title, "The Intrusion" is a powerful metaphor for the loveless, forced union of the man and the woman. It symbolizes not only a violation of her body, but her emotions as well.

7.6 Summing Up

Shashi Deshpande considers herself a writer, dealing with the domestic problems of middle-class women in India. She believes that literature does not always have to be about great issues and that her subject matter and audience is Indian. In "The Intrusion," she creates a narrative where the events are viewed through the perspective of the woman. Deshpande succeeds in creating a brooding and oppressive atmosphere, leading to a description of marital rape.

In this short story, the author challenges the institution of marriage, especially in the Indian context. The result is a disturbing picture of the underlying reality; a relationship



devoid of romance and understanding. The trajectory of this marriage can easily be visualized by the reader, where the female protagonist is forcibly made to submit to male desire.

Questions

- i) Would you agree that the story has an appropriate title. Give reasons.
- ii) Identify some narrative devices used in “The Intrusion.”
- iii) Discuss the narrator’s state of mind when alone with her husband.
- iv) Write a few lines about the man in “the Intrusion.”

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Manjula Padmanabhan, “Stains”

Dr. Seema Suri

Structure

- 8.1 *Learning Objectives*
- 8.2 *Manjula Padmanabhan: A Brief Sketch*
- 8.3 *Menstrual Taboos*
- 8.4 *Overview of the Plot*
- 8.5 *Critical Analysis*
- 8.6 *The East-West Theme*
- 8.7 *Feminist Rejection of Cultural Taboos*
- 8.8 *Summing Up*

8.1 Learning Objectives

Manjula Padmanabhan’s “Stains” was first published in her collection of short stories *Hot Death, Cold Soup* (1996). It has also been published in another collection of her short stories, *Three Virgins and Other Stories* (2013). This part of the study material includes a detailed critical commentary on the story and discussion of its major themes. After going through it, you should be able to:

- view the story in the larger context of Indian writing in English;
- understand the feminist critique of traditional menstrual taboos; and
- discuss the theme of cultural differences.

8.2 Manjula Padmanabhan: A Brief Sketch

Manjula Padmanabhan (born 1953) is an author, illustrator, playwright, and cartoonist. Padmanabhan’s comic strip, featuring Suki, has appeared in *The Sunday Observer* (1982-86) and *The Pioneer* (1991-97). Her science fiction play *Harvest* (1997) has received many awards, and her short stories have been published in many collections; namely *Hot Death, Cold Soup: Twelve Shorts Stories* (1996) and *Three Virgins and other Stories* (2013).

Padmanabhan’s work explores issues of science, technology, and gender. The short story “Stains” deals with the rather unconventional subject of menstrual taboos.



8.3 Menstrual Taboos

A taboo is a social or religious custom that either forbids or restricts something – which it is not acceptable to say, mention, or do. For instance, there is an implicit understanding that death and incest are not to be discussed. Marriage between close relatives is taboo in most communities, as is eating certain kinds of food. It is believed that such actions can invite divine retribution, as there are religious strictures against them.

In India, taboos associated with menstrual blood go back to Vedic times, with mythic origins in the *Rig Veda*. The normal, physiological function of a woman's body shedding endometrial tissue every month has been imbued with spiritual significance. Across most religious communities in Southeast Asia, Africa, and the Pacific countries, menstrual blood is considered impure and unclean. There is a long list of restrictions prescribed for menstruating women or menstruators, which is the preferred term nowadays. They are forbidden from bathing in communal spaces, touching fire or cooking in the kitchen, entering temples or accepting prasad. Men are forbidden from having sexual intercourse with them during their periods. In Papua New Guinea it is believed that menstruating women attract negative energies. In India, they are also prohibited from touching cows, tulsi plants, or pickles; lest they contaminate them.

Anthropologists from around the world have documented these cultural practices; such as the practice of *chhaupadi* in Nepal, where menstruating women are made to spend those three to four days in huts outside the perimeter of the village. Similar customs are followed by the Gond tribals of central India. Not only are the women isolated and segregated, they are, in the absence of access to feminine hygiene products, forced to use old rags, barks of trees, and newspapers to make sanitary napkins. Poor sanitation and poverty only compound their problems. It is only in some developed countries, like Scotland and New Zealand, that women have access to free sanitary napkins.

An overall survey of cross-cultural attitudes to menstruation in India reveals how “deeply ambivalent” they are (Chawla, 2817). In many indigenous communities, menstrual blood is considered sacred and a symbol of fertility. In South India, a girl's first period is observed publicly as a rite of passage. Family and friends come together for a celebration of womanhood. Similar customs are observed in Sri Lanka and amongst the Apache in North America. In Assam, the famous Kamakhya Temple has an annual Ambubachi Mela to mark the menstruation of the goddess and, for three days, the temple is closed as it is believed that the goddess is resting during her periods.

The cultural stigmas associated with menstruating women are deeply entrenched and resistant to change. In spite of sustained campaigns to dispel misinformation, there is still



a deep sense of shame associated with a woman's period. Even in the big cities in our country, it is amusing to watch shopkeepers wrap packets of sanitary napkins in newspapers before furtively handing them to their customers; even as supermarkets display the packets on their shelves. In China, there is a ban on advertisements for female hygiene products on television during prime time. Conversations about periods are always in hushed tones and, as noted by sociologists, there are hardly any jokes about it. You could read more on this topic as there is a plethora of research available on this.

In "Stains," Manjula Padmanabhan presents a feminist critique of traditional Indian taboos related to menstruation through Sarah, a young African-American girl.

8.4 Overview of the Plot

The short story has a fairly simple plot, with only three characters and covering the events of a single day. Deep and Sarah are students at Cornell, visiting Deep's mother, Mrs Kumar for the Christmas holidays. Sarah's bedsheet gets stained with her menstrual blood and Mrs Kumar tells her to wash it in the basement of the house. Though stunned and offended, Sarah does as instructed. Back in her room, she broods over her five-month-old relationship with her boyfriend and recalls an argument they had on their way to Deep's house. It is difficult for her to comprehend the cultural taboo, but she realizes that Mrs. Kumar is treating her as unclean, with the potential to pollute.

Sarah expresses her discomfort to Deep and there is an unpleasant argument about their cultural differences. Alone in her room, Sarah begins to pay attention, almost revel in what her body is going through. When Deep comes to check on her, they have a conversation about their national and racial identities, bringing their cultural conflict into further relief. In the bathroom, she notices some bloodstains on her inner clothes and jeans, and washes them. As she is about to hang them up to dry, Sarah realizes that if Mrs. Kumar comes there, she will guess what has happened and force her to wash her clothes in the basement again. She puts all her wet clothes in plastic bags and packs them in her backpack. Suddenly, she packs all her other stuff and leaves the house. Deep and his mother are not at home, but she doesn't wait for them to return. Back at her apartment at Cornell, she receives a message from Deep on her answering machine. When she calls him, Deep is concerned and informs her that his mother approves of her. Sarah is unrelenting and ends the conversation, implying that she cannot accept the tradition that was imposed on her. It is apparent that she has ended the relationship.



8.5 Critical Analysis

The short story begins with Mrs. Kumar holding up Sarah's bedsheet and pointing to the spot where her menstrual blood has stained it. Mark how she emphasizes the word 'stain,' drawing our attention to the stigma and shame she associates it with. When Sarah offers to wash it off, Mrs Kumar leads her to the basement and instructs her to wash it with her hands, in a big sink there. The freezing atmosphere in the unheated basement is evoked through a series of metaphors used to describe the cold water: "liquid ice", "arctic water", "Stream of ice", and "gelid water" (206-7).

For the next few paragraphs, the process of washing is described, with a lingering attention to Sarah's struggle with the bedsheet – going much beyond what is essential. Padmanabhan doesn't shy away from including seemingly gross details in her description of the stain: "Minute particles of her being, her discarded corpuscles, were detaching themselves, from the cotton fibres of the sheet . . ." (206). Don't miss the symbolism in Sarah being sent to the basement to wash off the stain; reminiscent of the custom of menstruating women being isolated in special huts, away from the communal spaces which they could pollute. Though baffled, Sarah does as told; even if she finds it "illogical and offensive" (208). Till this point, the exact relationship between Mrs Kumar and Sarah is unclear. However, the references to a basement in the house, and a washing machine and dryer in the kitchen – uncommon in Indian households – point to a foreign locale. Sarah finishes washing and carries the wet bedsheet to the kitchen, where Mrs Kumar is loading the dryer with damp clothes. She indicates that she would like to put the wet sheet with the other clothes, but Mrs Kumar is flustered and sends her back to the basement to hang the bedsheet on a clothesline there.

By now, it is apparent that Mrs Kumar doesn't wish to contaminate the other clothes. Back in her room, Sarah's thoughts hover around what has just happened. She wonders what she is doing there, amongst them: "These people. Deep and his mother. Indians. Not-us. Foreigners, Aliens" (209). We learn that Sarah and her boyfriend Deep are graduate students at Cornell University and are visiting Deep's mother during the Christmas holidays. Sarah broods over an argument they had on the drive to Deep's home. Noticing a few cows in a field, she had asked Deep if he would like to stop and pray – perhaps not fully conversant with the sanctity of cows for a traditional Hindu. Deep is offended at the suggestion and launches into a diatribe against American cows, that verges on the comic:

"Do you understand any of this?" he had said. "I mean – you look into the eyes of one of these animals here and you see nothing. Just a dull, stupid, unreflecting stare!" . . . "But – " he said, "you look into the eyes of an Indian cow and there –



you see it. Consciousness! An Indian cow is a developed being. She has a mind, she has a life, she is a person – no, better than a person. A sort of living manifestation of the, uh, bounty, the giving spirit of nature.” (211)

Deep’s argument is unscientific and there is cultural arrogance in his words. When Sarah mentions that Americans too have a special bond with their horses, he taunts her with a historical fact: how Americans ate horse meat during the Civil War (1861-65). Whereas horse meat is sold as a delicacy in France and other European countries, Americans have resorted to eating it only during times of war and scarcity; as during the Great Depression or World War II. Deep dismisses her comparison, telling her that Indians never ate their cows, even during times of famine. Sarah retorts that it would be “stupid” to die of starvation and that she couldn’t respect a culture that encouraged this (212). Deep brags about the superiority of his ethical system: “five thousand years of civilization” (212). His observation about Christianity and the image of Jesus Christ on a cross is rather distasteful: “an ethical system which uses, as its central icon, the tortured corpse of its religious prophet” (214).

It is important to view their argument in perspective and understand the irony underlying it. Remember that both Sarah and Deep, despite being American citizens, are outsiders in America. Deep is the son of immigrants from India and defends the culture of a country which, most probably, he visits only for his annual holidays. Sarah’s ancestors, in all likelihood, were forcibly brought from Africa, to work as slaves on the plantations in the American South – suffering through centuries of brutality and racism. But Sarah considers herself American and uses the pronoun ‘we’ to defend her countrymen. Deep’s caustic remarks hurt her and she remains silent for the rest of the drive.

Sarah and Deep have been together for five months and the visit to Deep’s home brings the fissures in their relationship to the fore. There is an absence of mutual respect and understanding; which is surprising, considering that they are both students at an Ivy League University. Sarah begins to feel a sense of alienation from her boyfriend.

Lying alone in her room, she remembers something she overheard her mother and aunt talking about when she was a child: the ancient cultural practice of isolating menstruating women in Africa. Suddenly, Sarah understands what Mrs Kumar is doing: “Avoiding contamination. Avoiding the unclean magic of a menstruating woman” (214). It also reminds the reader how far-removed Sarah is from her ancestral roots and culture. She almost always thinks of herself as American. What follows is another detailed account of Sarah changing her tampon. As she comments, aligning herself with modernity: “Twentieth Century Woman Removing Vaginal Insert” (214). In what is a clear rebellion against Mrs Kumar’s taboo, Sarah looks at her menstrual blood:



It's a beautiful colour, she thought, red and warm, like – like Burgundy. (214)

She overcomes her own prejudices and a sense of guilt that it was not proper to do so. When Deep enters the bathroom and sees Sarah on the toilet seat, he steps back in embarrassment. She realizes the “Powerful magic” of menstrual blood (215).

Sarah goes down to breakfast, but declines to eat what Mrs Kumar has prepared. She refuses to be treated like an invalid. The different cultural norms are evident here. Whereas Sarah thinks Mrs Kumar should have consulted her before preparing breakfast, her refusal to eat her host's food could be considered rude in an Indian household. She excuses herself and goes out for a walk. Again, she catches herself thinking of Deep and his mother as “*These Indians, these aliens*” and feels guilty about it (216). There is more than a hint of envy in her thoughts about the comfortable life Deep and his mother have. Deep's late father had been a successful surgeon, whereas her own father had owned a garage and struggled to put his five children through school. We learn that Sarah has lost a brother to drunken driving. There are also suggestions of racial abuse. It is important to remember that, till this point in the story, we do not know that Sarah is Black.

When Deep comes after her to find out what's wrong she doesn't hesitate to express her anger; upset at the “crazy out-dated customs” she has been made to follow (217). She doesn't respond to Deep's pleas to “bend” herself a little and excuse his mother's behaviour, which he attributes to the fact that she is “just a lonely old lady” (217, 218). She goes a step further, giving Mrs. Kumar's actions a political agenda, accusing her of “playing a power game” to control them (218). The magnitude of her charge seems exaggerated and Deep feels that she is looking at him as an outsider. For the first time in the story, Sarah's race is mentioned; when Deep accuses her of lacking sensitivity:

“I thought being black must mean that you're more sensitive – but that was stupid of me, huh? Another kind of racism. When it comes to the important things, you're just an American. Just a Westerner”. (219)

Sarah remains silent and they return. The revelation about her race comes as a surprise and, in retrospect, a lot of things Deep says make sense. Both Deep and Sarah come across as obtuse; Sarah in her refusal to forgive Mrs Kumar and Deep, in his inability to understand her discomfort.

In yet another long scene, Sarah is lying alone in her room, suffering from menstrual pain. It parallels the earlier one where she admires the colour of her blood. She almost revels in the pain, infusing it with life: “the roar being broadcast from her uterus, from her cervix” (221). She consciously counters the sense of shame Mrs Kumar has enveloped her in. She assures herself that the pain is not malicious and imagines it in rich colours.



While her menstrual blood was a rich burgundy, the pain is “deep, rich blue, royal” in colour (220). Read these lines:

It was possible to look steadily into the centre of the pain and in some undefined way, celebrate it. It was a trial by strength, a specialized type of wrestling match between her body and itself. (221)

Her attitude is reminiscent of the indigenous communities’ celebration of menstruation as a rite of passage for a woman.

Deep comes to check on her, but feels uncomfortable when she explains what is happening to her body. “In India,” he said “we don’t talk about such things. Women’s blood. We just don’t talk about it” (222). Sarah gently reminds him that they are not in India and it is the private space between them that matters. He brushes it aside as unrealistic:

“You’re not just Sarah, my girlfriend. You’re also a – an American black, you have your history and your separate destiny.” (223)

When Sarah points out that he is looking at her through the lens of race, Deep retaliates by accusing her of viewing him “as a foreigner, as an Indian” (223). Deep comments on the absence of a meaningful tradition in the West. Sarah counters his assertion with an irreverent retort, which escapes his notice:

“We have TV,” she said. “We have K Mart’s and Hollywood –” But he was already shaking his head. “We have Star Trek and Superman. Freeways and credit cards – “ (223)

“It’s in the Coke bottles and in the chewing gum and the neon lights and – and – all the things that you sneer at so much!” (224)

Observe how their conversation mutates into an academic debate of sorts. Sarah ends the discussion, telling Deep she would like to sleep. Alone again, she wonders what had attracted her to him. She thought he was different from American men: soft-spoken and gentle, but now she realizes that beneath the surface he is a traditional man. She remembers the time when he had teased her about not knowing the meaning of her name and she is sure that he must have thought less of her. She is also troubled by the fact that Deep accepts his parents’ arranged marriage as normal. He doesn’t question this custom and attaches little importance to “the detail of personality” (225). To Sarah, from the perspective of Western individualism, it is unthinkable. Earlier, she had been impressed with Deep’s description of tradition as a dance, the steps to which one knew beforehand. Now, she feels disenchanted and realizes that Deep is American only from the outside.

Feeling uncomfortable, she goes into the bathroom and sees blood stains on her underwear and clothes. She washes the blood stains off and is about to hang up the clothes



to dry when she realizes that Deep's mother would immediately understand what had happened and make her wash her clothes again, in the cold basement. She packs the wet clothes into plastic bags and stuffs them into her backpack. As if on impulse, she packs all her other things. Deep and his mother are not at home and Sarah leaves without waiting for them to return. She returns to Cornell by bus and, in her shared apartment, finds a message from Deep on her answering machine. He is concerned and tells her that his mother is also worried. He is excited, and informs her that his mother wanted to know if he was going to marry her. It is characteristic of him that he has not bothered to ask Sarah if she is willing to marry him. Ignoring his words, she asks him what type of feminine hygiene products women in India use. Deep is embarrassed and dismissive, and Sarah sarcastic. Read these lines carefully and observe how she rejects the taboos:

“ . . . if at the end of the day someone wants me to hide my blood underground and behave like an invalid – forget it, you know? If that's what tradition means, then I say, take it off the shelf. Leave it out. My packet of ultrathin, E-Z wrap pads and what it represents to me about the journey my generation of women has made, is all the tradition I need.” (228)

It is apparent that Sarah has ended the relationship, realizing that their cultural differences are irreconcilable. She is unwilling to accept Deep's traditions.

8.6 The East-West Theme

The clash between the East and the West has been a perennial theme of Indian writing in English (Mukherjee, 65). More than a hundred years ago, Sarath Kumar Ghose wrote *The Prince of Destiny* (1909), where an Indian prince is torn between his love for a British woman and an Indian princess. Another classic with this theme is Raja Rao's *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960). However, these are just a couple of random examples and the clash of tradition and modernity appears in many forms in this genre of fiction: sometimes as an inner conflict between values and at others, an outward clash between characters.

Padmanabhan's work is connected to the same theme at its core, but in an altogether different avatar. The setting is a small town in America, and with the most unlikely characters representing the East and the West. Born to Indian immigrants and brought up in the country, Deep is an American citizen by default. Geographically removed from India, he is an unlikely spokesperson for an ancient civilization he claims as his own. He is oblivious to the incongruity of his stance, while asserting the superiority of his own culture in front of Sarah. Beneficiary of a system that rewards talent and enterprise he, as Sarah points out, “loves to sneer” at the appurtenances of the American way of life



(224). He lacks the compassion that could have enabled him to understand Sarah's discomfort. Note how every argument they have ends with Sarah going silent. Like Deep, she is an unlikely representative of the West in this short story. An African-American, she belongs to a racial community in a country that is still grappling with the uncomfortable legacy of slavery. Note how she defends the consumption of horse meat during the Civil War (1861-65): forgetting that the war was fought over the issue of slavery. But she is conscious of the painful reality that she has embraced a culture that is predominantly white: "They're part of me . . . even when I'm not a part of them" (224). The author has employed an interesting narrative strategy, by not revealing Sarah's race till the story is half-way through. It adds an extra dimension to the narrative.

Mrs Kumar is also an outsider, who came to live in America after her wedding to Deep's father. Even after so many years, she is not fluent in English and nurtures her cultural taboos. The presence of a sink, a dry cake of soap, and a clothesline in the basement indicate that this is the place where she must have washed her own stained clothes in the past. At the same time, a closer look reveals some degree of assimilation into a foreign culture. Mrs Kumar welcomes her son's Black girlfriend into her home and doesn't seem to object to their staying together. This would have been frowned upon in her native country. Even before she is asked to do so, she extends her approval to her son's girlfriend.

If Mrs Kumar and her son Deep are representatives of Indian tradition, Sarah positions herself as a modern woman in the narrative. She constantly juxtaposes her modernity against the cultural taboo that she out rightly rejects as "oppressive and illogical" (208). The story ends on a sad note with Sarah underlining the fact that she cannot accept Deep's traditions. Her anger at being made to wash the stain off her bedsheet acts as a catalyst: the resentment was brewing inside her for a long time. The cultural conflict remains unresolved.

8.7 Feminist Rejection of Cultural Taboos

It is through the lens of menstrual taboos that the cultural conflict takes concrete shape. Mrs Kumar's tradition has moulded her prejudices. For her, menstrual blood is impure, with the potential to pollute anything it comes in contact with. That is what makes her force Sarah to wash off the stain in the basement and not in the washing machine.

The story is about Sarah's rejection of such a tradition, from a Western standpoint. All the negative connotations of the word 'stains' are challenged by her. She gazes on her menstrual blood, shedding whatever little guilt that she feels and learns to celebrate what is happening to her body. Colour is used to convey this. When Deep is embarrassed to



talk about it, she tells him that this is a natural occurrence, but he invokes his tradition. Observe how quickly he moves along the axis of family-tradition-civilization. As Sunder Rajan observes, tradition, in this story, is the “cynical legitimizing ideology” which Deep falls back on (235).

The short story is an outright feminist rejection of menstrual taboos. The negative connotations of the title are unmistakable. It evokes the stigma and shame associated with menstrual blood. Sarah rebels against such attitudes and learns to appreciate her womanhood. At the end of the story, she informs Deep that she is switching from tampons to sanitary pads as she doesn't wish to use a product that is designed to absorb menstrual blood, while remaining out of sight. She comes to appreciate the colour of her menstrual blood and when she is in pain, probably because of menstrual cramps, she visualizes what is happening inside her. Sarah's rejection of Deep's tradition is an assertion of her acceptance of menstruation as a normal physiological function: modern, scientific, and stripped of any mystique.

8.8 Summing Up

In this part of the study material, you have read about taboos related to menstruation. Through the central protagonist Sarah, the author presents a feminist rejection of such taboos, which Mrs Kumar tries to impose on her. Sarah's attitude to menstruation is modern and scientific and she cannot relate to her boyfriend's culture.

However, “Stains” is not simply about menstrual taboos. Sarah's rejection of Deep and his tradition should be viewed in a larger context. There are hints, scattered throughout the story, that theirs is an uncomfortable equation. Sarah begins to feel that her attraction for Deep was maybe based on his being different; exotic, in a way. But now, his tradition suffocates her to the extent that she, forgetting all social graces, goes back to Cornell without informing him. The story is also a sad comment on the failure of both Sarah and Deep to accept each other's differences with grace and compassion.

NOTES

- Faux Monet* : Fake print of a painting by the famous French painter, Claude Monet (1840-1926), who painted a series of oil paintings of his garden at Giverny.
- Ersatz Klimt* : Gustav Klimt (1862-1918) was an Austrian painter, whose painting is printed on Sarah's bedsheet.
- Holstein-Friesians* : Dutch breed of large dairy cattle and a dominant breed in America.



<i>Klingon</i>	:	Fictional language spoken by the Klingons, species of aliens in the Star Trek television series and movies.
<i>K Marts</i>	:	Chain of American retail stores, selling discounted items, from 1962-2006.
<i>Star Trek</i>	:	Science fiction TV series in the 1960s. It was a hugely popular and phenomenally successful brand: creating movies, video games, comic books.
<i>Freeways</i>	:	Wide roads meant for fast travel in the US.
<i>E-Z wrap pads</i>	:	A major brand of sanitary products.

Questions

- i) Why, according to you, does Mrs Kumar instruct Sarah to wash her stained bedsheet in the basement?
- ii) Write a few lines about:
 - Deep's family
 - Sarah's family
 - Mrs Kumar
- iii) Comment on the significance of the title of the story.
- iv) Why does the relationship between Deep and Sarah fail?
- v) Discuss the theme of cultural conflict in "Stains."
- vi) Write a few lines about the narrative style of "Stains."

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