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Department of Distance and Continuing Education

E-mail: ddceprinting@col.du.ac.in
english@col.du.ac.in

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Literature and Disability

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U N I T

I(1)

Firdaus Kanga, *Trying to Grow*

Aanchal Awasthi

Structure

1.1 Learning Objectives

To closely understand the novel and appreciate the themes and its narrative structure, along with various other aspects of Firdaus Kanga's *Trying to Grow*, the present study material is segregated into different sections which will help you to;

- Appreciate the disabled narrator's voice in the novel;
- Observe how the modern, urban Parsee milieu is depicted the novel; and
- Understand how Kanga's novel defies several stereotypes concerning disability.

1.2 The Author

Born in a Parsee family in Bombay in 1960, Firdaus Kanga is considered the first Indian author to write a novel revolving around a bisexual protagonist. He was born with *osteogenesis imperfecta*, commonly known as brittle bone disease; a condition where bones are prone to break easily. As a result of this condition, he stayed at home for most of his childhood and never attended school. Occasionally, he went to watch movies with his family. He completed his education at home till class four and later on enrolled in Campion School in Mumbai, only going to take exams. He grew up to be four feet

tall and got his first wheelchair, and hence the freedom of mobility, only at the age of nineteen. "Denied a physically active life accessible to an able-bodied man, Kanga built around himself a universe of literature, populated by gay writers such as James Baldwin and E.M. Forster and by English female novelists such as Iris Murdoch" (Chatterjee 1). As he grew up, his family wanted him to pursue law and become a solicitor. However, he did not feel interested in law, neither were his experiences satisfying enough. Instead, he studied journalism and even won a prize in a British Council short-story competition in 1987. Kanga graduated in history from the University of Bombay and, after receiving his degree, moved to London in 1989. This shift to London marked the beginning of his career as a writer, with the publication of his first novel, *Trying to Grow* in 1990. The next year, he published a travelogue *Heaven on Wheels,* which is about his experiences in the United Kingdom and his meeting with Stephen Hawking. In 1997, he wrote the screenplay of the movie *Sixth Happiness*, which was based on his first novel, and played the character of the protagonist Brit Kotwal. He also starred in the movie *Cricket or Bharatha Natyam Self* in 1999.

1.3 Introduction to the Novel and Critical Reception

Trying to Grow by Firdaus Kanga is the story of a young Parsee boy named Darius Kotwal, nicknamed Brit Kotwal, suffering from *osteogenesis imperfecta*. The novel is set in post-independence India, in Bombay of the 1970s. It is quite apparent from the beginning that the novel is semi-autobiographical in nature and draws heavily from the life experiences of the author. While, on one hand, Firdaus Kanga draws our attention to the question of disability in his novel; he also comments on the Parsee community. The growth of the Parsee community resonates with the introduction of western culture, particularly British culture. Before the British came to colonize India, the Parsee community led an agricultural life. However, after the arrival of the Britishers, they embraced the western culture and established themselves as an advanced urban community. Mathew and Nagesh comment on the same lines:

> Firdaus Kanga's novel *Trying to Grow* recollects a frequent theme of the Parsee novels, the lost glory of the community, with nostalgia, frustration, anger and humour. The story almost melodramatically sketches the 'fate of the colonial elite,' to use a phrase from Tanya Luhrmann, in the post-colonial world. The Parsee community rose to prominence, making use of the favourable circumstances provided by colonial rule and became an elite community by the turn of the century. The complete transformation undergone by this community in order to prosper under the British, had reached ridiculous proportions by the time India achieved its Independence. (78)

Trying to Grow could also be read as a bildungsroman, which charts the growth of its principal character, Brit, who undergoes several changes in his life. He is introduced to us as an eight-year-old child, who grows into a young adult during the course of the novel—experiencing love, loss, and acceptance. John C. Hawley comments on the novel as a bildungsroman:

> In the process, he [Brit] discovers his own awakening sexuality in encounters with a neighbor, Cyrus, and also with Cyrus's girlfriend, Amy. Cyrus appears to be everything that Brit can never be, and Brit's infatuation is immediate and intense. But the relatively idyllic world of childhood soon passes. Dolly moves to America and marries; Brit's father accompanies her and walks into oncoming traffic; Tina is sold into prostitution; Brit's mother dies; Cyrus and Amy decide on marriage—all potentially melodramatic but recounted simply. The author seems to be clearing the decks for his narrator because at this point in the novel Brit sees himself as free to move to England. He does so, and his life, in a sense, begins anew. (119)

The novel, when published, received much critical attention and got mixed reviews. While some critics, like Maria Couto, applaud Kanga and call his work "remarkable for its unselfconscious detailing of what it is like to be four foot nothing, to move only with the aid of a wheelchair, and to have a soul which yearns and a body bursting with irrepressible sexuality," others, like G.R. Taneja, feel that it "lacks a substantial centre" (768).

1.4 Critical Commentary

PART I: The Brave Act

Chapters 1-5

The novel opens with Brit and his father Sam, travelling on a bus. Sam discusses his son's condition with a total stranger and mentions that he is taking his son to a Wagh Baba, a holy man in search of a "cure" for his son. The stranger ridicules Sam's decision to go to a holy man in search of a cure for his son: "Shame on you! Educated, speaking English so well and going to a mumbo-jumbo Baba" (4). Brit is terrified as they arrive at their destination and the way he describes the place makes it clear that Wagh Baba is a fraud. While Brit's father believes in alternative treatments to cure his son, his mother Sera takes a more rational and scientific approach. She also rejects Sam's faith in "mumbo-jumbo" and calls him out. In the beginning of the novel, it is established that Sera keeps her "loyalty" towards the British even after twenty-five years of freedom, as she says: "I took an oath with the Guides which I intend to keep; an oath to King and Country" (12).

Brit tells us how his father inherited their Colaba flat from his mother, a rich Parsee lady. Sam's father died before he was born and his mother squandered her wealth on her English lover. All that remains now is their flat in Colaba. Though the family is not rich, they live in a posh south Bombay locality. Sam's father works in a bank, but the family cannot afford a helper for their handicapped son. Sera and Dolly bathe him, while Sam carries him in his arms whenever they go out.

It is in Chapter 3 that we get to know about Darius's disability. He calls it the "devil" and says that he is suffering from *osteogenesis imperfecta*. When he was born, the doctor told Sera: "Your boy is born with bones brittle as glass" and further mentions that he would never be able to walk and probably be toothless (28). The doctor says that the disease would naturally go away as he grew, but he would never be able to walk. Apparently, Sera takes this information with much strength and tells Sam, who appears to be completely shattered and dejected with this news that "he's a boy like any other; only his body has problems" (29). Dolly, Darius's elder sister, gives him the name 'Brit' as he has brittle bones and, throughout the novel, he is referred to as Brit. His painful experiences with his body as a child are described by him and he mentions that he broke his legs eleven times before he turned five.

Sam tries various remedies on Brit, including feeding him "pearl powder" given by Wagh Baba and the bone-marrow of a goat which Brit describes as gross, as it made him sick. His father sometimes rubbed the marrow on his legs, thinking that it would seep down into his bones. Sam also massages his legs with almond oil every night.

In chapter 4, for the first time, Brit voices his stance on disability and states that the appearance of "handicapped people" scares him:

> I was scared of the way handicapped people looked. You know the hesitant gait and robot-stiff movements of the blind, the lolling heads and strangulated speech of the spastics. Whenever I saw them, I wondered if I seemed as ugly and pathetic. I'd shudder and turn my mind away. (38)

This chapter also introduces us to another character with disability: Tina, who is Brit's cousin, suffers from hearing impairment. Brit and Tina share a close bond and communicate in sign language, which most of the other people around them fail to comprehend and offer their sympathy. Tina is not allowed to spend time or go out with anyone else as her mother Jeroo is afraid that someone might molest her daughter because of her disability.

Brit talks about the times when he broke his bones without even doing much physical activity and suffered immense pain: "As if that murderer had dipped his knife into my blood again without bothering to finish me off. And I would drag myself through

that trench of pain, 'Four times worse than anyone else's. Maybe this time it will kill me. Maybe'" (45). He would be on a wheelchair for six weeks and couldn't go out and constantly lived in fear of this happening again. This chapter also introduces Madame Manekshaw, a rich Parsee lady, who comes to tutor Brit. In her conversation with Sera, she says that "parents are not meant to be teachers" (48). She helps prepare him for admission to Campion School.

Sam always introduces Brit in a tone of sympathy. His parents and sister go to extremes to take care of him and even bathe and brush him: "I was perfectly capable of doing all this myself. But you know how it is, when you can't do some things people feel you can't do anything" (52). Brit is pretty much aware of his appearance and feels awkward when people stare at him with sympathetic eyes. Though he doesn't attend school, he does extremely well in the exams and is given "an Especial Prize" for being "brave and hardworking" (57). However, this special treatment makes him feel extremely uncomfortable. As he mentions: "around me the applause burst and swelled like some orchestral climax while I grew smaller and smaller in my seat wishing I wasn't there, wishing Father Ferra hadn't talked about me, wishing I hadn't got this prize for having legs that didn't work" (57).

Chapters 6-10

Brit's parents, especially Sam, like to make him dependent on them. Brit says that "for some funny reason, there were things in our flat that were kept out of my reach" (62). He later talks about an instance where he asks Sam why he can't keep his watch in his cupboard and he answers: "But, Brit, you just have to ask. We're always here to help" (62). However, Brit dislikes the idea of being dependent on anyone.

When Brit expresses a desire to become a psychiatrist, Madame Manekshaw tells Brit that it would be hard for people to trust him and believe that he can solve their problems. She comments: "To a lot of people you seem stupid because you are so short and, I know it's absurd, because you can't walk" (67). A similar situation occurs in chapter 7, when Brit and his family go to Los Angeles and he asks for directions in English. The owner of the gas station is quite astonished seeing Brit speak in English and he replies in amazement, "A genius in a wheelchair—oooff!" (74).

Dolly announces that she wants to become an air hostess, to which Sera objects. Even Sam argues with her saying that: "I know a lot about airlines, the kind of people who work with them. And it's not the kind of life a girl like you would want" (70). Later, Sam finds her a job in an airlines office to make up for his refusal. One day, their neighbour Defarge visits their house and asks Sera why they are not getting Dolly married. She also

hints that the reason they are not making any effort in this matter is because they "want her [Dolly] to stay and look after Brit" (76). Sera denies this allegation and, in turn, asks her to find a suitable boy for Dolly. Defarge arranges a meeting in Apollo Bunder, with one Dinsu Dinshaw and his mother. Tina is not brought along "because even Sera had to admit that two handicapped children in one family was a bit too much" (80). Dolly is asked several questions by the boy's mother, to which she replies coyly. Dolly then begins to ask Dinsu some difficult questions, to which he cannot reply, giving her an excuse to back out. Forewarned by Brit, the wicked Dolly had looked up an encyclopedia the same morning.

In chapter 9, we come to know that Madame Manekshaw's husband has died in an accident: run over by his own wife. Defarge comes to meet Sera to talk about the match she had suggested for Dolly and check if she would be getting a commission. Sera unabashedly says that the boy she had suggested was a "moron." A day later, Madame Manekshaw commits suicide by slitting her throat. Everyone thinks that she couldn't bear to live with the guilt of having killed her own husband. When Brit goes to the funeral, he notices an old lady in a wheelchair, sitting next to them. She introduces herself as the dead man's sister, Aloo Manekshaw, and hands him a blue envelope saying that his teacher, Madame Manekshaw left it for him. They later get into a conversation where she says that since he has been living with disability since birth, it wouldn't be difficult for him to "have a good time," while she, on the other hand, was on a wheelchair due to an accident that took place just six months ago and hence it would be quite hard for her to adapt to her present condition or enjoy all the wealth she has inherited from her brother.

While discussing Madame Manekshaw, Sam states that they too are mortal and it is not possible for them to be there for Brit forever. Though they will leave whatever they have for Brit, it wouldn't be enough for his entire life and he must find a way to earn a living. Sera ridicules the idea of Brit working and living on his own and says: "How on earth do you think he can go out and compete with all those young men bursting with energy?" (93). They discuss further possibilities, where both Sera and Sam believe that Brit would find it rather hard getting a girl. While Sam believes, "it's not right making Brit believe from now on that romantic love is out for him," Sera firmly stands on the point that "it is out" (94). She fears that since Brit's disease can be inherited, it is not a good idea for him to have children.

Brit confesses that he had become a "sex maniac" by his mid-teens. After his school exams are over, he spends his time lusting over Tina and Ruby. He, however, rejects the idea of Tina becoming his girlfriend as he "didn't want a deaf girlfriend even though she was a gorgeous girl and a fabulous friend" (96). He turns to Ruby, who responds to his

advances, but he stops, as he feels that "she didn't deserve a kiss from me" (98). One day, Ruby tells Brit that he is "awfully ugly" and the only reason she let him touch her was because she has known him a long time and could forget the way he looked.

Brit finishes school and joins a correspondence course at Bombay University. Tina now has a boyfriend named Rohit, who lives in a boarding-house across the street from her window. As Jeroo is very protective of Tina, Brit and Ruby accompany her when she meets Rohit. They are her confidants and encourage her romance with Rohit as they believe, "if she loses Rohit, she'll probably never find anyone else. You know how it is for handicapped people" (104).

PART II: Trying to Grow

Chapters 11-15

Jeroo comes to Brit's home to inform Sera and Sam that Tina has run away. The elders do not know about Rohit, but Brit and Ruby tell them after they see how upset they are. Jeroo decides not to go to the police as it would taint her reputation. They all go on a search mission of their own, which leads them to the red-light area of the city, Falkland Road. After all of them fail to find Tina, Jeroo loses her sanity and says: "I don't want to find Tina. She is not mine to find; she is not mine to love; she is not. What is not is not" (111). She later takes refuge in chanting mantras and does not talk about Tina. For a while, Brit too starts chanting mantras, believing that they help him.

Chapter 12 introduces us to the character of Cyrus, Defarge's cousin's son, who has come to live with her. He enters Sam and Sera's house as Defarge is there and immediately Brit turns his chair so he won't be able to see his legs. When Cyrus asks Brit's name, Defarge hurriedly meddles and says: "We call him Brit. Brit is short for his brittle bones. Poor, handicapped boy" (125). However, Cyrus has a very different attitude towards Brit which makes him like Cyrus. One evening, Cyrus comes to take Brit out with him and, in spite of Sam's discomfort, they go. Before leaving, Brit asks for time to change his clothes as he doesn't want people to stare at his thin and lean legs if he goes out in shorts, but Cyrus tells him not to bother.

It is already midnight when the two of them go for a walk. Cyrus asks Brit if he smokes. However, as he takes his first drag, his lungs are filled with smoke that leaves him feeling uneasy. Later, they go to experience the sea waves, where Brit is otherwise not allowed to go. They also discuss various subjects and have a good time. It is the first time that Brit has spent such an adventurous and fun night without any restrictions.

Sam and Sera make sure to get Brit lots of art and poetry books as he is an avid reader, but since Cyrus has no interest in poetry, Brit stops reading poetry. He even packs

away all his art books as he can't have a conversation with Cyrus about them. The next night, Brit tells Sera that he is going to Defarge's house to meet Cyrus, but she does not allow him as it is about ten at night. However, after much convincing and also getting Sam on his side, he finally makes his way to meet Cyrus who feels elated on seeing him. Brit and Defarge are embarrassed, seeing him only in underpants. Brit and Cyrus enjoy listening to music. While going back to his house, Brit compliments Cyrus and compares him with Michelangelo's *David*, saying that he looks as if he is made of gold. A couple of nights later, while he is alone at home, he fantasizes about Cyrus. They become very good friends and hang out together quite often. They also study together as both of them have their exams around the same time. While Cyrus takes his first-year law exams, Brit appears for his last B A papers.

One day, Cyrus suggests that they go for a swim once their exams are over. However, Brit blatantly refuses and starts making up one excuse or another, as he "couldn't tell him the truth. [He] couldn't say, Look Cyrus. Look at my body. Picture it in nothing but swimming trunks—osteowarped" (141). Later, on, he agrees to go with him. Seeing him swimming, Brit feels an intense attraction for him. Cyrus, takes him to the pool and helps him swim.

Sera sends Brit to an oculist with Sam. After the check-up, the oculist prescribes a thick pair of glasses as his eyesight is very weak. Brit passes a comment, to which the doctor replies: "I know why you are this way. You are a wicked boy and God has punished you" (144). This enrages Brit and he hits the oculist in his eye. On their way back, Sam tries to make him realize that his behaviour was rude and he should not care about what other people say. He further asks him when he would start writing seriously. Brit replies that writing is a "lousy profession" as one cannot make money and that he would like to become a solicitor. Sam feels disappointed. It is clear that Brit has abandoned his goal to write as he is enamoured of Cyrus and doesn't want to do anything that won't interest him.

Six months after Cyrus comes to stay with Defarge, he meets Ruby. While Ruby is asking Brit why he didn't introduce Cyrus earlier, Dolly jokes that Brit is gay, which leaves him flustered with shame. Thereafter, Sera also sits with all of them and starts chatting with Cyrus. Brit feels side-lined as Cyrus becomes busy with the three women. Ruby continuously flirts with Cyrus, who also reciprocates. She teases Brit for preferring boys, to which Cyrus replies: "Sorry, Brit, I'm just not inclined" (149). Cyrus's response crushes his hopes. When everyone leaves, Cyrus shares his innermost feelings with Brit. He expresses his admiration for Brit's honesty and wonders why he doesn't want to write anymore. He tells him how he wanted to be a concert violinist and also got admission in

a good school abroad, but later decided against it, thus failing his mother's expectations. As Brit spends more time with Cyrus, he gets closer to him.

In chapter 15, we learn that Dolly is in love with a Muslim doctor named Salim, who lives in New York and wants to marry him. She confides in Brit first, then their parents. While Sam congratulates his daughter and feels happy, Sera is extremely dejected and does not consent to the match as Salim is a Muslim. Dolly goes on a hunger strike and finally, after three days, Sera invites Defarge and tells her that her daughter is getting married to a Muslim boy; thus, ending the cold war between Sera and Dolly.

Chapters 16-20

There is an incident where Cyrus believes he has hurt Brit and thus, starts avoiding him. They finally sit down to talk after twelve days and Brit's feelings come to the fore. Brit kisses Cyrus and he kisses him back, but suddenly Brit realizes: "Somehow it felt all wrong as if I had clasped the wrong partner in the dark" (169). Cyrus reveals that he has known about Brit's attraction for him from the beginning and wanted to experiment. Cyrus asks Brit if he is gay, to which he replies that he doesn't know. He also asks Brit why he likes and wants him, to which he responds:

> You're tall, I'm four feet nothing, you've got muscles in your thighs when I've got matchsticks, you've a voice like hot chocolate—You've got a swimmer's chest; I've got a pigeon-chest. Girls love your body; they don't look at mine except to shudder—. (170-171)

After Brit draws all these comparisons between the both of them and projects himself as weak and ugly, Cyrus rebukes him: "Stop looking like Osteo Brit" (172). Cyrus picks Brit in his arms, when Sera walks in and screams. She calls them perverts but, somehow, Brit convinces her that there is nothing between them and he is not gay. Later, Brit tells everyone that he has decided not to pursue law but write.

Sam and Dolly leave for New York to get her married as Salim cannot come to India. Brit does not want to go to see them off, as Sera and other relatives would create a dramatic scene at the airport. After the intimacy with Cyrus, Brit's feelings towards him have changed and he feels awkward in his arms. After Dolly leaves, Brit finds a letter from her in his room which states that she is leaving her "nest-egg" for him. She also confesses that sometimes she hated him as, in their parents' absence, she had to stay back to take care of him. However, never for a moment, did she feel that she should replace him with a different sibling. Brit turns emotional reading the letter. Later, Ruby comes to visit him, and he calls her a "Cyrus-thief," but Ruby explains that she hardly meets Cyrus and there isn't much going on between them. After Ruby leaves, Brit sits down

to write his first short story, which wins a prize. It is an important moment for him as now "he did not feel alone anymore" (181). This marks an important stage in his growth.

A few days later, Brit meets Zarthost, also called Jerry, at a bookstore. He instantly "liked him because he was ugly and that was such a relief after going gaga over every little bit of Cyrus" (182). In their first meeting, he goes out with him to have a hotdog. Brit confesses that he is extremely tired of his confined life and he wants to see the real world and meet other people.

Chapter 18 marks the changing dynamics in relationships. Brit gets Dolly's letter, informing him that she would be getting married on his birthday. She also reveals that she has known all along that he is homosexual and believes Brit thought it was "better to be stared at as homosexual rather than handicapped!" (188). Later, Cyrus comes to take Brit to the Hanging Gardens to celebrate his birthday at midnight. There, he meets Amy, Cyrus's girlfriend, for the first time as he gets into the cab, which leaves him quite puzzled and awkward. After Brit explains the meaning of his name, Amy does not react as the others do. She applauds him, saying: "How lovely! Imagine celebrating your problem. Needs guts" (190). Amy also loves reading and she has much in common with Brit, as they both understand each other's references to books and authors. She also praises Brit's first story, which she has read. However, Cyrus is entirely engrossed with Amy, which makes Brit feel uncomfortable and neglected throughout the night.

The next morning, Sera wakes up Brit to tell him that Sam has died in an accident abroad, the day after Dolly's wedding. She tries to console the sobbing Brit by assuring him that she will always be there for him. The next day, she arranges a prayer meet for Sam at the Parsee fire temple, Amy also comes. Brit thinks that perhaps Sam killed himself by deliberately walking into traffic, tired of his travails, as "there's only so much you can go through" (195).

Jerry tries to contact Brit a number of times, but each time Sera disconnects the call, saying that Brit's dad has passed away and he is in no mood to talk to anyone. Jerry finds his way to Brit's house, using the Bombay Telephone Reverse Directory and takes him home. Brit is enamoured, seeing their affluence. He is also surprised to know that Jerry's mother, Rati Davierwalla already likes him and addresses him as "a famous writer." He spends a happy time with Jerry for the entire day: they have lunch together, play Flush, and also watch a movie. On his return, Rati gifts him a first edition of Housman's *Last Poems*.

Days after Sam's demise, Sera gets a helper named Esmero for Brit; to be with him all the time. One day, Brit goes to the library and asks him to come after two hours, but the hours pass by and Esmero does not turn up. Brit starts feeling dizzy with hunger and the thought that he is stuck there. Fortunately, Amy spots him and offers to take him back

to his home and, on their way back, though they exchange few words, they are sufficient enough to create a spark. After he reaches home, Brit is attacked by Esmero, who is drunk, but he somehow manages to outpower him. After this incident, Cyrus begins paying more attention to him. One day, after returning from dinner with Amy and Cyrus, Brit realizes that he has started developing feelings for Amy and starts admiring her beauty, which he otherwise never looked at. This perturbs him to a great extent, and he reminds himself that she is "going to be [his] neighbour's wife soon" (221).

Chapters 21-25

Amy and Brit go to watch *The French Lieutenant's Woman,* alone together for the first time. Cyrus drops them at the cinema hall and promises to pick them up after the movie. Half of Brit's attention is on Amy and the other half on the screen. In the interval, when the lights are on, people stare at Brit. A little boy asks his father, "Papa, why is this uncle so small?" which enrages Brit and an argument ensues (224). Amy jumps in and defends Brit by hurling rude comments at the father. Usually, Brit does not like to be rescued/ defended but, in this case, he feels quite happy. On reaching home, Brit finds out that Sera isn't there. Brit realizes that Sera is preparing him to be on his own.

Brit accompanies Jerry on a three-day trip to his mansion in Davier, a coastal town popular with Parsees. Sera lets him go without a fuss, and Brit feels like a bird walking out of its cage. Jerry is not at all like Brit; he can hardly hold any conversation about authors or books with Brit. So, they spend their time laughing, eating, and roaming around. One morning they go to the beach, where Jerry buries him in sand. As Brit gets agitated with this, Rati says, "Don't take it ill. It is an age-old cure for limpy legs" (217). She assumes that Brit has polio and he humours her. After getting back to Bombay, Sera tells Brit that she was testing him by letting him travel alone.

The next day, Brit and Cyrus go to Amy's house, as she has organized a party, where he also meets her mother. Brit goes to the bathroom and, suddenly, Amy comes up from behind and offers to help him. While in the bathroom, both Amy and Brit confess their love for each other and Amy says that it was love at first sight for her. Brit wonders how she can be in love with his body. She later sits on his lap. As he has been gone a long time, Cyrus comes to check on Brit and finds both of them. Later, Amy drops Brit at his home.

Sera goes berserk after Brit tells her that Amy is his girlfriend and says: "You are not going to have any girlfriend. Not Amy, not Freny, not Hilloo, not —" (247). Sera is convinced that no one is going to marry Brit because of his condition and, eventually, it is going to break his heart. But after Brit says "Let me love Amy. Maybe it isn't fair asking you to go on supporting me—but I want to live like everyone else, feel the things

they do —" (249). Sera gets emotional and gives in. Later, Amy and Brit go for a walk on the beach where they meet Cyrus and Ruby. As Cyrus and Brit get talking, he says that he could see that Amy and Brit hit it off in their first meeting itself. This is why he kept pushing them to spend time alone as it was a test, which they ultimately couldn't pass. After Cyrus and Ruby leave, Amy kisses Brit, which creates quite a scene as people start talking about them, leaving Amy in tears. A lot of prejudiced and stereotypical perceptions come to light through this incident, as someone remarks: "Maybe something is wrong with her inside, we can't see it. That's why she has to marry this cripple. She can't find anyone else" (253). Amy is extremely jolted because of what happens on the beach, but Brit somehow pacifies her as this is nothing new for him. Later in the evening, Amy and Brit go back to Brit's place as Sera is not at home. For the first time, Brit realizes that Amy hasn't seen his legs and she might get repulsed and turned off. He insists that they must turn the lights off, but Amy doesn't agree as she understood the reason. She makes Brit feel comfortable and they make love in the natural light of the moon.

One day, while Brit is working on his novel, Jeroo walks in with a bottle filled with Gangajal and she starts splattering it all over their house to make it pure. Jeroo climbs a stool to sprinkle the holy water on the top of Sera's cupboard. Appalled at seeing this, and in an attempt to stop her, Sera too climbs the stool, loses her balance, and falls off. Brit watches his mother die before his eyes. At his mother's funeral, he feels devastated by the thought of vultures eating his mother's eyes. You must be familiar with the Parsee tradition of leaving bodies of their dead in Towers of Silence, for vultures to eat.

A month later, Brit's first novel gets published and he goes out with Amy to celebrate. During a conversation about Cyrus, Amy says: "Oh, Brit, it was awful never being able to trust him; but it's different with you, isn't it? I mean, I never ever have to worry—" (269). This offends Brit and, under the influence of champagne, they start arguing playfully, but end up fighting and Amy starts crying.

A couple of days later, Cyrus informs Brit that he has got a job in Delhi and would be shifting there. This news upsets Brit and he begs him not to go, but Cyrus has made up his mind. Later, Ruby comes to visit Brit and they bake a cake in Brit's newly renovated kitchen and spend a good time. Later, he calls Amy over. She wants to work on their relationship but Brit refuses, saying: "No, Amy, I've got to be alone. I have to be Osteo Brit and not mind" (278). After Amy leaves, Brit wonders why he should live without her. He goes after her and as Brit looks at himself in the mirror in the lift, he realises that something has changed: for the first time, he looks into the mirror and doesn't despise himself and the novel ends with Brit thinking, "I liked the way I looked" (280). This signals his acceptance of himself and his disability.

Check Your Progress

i) How is Sera's attitude towards Brit's disability different from Sam's?

ii) In what way does Brit's tutor, Madame Maneckshaw influence him?

iii) Explain how Cyrus's entry in Brit's life is one of the turning points of the novel.

iv) Comment on the role of Dolly in Brit's life.

v) Why do you think Brit dislikes Amy in the beginning and what makes him fall in love with her?

vi) Sera's behaviour undergoes a tremendous change after Sam's death. Do you agree? If yes, give reasons.

vii) How is the presence of Jerry relevant in Brit's life as well as the story?

viii) Explain the ending of *Trying to Grow*.

1.5 Narrative Style

Trying to Grow is a semi-autobiographical novel and the narrator's tone is intimate. Darius Kotwal, popularly known as Brit is the narrator of this novel. We experience the journey of Brit's life, roughly between the age of eight and the early twenties, through his eyes. We see what he tries to show, we hear what he says. As a narrator, Brit seems to be brutally honest, especially when it comes to talking about different personalities around him. He also unabashedly unravels the stereotypical and judgemental attitude of not only Indian society, but people in general. Most of the time, we become engrossed in the ongoing events, tending to forget what age Brit is and it is only through a close reading and extrapolation that we estimate his age at any given point.

Right in the beginning, he establishes that his father Sam believes in irrational cures and tries every possible way to get his son on his feet. We learn about his close bond with his father as he lets him try these remedies, even though they are unscientific. We sense a change in Brit's perception about different people, including his parents, as he grows up. He isn't biased while giving us an account of his life experiences. Although we do not see much of the emotional side of Brit, he makes sure to get his readers on board and experience what he is going through.

Brit's depiction of his vulnerability and feelings seems to be quite realistic and non-dramatic. For instance, when Brit gets news of Sam's death, he mentions that he was filled with a pool of tears, but it hardly pulls any emotional strings for the reader. At

Sera's funeral, he looks at Cyrus, wishing that Sera should've had a son like him. When Cyrus announces that he is leaving, Brit's response is extremely candid and genuine. We can feel his restlessness and helplessness. To sum up, the novel's narrative style is highly personal and experiential in nature, as readers constantly feel as if they are on a roller-coaster journey along with the protagonist. More than anything else, Brit does not exhibit any self-pity for his condition. The overall tone of the novel is comic, with Brit making gentle fun of the Parsee characters.

Brit's ability to reflect dispassionately on his emotions helps the reader follow the trajectory of his growth. From self-disgust, he grows to a position of mature acceptance of his physical deformity; learning to find contentment in his writing. This brings us to the title of the novel, which draws our attention to the central protagonist's growth as a writer.

1.6 Representation of Disability in *Trying to Grow*

Firdaus Kanga gives a very realistic, experiential, and personal sketch of how disability is perceived in India. As Renu Adlakha observes:

> Historically in India as elsewhere in the world, there has been a deep-rooted cultural antipathy to persons with disabilities. Throughout the ages, the disabled have been looked down upon with disdain, almost as if they were subhuman. They have been portrayed as medical anomalies, helpless victims and a lifelong burden on family and society. Even in religion and mythology, negative characters often had some form of deformity, be it Manthara, the hunchback in The Ramayana or Shakuni, the lame of The Mahabharata (Ghai 2002). Indeed, the law of karma decreed that being disabled was just retribution for past misdeeds. Pity, segregation, discrimination and stigmatization became normalized in the management of persons with disabilities. Such constructions of the disabled by the non-disabled have the dual effect of not only justifying the marginalization and disempowerment of a whole population group but also leads to the internalization of such negative stereotypes by disabled persons themselves. This acceptance translates into passivity, dependency, isolation, low self-esteem and a complete loss of initiative. (2)

The attitude of Indian society towards disability and people with disabilities hasn't changed much. Kanga vividly describes how people look at people with disabilities, mostly through the lens of morality or charity:

> The moral model regarded impairments as punishments for sins in the previous birth, a result of bad karma. The charity or welfare model of disability, guiding the work of several disability organizations in India even today, perceives persons with

disabilities as dependent on the sympathy, charity and assistance of the "more privileged" non-disabled members of the society. (Bhattacherjee 86)

Like the West, India also moved from the medical model of disability to the social model but, as we see in the novel, society still locates the issue of disability in individuals and relentlessly tries to uproot it at that level. Both Sam and Sera make incessant efforts to get their son "cured" and hence, try different cures like feeding him pearl powder, bone-marrow of a goat and lots of medicines. In the first half of the novel, they live in denial and keep on hoping that Brit will be "normal." Sera cares for her son along with the other members of the Kotwal family. Brit observes that everyone believes that the disabled are unfit to do anything when the reality is that they are unable to do only some things. He says: "I was perfectly capable of doing all this myself. But you know how it is, when you can't do some things people feel you can't do anything" (52). For most of the narrative, Sera imposes several restrictions on Brit because of her concern that he might get hurt; both physically and emotionally. She constantly tries to keep him in her cocoon. However, it is only after Sam's death that she realizes the uncertainty of life and starts preparing him to live on his own. She deliberately leaves him alone at home, going over to stay with Jeroo.

There has always been present, a well-established dichotomy between 'able/ normal bodied' and 'disabled/abnormal bodied' in society, since time immemorial. Various stigmas and prejudices attached to disability have come to define the condition as something to be ashamed of. A number of religious beliefs and myths associated with disability have resulted in the marginalization of people with disabilities, due to negative attitudes towards them. Kanga brings to light the judgemental attitude of people towards people with disabilities. In one incident, when Amy kisses Brit in public, people present in the vicinity do not only raise eyebrows but they are shocked to their bones. It is extremely difficult for them to digest the fact that a good-looking and non-disabled woman kisses a man like Brit. They discuss amongst themselves the possible reasons why Amy is in love with Brit. Some say that he must be super rich and Amy is with him because of his wealth. There are many other instances where Brit is subjected to prejudices. Amy's mother comments that he must have many handicapped friends, and Defarge tells Cyrus that Brit is "a poor handicapped boy" (125). This brings forth the stigma people with disabilities face in their day-to-day life.

More than the prejudices harboured by other people, Brit has to fight his own. Throughout the novel, he remains distressed by his body. Looking at other people with disabilities, he wonders if he looks as "ugly and pathetic" as them (38). With Cyrus, he becomes acutely conscious of his "osteowarped" body and is reluctant to go swimming

with him (141). He frequently draws attention to his lantern-jawed smile and pigeon-chest, saying that "not all the cosmetic surgeons in America can make me like looking at myself" (171). It is important to note that Brit is filled with self-disgust, as far as his appearance is concerned. He has "an aversion to mirrors" and wonders how Amy could kiss him (231). It is Amy who questions his perception of himself, asking him why he cannot see beyond bodies. Remember that Amy is instrumental in making Brit feel loved and wanted. It is not surprising that the last line of the novel marks his acceptance of himself. When he goes after Amy and sees his reflection in the mirror in the lift, he says: "I liked the way I looked" (280).

1.7 Sexuality and Disability

In a country like India where the topic of sex and sexuality is taboo, talking about sexuality in tandem with disability becomes even more difficult. As Rimjhim Bhattacherjee notes:

> Works by disability scholars like Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, Anna Mollow and Robert McRuer, and Margrit Shildrick have pointed to the idea that disability is seen as incongruous and contradictory with sexual desire in the popular imagination. More pleasurable sexual sensations are generally dissociated from disabled bodies and lives. One need only to examine the cultural constructions of the most sexually desirable people in order to understand this: thin models, regular visitors to the gym resulting in sculpted bodies, and so on. Rarely are disabled people regarded as either desiring subjects or objects of desire. As Mollow and McRuer have observed, if sex and disability are ever linked in contemporary cultures, it serves either to marvel or marginalize: the sexuality of disabled people is typically depicted in terms of either tragic deficiency or freakish excess (1). Disabled people are seen as incapable of both experiencing sexual desire and engaging in sexual acts. (89)

Firdaus Kanga has deftly incorporated this stereotypical perception of persons with disabilities as asexual, in his novel *Trying to Grow.* In one conversation, while cursing men in general, Jeroo says to Sera: "So sorry! I forgot about your son. You understand, when I say men, I mean—men. Not someone like you, Brit" (39). Affected by Jeroo's statement, Brit says, "I wasn't male. Not to them. The magic mirrors of their minds had invented a formula: osteo = sexlessness" (40). During another conversation, Sera very casually says that her son is never going to get married or have children. Sam too agrees with the idea. It is interesting to note that, it is not just other people around Brit who think that people with disabilities cannot have a sexual life or can get a good partner, Brit himself reiterates the same thought at least twice in the novel. When Brit's cousin, Tina,

who is hearing-impaired, falls in love with a boy, Brit and his friend Ruby contemplate the tactics they should use to convince Tina's mother to allow her to marry the boy she loves. Ruby says, "if she loses Rohit, she'll probably never find anyone else. You know how it is for handicapped people" (104). Brit also rejects the idea of getting along with Tina because of her disability. He says:

> But I knew I didn't really want Tina. Not the way you want a girl when you're fifteen. Because then you've got to have everything just right—soft music and poetry and whispered somethings. And they wouldn't have worked their magic on her ears. I didn't want a deaf girlfriend even though she was a gorgeous girl and a fabulous friend. (96)

Renu Adlakha comments on the same:

> Sexuality is an area of distress, exclusion and self-doubt for persons with disabilities. Sexuality at core is about acceptance of self and acceptance by others. Indeed, disability and sexuality not only evoke strong emotional reactions but are also mired in cultural myths and misconceptions. . . . Rarely is a person with an impairment conferred a positive or heroic role. Disabled persons are expected to reject their bodies as asexual. . . . Disabled people are the perennial ugly brothers and sisters. As a corollary to this, their needs for human contact, affection and intimacy are often ignored. . . . The situation is more complicated in societies like India where sex is a highly tabooed subject. (4)

While vividly penning down the stereotypes in society, Kanga has not shied away from rebelling against these notions. Just like him, his protagonist is also fearless and very open in talking about his wants and desires. When Brit meets Cyrus, he is immediately enamoured of his charming personality. The passages where he gazes on Cyrus' body are erotic. He is frank in describing the effect Cyrus has on him. Many times, he behaves like a jealous lover. When he does eventually kiss Cyrus, who kisses him back, he realizes that it is not really what he wants. He is, at this point, confused about his sexuality and Cyrus confesses that he was experimenting. Though the two remain close, the bond is emotional.

In the case of Amy, it is she who falls in love with Brit first. Kanga once again emphasises the fact that disability is just a part of a person and not his/ her entire personality. Amy reinforces, time and again, through her actions as well as words that she is attracted to Brit for the person he is and is not with him out of pity or sympathy.

While Brit is somehow able to explore and discover his sexuality, Tina isn't given that chance as the moment she steps out of her confined space and tries to transgress the

norms dictated by society, she faces dangerous consequences or rather, her existence is wiped out. When disabled women attempt to subvert the "passive, dependent, weak" identity assigned to them by gender and disability, it has significantly adverse consequences, particularly in the social context of India. Tina's exploration of desire, her assertion of herself as a desiring subject and her attempt to "take charge and control of [her] life" is seemingly bound to fail. Not only does she challenge society's prescription for an "ideal" disabled woman: passivity and asexuality, but she also threatens to unravel the fundamental power relationships that characterize her social existence in a patriarchal setup. (Bhattacherjee 102-103)

Check Your Progress

i) How does gender become a decisive factor in the treatment of persons with disabilities?

ii) The Disability Rights Movement began in 1970s, which introduced the social model of disability. However, *Trying to Grow* was written in 1990 and as per the depiction of Kanga, Indian society still views disability through morality, charity, and the medical model of disability. Explain with suitable examples from the text.

iii) How do you perceive Brit as a narrator of the novel?

iv) Do you think that Kanga has given justice to the representation of disability in the novel?

v) While Sam, Sera, and Defarge have biased and stereotypical notions on disability, Amy and Cyrus have a relatively rational approach. Compare and contrast the two stances with suitable examples from the text.

1.8 Major Characters

Darius Kotwal/Brit

Brit is not only the protagonist of the novel but also the narrator. It is through the lens of Brit's perspective that we read the novel. Darius Kotwal is born with *osteogenesis imperfecta* commonly known as brittle bone disease; a condition where bones are prone to break easily. In the initial years, from the age of eight, when we first meet him, Brit breaks his bones several times. He goes through immense pain every time, but with a pinch of humour. *Trying to Grow* can also be seen as a coming-of-age novel, where we closely watch the growth of Brit's character and personality, with every passing chapter. Although he grows only four feet in height, his cognitive development keeps progressing

with time and experience. Many people contribute to the development of his personality; Cyrus, Amy, Madame Manekshaw and Jerry. The novel is as much about Brit finding his own voice as a writer as it is about his growth as a person. After meeting Cyrus, he decides he will become a lawyer, but his father Sam and sister Dolly encourage him to write. Even in her letters from America, Dolly asks if he has started writing.

Initially Brit appears to be entirely dependent on his mother as well as sister Dolly, to some extent, for his day-to-day needs. In fact, his parents deliberately keep things in the house out of his reach so that they can help him, which puzzles him. Despite being able to bathe and dress by himself, Sera and Dolly don't let him. However, things gradually change as Dolly relocates to America and Sam dies in an accident. It appears that Brit gets the agency of controlling his own life only after Sera begins to prepare him for her own death.

The novel ends on a positive note. Brit receives a handsome amount as advance for his novel. Brit observes that he doesn't feel alone when he writes. In the end, when Amy goes away, Brit realizes:

> I have never felt so good in my life. Not in the I-could-go-out-and-kiss-the-first-girl-I-see kind of way. But solid and calm and right. Then something strange began to happen—like a singing army, sentences, paragraphs, pages began pouring into my head. Up from my toes and knees and cock and stomach they came: fluent and clear and correct. (279)

From nurturing a poor image of his own body, Brit learns to view himself without disgust. Recall the moment in the end, when he views his own reflection in the mirror in the lift, without cringing.

Cyrus

Cyrus is introduced as Defarge's cousin brother's son, who has come to live with her. He meets Brit the very day of his arrival in Bombay. Cyrus becomes friends with Brit after a few meetings. Brit is immediately drawn towards him, not just because of his strong build and charming aura but also because, for the first time, he meets someone who sees beyond his disability. Not even once does Cyrus show any pity towards Brit and treats him like any other person. He dismisses him many times for portraying himself as a disabled person. One evening, Cyrus comes to ask Brit for a long walk and, despite Sam's discomfort, Brit goes. Cyrus talks to him about girls, his career, his parents, and takes him swimming. Like normal friends, they go to concerts, movies, the seaside, and restaurants. Cyrus even takes Brit into his bathroom to watch a neighbour's maidservant bathing, through his home-made telescope.

Cyrus and Brit get close to each other in a short span. After Brit confesses his feelings to him, he reveals that he already knows. Despite knowing that Brit likes him, Cyrus does not stop meeting him. Though not a homosexual, he welcomes his advances and extends a hand of affection towards him. Perhaps Cyrus also feels a lack of attention in his life and when he gets that from Brit, he welcomes it. Probably, he is also afraid of losing a close friend with whom he can share anything. Brit is the only person in the novel with whom Cyrus opens up. He tells Brit that he is very formal with his parents, which is yet another reason why he needs Brit. Time and again, Cyrus expresses his admiration for Brit's honesty and wonders why he has decided to become a solicitor, instead of a writer. It is Cyrus who helps Brit get out of the cocoon created by his family and have some fun.

Although Cyrus gets into a relationship with Amy and most of his attention is focused on her, he does not neglect Brit. Cyrus gets into a relationship with Ruby, even while seeing Amy. He lies to both the women. Cyrus admits to Brit that most of the time, he gets into relationships with women only because they want him. Cyrus comes across as confused about what he wants from women. He is disappointed when Brit and Amy get close, but still does not feel angry. Towards the end of the novel, Cyrus decides to take up a job in a law firm in Delhi which saddens Brit.

Amy

The arrival of Amy proves to be yet another turning point in the novel as well as the life of Brit. Amy is presented as a modern, self-dependent and bold woman who does not believe in conventions. She is introduced as Cyrus's girlfriend and works at a library. She is the only person with whom Brit can talk about books, authors and poets, and who can participate in a discussion. She likes Brit's company as they have much in common to talk about. Cyrus also notices the same and that is why, when he gets to know about her feelings for Brit, he does not seem surprised. Just like Cyrus, Amy is also not bound by conventional attitudes towards disability. She leaves no chance to appreciate Brit for his wit and knowledge and this somewhere gives him a sense of security when around her. Brit initially dislikes Amy to the core as he believes that she is responsible for taking Cyrus away from him. However, despite knowing that Brit is in love with Cyrus, she never has any problem with both of them spending time together.

It is later that we come to know that Amy fell in love with Brit right in their first meeting. She does not hesitate, even for a moment, to offer help to Brit when he is stuck in the library. While they are in the cab, she reads his mind and tells him not to feel embarrassed. It is at this point that Brit actually sees her with a different gaze and appreciates

her beauty as well as brains. It is only after meeting her that Brit accepts himself as he is and looks into the mirror, not with aversion but with a smile. She is the only person who can read his mind and at the same time pacify him. Amy and Brit finally confess their love for each other towards the latter half of the novel. Thereafter, she roams hand in hand with him and despite knowing the repercussions of her action, she kisses him in public and also defends him when people start talking about them.

After their fallout, when Brit meets her one last time, she tries to mend things and asks him to try again, but Brit does not consent and they end on a friendly note. However, he wonders why he should live without her and runs after her.

Dolly

Dolly is Brit's elder sister, who could also be seen as a mother figure in his life. She helps him get ready on a daily basis. She is a witty character, who likes to pass sarcastic comments on different situations. Although she has to cancel a lot of her plans because of Brit, she never complains to her parents. It is true that we don't see much of Dolly in the novel, but her presence is constantly felt; as someone whom Brit relies on. She is not only Brit's sister but also his confidant and friend. Before Cyrus and Amy come into his life, it is Dolly with whom he spends most of his time. She plays an integral part in shaping Brit's personality.

Dolly is a bold girl who doesn't believe in tying herself up in the shackles of society. She confides in Brit that she is in love with a Muslim boy, Salim and intends to marry him. When Sera refuses to accept this relationship, she goes on a hunger strike to prove that she is really serious about this and finally, Sera gives in. As Brit tells us, Dolly is closer to her father and this is the reason why Sam goes with her to America to arrange for her wedding. She leaves a note for Brit where she informs him that she's leaving a sum of money for him so that he could get a "slave" for himself as she wouldn't be around. She writes many letters to him and in one of the letters, she reveals that she knows about Brit's homosexuality. After Sam dies, Sera decides to let Dolly take care of the funeral service for him and keep the ashes as she was closest to him. She comes to visit Brit towards the end of the novel and also promises to come more often, which cheers him up. Dolly motivates Brit to write. She once jokingly suggests that he can write a novel on their family and title it, "The Cruel Kotwals" (216).

Check Your Progress

i) Comment on how the relationship between Brit and Cyrus evolves over time.

ii) Who do you think is a better partner to Brit—Cyrus or Amy? Give reasons for your answer.

iii) Analyse the characters of Dolly and Amy and comment on their personalities.

iv) Why do you think Brit disagrees with Amy's suggestion to give their relationship another chance?

v) Comment on the significance of the title of the novel, with special reference to Brit.

1.9 Suggested Readings

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U N I T

II(2)

Sight Unseen
Georgina Kleege

Shrimi Gupta

Structure

1. Learning Objectives

The lesson will enable you to:

- Learn about the life and literary contributions of Georgina Kleege.
- Explore how blindness shapes identity and perception, and how individuals with disabilities navigate social and personal identity.
- Rethink societal notions of 'normal' by analysing how *Sight Unseen* (1999) critiques visual-centric assumptions about human experience and disability.
- Critically assess portrayals of blindness in literature and media, evaluating their impact on societal attitudes and the lived experiences of the visually impaired.

2. Introduction

2.1 About the Author

Figure 1: Georgina Kleege

Georgina Kleege (1956-present) is an American writer and Professor at the University of California, Berkeley where she teaches creative writing courses along with classes on the representations of disability in literature and disability memoir. Diagnosed with macular degeneration and declared legally blind at age eleven, Kleege gradually lost her ability to see clearly.

Her scholarly work often intersects with her personal experiences, allowing her to bring a deeply informed perspective to her writing and teaching. She is best known for her book *Sight Unseen* (1999). In addition to *Sight Unseen* (1999), Kleege authored *Blind Rage: Letters to Helen Keller* (2006), which transcends the boundaries between fiction

and nonfiction by re-imagining the life and legacy of Helen Keller. Her book, *More Than Meets the Eye: What Blindness Brings to Art* (2017), focuses on the relationship between blindness and visual art, exploring how blindness is represented in art, how it affects the lives of visual artists, and how museums can make art more accessible to blind and visually impaired individuals. Kleege has lectured and served as a consultant to major art institutions, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the Tate Modern in London.

In recognition of her contributions to academia, Kleege received the Distinguished Teaching Award from the Division of Arts and Humanities in 2013 and from the University of California, Berkeley, as a whole in 2016. Through her memoirs, essays, and lectures, Georgina Kleege continues to be a prominent voice in disability advocacy, emphasising the importance of representation and the need to rethink societal attitudes toward disability. Her work inspires and challenges readers and scholars alike, offering valuable insights into the lived experiences of disability and the broader implications for understanding human diversity.

2.2 About the Book

Georgina Kleege's *Sight Unseen* (1999) is an introspective, cultural critical exploration of blindness, challenging societal perceptions and broadening the understanding of what it means to live with visual impairment. Kleege, who was diagnosed with macular degeneration as a child, draws on her personal experiences and uses them as a lens to critique how blindness is treated in literature, film, language, and everyday interactions.

Her book, *Sight Unseen* (1999), is a work that combines memoir, cultural critique, and disability studies, operating within the realm of *creative nonfiction*. The memoir aspect of the book provides intimate insights into Kleege's life as a legally blind individual, offering a personal narrative that recounts her experiences navigating a predominantly sighted world. This autobiographical dimension adds authenticity and emotional depth, allowing readers to connect with her lived experience. At the same time, *Sight Unseen* (1999) functions as a cultural critique, as Kleege deconstructs societal norms and media portrayals of blindness, questioning dominant narratives that frame it as a deficiency. Through this critical lens, she addresses issues of representation, stereotype, and bias, contributing to broader discussions in disability studies and cultural theory. Furthermore, the book delves into the academic field of disability studies by exploring blindness as a socially constructed experience shaped by cultural assumptions and societal attitudes. By weaving together personal reflection, philosophical inquiry, and academic analysis, *Sight Unseen* (1999) positions itself as a text that appeals to both general readers and scholars interested in memoir, disability studies, and cultural critique.

Kleege begins the book by confronting the discomfort many people have with the term "blindness," questioning why society relies on euphemisms like "visually challenged." She delves into the gaps between how blindness is perceived by the sighted and how it is lived by the blind. This theme resonates throughout the book as Kleege examines representations of blindness in cultural narratives, including Greek mythology and Hollywood films. Her analysis critiques the tendency to link blindness with punishment or moral failure, as seen in the myth of Oedipus and reinforced in popular culture.

What sets *Sight Unseen* (1999) apart is its balance between cultural criticism and personal narrative. Kleege moves fluidly between theoretical discussions on blindness and stories from her life, inviting readers to view blindness as a complex and layered experience. She emphasises that while blindness is a significant part of her life, it does not define her entirely, challenging readers to rethink the fixed associations between sight, identity, and understanding. Kleege's philosophical reflections on perception argue that sight is not a mere mechanical process but a deeply subjective experience, involving not just the eyes but the mind's ability to interpret and give meaning to what is seen.

In *Sight Unseen* (1999), Kleege advocates for a more inclusive view of blindness, one that moves beyond pity or fascination. The book provides an essential critique of societal attitudes toward disability and pushes for a reconstitution of what is considered 'normal'. Through her insightful observations, Kleege opens the reader's mind to the possibility that blindness offers a different, though equally valuable, way of experiencing the world.

2.3 Three-Part Structure of the Book

The three-part structure of *Sight Unseen* (1999)—"Blindness and Culture", "Blind Phenomenology", and "Blind Reading: Voice, Texture, Identity"—presents a comprehensive examination of blindness from social, philosophical, and personal perspectives. This structure rationalises the exploration of blindness not only as a sensory condition but also as a cultural and phenomenological experience.

"Blindness and Culture" sets the stage by contextualising blindness within societal and cultural frameworks. This section addresses how blindness is perceived and constructed in various cultural settings, exploring stereotypes, misconceptions, and the ways in which sighted society interacts with and defines blindness. Kleege challenges the cultural norms around blindness, dismantling the idea that it is purely a physical deficiency. This section also addresses how representations of blindness in media, literature, and art shape societal attitudes and the lived experiences of blind individuals. This provides a critical foundation by offering readers an understanding of the cultural "baggage" that blindness carries, which informs the rest of the book.

"Blind Phenomenology" moves deeper into the subjective, personal experience of blindness, focusing on how blind individuals navigate the world phenomenologically. This section dives into the lived experience of blindness—how one interacts with the environment, understands space, and engages in daily activities without sight. Phenomenology, as a philosophical approach, emphasises subjective experience, and this part seems to resonate with the embodied experiences of blind individuals, allowing readers to step into their shoes. Kleege discusses the multi-sensory perception of blind individuals, where touch, hearing, and even imagination play a role in "seeing" the world. This section provides a more intimate look at blindness, offering insights into its nuances beyond the simple absence of sight.

"Blind Reading: Voice, Texture, Identity" delves into how blind individuals experience and interact with literature and text, both aurally and tactilely. It examines the intersections of voice, texture, and identity through blind reading methods such as Braille and audiobooks, challenging conventional notions of reading and literacy. This section explores how the act of reading shapes identity and knowledge acquisition for blind individuals, who engage with texts in ways that might differ from sighted readers. It also confronts the biases that regard visual reading as superior or more legitimate, offering a critical reflection on alternative reading practices and their cognitive and emotional impacts on blind individuals.

Overall, this three-part structure allows for a layered examination of blindness. It progresses from external cultural perceptions, through personal phenomenological experience, to a specialised focus on reading and identity, illustrating the complexity and diversity of blind experience. Each part builds on the previous, offering readers a holistic view of blindness that moves from the societal to the deeply personal and intellectual realms.

Part-1

3. Central Themes

3.1 Challenging the Concept of 'Normalcy'

One of the central themes of *Sight Unseen* is Kleege's critique of societal ideas about what constitutes 'normal' vision and how those norms define human identity. Kleege repeatedly challenges the notion that seeing is the default or 'normal' mode of human experience. She critiques the social and cultural systems that frame sight as a superior sense, often marginalising those who experience the world differently. The dominant idea of 'normal' vision leaves little room for the complex, diverse experiences of people with visual impairments, often placing them in a category of abnormality or deficiency.

Kleege highlights how society is structured around visual cues, from communication and art to daily navigation, which alienates those who rely on other senses. She observes that even in educational settings, she must navigate this "visual hierarchy," as students and colleagues often assume that sight is essential for teaching, learning, or even understanding one's environment. However, through her personal experiences, she offers a counter-narrative that emphasises the richness and value of other sensory experiences, such as touch, sound, and memory. For instance, Kleege discusses how, when she was training in dance, sight was not always necessary, as dancers often had to rely on muscle memory and spatial awareness without looking in mirrors. This perspective broadens the notion of human experience beyond the limitations of sight, illustrating that blindness is not merely a loss but a different mode of interacting with the world.

Her emphasis on normalcy ties into the broader discourse of disability studies, which seeks to destabilise the binary between able-bodied and disabled, arguing that disability is a part of human diversity rather than a deviation from the norm. Kleege encourages the reader to rethink what is considered "normal" and pushes for a more inclusive understanding that validates diverse sensory experiences, particularly the blind experience.

Check Your Progress

1. How does Kleege challenge the societal assumption that sight is the 'default' or 'normal' mode of human experience?
2. In what ways does Kleege's personal experience, such as her time in dance training, help her illustrate that blindness is not merely a loss but a different way of interacting with the world?

3.2 Representation of Blindness in Culture and Media

Kleege dedicates a significant portion of *Sight Unseen* (1999) to critiquing how blindness is portrayed in literature, films, and other forms of media. A central theme is the persistent use of blindness as a metaphor for ignorance, vulnerability, or moral deficiency, particularly in classic narratives like that of Oedipus. Kleege challenges this recurring trope by emphasising that blindness is not inherently tragic or linked to punishment, as is so often suggested in literature and film. She discusses how, in works like *Oedipus Rex* and *Jane Eyre,* blindness is presented as a form of divine retribution, signalling a moral or emotional failing that must be corrected. In both stories, the characters' blindness serves as an instrument of justice or penance, reinforcing a perception that blindness is a loss that must be compensated through suffering.

Kleege further criticises modern films, such as Martin Brest's 1992 film *Scent of a Woman* and Bruce Robinson's 1992 film *Jennifer 8,* which perpetuate the idea that blindness diminishes personal agency. In *Scent of a Woman,* Al Pacino's character, Colonel Slade, is portrayed as a bitter, suicidal man whose emotional recovery relies on a sighted companion, suggesting that a blind person cannot navigate life without the aid of the sighted. Similarly, in *Jennifer 8,* the blind woman is depicted as entirely helpless, reliant on sighted individuals to protect her from danger, further embedding the stereotype that blind individuals are inherently dependent.

Kleege argues that these cultural depictions fail to represent the real-life complexities of living with blindness. They strip blind characters of agency, often using them as devices to further the development of sighted characters. She calls for a re-evaluation of these representations, advocating for portrayals that depict blindness as a natural variation of the human experience rather than an exceptional or tragic condition.

Check Your Progress

1. What are some of the harmful stereotypes about blindness that Kleege identifies in literature and film? Provide specific examples from *Oedipus Rex* or *Scent of a Woman.*
2. How does Kleege argue that cultural depictions of blindness often strip characters of personal agency?

3.3 The Subjectivity of Perception

In *Sight Unseen* (1999), Georgina Kleege explores the subjectivity of perception by challenging the conventional belief that sight offers direct, objective access to reality. She argues that even for those who are fully sighted, perception is always mediated by the brain, memory, and individual interpretation. Kleege shares her personal experience with macular degeneration to emphasise how vision is not a simple process of seeing but one of processing and making meaning from incomplete information. She likens her visual experience to optical illusions, describing how her brain, when presented with limited or contradictory visual signals, guesses at what she sees—sometimes incorrectly. This parallels how the sighted experience moments of visual confusion, as when interpreting ambiguous images like a rabbit-duck illusion, where the brain must decide between multiple possible interpretations.

Kleege expands this discussion by illustrating how she navigates the world using non-visual cues, such as touch and auditory signals. She explains that when objects in her central field of vision disappear, they seem to "disintegrate into tiny, quivering particles" before reappearing when she shifts her gaze (Kleege 100). This underscores her

argument that perception, even for those with sight, is not a straightforward reflection of reality but a process shaped by various factors, including memory and attention. Kleege's critique extends beyond her own experience, suggesting that vision itself, often held as the most reliable sense, is subjective and filtered through the brain's expectations and interpretations. Thus, her analysis reframes blindness not as a deficiency but as another valid form of perception, challenging the privileging of sight as the primary mode of understanding the world

Check Your Progress

1. How does Kleege argue that sighted individuals' perception is just as subjective as that of visually impaired individuals?
2. Can you think of examples in your own life where your perception of reality was influenced by factors other than direct visual input?

3.4 Identity and Self-Presentation

In *Sight Unseen,* Georgina Kleege explores how blindness shapes identity and self-presentation, focusing on the ways in which blind individuals often feel compelled to "pass" as sighted in order to navigate a society that assumes sightedness as the norm. Kleege provides personal examples to illustrate how her blindness has influenced how others perceive her and how she, in turn, presents herself. For instance, Kleege shares her experiences with "passing" as sighted by using compensatory techniques such as memorising environments or listening to auditory cues to blend in without drawing attention to her visual impairment. She explains, "For one thing, the sighted are not all that observant. And most blind people are better at appearing sighted than the sighted are at appearing blind" (Kleege 19).

Kleege's reflections underscore the societal expectation that disabled individuals must conform to able-bodied norms to avoid social discomfort or alienation. In many cases, this means that blind people, including Kleege, often find it easier to conceal their condition rather than openly discuss it. Kleege's description of the pressure to "sham sight" highlights how societal perceptions of blindness often hinge on harmful stereotypes that reduce blind people to symbols of helplessness or pity. This contributes to the broader theme of self-presentation as an act of both survival and adaptation.

Moreover, Kleege critiques how blind people are expected to perform a "visible" disability. When Kleege tells her students that she is legally blind, they are confused by her lack of the typical indicators of blindness, such as a white cane or guide dog. This reflects how blindness is often perceived as a physical marker rather than a nuanced experience. Kleege highlights how her ability to function in public without such markers

leads people to doubt her blindness, further complicating how society understands and accepts different forms of disability.

Through these examples, Kleege critiques societal pressures on disabled people to conform to normative expectations of identity and self-presentation. She pushes readers to reconsider the assumptions they make about disability and how they perceive individuals who do not fit neatly into preconceived categories of what it means to be blind.

Check Your Progress

1. What does Kleege mean when she discusses 'passing' as sighted? How does this relate to societal expectations of disability?
2. Why do Kleege's students struggle to reconcile her blindness with the lack of typical markers like a white cane or guide dog?
3. How does Kleege's experience with self-presentation critique societal assumptions about disability?

3.5 The Emotional and Social Dimensions of Blindness

Kleege offers deep insights into the emotional and social dimensions of blindness, reflecting on how the condition shapes not only her ability to see but also her relationships and interactions. One key theme is the loneliness and isolation that often accompany blindness, both physically and socially. Kleege describes how blindness can create emotional barriers between her and others due to pity or discomfort. For instance, she reflects on how people react with discomfort when they learn of her blindness, which can result in social awkwardness. Kleege recounts, "When I identify myself as blind on the first day of class, it is perhaps presumptuous because I see more than the word is generally assumed to designate" (Kleege 40). This reflects how the label of "blindness" often overshadows other aspects of her identity, leading people to focus solely on her disability.

Another instance that highlights the social dimension of blindness is Kleege's experience of "passing" as sighted, particularly in social situations. She notes how, before she started teaching, she never publicly identified herself as blind and relied on her ability to "pass" as sighted. She writes about learning to direct her eyes at sounds to simulate sight, helping her blend into the sighted world, thus preventing blindness from becoming a distraction to others. However, this self-presentation created its own form of emotional isolation. As Kleege notes, "In social situations, I seldom announced my blindness. And as long as I was not obliged to read anything, or to identify a person or a plate of food, people tended not to notice. I passed as sighted" (Kleege 12). This strategy helped her

navigate social situations more comfortably, but it also furthered her sense of isolation as people were not aware of the full scope of her experience.

Kleege also delves into how blindness shapes her emotional landscape by exploring the feelings of vulnerability and dependency that can arise from societal perceptions of blindness. For example, she recounts a flight where she assisted a disabled swimmer who was mistreated by airline staff. This incident sheds light on societal discomfort and lack of empathy toward those with disabilities. Through such personal reflections, Kleege highlights how blindness influences not just her day-to-day experiences but also how she is perceived and treated in society. By addressing these emotional and social aspects, Kleege pushes readers to develop a more empathetic understanding of blindness.

Check Your Progress

1. How does Kleege describe the feelings of isolation that often accompany blindness, both emotionally and socially?
2. What role does 'passing as sighted' play in Kleege's social interactions, and how does it affect her sense of identity?
3. How does Kleege's interaction with the disabled swimmer on the flight highlight societal discomfort with disability?

3.6 The Interplay of Memory and Imagination in Perception

The interplay of memory and imagination in perception is a key theme in *Sight Unseen* (1999), where Kleege explores the relationship between memory, imagination, and visual perception in the context of her blindness due to macular degeneration. For Kleege, vision is not simply a mechanical process but a deeply subjective experience influenced by memory and imagination, especially when visual input is limited or unclear. This theme is most evident when Kleege describes her interactions with art and visual culture, where she must "fill in the gaps" of what she perceives with memories of what she once saw or what she imagines might be present.

Kleege emphasises that even sighted people constantly rely on memory and imagination to interpret and reconstruct visual information. This idea is highlighted when she describes how her brain compensates for missing or distorted visual input by drawing on past experiences, knowledge, and emotions. For example, she discusses how she must get close to a painting to appreciate its details, relying on fragmented perceptions combined with her memory of colours, shapes, and forms to complete the image in her mind.

Kleege's account of scanning paintings in fragments underscores the fact that perception is not instantaneous or comprehensive for anyone. Even for the sighted, seeing often involves focusing on specific parts of a scene and mentally assembling them into a coherent whole. She notes that her blindness makes this process more visible and deliberate, but that it mirrors how sighted people interact with the world as well.

Additionally, Kleege critiques the assumption that sight provides unmediated access to reality. She argues that vision is influenced by internal mental processes just as much as by external stimuli. Her description of moments when her brain guesses what she is seeing—sometimes incorrectly—demonstrates how perception is shaped by more than just the physical act of seeing. These insights call into question the primacy of sight as a mode of understanding the world, suggesting that everyone's experience of seeing is selective and incomplete.

Through these discussions, Kleege invites readers to consider the role of memory and imagination in their own perception, challenging the traditional belief that sight is a direct, infallible way of knowing. She argues that imagination and memory play crucial roles in how all people, sighted or blind, construct their experience of the world.

Check Your Progress

1. Why does Kleege argue that sight, even for sighted individuals, is influenced by more than just external visual input?
2. How does Kleege's discussion challenge the traditional view of sight as the most reliable sense for perceiving reality?

3.7 The Role of Technology and Assistive Devices in Shaping Blind Experience

Kleege explores the significant role that technology and assistive devices play in shaping the experience of blind individuals. Kleege critiques how society views assistive technology, emphasising that such devices are often designed with the assumption that their primary goal is to replicate sight. This perspective, as Kleege suggests, reflects a broader societal discomfort with blindness and an overemphasis on sight as the ultimate means of interacting with the world.

One piece of evidence from Kleege's discussion is her reflection on the high-tech low-vision aids prescribed by optometrists, such as magnifiers and specialised glasses. She explains that these aids, while helpful in some tasks, cannot fully replicate normal vision, and users must adapt to fragmented visual experiences. She notes that vision is "a series

of discrete activities, not a constant, seamless, pervasive ebb and flow of information," forcing individuals to prioritise which visual tasks matter most (Kleege 114).

Kleege also shares her experience with magnifying lenses and closed-circuit television systems that project enlarged images, explaining how these devices allow her to read print and continue certain activities that depend on sight. However, she points out that the use of these aids often feels cumbersome, as they are imperfect substitutes for full vision.

Kleege further critiques medical professionals who often view blindness as something to be fixed or mitigated. She discusses an interaction with an eye specialist who recommended special glasses that would allow her to see students' faces from a distance. After trying them, Kleege found the distortion disorienting and impractical, leading her to reject them. Her optometrist accepted this decision, recognizing that what works for one patient may not suit another.

Finally, Kleege addresses more experimental approaches to artificial vision, such as implants that stimulate visual centres of the brain. She acknowledges the benefits of such research but questions whether these solutions truly improve the quality of life for blind individuals, especially if they cannot restore full or meaningful sight. She concludes that assistive devices should not be designed with the sole aim of mimicking sight but should embrace and enhance non-visual ways of perceiving the world.

Check Your Progress

1. How does Kleege critique the design and societal view of assistive devices for blind individuals?
2. What are some of the limitations Kleege finds in the use of high-tech low-vision aids, and how do these shape her experience?

3.8 Blindness and Sexuality

Kleege explores the theme of blindness and sexuality, focusing on how blind women are often desexualized or hyper-sexualized in cultural narratives. She discusses how blind characters in literature and film, particularly women, are depicted as vulnerable, dependent, or even exoticized. These portrayals often strip blind women of their agency, presenting them as objects of either pity or fascination.

Kleege critiques these depictions, arguing that they reinforce harmful stereotypes about blind people, particularly women, and their ability to form romantic or sexual relationships. A key example Kleege provides is from Bruce Robinson's 1992 film *Jennifer 8,* where the blind female character is depicted as entirely helpless, reinforcing the trope that blind women

are vulnerable and in need of constant protection from sighted men. The film positions her as an object of desire for the male protagonist, whose duty it is to protect her, thus casting her as dependent and incapable of agency in her romantic and sexual life.

Kleege also delves into the stereotype of blind women being hyper-sexualized. She refers to Michael Apted's film *Blink* (1994), *w*here the blind female character asserts that blindness gave her control in her romantic relationships, as she could project her fantasies onto her partners without being influenced by their physical appearance. This depiction reinforces the idea that blind women's sexuality is somehow more primal or uninhibited due to their lack of sight.

Kleege critiques these representations for reinforcing societal perceptions that blindness is either a condition that diminishes sexual agency or one that enhances it in a fetishized manner. She argues that these portrayals fail to recognize the complexities of blind individuals' emotional and sexual lives. By challenging these reductive stereotypes, Kleege emphasises the importance of portraying blind individuals in literature and media as complete, autonomous beings, rather than caricatures driven by societal misconceptions.

Check Your Progress

1. What are the harmful stereotypes about blind women's sexuality that Kleege identifies in films like *Jennifer 8* and *Blink*?
2. Why does Kleege argue that these depictions fail to capture the complexity of blind individuals' romantic and sexual lives?

4. Detailed Critical Summary

4.1 "Blindness and Culture"

Chapter 1: "Call It Blindness"

In Chapter 1, titled "Call It Blindness," Georgina Kleege reflects on her personal experiences of being legally blind and how society perceives and misunderstands blindness. Kleege begins the chapter with an anecdote about her classroom, where she announces to her students that she is legally blind, a declaration that leaves them uncertain and perplexed. This moment serves as a springboard for her exploration of blindness as a complex social construct, steeped in misconceptions and misunderstandings. Despite being legally blind, Kleege retains some visual ability, which complicates the rigid distinction society often draws between sightedness and blindness. The chapter delves into Kleege's critique

of societal perceptions, language, and the broader cultural meanings attached to blindness, while also offering a personal reflection on how blindness has shaped her identity.

Kleege's account challenges the binary perception of sight and blindness. As someone who experiences partial vision, she complicates the clear-cut division between being sighted and being blind. She highlights that blindness is not always total; there is a wide spectrum of visual impairment that the legal definition of blindness does not fully capture. Legally blind individuals like Kleege may retain some functional sight, but because society often operates on an "all or nothing" understanding, those who fall somewhere in between sightedness and blindness are left in a confusing, ambiguous space. This nuanced experience is not adequately represented by the rigid legal definitions established in the 1930s, which focus on visual acuity and field of vision. By outlining these complexities, Kleege critiques the inadequacy of the legal term "blind," which fails to capture the broad spectrum of visual impairment.

Language plays a significant role in how blindness is perceived and discussed, and Kleege critiques the euphemisms often used to describe it. Terms like "visually challenged" or "differently abled" aggravate her because they obscure the reality of blindness and attempt to soften its perceived severity. For Kleege, these euphemisms reflect society's discomfort with disability, attempting to make blindness more palatable by using terms that sugarcoat the reality of visual impairment. However, she argues that these softened terms undermine the complexity and diversity of blindness, masking the real challenges and lived experiences of people with visual impairments. Kleege's rejection of these euphemisms is a powerful critique of how language shapes societal perceptions of disability. By insisting on calling herself "blind," she embraces the word as part of her identity, challenging society to understand blindness on its own terms rather than through sanitised euphemisms.

Kleege's discussion of her ability to "pass" as sighted highlights the performative nature of vision. In her professional and personal life, Kleege often navigates the world using memory, touch, and compensatory strategies, enabling her to perform tasks that might make her appear fully sighted to others. This performativity, she suggests, is a result of societal pressure on individuals with disabilities to conform to able-bodied norms. For Kleege, passing as sighted is not just about surviving in a world that privileges sightedness, but also about resisting the pity, awkwardness, and discomfort that often come when others discover her blindness. Her ability to pass complicates the clear division between sightedness and blindness and highlights the societal expectation that people with disabilities must assimilate into able-bodied standards, often at the cost of their own comfort and authenticity. This critique aligns with broader discussions in disability studies about the pressures on individuals with disabilities to conform to societal norms of ability.

Another key aspect of Kleege's critique is her analysis of cultural and literary portrayals of blindness. She observes that the word "blind" is often used metaphorically to imply ignorance, ineptitude, or weakness. Common phrases such as "blind faith" or "blind rage" associate blindness with a lack of control, understanding, or insight, reinforcing the negative connotations that society attaches to the condition. Kleege argues that these metaphorical uses of blindness in language perpetuate stereotypes that equate blindness with deficiency or error. She contrasts these negative connotations with society's elevation of sight, which is often linked to clarity, knowledge, and truth. By drawing attention to these cultural associations, Kleege critiques how deeply ingrained biases about blindness are reflected in language and thought, reinforcing the idea that blindness is a form of weakness.

In conclusion, Chapter 1, "Call It Blindness," serves as both a personal reflection and a broader critique of societal perceptions of blindness. Kleege challenges the reader to reconsider the narrow frameworks that define blindness and to question the assumptions that underpin cultural and linguistic representations of the condition. By embracing the term "blind" and reclaiming it from its negative associations, Kleege pushes for a more inclusive understanding of blindness that recognizes its complexity and diversity. Her work not only contributes to disability studies but also offers valuable insights into how society constructs and perpetuates notions of normality, ability, and difference.

Chapter 2: "Blind Nightmares"

In Chapter 2, titled "Blind Nightmares," Georgina Kleege offers a critical exploration of how blindness is portrayed in cinema, shedding light on the broader cultural misconceptions that shape society's understanding of visual impairment. Kleege draws from her personal experiences as a legally blind viewer, using film as a lens to examine the representation of blindness and its impact on societal attitudes. Through this chapter, she critiques not only the film industry but also the cultural narratives that perpetuate harmful stereotypes about blindness.

Kleege begins the chapter by reflecting on her unique experience of watching films as someone who is legally blind. Contrary to popular belief, she asserts that cinema can actually offer a more coherent and structured visual experience for blind viewers than real life. Films, with their careful use of lighting, colour, and editing, are designed to direct the viewer's attention to key details, creating a visual clarity that is often absent in the randomness of the real world. For Kleege, this curated visual experience is more accessible because the techniques filmmakers use—such as close-ups, music to set the mood, and cuts to emphasise important moments—help her "see" more clearly than she can in everyday life. This insight challenges conventional assumptions about blindness and visual media, disrupting the idea that blind people cannot engage with or enjoy films.

However, despite the accessibility of film as a visual medium, Kleege points out the challenges blind viewers face in interpreting certain cinematic elements. Recognizing characters, understanding sight-based gags, or grasping the physical resemblance between actors can be difficult without assistance. Kleege describes how, at times, she relies on external cues—such as friends explaining crucial visual moments or the dialogue filling in visual gaps—to fully appreciate a film. Horror and science fiction movies, in particular, present unique difficulties because the visual imagery often features creatures and settings that bear no resemblance to anything in the real world, making it even harder to mentally connect the dots. Yet, these challenges are not Kleege's primary critique. Instead, she focuses on how blind characters are depicted in films, often in ways that reinforce negative stereotypes.

A central theme in "Blind Nightmares" is Kleege's dissection of the stereotypical portrayals of blindness in cinema. Blind characters are frequently depicted as pitiable, helpless, and tragic, with their blindness portrayed as the dominant, insurmountable challenge in their lives. Kleege critiques these depictions, arguing that they reflect society's deep-seated misconceptions about blindness. In films like *Scent of a Woman* and *Jennifer 8*, blind characters are often used as narrative tools to evoke sympathy for sighted characters or to serve as vehicles for their personal growth. For example, in *Scent of a Woman*, Al Pacino's character, Lieutenant Colonel Frank Slade, is portrayed as suicidal, gloomy, and dependent on a young sighted man to help him regain a sense of purpose. His blindness is depicted as an overwhelming barrier that defines his entire existence. Kleege notes that these portrayals reduce blind characters to passive objects rather than fully realised individuals with agency and complexity.

One of the most pervasive and damaging tropes Kleege critiques is the "blind seer" stereotype. In this trope, blind characters are often depicted as possessing extraordinary abilities, such as heightened senses or extrasensory perception, to compensate for their lack of sight. This trope is evident in films like *Sneakers*, where the blind character, Whistler, is portrayed as having near-supernatural auditory abilities. While this might seem like an empowering portrayal, Kleege argues that it reinforces the idea that blindness must be compensated for in extraordinary ways in order for a character to be interesting or valuable. This narrative creates unrealistic expectations for blind individuals in real life, who may feel pressured to conform to the stereotype of having heightened senses or exceptional talents to "make up" for their blindness. Kleege dismantles this trope by highlighting how it reduces blind people to caricatures, minimising their humanity and ignoring the realities of living with visual impairment.

Kleege's analysis of gendered portrayals of blindness in film adds an important layer to her critique. She points out that blind women in cinema are often depicted as even more

vulnerable and dependent than their male counterparts. Films like *Wait Until Dark* (1967) and *Jennifer 8* portray blind women as passive, helpless, and in need of protection from male figures. These characters are frequently shown as easy targets for violence, reinforcing the stereotype that blindness—especially in women—renders them defenceless and fragile. Kleege's feminist critique underscores how these portrayals marginalised blind women further, stripping them of agency and subjectivity while perpetuating harmful gender norms.

Kleege's critique extends beyond individual films to a broader cultural commentary on how disability, particularly blindness, is framed and understood in society. She argues that these cinematic portrayals matter because they shape how sighted audiences perceive and interact with blind individuals. By consistently portraying blindness as a tragic condition that renders individuals dependent and incapable, films reinforce societal biases that view blindness as a deficiency rather than a different way of experiencing the world. Kleege's analysis challenges readers to reconsider their own assumptions about disability and to question how media representations influence societal attitudes toward people with disabilities.

The chapter concludes with Kleege's call for filmmakers to re-evaluate how they depict blindness on screen. She advocates for more nuanced and realistic portrayals that move beyond outdated stereotypes and reflect the actual complexities of living with blindness. Rather than using blind characters as plot devices or relying on the "blind seer" trope, Kleege urges filmmakers to engage with the lived experiences of blind individuals and to portray them as fully realised people with diverse abilities and personalities.

Check Your Progress

1. How does Kleege's ability to "pass" as sighted complicate societal perceptions of blindness and disability?
2. How do films like *Scent of a Woman and Jennifer 8* contribute to harmful stereotypes about blindness?
3. What is Kleege's main criticism of the "blind seer" trope commonly found in films, and how does it distort the real experiences of blind individuals?

Chapter 3: "In Oedipus' Shadow"

Chapter 3, "In Oedipus' Shadow" presents a critical examination of how blindness has been culturally and literally framed, drawing heavily from ancient myths, particularly the story of Oedipus. Kleege explores the pervasive association between blindness and moral failings, revealing how this symbolic linkage has shaped Western representations

of blindness in literature, film, and societal attitudes. The chapter not only critiques these enduring stereotypes but also highlights more nuanced portrayals that challenge these traditional views, ultimately calling for a reconsideration of how blindness is represented.

Kleege begins by outlining how negative portrayals of blindness, especially those in modern cinema, are not isolated to contemporary works but have been embedded in cultural narratives for centuries. She locates the origin of this symbolic framing in the myth of Oedipus, the tragic Greek king whose story has profoundly influenced Western literary depictions of blindness. In the myth, Oedipus blinds himself after discovering that he has unwittingly committed two heinous acts: killing his father and marrying his mother. This self-blinding is not merely a physical affliction but serves as a symbolic act of atonement for his sins. For Kleege, Oedipus's blindness represents not only punishment but also an intense moral and existential reckoning. It connects blindness with guilt, shame, and the consequences of forbidden knowledge.

Kleege argues that this Oedipal narrative has cast a long shadow over subsequent portrayals of blindness, linking it to moral or sexual failings in Western literature and culture. In particular, blindness is often depicted as a deserved consequence of sin, reinforcing a harmful view that the condition is not merely physical but deeply moral. Kleege explores how this motif appears in a variety of literary works. For instance, in *Jane Eyre* (1847), Mr. Rochester's blindness is framed as a form of divine punishment for his moral transgressions—his attempt to commit bigamy by marrying Jane while concealing the existence of his first wife. Here, blindness serves as a moral correction, a way of illustrating Rochester's need for redemption before he can reunite with Jane. Similarly, in Anita Shreve's 1989 novel *Eden Close*, blindness results from a taboo, incestuous relationship, mirroring the Oedipal theme of forbidden desires leading to catastrophic consequences.

Through these examples, Kleege illustrates how blindness in literature has often been portrayed not as a mere physical condition but as a symbolic manifestation of inner moral corruption. This association perpetuates the stereotype that blindness is intrinsically tied to personal failings, a trope that reinforces societal fears and misunderstandings about the condition. Kleege highlights the dangerous implications of such portrayals, suggesting that they perpetuate a view of blind individuals as pitiable, morally suspect, or inherently flawed.

In addition to examining individual characters, Kleege extends her critique to how blindness is employed symbolically to comment on broader societal and political issues. She analyses works like Rudyard Kipling's *The Light That Failed* (1900), where the protagonist's blindness is not just a personal tragedy but also a metaphor for the moral

blindness of British imperialism. The character's physical blindness mirrors the nation's inability to see the destructive consequences of its colonial ambitions. In this context, blindness becomes a tool for exploring themes of guilt, exploitation, and retribution on a larger societal scale. This use of blindness as a symbol for broader moral failings reflects how literature has continued to frame blindness in negative and punitive terms.

Despite this historical and literary legacy, Kleege highlights more progressive portrayals of blindness that challenge the traditional association with punishment and sin. She points to works such as Henry Green's novel *Blindness* (1926) and H.G. Wells's story "The Country of the Blind", which presents blindness in a more positive and transformative light. In Green's novel, the protagonist John Haye loses his sight but learns to adapt and even gains new insights and abilities as a result of his blindness. This depiction subverts the Oedipal narrative, presenting blindness not as a tragic fate or a form of divine retribution but as a different way of experiencing the world. Similarly, in Wells's story, the protagonist stumbles upon a society where blindness is the norm, and sight is considered an abnormality. His attempts to impose his visual-centric worldview on the blind inhabitants are met with resistance, ultimately highlighting the limitations of his own perspective. Through these examples, Kleege shows that blindness can be reimagined as a state of being that offers new ways of engaging with the world, rather than a condition to be pitied or feared.

Kleege concludes the chapter by acknowledging that while some modern works offer more empowered representations of blindness, the Oedipal association between blindness and sin remains deeply ingrained in cultural narratives. Even in texts that attempt to subvert these stereotypes, blindness is frequently used as a metaphor for ignorance or moral failure. Kleege's analysis underscores the enduring power of these symbolic frameworks, which continue to shape how blindness is perceived and understood in society.

Check Your Progress

1. How does the Oedipus myth shape cultural narratives about blindness, and in what ways have these themes been perpetuated in both classical and modern literature?
2. In what ways do literary works like *The Light That Failed* and *The Country of the Blind* offer alternative depictions of blindness, and how do these works challenge traditional stereotypes associated with blindness?
3. Why is Mr. Rochester's blindness in Jane Eyre considered a form of retribution?

Sight Unseen (Contd.)
Georgina Kleege

Shrimi Gupta

Part-2

4.2 "Blind Phenomenology"

Chapter 4: "The Mind's Eye"

In Chapter 4, "The Mind's Eye," Georgina Kleege offers a deeply reflective and philosophical examination of vision, perception, and the experience of blindness. The chapter, drawn from her own experiences with macular degeneration, serves as both a personal narrative and a critique of society's conventional understanding of sight. Kleege challenges the assumption that vision is an objective and straightforward process, offering a richer, more nuanced view of how people—both sighted and visually impaired—perceive and interpret the world around them.

The chapter opens with a memorable anecdote from a 1992 Matisse exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, where Kleege is told by a fellow attendee that she is standing too close to a painting to "really see it." This comment acts as a springboard for Kleege's broader exploration of how people view visual art differently, particularly those with visual impairments. As someone who experiences macular degeneration, Kleege describes her method of viewing paintings, which involves getting as close as possible to the canvas and scanning its various sections to assemble a mental map of the whole image. This process is slow and meticulous, requiring concentration and effort to compensate for the blind spot that obscures the central part of her vision. Despite these limitations, she finds that this close engagement with art allows her to appreciate details that sighted viewers might overlook, such as the texture and brushstrokes of a painting.

Kleege's experience of viewing art challenges the traditional approach to visual appreciation. She notes that standing too close to a painting may cause even the most realistic artwork to dissolve into abstract shapes and colours. For example, she explains that works by artists like Rembrandt or Rubens, viewed up close, lose their representational quality and become fields of swirling pigment and movement. This unique experience disrupts the typical expectations of art appreciation, which often involve standing at a prescribed distance to take in the entire composition at once. Instead, Kleege's method of viewing art is fragmented and interpretive, forcing her to engage with each section of the painting individually before piecing them together in her mind.

From here, the chapter expands into a philosophical exploration of sight itself. Kleege critiques the conventional belief that vision is instantaneous, passive, and unmediated—simply a matter of the eyes receiving images from the world. Instead, she argues that vision is an active process, heavily influenced by the brain, which is constantly interpreting, revising, and constructing the visual input received by the eyes. This interpretation process, according to Kleege, is often overlooked by sighted individuals, who tend to believe that their perception is direct and unfiltered. However, Kleege provides examples of how even sighted people experience gaps or inconsistencies in their vision, such as failing to recognize a friend from a distance or focusing solely on a particular object in a larger scene.

Kleege's critique of vision as a reliable source of truth is one of the chapter's most compelling insights. She points out that everyone's experience of sight is subjective and influenced by factors such as mood, expectations, and prior knowledge. Sighted individuals, in particular, often take for granted the idea that what they see is an accurate representation of reality, without acknowledging the role their brain plays in shaping their perception. By deconstructing this assumption, Kleege reveals the limitations and fallibility of sight, highlighting how much of what people see is, in fact, a construction of the mind.

Central to Kleege's analysis is her personal experience with macular degeneration, which distorts her visual perception in profound ways. She describes how objects in her field of vision seem to dissolve, vibrate, or shimmer, creating a dynamic and often surreal visual landscape. Far from presenting this experience as a deficit or tragedy, Kleege frames it as simply a different way of seeing the world. Her blindness, rather than being a loss, offers her a unique perspective that is attuned to certain details and textures that sighted people might miss. This reframing of blindness challenges the traditional narrative that equates visual impairment with a diminished experience of the world. Instead, Kleege insists that her way of seeing, though different, is equally valuable and valid.

In a broader sense, the chapter also critiques the societal hierarchy of the senses, particularly the privileging of sight over other forms of perception. Kleege argues that sight is often elevated to a position of supremacy, with other senses, such as touch or hearing, seen as secondary. However, her experience demonstrates that these other senses, along with the brain's interpretive processes, contribute significantly to how individuals perceive and understand the world. Kleege advocates for a more inclusive and egalitarian view of human perception, one that values the diverse ways in which people experience reality.

The chapter's philosophical stance on the nature of vision has significant implications for how society views disability and normality. By challenging the primacy of sight, Kleege calls into question the ableist assumptions that often underlie discussions of blindness and visual impairment. She argues that blindness should not be seen as a condition to be

pitied or corrected but rather as a different, though equally rich, way of interacting with the world. This perspective pushes readers to reconsider their biases about disability and to recognize the limitations of their own sensory experiences.

Chapter 5: "Here's Looking at You"

In Chapter 5, titled "Here's Looking at You,", Georgina Kleege presents a detailed examination of the role of eye contact in society and its assumed connection to human emotion and truth. Through personal anecdotes, reflections on her experiences as a legally blind person, and a critique of cultural and biological assumptions about visual engagement, Kleege challenges the idea that eye contact is a universal and infallible means of communication. Instead, she highlights the performative and culturally constructed nature of eye contact, encouraging a more critical perspective on how society interprets visual engagement.

Kleege opens the chapter with a vivid anecdote of a mother confronting her child's molester, looking him "dead in the eye" before shooting him. This story exemplifies the widespread cultural belief that eye contact reveals one's true emotions, such as guilt or remorse. The idea that human emotions can be discerned through eye contact is a powerful societal narrative, particularly in emotionally charged situations like the one Kleege describes. However, Kleege questions the reliability of eye contact as a medium for conveying such profound truths. The story serves as a gateway for her critique of the expectations placed on eye contact in both everyday and intense interactions.

The chapter then shifts focus to Kleege's personal experience with macular degeneration, a condition that prevents her from seeing faces and eyes in detail. This inability to engage in traditional eye contact allows her to critique the societal norms surrounding it. Kleege explains that, as a young person, she learned to fake eye contact to blend in with sighted individuals, a skill she honed by aiming her gaze at a person's ear or side of their face. This technique gave the illusion of visual engagement, and Kleege notes that most people didn't notice the difference. Through this reflection, she exposes the performative aspect of eye contact and questions whether it is truly as meaningful as society assumes. The fact that she can successfully simulate eye contact without actually seeing someone's eyes suggests that much of what people believe about visual engagement is superficial.

This idea of faking eye contact connects to broader themes in disability studies, particularly the societal pressure on disabled individuals to conform to able-bodied norms. Kleege's experience of simulating eye contact to pass as sighted mirrors the expectations placed on

disabled people to "pass" as non-disabled in other areas of life. This critique extends to the ableist assumption that eye contact is essential for meaningful communication, revealing how society values the appearance of engagement over the reality of an individual's abilities or needs.

Kleege's analysis also touches on the biological and evolutionary significance attributed to eye contact. She acknowledges that eye contact plays an essential role in early human bonding, particularly between infants and caregivers. It is a fundamental component of nonverbal communication that signals trust, attention, and emotional connection. However, Kleege challenges the assumption that eye contact is always a reliable or accurate way of understanding another person's emotional state. In fact, one of the most compelling critiques in the chapter is Kleege's dissection of the cliché that "the eyes are the windows to the soul." She critiques the cultural belief that emotions like sadness, joy, or guilt can be easily seen in someone's eyes, especially through photography. She uses the example of a photograph of a homeless person whose eyes are said to tell a tragic story. Kleege points out that such interpretations are often projections of the viewer's assumptions rather than an accurate reflection of the subject's emotional state. This critique extends to broader assumptions embedded in visual culture, where people often believe they can read someone's entire life story or emotional depth from a single glance. Kleege's analysis challenges the idea that photography or visual engagement can capture the essence of a person, particularly through their eyes, and reveals how such assumptions reinforce harmful stereotypes, particularly toward marginalised individuals like the homeless.

Kleege also explores the cultural and gendered dimensions of eye contact. She highlights how different cultures interpret eye contact in various ways, with some viewing direct eye contact as a sign of respect and others seeing it as confrontational or disrespectful. For example, in some Eastern cultures, avoiding eye contact can be a sign of deference, while in Western cultures, direct eye contact is often interpreted as a marker of honesty and confidence. This cultural variability reveals that eye contact is not a universal language but rather a socially constructed practice shaped by context. Kleege's discussion of gender norms further complicates the meaning of eye contact. She notes that women who maintain strong eye contact are often seen as assertive or challenging, while men are expected to use eye contact to assert dominance or power.

In conclusion, Chapter 5 challenges the conventional wisdom surrounding eye contact and reveals its limitations. By exposing the performative, culturally constructed, and biased nature of visual engagement, Kleege calls for a re-evaluation of how society interprets and values eye contact.

Check Your Progress

1. How does the Kleege's experience of viewing art with macular degeneration challenge conventional ideas of sight and perception?
2. How does Georgina Kleege's experience with macular degeneration challenge societal expectations surrounding eye contact, and what does this reveal about the performative nature of visual communication?
3. How do cultural and gender differences affect the interpretation and significance of eye contact, according to Kleege's analysis?

Chapter 6: "A Portrait of the Artist by His Blind Daughter"

In "A Portrait of the Artist by His Blind Daughter", Georgina Kleege delivers a deeply reflective narrative, exploring her relationship with her father, a sculptor, through the unique lens of her blindness. The chapter intertwines personal memoir with broader meditations on art, vision, and disability, inviting readers to reconsider the conventional relationship between physical impairment and creativity.

Kleege begins by reflecting on her father's insistence that eye contact and visual engagement held profound meaning. He believed that drawing was fundamentally about learning how to see and translating that vision onto paper. For him, art was an act of continuous revision, where perception constantly reshaped the representation. As a sculptor, her father focused on the anatomical precision of the human form, and his teaching methods involved large, expressive hand gestures that connected vision with physical engagement.

This notion of seeing and visual experience, however, becomes deeply complicated when viewed through Kleege's own experience of macular degeneration, a visual impairment that affects her ability to perceive objects in a conventional sense. Kleege's blindness leads her to engage with the world in ways that diverge from sighted norms, often relying on touch or memory to "see." Her father encouraged her to draw and asked her to "show" him her blindness by sketching what she saw. In one instance, she attempted to draw a cup, only to find herself smudging the drawing to demonstrate how her distorted vision affected her perception. This act of translation—attempting to make the invisible visible—became a frustrating experience, highlighting the challenges of expressing personal experiences that remain largely imperceptible to others.

A key theme in this chapter is the subjectivity of visual experience. Kleege emphasises that visual engagement is not a fixed or universal process but one deeply influenced by individual perception. Her father's belief in the power of visual learning is juxtaposed

with Kleege's understanding that seeing, especially for someone with visual impairment, is a far more complex and subjective experience. This tension between normative sighted experiences and Kleege's unique perceptual realities underscores the broader societal assumptions about art and disability, where sight is often seen as the primary medium for creating and appreciating artistic work.

Kleege's personal experience with drawing becomes a critical exploration of societal expectations regarding blindness and creativity. Her struggle to "pass" as sighted in her father's presence reveals the performative aspects of both sight and disability. She navigated the world using memory and touch, but her father's insistence on visual learning reflects the pressure that society places on disabled individuals to conform to sighted norms. Her ability to navigate the world through alternative senses suggests that visual impairment does not necessarily limit one's engagement with art or the world, but rather offers different ways of perceiving and understanding reality.

The performative nature of vision is further explored through Kleege's reflections on her parents' contrasting artistic styles. Her father's precise and controlled approach to art is contrasted with her mother's more fluid and expressive style, where loose lines captured the essence of form rather than its anatomical precision. This dichotomy between her parents' artistic methods serves as a metaphor for the different ways people engage with the world. Her father's meticulous control contrasts sharply with her mother's embrace of ambiguity and imperfection—qualities that resonate more with Kleege's experience of blindness. This artistic contrast mirrors the broader divide between normative and alternative forms of perception, suggesting that there is no singular "correct" way to see or create.

Kleege's reflections extend beyond her own experiences to include musings on well-known artists such as Degas and Rembrandt, whose later works became less visually precise as they aged and experienced vision loss. Kleege contemplates whether this deterioration was a result of their failing eyesight or a shift in artistic intention. She argues that while visual impairment may influence an artist's style, it should not reduce their work to mere reflections of physical limitations. This argument is part of a broader critique of societal attitudes toward disability and creativity. Kleege resists the ableist assumption that physical impairment diminishes creative potential, instead proposing that blindness and other disabilities offer alternative lenses through which to engage with the world and produce meaningful artistic expression.

Through her father's teachings and their shared appreciation for craftsmanship, Kleege delves into the emotional and relational dimensions of blindness. As her father aged, his large and powerful hands—once so central to his artistic process—became fragile. Kleege's blindness allowed her to experience his physical decline differently from sighted individ-

uals, softening the harshness of his ageing body. In a profound metaphorical sense, her visual impairment became a protective filter, sparing her the full weight of witnessing his deterioration. This dynamic illustrates how blindness, far from being merely a physical limitation, can mediate emotional experiences and relationships.

The tactile nature of Kleege's interactions with her father, particularly in his final days, underscores the non-visual forms of connection that can exist between people. Their wordless conversations, rooted in mutual understanding and creative expression, serve as a testament to the depth of their bond. The power of touch—his once-strong hands now delicate and frail—becomes a symbol of their shared artistic journey and the ways in which blindness shapes not only perception but also emotional intimacy.

Thus, through her thoughtful reflections on her father's teachings, her struggles with drawing, and her contemplations of famous artists with vision loss, Kleege critiques the ableist framework that dominates society's understanding of art and disability. Her narrative advocates for a reimagining of how we define artistic vision, inviting readers to embrace alternative ways of seeing and creating.

4.3 "Blind Reading: Voice, Texture, Identity

Chapter 7: "Voices in My Head"

In the chapter "Voices in My Head," Kleege delves into the intricate relationship between blindness, reading, and the auditory experience. The narrative opens by reflecting on how blindness affects one's perception of reading and introduces the impact of audiobooks as a key tool for accessing literature, particularly for those who are visually impaired. As Kleege is legally blind, she relies on audiobooks to engage with written texts, a practice that has historically been associated with blindness but is now growing in popularity among sighted individuals as well.

The chapter introduces an interesting societal perspective by recounting a conversation at a dinner party where a sighted woman expresses her love for listening to books during her long commutes but hesitates to call it "reading." This highlights a broader societal discomfort with fully accepting audiobooks as a legitimate form of reading. Traditional notions of reading have always been tied to visual engagement with text, and the act of listening to a book, despite the intellectual and imaginative engagement it invokes, is often considered inferior. Kleege questions this distinction, suggesting that the auditory consumption of literature should be seen as an equally valid method of reading.

Kleege reflects on her own experience of reading aurally, describing how it differs from visual reading in terms of retention, engagement, and emotional resonance. To bridge the gap between auditory and visual reading, Kleege often uses techniques such as listen-

ing to audiobooks multiple times or pairing the audiobook with magnified text, following along as she listens. While the efficiency and accessibility of audiobooks have become vital to Kleege, she admits to an internal struggle—feeling that aural reading may still be perceived as inferior, even though it provides her with a deep connection to literature. This tension illustrates how societal expectations about what constitutes "real" reading create a complex dynamic for individuals with visual impairments who rely on alternative methods of consuming text.

The chapter delves further into the nuances of auditory reading by focusing on the influence of narrators in shaping the listener's experience of a text. Professional narrators bring their own interpretations to the material through tone, accent, pacing, and other vocal qualities. These elements can enhance the reader's engagement with the story, but they can also lead to frustration when the narrator's voice does not align with the listener's internal vision of the text. Kleege highlights this duality, discussing how certain narrators have brought the text to life in unexpected and enriching ways, while at other times, the narrator's choices conflict with their perception of the material. This added interpretive layer in audiobook reading creates a unique form of engagement that is not present in visual reading.

Interestingly, the chapter also touches upon how reading aloud plays a crucial role in Kleege's own writing process. Hearing her own words read aloud allows Kleege to better assess the rhythm and flow of her prose, providing insights that might be missed when reading silently. This process of auditory editing underscores the importance of sound in literary creation, further challenging the idea that reading is purely a visual or silent activity. In many ways, the act of reading aloud breathes life into a text, turning the written word into a dynamic auditory experience that deepens the connection between the reader and the material.

Kleege's exploration of the auditory dimension of reading ties into broader reflections on the nature of reading itself. Historically, storytelling began as an oral tradition before transitioning into written and eventually silent reading, which became associated with intellectual maturity. The chapter prompts readers to reconsider these cultural milestones, questioning whether the auditory experience of reading is any less valid or mature than the visual experience. Kleege suggests that listening to a text can be just as immersive, intellectually stimulating, and emotionally resonant as reading it visually.

While the chapter advocates for the legitimacy of audiobooks as a form of reading, Kleege also acknowledges the limitations of auditory reading. One of the challenges she faces is navigating visual elements like charts, diagrams, or photographs in books, which often remain inaccessible despite advancements in audiobook technology. This gap in

accessibility presents an ongoing struggle for visually impaired readers, who may still miss out on certain types of information that sighted readers take for granted. Kleege's balanced perspective ensures that while audiobooks are celebrated as a revolutionary tool for blind readers, their limitations are not ignored.

The chapter ultimately concludes by challenging the societal hierarchy that places sighted reading above auditory reading. Kleege emphasises that reading is fundamentally a cognitive and imaginative process that takes place in the mind, regardless of whether it happens through the eyes or ears. This argument dismantles the conventional bias toward visual reading, urging readers to see both auditory and visual engagement with text as equally valid. Kleege advocates for a more inclusive understanding of reading—one that recognizes the richness of auditory comprehension and the value of reading beyond the limitations of sight.

In this sense, "Voices in My Head" offers a profound critique of societal attitudes toward reading and disability, urging a reconsideration of what it means to "read" in the first place. The chapter pushes back against ableist assumptions that favour sighted reading and underscores the creative and intellectual potential of auditory experiences. By framing reading as a cognitive and imaginative process rather than a purely visual one, Kleege argues for a broader, more inclusive definition of reading that acknowledges the varied ways in which individuals engage with literature.

Check Your Progress

1. How does Georgina Kleege's father's approach to art and drawing influence her own understanding of visual experience and creativity, particularly as a blind person?
2. How does the chapter, "A Portrait of the Artist by His Blind Daughter", challenge traditional assumptions about the relationship between vision and art, particularly in the context of Kleege's reflections on artists like Degas and Rembrandt?
3. What are some of the advantages and limitations of auditory reading as described by Kleege in "Voices in My Head"?

Chapter 8: "Up Close, In Touch"

In the chapter "Up Close, In Touch," Kleege offers a deeply personal exploration of the challenges and triumphs she experiences in reading and writing as a visually impaired individual. The chapter begins with vivid descriptions of the physical strain caused by reading up close, as Kleege is required to focus intensely to make out the text. This strain

manifests as persistent eye and muscle pain, which, though not excruciating, accumulates over time. Kleege reveals a strong compulsion to push through the discomfort in order to fully capture her thoughts on paper, underscoring the tension between her physical limitations and intellectual drive.

Throughout the chapter, Kleege discusses the various aids she uses to facilitate reading, including magnifying lenses, specialised reading devices, and enlarged text formats. Despite these tools, reading remains a slow and labour-intensive process. Kleege shares her experiences using closed-circuit TV systems that magnify text onto a screen, providing even greater enlargement but introducing new challenges, such as motion sickness from having to move the text across the screen. These tools, while helpful, do not fully alleviate the physical discomfort or the time-consuming nature of her reading practice, presenting both practical and emotional obstacles.

Reflecting on her academic life, Kleege connects her experience of close reading—borne out of necessity because of her visual impairment—with her later academic training as an English major. In academia, "close reading" is a critical method of analysing texts, where every word and phrase is scrutinised for deeper meaning. This parallel between Kleege's personal reading habits and academic practices provides a sense of validation, aligning her physical struggles with intellectual rigour. Kleege finds solace in the idea that her slow, detailed reading process, far from being a hindrance, is in fact a scholarly strength that enriches her intellectual engagement with literature.

The chapter also chronicles Kleege's gradual adoption of braille later in life. Initially, braille seemed unnecessary since Kleege retained some vision and used visual aids. However, as she faced increasing physical strain from reading, braille became an essential tool in her reading and writing process. The tactile nature of braille, where fingers glide over raised dots instead of the eyes scanning text, proved liberating, allowing her to read without the physical pain associated with visual reading. This shift to braille opened up new possibilities for engaging with literature in a way that felt both empowering and independent from technology, which had previously mediated her reading experiences.

Kleege details the frustrations and victories in learning braille, acknowledging that it was not an easy transition but ultimately a freeing one. The tactile reading method offered by braille allowed for a different kind of connection with text, one that was not limited by her deteriorating sight. This transition, while rewarding, also came with resistance from educators and medical professionals who initially discouraged braille learning, believing that visual aids would be sufficient. The societal expectation that individuals with partial sight should cling to vision, rather than embracing non-visual methods, reflects a broader cultural bias that prioritises sight over other senses.

The chapter also explores accessibility issues within educational and medical systems, noting how Kleege's delayed introduction to braille was a reflection of these broader inequities. While technological aids like magnifiers and screen readers are often seen as the most advanced solutions for visually impaired individuals, the chapter argues that braille offers a more direct and empowering form of literacy that bypasses many of the frustrations associated with these tools. Yet, societal attitudes toward blindness and disability continue to favour visual solutions, reinforcing the idea that sight, even if limited, is always preferable to alternative methods of reading.

The chapter concludes with Kleege's reflections on Louis Braille and the revolutionary impact of his invention. Visiting Braille's childhood home in Coupvray, France, Kleege gains a deeper appreciation for the ways in which braille has transformed her life and the lives of many visually impaired individuals. Braille's system, designed to provide blind individuals with a means of independent reading and writing, resonates deeply with Kleege's own journey toward independence and self-empowerment through literacy.

Check Your Progress

1. How does Kleege describe the physical and emotional impact of reading with a visual impairment?
2. What societal attitudes toward braille does Kleege critique in the chapter?
3. How does Kleege's embrace of braille represent both a practical solution and a form of resistance?

5. Let's Sum Up

Let's Sum Up

In this lesson, we delved into the life of Georgina Kleege and her seminal work, *Sight Unseen* (1999), uncovering its profound relevance in challenging societal attitudes towards blindness. Through a combination of personal narrative and cultural analysis, Kleege critiques the dominance of sight in shaping perceptions of normalcy. Today, as society increasingly emphasises diversity and inclusion, her work resonates by urging readers to rethink stereotypes of disability. By blending personal insights with cultural critique, *Sight Unseen* (1999) invites critical reflection on how we frame disability, offering an empathetic, inclusive perspective that continues to shape modern views on visual impairment.

6. Further Readings

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Image Courtesy

Figure 1: Georgina Kleege

Source: https://www.pbs.org/newshour/brief/220998/georgina-kleege

U N I T

III(3)

"Helen and Frida"
Anne Finger

Nalini Prabhakar

Structure

1. Learning Objectives

This lesson will enable you to:

- Analyze the short story "Helen and Frida" as a critique of ableist mainstream narratives.
- Contextualize the story with reference to the biographical details of Helen, Frida and the Narrator.
- Understand the narrative structure and the narrative techniques employed- film montage and *mise en abyme* (film-within-a-film).
- Understand the relevance of the various references to Hollywood movies.

2. Introduction

Anne Finger is an American author, educator, and disability rights advocate. She contracted polio when she was four years old, which left her disabled for life. Her disability had a profound impact on her writing. In her writing she combines her own personal experiences with disability and marginalization, with the broader social and political issues associated with disability rights and representation. She has also been active in the disability rights movement, advocating for accessibility, inclusion and social justice. Through her writing and activism, she challenges ableist narratives and gives voice to the experiences, not only of the disabled but also other marginalized sections of the society such as women and LGBTQ.

Some of her most notable books include: *Past Due: A Story of Disability, Pregnancy, and Birth (1990); Bone Truth (1994); Elegy for a Disease: A Personal and Cultural History of Polio (2006); Call Me Ahab(2009); A Woman in Bed (2018).* In addition to her books, Finger has published numerous short stories and essays in literary journals such as *The Southern Review, Kenyon Review, and Discourse*. Her work is celebrated for its candid, unflinching portrayal of disabled lives.

The story "Helen and Frida" was first published in *Kenyon Review* in the year 1994. It challenges the stereotypes of disabled persons as portrayed in mainstream "ableist" narratives, especially in popular Hollywood cinema. These narratives construct images of the disabled as pitiable, inferior, incomplete, and asexual beings, and define their identity entirely in terms of their disability. Finger reimagines the two icons of disability Helen and Frida, in a space free from these prejudices and allows them to explore their identities as also their sexuality. The story is interspersed with many references, mainly from the mainstream Hollywood movies, as also telling biographical details from the lives of Helen and Frida which make us question the manner in which disability and sexuality is viewed in ableist narratives.

3. "Helen and Frida": Critical Summary

The story "Helen and Frida", is being narrated by a nine-year-old girl, who is affected by polio and is recovering from a surgery. She is confined to a couch with her "leg in a thick plaster cast, inside of which scars are growing like mushrooms, thick and white in the dark damp." (p. 7) With her entire family off at "work or school", she is all alone watching the movie "*Singing in the Rain*", on a black and white television set, telecast in the television series "*Million Dollar Movie*". The narrator, in her isolation, who is watching movies continuously, is unable is identify either with the able-bodied women "with their high heels and shapely calves and their firm asses swaying inside of satin dresses waiting, waiting for a man" (p. 7); or with the apologetic, pitiable, characters with disability played by beautiful able-bodied actresses. It is perhaps this disillusionment with portrayals on the screen that lead her into creating her own imaginary movie, *Helen and Frida*. The narrator imagines herself as a 18-35-year-old woman on a film set, directing a film on the two "female icons of disability" – Helen Keller and Frida Kahlo – with focus on sexuality in Helen's case and physical pain in Frida's case. In the opening scene, Helen and Frida are "standing on a veranda, with balustrades that appear to be made of carved stone, but are, in fact made of plaster." (p. 2) This scene in a sense, is symbolic of what is to follow in the movie. It alerts us to the fact that what appears invincible and unbreakable (stone), is in reality fragile and brittle like the plaster. It is clearly a reference

to the stereotypes of "disability" constructed by the society of able-bodied people, as also the social and cultural barriers that society imposes on the disabled.

Helen Keller's role is not being played by Patty Duke, who essayed the role of Helen in the acclaimed film *Miracle Worker*. The movie *Miracle Worker* is about the tutor Anne Sullivan taming the "wild child" Helen into an asexual, inspirational figure. The role interestingly, is now being played by Jean Harlow who was the reigning sex symbol of 1930's Hollywood Cinema. The choice of actress is in itself an indication about the kind of film being made. One thing is certain, this film is not going to be based on the usual kind of narratives about Helen Keller. The narrator is playing the part of Frida, who like herself endured pain throughout her life, afflicted by polio at a very young age, compounded by serious injuries in a bus accident, which plagued her throughout her life. The film itself is based on a short script which deals with the coming together of Helen and Frida, who in real life had never met; and occupied two different time periods- Helen Keller (1880–1968), Frida Kahlo (1907–1954). The narrator tells us that "It isn't so hard to imagine that the two of them might meet. They moved, after all, in not so different circles, fashionable and radical…" (p. 2) Helen was a socialist, actively involved in progressive politics, and Frida was a member of the Mexican Communist Party. The narrator also admits that "the years are all wrong", but provides two analogies to explain the anomaly of "years". The first analogy is from the "*Million Dollar Movie*" series, where during the Frank Sinatra Week, Sinatra would within the course of a week, be "young and handsome" on Monday, "older than her father" on Tuesday, and on Wednesday "younger than he had been on Monday." (p. 2) In the second analogy, she writes that just as her mother used two different Betty Crocker mixes, and made a single "black and white marble cake", one could "pour the different decades in a bowl together and give them a single quick fold…" (p. 2) And so, by adopting this formula the narrator explains that it is possible to show Frida at the "Little Falls strikers" protest in 1912, where the labour leader Bill Haywood is waving the cheque sent by Helen for the strikers, not as a five-year-old child "before the polio, before the bus accident, but as a grown woman, cheering along with the strikers." (p. 2) Frida in real life was 5-year-old at that time, but she is a grown woman here, cheering the strikers. The immediate next scene could be August 31, 1932, where Helen and Frida along with Diego (Frida's husband) would be standing on the roof of the Detroit Institute of the Arts, watching the eclipse of the sun. Helen, who unlike the others cannot "see" the eclipse, nonetheless can experience the same with the "chill of night descending, to hear the birds greeting the midday dusk." (p. 2) So, basically the two scenes in quick succession, one in the year 1912, and the other in 1932, have nothing to relate them except the characters, and perhaps an idea. Moreover, nothing about the characters in the scenes is historically accurate. The narrator here is referring to a film technique called film montage, where in film shots are assembled together

in quick succession by a theme or an idea rather than action or continuity. The settings, and timeline do not adhere to any particular chronological order or logic. The word "montage" has French origins, and means "assembly". The narrator at this point also hints at what to expect from the movie she is directing, "Let's get one thing straight right away. This isn't going to be one of the movies where they put their words into our mouths…" (p. 2) This reference to the kind of movie being made, holds equally true for the story being told. The narrative "Helen and Frida" is unlike the conventional narratives in films like *Magnificent Obsession*, *A Patch of Blue*, and *Johnny Belinda*.

In the film *Magnificent Obsession* the blind protagonist, Jane Wyman, chooses not to marry Rock Hudson because she thinks she will be a "burden". The movie ends on a happy note, only when by some miracle Jane's sight is restored. In *A Patch of Blue* a young Negro is ironically handing out dark glasses to the blind and does not think it necessary to explain the purpose of the dark glasses. The dark glasses do not provide any kind of relief to the blind, they only highlight their blindness and hide "the stone Medusa gaze" from the sighted. The film "Johnny Belinda" features a deaf-mute character Belinda, who is "sweetly mute, surrounded by an aura of silence." (p. 3) The narrator asserts that in her movie, "the blind women have milky eyes that make the sighted uncomfortable. The deaf women drag metal against metal, oblivious to the jarring sound, make odd cries of delight at the sight of the ocean, squawk when we are angry." (p. 3)

Check Your Progress

1. Who is the narrator?
2. What prompts her to create an imaginary film about Helen and Frida?
3. What is the significance of the stone balustrade?
4. Describe the opening scene of the film.
5. Explain the references to Patty Duke, *Miracle Worker* and Jean Harlow.
6. The narrator's film technique is inspired by Frank Sinatra and Betty Crocker cake mixes. Explain.
7. What is film montage? Which two scenes does the narrator assemble, to explain it?
8. By giving the reference of the movies - *Magnificent Obsession, A Patch of Blue, and Johnny Belinda* - what point is the narrator driving home?
9. How does the narrator intend portraying the blind and the deaf in her movie?

After this digression from the film scene, the narrator moves back to the scene being filmed. The two women Helen and Frida standing on the veranda, are a study in contrast.

Helen is sweet, "with her drooping dresses covering drooping bosom" whose limited definition and identity is that of "Blind and Deaf". Frida on the other hand is "Sexual", and so her definition is that she can't be "disabled". The general perception of the ableist narratives is that, sexuality is incompatible with any form of disability. Frida who is open about her sexuality is a threat to this perception: Frida "who lifts her skirt to reveal the gaping, cunt-like wound on her leg, who rips her body open to reveal her back, a "broken column" *(see Glossary)*, her back corset with its white canvas straps framing her beautiful breasts, her body stuck with nails: but she can't be Disabled, she's Sexual." (p. 3)

The setting of the scene being filmed is that of a "ball" most likely in New York. Frida, after a quarrel with Diego that afternoon has cut her hair and is dressed in one of Diego's suits, because she doesn't want Diego to "parade his beautiful wife." This cross-dressing ("drag") foreshadows the conversation between Helen and Frida, where Frida openly talks about her relationships with men as also women. It's a noisy party with men in tuxedos and women in black satin dresses, and glittering diamond jewellery. Frida has dragged Helen to the balcony, away from the noisy party. It is interesting that Helen is thirty-six in this scene and we are told that she has just come back from Montgomery. She is the same age as in her real life, when her mother had forcibly taken her away to Montgomery to thwart her marriage to Peter Fagan. Her one chance at finding "carnal and thrilling and forbidden" love, was considered by her family as shameful. Helen did not assert herself by defying her family, instead wrote a poem blaming "fate" for denying her a husband, and the "joy of motherhood". She hopes that her "unfilled longings will be gloriously satisfied, in a world where eyes never grow dim, nor ears dull." The reference here is to life after death. The narrator sums this entire episode as, "Poor Helen, waiting, waiting to get fucked in heaven." (p. 4)

Helen is relieved that Frida does not ask the usual questions about blindness and deafness that she is almost always, asked. Frida, straight away launches into her husband Diego's betrayal, but is honest enough to confess that she too has relationships with "men and other women". Helen, whose idea of love and marriage was one of "holy, golden monogamy", "meeting of two souls-in-flesh" is shocked at the candid manner in which Frida discusses her sexuality, and remarks that it is Frida's "Latin nature". (p. 4)

Check Your Progress

1. How is Frida dressed for the "ball"? What does it foreshadow?
2. What according to the narrator is the reason for denying Helen her sexuality, and Frida her disability?
3. What is the significance of Helen's age?
4. What is Helen's idea of love and marriage?
5. What is it that Helen attributes to Frida's "Latin nature"?

At this point in the film, there is a change in roles. The narrator is no longer a director/ actor, but is now a part of the audience in Castro theatre in San Francisco theatre, watching the film on Helen and Frida. The technique being adopted here is one of "a film within a film" (*mise en abyme*). There is a change in the scene setting too. The film cuts from Helen and Frida on the balcony to the night sky closer to the equator, where "you feel the press of the stars, the mocking closeness of the heavens as you can feel it only in the tropics." (p. 5) This change in setting from New York to the tropics (Mexico perhaps, Frida's country), is a movement from the artificiality of the high society men and women at the ball to the unfettered, natural, free space, and metaphorically leads to Helen at the age of 36, exploring her sexuality and claiming her body for the first time, free from the social expectations and constraints. The balcony is now a veranda of a colonial Spanish palace built within a jungle where a macaw perched on a broken Mayan statue repeatedly calls, "I am queen", and a spider monkey "shits on the face of a dead god." (p. 4) (*Refer to the Glossary*)

The narrator, is now a 27-year-old watching the film *Helen and Frida*, in the Castro theatre, when Dolores del Rio disrupts the film by objecting to the Mexicana Frida being played by a white imperialist (the narrator). Dolores also objects to Helen's remark which labels Frida's sexuality to her "Latin nature". Dolores claims that she should be playing Frida's character, as Frida loved her as much as she loved Frida. The proof of this love, according to Dolores is that instance when Frida threatened to send Dolores, "her amputated leg on a silver tray" (p. 5) after one of their fights. The rage which perhaps prompted this threat by Frida, is seen by Dolores as an affirmation of their love. At this point in the film we jump to the year 2015, and the narrator, who is among the audience in the film, is still 27 years old. The theatre Castro is totally accessible to the blind people, and a "voice loop, interprets the action for the blind people. The voice loop now announces the film action" As Dolores del Rio argues with the actress playing Frida, Helen Keller waits patiently ___". (p. 5) Another woman(blind) in the audience disrupts the film for the second time, and objects to the word "patiently", and shouts, "you can't tell the difference between patience and powerlessness." (p. 5) She is angry with the euphemisms which try to obliterate the condition of blindness.

Check Your Progress

1. What changes of roles and settings occur in this part of the story?
2. What is the significance of these changes?
3. Why does Dolores interrupt the film?
4. Why is the blind woman in the audience angry?
5. Why is there a leap into the future (2015) in the scene which has the Castro theatre as setting?

After these interruptions, the film *Helen and Frida* resumes with Dolores playing Frida's part; Frida is now long haired, wearing the Mexican traditional Tehuana skirts. The conversation between Helen and Frida picks up from where it was left off, (before the disruptions) and the scene shifts back to the veranda of the Spanish palace. To Helen's remark "Latin nature", Frida replies, "I think perhaps it is rather your cold Yankee nature that causes your reaction…" (p. 6) In the light of Frida's reply, the shift in the setting from the American ball-room balcony to the veranda in a Spanish palace, can be understood as a cultural shift from "cold Yankee nature" to the "Latin nature". Frida is fascinated by the "infinite unpassive receptivity" (p. 6) of Helen's hand, and likes the sensation of writing the shape of letters into Helen's hand (finger writing) describing the Yucatan jungle and the various animals. Frida, the artist and the subject of her many self-portrayals, is now the subject of the eye of the camera, as also the "unforgiving blank stare of a blind woman." (p. 6) The camera now shifts from Frida face to Helen's face. The director (narrator) does not intend using sweet soothing music to make the audience "comfortable" with blindness. In many movie representations of blind women played by beautiful sighted women like Jane Wyman, Merle Oberon, Andrey Hepburn and Uma Thurman, the camera captures their faces either "bracketed by others" or "in moments of terror, when beautiful young blind women are being stalked." (p. 6) In this movie, the director intends to "linger lovingly" on Helen's face in a close-up, and show the "frightening blank inward turning of passion, a face that has never seen itself in the mirror, that does not arrange itself for consumption." (p. 6) The camera moves from Helen's face to Helen's fingers stroking the contours of Frida's face, again in a close-up. Frida is shocked at the "hunger" in Helen's hands, a hunger which obliterates the line which distinguishes "knowing" from "needing". (p. 7) This scene ends with a highly intense kiss between Helen and Frida. Frida arouses Helen's sexuality by finger writing in Helen's palms, and their "kiss" becomes a moment of awakening for Helen, where she lays claim to her sexuality, denied to her by the society, especially, her mother, brother-in-law, and her mentor Anne Sullivan.

In her imaginary film, although the nine-year-old narrator allows Helen to explore her sexuality, the heightened passion unnerves her. She is "not ready for the way that Helen's tongue probes into Frida's mouth, the tongue that seems to be not so much interested in giving pleasure as in finding an answer in the emptiness of her mouth." (p. 7) The narrator shouts "Cut", to stop her imaginary filming, but Helen and Frida do not stop. Helen's blind eyes are wide open and reveal a "passion blank and insatiable, a void into which you could plunge and never, never touch the bottom. Now she begins to make noises, animal mewlings, and cries." (p. 7) The narrator does not want to witness this and wills her imagination back to the reality of her couch and the black and white T.V. set. This scene highlights the need for an alternate language to portray sexuality of

people with disabilities. More importantly, it challenges us as readers, to adopt alternate ways of reading and understanding sexuality.

Check Your Progress

1. How does Frida's appearance change when Dolores replaces the narrator in Frida's role?
2. What is the significance of the shift from ball-room to the Spanish palace in the jungle?
3. What does the camera focus on, in this scene?
4. How does this scene challenge the mainstream narratives of sexuality vis-à-vis the disabled?

4. Narrative Structure and Technique

In this story there are two related narratives - the story narrative and the film narrative- which seamlessly flow into each other. As readers, we need to distinguish one from the other.

The story narrative provides a context for the film narrative. The nine-year-old narrator is unable to identify with the mainstream movie narratives which view disability as a form of tragedy which has to be endured stoically, and thereby deny agency, complexity, and sexuality to disabled individuals. The narrator juxtaposes mainstream film references and biographical details which deny any kind of complexity, sexuality and agency to the disabled, with a more liberated, inclusive, reimagining of Helen and Frida in a film, free from the reductive lens through which disabled people are viewed.

The film narrative, effectively has three scenes. In the first scene, Frida has dragged Helen out of a noisy ball-room and they are standing on the balcony. Helen is now thirty-six and has just returned from Montgomery. In the second scene the setting has changed from the balcony of the noisy ball-room to the inside of the Castro theatre. The narrator is now part of the audience watching the film on Helen and Frida. The setting of the film she is watching, shifts from the ball-room balcony to the veranda of a Spanish palace in a jungle. The conversation between Helen and Frida in the film is interrupted by Dolores and another member in the audience. These interruptions constitute the second scene. In the third and final scene, before the narrator wills the imaginary film to end, the setting shifts from Castro Theatre back to the veranda of the Spanish palace in the middle of the jungle.

This story uses the technique of film montage, where in film shots are assembled together by a theme or an idea rather than action or continuity. The word "montage" has

French origins, and means "assembly". The characters, settings, and timeline in this story merge into one another in a fluid movement and do not adhere to any particular chronological order. The focus of the story is the portrayal of disability in general, and sexuality of the disabled in particular, in the mainstream movies. This story also uses the "film within film" technique in the second scene, when the narrator/director/actor, assumes the role of a member in the audience at the Castro theatre. Dolores del Rio and another member in the audience disrupt the movie, which leads to Dolores replacing the narrator in the role of Frida.

Check Your Progress

1. Explain in brief the narrative structure of the story.
2. Explain film montage and *mise en abyme* with an example from the story.

5. Summing Up

The story "Helen and Frida" by bringing together two iconic figures of disability, offers a critique of mainstream portrayals of disability and sexuality, especially in films. Helen Keller was denied her sexuality and her desire to be a mother, because she was blind and deaf. Her disability relegated her to an inferior position within the society, as it does not fit into the normative idea of perfection. Frida on the other hand, was denied her disability, because she was sexual. This story by putting them both in the same frame allows Helen to explore her sexuality and Frida gets to express her debilitating physical pain.

The narrator in this story is a nine-year-old girl with an intelligent, critical mind, and a highly fertile imagination. As readers however, we are faced with reconciling the mature film narrative which explores sexuality and its physical expression to a nine-year-old, no matter how precocious. Her frank assessment of the incidents in the lives of her two characters also seem beyond the scope of a nine-year old. Although, at the end of the story the child in her is unnerved by her own imagination, one cannot but think, that perhaps the narrator's voice is in certain parts of the story taken over by the adult voice of the author.

6. Glossary

Ableist Narratives refer to stories, representations, or messages that reinforce ableism—a set of beliefs, practices, or assumptions that devalue or discriminate against disabled people. These narratives typically prioritize able-bodied norms, perpetuate stereotypes about disability, and marginalize the lived experiences of disabled individuals.

Helen Keller (1880–1968) was an American author, educator, and activist who was both deaf and blind. Despite these profound disabilities, she became a symbol of perseverance and inspiration. Keller became a prominent advocate for people with disabilities, women's suffrage, labour rights, and socialism.

Anne Sullivan: Keller's life was transformed when Anne Sullivan, a teacher from the Perkins Institute for the Blind, became her instructor in 1887. Sullivan taught Keller to communicate by spelling words into her hand (Finger writing).

Frida Kahlo (1907–1954) was a Mexican painter known for her striking, and symbolic self-portraits. Kahlo contracted polio at age six, which left her with a lifelong limp. At 18, she was severely injured in a bus accident that fractured her spine, pelvis, and legs. This incident led to numerous surgeries and chronic pain, which heavily influenced her art. She married the celebrated Mexican muralist Diego Rivera in 1929. Their married life was tumultuous, marked by love, but also infidelity.

Million Dollar Movie was a famous television series in the United States that aired popular big-budget Hollywood films. It became a cultural phenomenon and lasted for more than three decades (1955-1988). The series was unique because it aired the same movie repeatedly throughout the week, often multiple times in a single day and literally brought cinema into American living rooms.

Frank Sinatra (1915–1998) was an American singer and actor, whose career spanned over six decades. Sinatra's rich baritone voice and ability to sing lyrics with deep emotional resonance made him a cultural icon. He was also a successful actor, who earned critical acclaim for his work in films.

Betty Crocker is a brand name created by the Washburn-Crosby Company in 1921. Betty Crocker cake mixes and other food products became a staple for easy home cooking.

The Miracle Worker is a film made in 1962, starring Anne Bancroft as Anne Sullivan and Patty Duke as Helen Keller. The film is about Anne Sullivan's role as "the miracle worker" who unlocked Helen's ability to learn.

Patty Duke (1946–2016) was an American actress and author. She portrayed the role of Helen Keller in the movie *The Miracle Worker*.

Jean Harlow (1911–1937) was an American actress and one of Hollywood's first blonde bombshells. Harlow rose to stardom in the early 1930s, becoming a symbol of glamour and sensuality.

Finger writing typically refers to the process of using one's finger to "write" or trace letters, words, or symbols, often as a teaching or communication tool. This method was

famously used by Anne Sullivan to teach Helen Keller how to communicate by spelling words into her hand. For example, Sullivan spelled "w-a-t-e-r" into Helen's hand while running water over it, leading to Helen's breakthrough understanding of language.

Big Bill Haywood (1869–1928) was an influential American labour leader and socialist, known for his militant advocacy for workers' rights. He believed in uniting workers across boundaries and challenged corporate power.

"The Broken Column" (1944) is one of Frida Kahlo's most famous and emotionally powerful paintings. Kahlo portrays herself standing upright but with an exposed cracked column in place of her spine, and wears a surgical brace to support her spine. Small metal nails pierce her entire body, representing the chronic pain she endured on a daily basis.

The mise en abyme or film within a film technique refers to a scene embedded within another scene of the film. For instance, in this story "Helen and Frida", the narrator who plays the role of Frida is watching the film, in a film that parallels the main film. This technique is self-reflexive and draws attention to the very nature of film creation.

Castro Theatre is a historic movie theatre in the Castro District of San Francisco. It housed a Wurlitzer pipe organ which was played before films and events.

Macaws and Spider Monkey: Two of the many animal/bird images from the self- portraits of Frida Kahlo.

Southern Cross (*Crux*) is a prominent constellation in the Southern Hemisphere and one of the smallest in the night sky. It became a symbol representing a connection between different cultures south of the equator.

Clouds of Magellan are two irregular dwarf galaxies in the southern hemisphere night sky and look like faint, cloud-like smudges.

7. Reference

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U N I T

III(4)

Tito Rajarshi Mukhopadhyay, "Poem 1" and "Poem 4"

Dr. Himani Kapoor

Structure

4.1 Learning Objectives

After reading this lesson you will be able to:

- Understand how Tito Mukhopadhyay's poetry articulates the experience of autism.
- Critically appreciate Tito Mukhopadhyay's poetry.
- Analyse Mukhopadhyay's poetry in the larger context of disability studies.
- Examine the ways in which Mukhopadhyay's work challenges conventional understanding of language and expression in literature.

4.2 Introduction

"Poem 1" and "Poem 4" by the autistic poet Tito Rajarshi Mukhopadhyay were published in his larger work, *The Mind Tree: A Miraculous Child Breaks the Silence of Autism* in 2011. In this work, Mukhopadhyay talks about his life, thoughts and relationship with the world. "Poem 1" captures his thoughts and the perception of people around him. "Poem 4" throws light on the ways in which he regulates his thoughts according to his physical environment. Both the poems challenge the conventionally held notions of disability in general and autism in particular. They give valuable insight into the lived experience of

autism, thus building critical awareness of culturally constructed concepts such as autism, disability what constitutes normal and abnormal.

4.3 Tito Mukhopadhyay: A Brief Biographical Sketch

Tito Mukhopadhyay (born 1989) is an Indian poet known for his vivid and introspective writing. He has severe autism, a disorder that causes mind-body disconnect. As a result, Mukhopadhyay is unable to engage in oral communication and he connects with people through written and typed messages. Despite the obvious challenges of movement and communication, he is well known for his evocative poems written on the subjects of autism, self-perception, disability and neurodiversity. He remains one of the most important writers to have described the mind of a severely autistic person.

Diagnosed with severe non-verbal autism at an early age, Mukhopadhyay struggled with social interaction and communication. Nonspeaking or nonverbal autism refers to a disorder in which an autistic person has a delay or difficulty with speech. This can range from mild to severe. Some people do not speak at all. Mukhopadhyay was initially diagnosed as "retarded" and no school agreed to admit him (Mukherjee 50; Biklen 119). However, his mother firmly believed that he was not cognitively weak and thus taught him to point at alphabets and spell out words. Mukhopadhyay began writing poetry and prose as a young child. *The Voice of Silence* was written when he was eight years old and *Beyond the Silence* (2000), when he was eleven. Such breakthroughs early in his life, caught the attention of researchers of autism and he was invited to England to be studied by Richard Mills of the National Autistic Society in London. His inability to engage in oral conversation, however, did not hinder his grasp of language or his ability to think and write about abstract topics. In fact, Mukhopadhyay and his mother found new ways for him to express his thoughts and feelings. His first interviews to researchers were done by pointing at alphabets and the words that he would spell were read out by his mother.

In his writings, Mukhopadhyay talks about several everyday struggles as a person with autism, like fear of new routes, people, noises or faces. His inability to follow instructions or behave like his fellow playmates was often misunderstood as his stubbornness (Mukhopadhyay 21). At times he would need frequent breaks during a conversation or become extremely unsettled about a minor object in his environment (Biklen 113). All these everyday events that do not threaten or induce anxiety in most individuals, were overwhelming and unbearable for him. His writings have, therefore, been helpful in shaping the current discourse about autism and people on the autism spectrum.

Mukhopadhyay's poetry decisively disrupts the myth that people with "low functioning autism", even the ones who cannot speak, are also thinking individuals with profound and complex ideas about their lives and their relationship to the world. In fact, researchers have described autism as a "social construct," that tells us a lot about the complex and layered relationship between the individual and the society (Biklen 1). What Mukhopadhyay's poetry offers is a valuable, firsthand narrative of the experience of autism. His works include *How Can I Talk If My Lips Don't Move?* (2008), *The Gold of the Sunbeams: And Other Stories (*2005), *The Mind Tree* (2011), *Plankton Dreams: What I Learned in Special Ed (*2015) and *The Elements* (2019).

While autism has been researched for several decades now, the writings of people with autism throw light upon hitherto unknown aspects of this condition thus paving the way for fostering a conducive environment for the support and empowerment of not just people on the autism spectrum but those with other mental disorders as well.

4.4 "Poem 1"

"Poem 1" introduces us to the everyday reality of Mukhopadhyay's life. Especially how the world perceives him and his own way of managing his everyday sensory experiences.

Men and women are puzzled by everything I do

Doctors use different terminologies to describe me

I just wonder

The thoughts are bigger than I can express

In the above lines, the poet expresses his feelings of being treated differently by people around him, on account of his autism, which makes him appear or behave differently than most people. His movements, behaviour and actions often surprise people around them. Different terms are used to describe people with autism and medical practitioners have used various terms to study this condition. The complexity of his thoughts is thus difficult to express in simple words.

Every move that I make shows how trapped I feel

Under the continuous flow of happenings

The effect of a cause becomes the cause of another effect

Here, Mukhopadhyay talks about the sensory overload of his surroundings, which is always a challenge for him. This causes him a lot of anxiety. As a person with autism, he feels trapped by his external environment, which is unchangeable for him.

And I wonder
I think about the times when I change the environment around me
With the help of my imagination
I can go places that do not exist
And they are like beautiful dreams.
But it is a world full of improbabilities
Racing towards uncertainty.

Despite the seemingly difficult environment which is impossible to change, that often causes anxiety in him, the poet uses the power of his imagination to escape his difficulties. As he is perfectly capable of thinking abstractly, his imagination and his dreams allow him an escape to a more comfortable world, where he has more agency. His imagination is so powerful that he is able to empathise with inanimate objects and be completely absorbed in the world of his imagination forgetting the real world altogether (Savarese "More Than a Thing to Ignore"). Towards the end of the poem, he reflects on the improbability of his dreams and the general uncertainty in his life, given his limitations. He demonstrates the ability to reflect with irony and detachment on his condition.

Check Your Progress

1. Why does the poet feel that people are puzzled by whatever he does?
2. How does Tito Mukhopadhyay depict the experience of autism?
3. How does the force of imagination help the poet?
4. Discuss the imagery used by Tito Mukhopadhyay to describe the experience of autism.

4.5 "Poem 4"

"Poem 4" throws light on the sensory processing and emotional regulation that Mukhopadhyay uses in order to come to terms with his environment. For neurotypical people, unfamiliar with autism, such movement of autistic people may be surprising. In order to regulate their emotions autistic people like the poet have to rock their body rhythmically, or make loud, smacking noises—behaviours often referred to as "stimming". These bursts of activity may look inexplicable to the onlookers, but for him, they are inevitable.

In *The Mind Tree*, Mukhopadhyay talks about two different selves, "the thinking self" that is full of "learnings and feelings" and an "acting self that had no self-control" (62).

He further states that these two selves, stay isolated from each other (Mukhopadhyay 61, 62). He has also described the bodily movements as a way to become "more aware of bodily sensations" (Mukherjee 50). In the poem, Mukhopadhyay captures this disconnect between the physical and the mental selves, and how he regulates them.

When you are trying to think blue
And end up thinking black
You can be sure to be frustrated
Time and again it happens to me
And I get quite helpless
Otherwise why should I get up and spin myself

In the above lines, the poet delves into his struggle with the challenges of mental and physical regulation. He feels frustrated not being able to control his thoughts or think in a systematic way, which causes anxiety. This makes him feel helpless and move or spin his body, which brings him a sense of harmony. These thoughts are symbolised by the colours blue and black. He wants to completely avoid the "black" thoughts while wanting the "blue", but at times, it becomes difficult for him to achieve a sense of harmony. The colour black thus symbolizes his unwanted dark thoughts, whereas blue represents a sense of calm.

Spinning my body
Brings some sort of harmony to my thoughts
So that I can centrifuge away all the black thoughts
I realise that the faster I spin
The faster I drive away the black
When I am sure that even the last speck of black
Has gone away from me

In the above lines, Mukhopadhyay uses the metaphor of centrifuging to represent his physical and mental states. The word "centrifuge" means spinning an object or material rapidly, causing heavier components to move outward and lighter ones to remain close to the centre. The metaphor of centrifuging in the above lines, refers to his physical effort to ward away the "black thoughts" thus giving way to "blue thoughts" that are desirable. This is thus, the poet's way of attaining emotional peace.

Then I spin back in the opposite direction
And pull the blue thoughts into myself

It depends on how much blue I want

If I want more blue I have to spin faster

Otherwise not so fast

It's just like being a fan

The trouble is when I stop spinning

My body scatters

And it's so difficult to collect it together again

The poet continues with the metaphor of centrifuging to convey his physical movement. However, this is not easy, as it depends upon the level of his anxiety. He has to "spin faster," thus moving his body or yanking his muscles more vigorously. Here, he also uses the metaphor of the fan. Just like a fan, he has to spin with intensity to regulate his own thoughts through vigorous movement. However, at times, he goes too far in this effort to make peace with his thoughts and thus finds it very difficult to get back to the state of mental harmony, that has been disrupted.

In one of his early interviews Mukhopadhyay described his urge to move as an indispensable urge to feel his body. "I hardly realized that I had a body except when I was hungry . . . Every movement is a proof that I exist. I exist because I can move'' (Blakeslee "A Boy, a Mother and a Rare Map Of Autism's World"). The poem ends with the metaphor of "scattering," throwing light on the difficulty that the poet faces to get back to the initial state of calm after a lot of movement. The poem thus offers a remarkable view of the way in which everyday emotions are handled by people with autism.

4.6 Glossary

- **terminology:** technical meaning of a particular word
- **centrifuge:** a device that helps separate components of a mixture through spinning
- **speck:** a tiny spot
- **scatter:** to throw in various random directions

4.7 Summing Up

The two poems covered in this unit, "Poem 1" and "Poem 4", both study the experience of disability with respect to autism. The lesson helps you understand the aspects of Mukhopadhyay's poetry that lay out the landscape of everyday struggles faced by people

with autism. The analysis, and critical commentary on the poems give a fresh perspective on the experience of disability, and challenge the generally held ableist beliefs about life and literature.

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U N I T

III(5)

Happy Birth-Day
Hayleigh Barclay

Shriya Pandey

Structure

1. Learning Objectives

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

- Understand the Postmodern narrative technique of *Happy Birth-Day.*
- Understand the subversion of traditional fairytale motifs towards disability.
- Understand the imperative critique of exclusion.

2. Introduction

Hayleigh Barclay is a Scottish writer and disability advocate recognised for her active involvement in promoting disability rights. As a person with Spinal Muscular Atrophy (SMA) Type 2, her lived experience significantly shapes both her advocacy work and her writing. By combining personal narratives with artistic expression, Barclay aims to challenge stereotypes and encourage greater inclusion of people with disabilities in society.

Her literary work includes a variety of short stories. *Happy Birth-Day* (2018) explores themes of self-perception and expectations, while *Designer Genes* (2018) tackles the ethical questions surrounding genetic engineering. *Office Politics* (2019) critiques workplace dynamics, and *Rolling In It* (2020) reflects social attitudes towards wealth. In her reimagining of *Cinderella* (2021), Barclay transforms the classic tale into a story of empowerment featuring a protagonist who defies traditional norms.

Barclay's works are featured on *Disability Horizons*, an online platform dedicated to empowering disabled individuals. The platform shares stories, advice, and resources to foster a positive and inclusive narrative about disability. It was founded in 2011 by Martyn Sibley and Srin Madipalli, both of whom have Spinal Muscular Atrophy (SMA) and seeks to highlight the achievements and experiences of disabled people globally.

Barclay's debut novel, *Girl of the Ashes* (2020), is a historical fantasy set in 19th-century Scotland. The novel focuses on an 18-year-old protagonist who uses a wheelchair, providing an honest and introspective portrayal of individuals' internal struggles when navigating social expectations and personal identity. *Girl of the Ashes* was published by *Indie Authors Press*, a platform dedicated to amplifying emerging voices and diverse narratives.

In addition to her written works, Barclay has also worked in films. Her 2023 short film, *The Ghost of Me*, explores themes of mental health, identity, and self-acceptance. The media branch of *Disability Horizons* produced and distributed the film.

2.1 Literature and Disability

Disability academics like Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, Lennard J. Davis, Simi Linton, and Tom Shakespeare, in the tradition of Hayleigh Barclay's creative contributions, encourage the development of distinctive approaches in disability discourse:

The body is both a site of medical knowledge and a site of social significance. The discourse surrounding the body not only reflects but actively constructs the body itself as a 'norm' …Disability is a social construction, a way of defining the 'other' about the able-bodied norm. (Davis 5-40)

In her book *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (1997), Rosemarie Garland-Thomson examines how cultural narratives influence perceptions of physical disability. Similarly, Hayleigh Barclay's short story *Happy Birth-Day* (2018) presents disability not as a medical condition but as a distinctive perspective through which the protagonist experiences the world, "Disability is a cultural and historical construction, not a natural or biological given, and it is through the process of representation that the 'meaning' of disability is shaped and shared." (Garland-Thomson 15) The protagonist's birthday celebration serves as a metaphor for social expectations, depicting the conflict between internal identity and external exclusion.

According to Simi Linton in *Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity* (1998), understanding disability is a form of epistemic insight. *Happy Birth-Day* uses the protagonist's introspections to foreground lived experiences:

Disability identity, unlike the identity of other marginalised groups, has been historically constructed as a negative, something to be overcome or hidden. By 'claiming disability,' individuals assert their right to be defined in their terms, challenging the dominant medical and social perspectives. (Linton 52 - 109)

Tom Shakespeare's work, particularly in *Disability Rights and Wrongs* (2006), reflects on the importance of integrating the social and medical models of disability. Shakespeare critiques the limitations of the purely social model and advocates a balanced approach that acknowledges the biological realities of disability while emphasising the role of social structures in shaping disabled identities.

Barclay's story combines social criticism with personal experience. The story, in line with Tom Shakespeare's formulations, constructs disability as both a socially created experience and an embodied reality. Each of these academicians expresses the growing recognition of disability as a dynamic, multifaceted identity that connects individuals' lived experiences with larger social structures.

2.2 'Plane Fair' Campaign

In 2010, Hayleigh Barclay founded the 'Plane Fair' campaign, a significant initiative aimed at improving air travel accessibility for disabled passengers. The campaign's primary goal was to encourage the aviation industry to explore and adopt new technologies that would allow wheelchair users to remain in their chairs during flights. This campaign highlighted numerous challenges disabled travelers face, including inaccessible seating, inadequate toilet facilities, and frequent damage to wheelchairs during air travel.

The initiative is part of a larger movement for disability rights in Europe, and her work directly aligns with frameworks like the 'A Fairer Scotland for Disabled People'

Strategy (2016**)**. This strategy, introduced by the Scottish Government, aims to enhance opportunities for disabled individuals in education, employment, and social services. Through her work with 'UK Trailblazers', a network of young disability advocates, Barclay is involved in grassroots initiatives that raise awareness about the everyday challenges faced by disabled people.

Check Your Progress

1. How does Hayleigh Barclay's personal experience with Spinal Muscular Atrophy (SMA) Type 2 influence her writing and advocacy work?
2. What is the significance of Barclay's short story collection in the context of disability rights?

3. *Happy Birth-Day*

The short story *Happy Birth-Day* draws from various literary traditions to enrich its narrative themes and critique social constructs.

3.1 Summary

In *Happy Birth-Day*, a woman finds herself in the 'Reincarnation Department' preparing for her next life. The story begins with her sitting in a cold, uncomfortable room with beige walls and flickering neon lights, feeling uneasy. The atmosphere is sterile and detached, and the other people in the room do not engage with her. A young man enters and invites her to follow him, leading her to a purple door.

Upon entering the door, a flash of blue light transports the woman to another room, where she lands in an oversized yellow armchair. She meets Dr. LuLu, a red-haired woman dressed in a pinstripe suit, who introduces herself and explains that this is a pre-birth consultation. Dr. LuLu calmly explains that she is here to discuss the woman's next life, including her parents, appearance, gender, and even her expected date of death. The woman, confused and uneasy, struggles to process the information and does not listen fully to the details.

The woman is shocked when Dr. LuLu reveals that she will be born disabled. This revelation causes the woman to question why she was chosen for this fate. She asks if there is any way to change her circumstances, but Dr. LuLu, seemingly unfazed, explains that she has no control over this decision. It is simply a part of the process.

As the woman grapples with the idea of being born disabled, she becomes frustrated and asks if she can at least choose the type of disability she will have. Dr. LuLu answers

dismissively, stating that all disabilities are equal and that it is not for the woman to decide. This response deepens the woman's frustration and sense of helplessness.

The woman grows increasingly emotional, feeling anger and sadness at her lack of control over her future. In a vulnerable moment, she asks Dr. LuLu if she is being punished for something she did in a previous life, but Dr. LuLu dismisses this as a myth, reinforcing the indifferent tone of the process. The conversation then shifts, and Dr. LuLu talks about the social challenges the woman will face due to her disability and explains how people will ask inappropriate and intrusive questions.

As the woman expresses more discontent and continues to question whether she can change her fate, Dr. LuLu firmly informs her that this is her life plan, and there is no way to alter it. The woman's anxiety grows as she realises the total lack of agency in the situation. She asks about her parents and what her life will be like, but Dr. LuLu refuses to repeat the details that she has already provided, which only adds to the woman's growing sense of frustration and helplessness.

Finally, Dr. LuLu declares, "She's ready," and quickly ushers the woman out of the room, leaving her to face her fate without any further explanation. The woman is handed off to the young man who had led her to Dr. LuLu earlier. As she walks away, still is filled with questions that she wants the doctor to answer. But the doctor just tells her to "Deal with it".

3.2 Representation of Disability

The disability rights movement in Scotland gained considerable momentum in the 1970s and 1980s, as it aligned with other broader social justice causes. Activism during this time led to significant legislative changes and greater visibility for disabled individuals, notably through organisations such as the *Scottish Disability Equality Forum* (established in 2001) and *Disability Scotland* (founded in 1991).

The issues surrounding disability have also found a voice in literature as well. Leela Soma's novel *The Slow Disappearance of Dale R.* (2001) delves into disability from a personal perspective, offering a critique of conventional stereotypes surrounding disabled people. David R. Brown, a poet and essayist, explores themes of disability, inclusion, and resilience in his writings. His poetry collection, *The Silence of the Wheelchair* (2003), reflects on the lived experiences of disabled individuals, critiquing the medical model of disability.

In recent years, writers like Hayleigh Barclay have become key figures in the development of disability literature in Scotland. Barclay's short story *Happy Birth-Day* (2018) exemplifies the current wave of disability activism in literature. Barclay's work, including her contributions to platforms like *Disability Horizons* (founded in 2011), plays a significant role in advancing the conversation on disability.

3.2.1 The Protagonist

In *Happy Birth-Day*, the protagonist faces a disability that is given to her without her choice or consent. She is not even informed about the nature of the disability that she will be reincarnated with. The protagonist is powerless and can do nothing to avert the situation. Further, she must deal with disability as a label rather than a specific disadvantage. Her situation reveals the conflict between the individual predicament of disabled people and social forces that label disability as an undifferentiated physical inadequacy rather than specific individual experiences. The protagonist's frustration is clear because she is being reduced to just a label, losing her full identity as an individual.

Lennard J. Davis in his book *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body* (1995), explains that the medical model sees disability as something wrong with the individual that needs to be fixed. On the other hand, the social model, as explained by Michael Oliver in *The Politics of Disablement* (1990), says that disability comes from social barriers in society that make life harder for people with disabilities. The protagonist's frustration comes from realising that the disability assigned to her is not a part of who she is but something forced on her by an impersonal system that only sees her as a medical case.

Her journey is not going to be about overcoming disability itself but about fighting against the way society keeps defining disability itself. This a part of the bigger problem in society where people's worth is decided by what others think of them. This idea is also discussed by Rosemarie Garland-Thomson in *Disability and the Disordered Body* (1997), where she says that we should see disabled people as having many different sides to their identity, not just as one single story or label.

3.2.2 An Unhappy Fairy Tale

Happy Birth-Day, the story changes the typical *Cinderella* tale in a way that critiques society's expectations. In traditional fairy tales like *Cinderella* (1697), the main character often magically overcomes her problems with some external help. But the main character here may not hope for any such magical transformation. Instead, she must accept a condition that she did not choose.

Rosemarie Garland-Thomson in *Extraordinary Bodies* (1997) explains how disabled bodies are often portrayed negatively in literature, and disabled people are rarely shown as heroes. A well-known example is *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* (1831), where Quasimodo, the disabled character, is depicted as an outcast, seen as tragic, and often in need of rescue.

The irony also draws attention to the concept of transformation in fairy tales, particularly in stories like *Cinderella*, where transformation is often seen as a magical solution to hardship. In *Happy Birth-Day*, there is no magical fix. Instead, the protagonist's life

becomes more complex and challenging after receiving the disability, mirroring the struggles of many disabled individuals in the real world.

3.2.3 Dr. Lulu

Dr. LuLu is a complex character who balances her professional responsibilities with a deep understanding of the struggles faced by disabled individuals. For example, when she explains the protagonist's disability, she uses the term "mission" instead of something negative, like "problem" or "defect." This suggests she is trying to give the protagonist a sense of purpose, even though the situation is difficult. Her focus on completing the process quickly may seem cold, but it could also show that she understands delaying it would only add to the protagonist's frustration. This reflects her practical way of showing care.

According to Tom Shakespeare, a disability theorist, systemic barriers play a big role in how disabled people are treated. In *Disability Rights and Wrongs* (2006), Shakespeare explains that social systems often create more challenges for disabled people. Dr. Lulu's reference to "Soup Can Culture" refers to Andy Warhol's *Campbell's Soup Cans* (1962), a series of pop-art pieces that flattens the uniqueness of mass-produced, marketable labels.

Carol Gilligan, in *In a Different Voice* (1982), delves into the ethical dilemmas faced by caregivers, particularly focusing on the conflicts that arise when institutional requirements clash with the personal, emotional, and moral needs of those receiving care. Dr. LuLu's actions also reflect her awareness of the emotional and moral complexities involved in caregiving.

Dr. LuLu's choice of words shows that caregivers should try to treat the person they care for with dignity and understanding. But at the same time, Dr. LuLu also has a job to do and must follow the rules of the place where she works. By framing the disability as a "mission," she avoids terms such as "problem" or "defect." This approach aligns with Gilligan's view that caregivers often seek to balance their professional responsibilities with a moral commitment to uphold the dignity of those in their care.

Check Your Progress

1. Discuss how the story moves away from the stereotypical, pity-driven depiction of disability.
2. Discuss the irony of the title and how the absence of magical resolutions mirrors the real-life struggles of disabled individuals.
3. How does Dr. LuLu's character portray the role of a caregiver?

4. Critical Overview

The story begins in a sterile room with beige walls, flickering neon lights, and an Aztec rug, elements that evoke discomfort and tension. The oversized pink armchairs, designed to provide comfort, ironically amplify the woman's nervousness. These visual details reflect the woman's fears as she faces her unknown fate.

4.1 The Sterile Room

The sterile room with beige walls, flickering neon lights, and an Aztec rug is meticulously constructed to evoke discomfort, tension, and a sense of liminality. The beige walls are plain, which makes the woman feel like she's in a place of uncertainty— a blank space waiting for something unpredictable. The flickering lights make the place feel unstable, showing how the woman's situation is fragile.

The Aztec rug, with its old patterns, refers to the idea of life coming back again, which is a key part of the Aztec beliefs about life and death. The large pink armchairs look comfortable but make the woman feel even more out of place. They represent how some places try to give comfort without solving real problems. This mix of comfort and unease mirrors the woman's feelings about her unknown future. This ironic juxtaposition of physical comfort and emotional unease mirrors the woman's internal turmoil. By putting the story in this room, the author shows a cold and impersonal place.

4.2 The Carnation Poster

The white carnation with the word 'REIN' written in gold on the poster is an important symbol in the story. White carnations usually mean purity and new beginnings, which fits the story's focus on new starts. But the flashy way the poster is designed makes the serious idea of reincarnation seem silly. The design of the poster makes fun of how big ideas like reincarnation can be turned into something simple and commercial.

The gaudiness of the poster parallels the absurdity of blending mysticism with an impersonal tone. Just as the profound notion of reincarnation is reduced to a decorative wall piece, so too are the complexities of identity, fate, and agency reduced to impersonal decisions made in the sterile room. The protagonist's disdain for the poster is an extension of her broader struggle to maintain individuality in a world that often seeks to categorise and commodify.

The poster's wordplay, with 'REIN' suggesting both control and the cyclical nature of life, adds another layer of meaning. While reincarnation is a controlled, orderly process, the woman's experience reveals its chaotic, arbitrary nature. This duality reflects the big

question of whether life follows a clear order or is completely random. This idea is also reflected in Albert Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942).

4.3 The Purple Door

The purple door is a powerful symbol of transition, the threshold between the known and the unknown. Purple, often associated with spirituality and transformation, sets the stage for the protagonist's journey into a new existence. The door's presence as both a literal and figurative gateway highlights the inevitability of change and the necessity of crossing boundaries to embrace growth, even when it is forced.

When the woman steps through the door, she sees a flash of blue light and then falls into a dark space. This represents the confusion and surrender that often come with big changes. The blue light suggests clarity and peace for a brief moment, but then the dark space takes over. This shows how life's journey can be unpredictable, with moments of understanding followed by confusion.

The chaotic landing in the brightly coloured yellow armchair with orange stripes further emphasises the unpredictability of life. The vibrant colours contrast sharply with the sterile room, representing the jarring nature of new beginnings. This juxtaposition reflects the duality of change—it is both disorienting and vibrant, overwhelming and invigorating. The armchair, like the oversized pink chairs in the sterile room, serves as a reminder that comfort is often illusory, and true growth requires embracing discomfort.

4.4 The Cupcake

The cupcake in *Happy Birthday* represents a superficial solution that ignores the real emotional and psychological needs of the protagonist. It stands as a satirical comment on the attempts to "fix" complex human issues with simple, consumable gestures that provide temporary comfort but fail to address underlying problems. The use of such a trivial symbol in a moment of crisis highlights the gap between the gravity of the situation and the ineffectiveness of the system's response. In this aspect the story reminds us of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) that takes a satirical approach to a supposedly utopian society that uses comfort and pleasure to control its citizens offering comfort in the form of cupcakes. In Huxley's world, people are conditioned to accept superficial pleasures to maintain order, while their true emotional and intellectual needs are ignored. Here '*soma*' (a drug) represents a form of shallow contentment, much as the cupcake in *Happy Birthday* represents a meaningless gesture of comfort in response to a complex crisis. Huxley's novel critiques the way institutions trade depth and meaning for surface-level appeasement. This critique is echoed in Barclay's use of the cupcake as a symbol of trivialisation of personal crises.

Happy Birth-Day also uses dark humour the way Jonathan Swift uses it in *Gulliver's Travels*. Through the absurd and often grotesque societies Gulliver encounters, Swift exposes the follies and contradictions of his society. Barclay's use of dark humour mirrors the use of exaggerated situations to critique real-world issues—such as the Lilliputians or the detached, ineffective governance in Brobdingnag—in *Gulliver's Travels*. The cupcake in *Happy Birth-Day* functions in a similar way: it is an exaggerated symbol of the absurdity of the approach to solving deeply personal problems.

4.5 Deal with It!

The phrase "Deal with it!" in *Happy Birth-Day*, encapsulates the emotional detachment and the harsh realities faced by the protagonist. This phrase highlights how the challenges she experiences are met with little empathy or support. The phrase becomes a symbol of the protagonist's struggle to deal with complex and often overwhelming situations on her own, with no clear guidance or understanding from those around her.

The protagonist in *Happy Birth-Day* experiences a world in which personal identity, agency, and fate seem beyond her control. The narrative explores these themes by portraying how she is pushed, with little concern for her needs and emotions, into a cycle that feels unavoidable. The struggle for independence and self-determination is often complicated by societal perceptions of what it means to live with a disability.

Disability theorists, such as Lennard J. Davis in *The Disability Studies Reader* (1997), have argued that society, rather than acknowledging the full humanity of individuals with disabilities, often views disability as something that needs to be fixed or cured. This approach strips individuals of their agency, making them feel as though they have little control over their lives.

In *Happy Birth-Day*, the protagonist is similarly trapped in a system that makes decisions for her without considering her desires, preferences, or agency. Furthermore, the story presents the protagonist's journey as one of navigating ambiguity, much like the experience of living with a disability in a world that often offers no clear answers or easy solutions.

Disability theorists like Rosemarie Garland-Thomson in *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (1997) have written about the complexities of disability and how it challenges traditional notions of normalcy. In *Happy Birth-Day*, the protagonist is faced with a world, just as individuals with disabilities often must navigate a world that is not designed to accommodate them, that offers no manual on how to live. The uncertainty and lack of clear direction in the protagonist's life mirror

the experience of those who must deal with the unpredictable nature of life, particularly when it involves disabilities or societal expectations that are difficult to meet.

The lack of clear answers is a central theme in the story. The protagonist's experiences are marked by moments of confusion and lack of clarity, which parallel the challenges faced by many people with disabilities who may encounter obstacles without a clear guidelines on how to overcome them. These challenges are often compounded by the emotional strain of dealing with a world that may not fully understand or accept the complexities of living with a disability. The phrase "Deal with it!" highlights the emotional exhaustion that comes from having to navigate these situations without support or understanding. In a world that emphasises independence and self-sufficiency, the protagonist in *Happy Birth-Day* finds herself struggling to assert her voice and identity.

4.6 Narrative Technique

Gérard Genette, in his work *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (1980), defines focalisation as the lens through which the narrative is perceived. Focalisation refers to the perspective from which a story is told, as well as to the limitation or scope of what the reader can know about events. In *Happy Birth-Day*, the first-person narration functions as both the *narrator* and the *focalizer*, meaning that the protagonist is both telling the story and controlling what the reader can see and understand about the events around her. This alignment of narrator and focalizer means that the story is presented through her subjective perception.

The story disrupts traditional linearity by incorporating flashbacks that blur time and space. This technique allows readers to experience the protagonist's disability and personal history out of sequence, reflecting the fragmented nature of identity for individuals navigating social expectations of 'normalcy'.

Happy Birth-Day is narrated from the first-person perspective, creating an intimate view of the protagonist's emotions and thoughts. This technique fosters empathy and brings the internal struggles of living with a disability to the forefront. This is a good example of how personal narratives can challenge the external definitions imposed by society. Barclay achieves this by allowing the protagonist's voice to centralise her own lived experience rather than being viewed through a medical or social lens.

Hayleigh Barclay's narrative is interwoven with allusions to other works of literature and culture, which is a hallmark of postmodern literature. *Happy Birth-Day* portrays the protagonist's struggle as absurd and often ironic. The problem lies not with the disabled individual but with the social structures that define and marginalise them. The narrative

creates a space where the protagonist confronts her disability not as a limitation but as a source of personal and philosophical insight.

Check Your Progress

1. Discuss the symbolism behind the room's details, such as the beige walls, flickering neon lights, and Aztec rug.
2. What role does the white carnation poster play in the story?
3. Discuss the significance of the first-person narrative in Happy Birth-Day. How does it foster empathy and present the protagonist's experience with disability?

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Department of Distance and Continuing Education
Campus of Open Learning, School of Open Learning, University of Delhi