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(Under CBCS)

ENGLISH

Paper: ENG 4016

INDIAN WRITING IN ENGLISH



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UNIT- 1

History of Indian English Literature: Beginnings

Unit Structure:

- 1.1 Objectives
- 1.2 Introduction
- 1.3 Brief History of the Colonial Encounter
- 1.4 Beginnings of Indian Writing in English
- 1.5 Important Writers and Major Trends
- 1.6 Summing Up
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1.1 Objectives:

This unit aims to make you aware of the complex history that lies behind the very discipline in which you are working to gain a master's degree – English literary study in India, and how it came to be. In one sense, this is not a purely 'literary' history as the impulses creating this discipline in India were explicitly 'non-literary'. Within the space of a few pages we cannot go over all the events and social currents that make up this 'history'. Our unit therefore proposes to help you to

- *read* critically Indian Writing in English,
- *recover* the themes that animate this writing,
- *explore* the scope of this area of literary studies.

1.2 Introduction:

We have already gained, from the paragraph above, the range of ideas that are clustered together within the label 'Indian Writing in English'. We normally tend to accept without question the spread of English education in India and to think of English literary study as an extension of this phenomenon. However, as we look more closely at the way in which English Literature

was introduced in our educational institutions, it becomes clear that the subject always had a privileged position under colonialism. Indeed, for the colonial structures, English literary study was a powerful and apt tool for the consolidation of colonial authority in India. You will find it of particular interest to know that contrary to our familiar identification of ‘literature’ (in the English context, especially) with secular humanist movements, in the Indian context English literary study had an almost opposite role to play in keeping with missionary activity.

Some of this we have compiled below for your understanding. We should point out to you here that the study of Indian Writing in English necessarily embroils us in postcolonial theories. That is natural, given that the colonial stretch of Indian history brings up questions of power, domination, cultural inequalities, cultural conflicts, and therefore the status of Indian Writing in English in general. It is for this reason that the sequence of historical events from the end of the eighteenth century till the present is of such great importance. Below, you will find a brief glimpse of this troubled history.

Stop to Consider:

The term “Indian English literature”- From “Commonwealth” to “Indo-Anglian”

Indian English literature is generally defined as literature written originally in English by Indian authors by birth, ancestry or nationality. Indian English literature is both an Indian literature and a variation of English literature. Indians have started writing in English for communicating with one another and the outside world using English in an Indian way. The term ‘Indian English’ literature is also known as ‘Indo-Anglian’ literature or Indian writing in English. Anglo - Indian literature – the writings of the British or other Western authors regarding India cannot be a part of Indian English literature. Similarly literature in Indian languages translated into English cannot also become a part of Indian English literature unless they are not creative translations by concern authors themselves. Indian writing in English is greatly influenced by the writings in England and the Indians have had their own “Romantics”,

“Victorian”, “Georgians” and “Modernists”. However, Indian English literature has contributed to the field of world writing in English in its own way.

1.3 Brief History of the Colonial Encounter:

If we look closely at the history of English in India, we will find that it actually came here to our country before the East India Company did. The earliest instance of an Indian writing in English is Din Muhammad, who migrated to England in 1784 and whose *The Travels of Dean Mahomet* appeared in 1794. It was not a great literary success but it was indeed subscribed to by a number of the elite in Cork, Ireland, where he lived.

The English language actually came to India twenty years before the East India Company came into existence. A Roman Catholic, Father Thomas Stephens came to India to escape persecution in Elizabethan England, around 1578. There were other merchants and traders (John Newbury, Ralph Fitch, William Leedes, James Story) who came to India, too. Ralph Fitch’s account of India which appeared in Richard Hakluyt’s *Principal Navigations* in 1599 is comprehensive. Both Stephens and Fitch are representative cases of the missionary and the merchant who first gave rise to what we think of as Indian literature in English.

English really came into circulation on Indian soil around 1660 when the factories of the East India Company along the Malabar and Coromandel coasts began to prosper. You should remember that in 1660, Charles II who had been restored to the throne sanctioned the East India Company with several powers as part of which it could exercise jurisdiction over all the English subjects in the factories and to make war or peace on native Indians. The interaction between the Englishmen on Indian soil and native residents was naturally regulated by practical needs such as the zone of employment in which the Company got its work done with the help of Indian assistants. This created a class of dubashis (or those who were bilingual, familiar with both local languages and English, or French, or Dutch, or Portuguese). This was more common in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries during the time of small European trade centres. Through the fact

of Indians working in European trading companies and conversely, Europeans working for Indian rulers, the linguistic transmission began to take place.

1.4 Beginnings of Indian Writing in English:

The East India Company, which came to India for trade, gradually became the administrator of the country. Therefore, the company had to maintain offices for this purpose. As it was a costly affair to bring clerks for the office of the company from England, they decided to train some Indian people for the minor jobs of the company and established schools and colleges for this purpose. It was the Charter Act of 1813, which imposed an official responsibility upon the Company to educate Indian natives.

Gauri Viswanathan writes (in *Masks of Conquest*) that the English Parliament, fearing that a commercial company – the East India Company – should assume political importance, looked for a cause to interfere with its workings. This sought-for reason came only in the last quarter of the eighteenth century whence Parliament undertook to take “a serious and active interest in Indian political affairs” (27). A visible cause for this turn of parliamentary interest was the moral depravity of those employed by the Company. What it gave rise to was a concern to safeguard the Indian natives “against the wrongs and oppressions of British subjects resident in Bengal” (27). You should remember that the East India Company, by 1757, had already established itself as the virtual ruler of Bengal. This stage of colonial consolidation of power (enmeshed as it was with a more benign concern for Indian culture), led to what has been called the “Orientalist” phase of colonial rule. “Orientalism was adopted as an official policy partly out of expediency and caution and partly out of an emergent political sense that an efficient Indian administration rested on an understanding of “Indian culture” (28). However, as Viswanathan also reminds us, the real concerns behind Orientalism were far from scholarly. They, in fact, point to the infusion of “the worlds of scholarship and politics” (29).

Orientalism came into conflict with a body of thought called ‘Anglicism’. This really means that there were those then who thought that the promotion of indigenous Indian languages and literatures in native education would lead to undesirable consequences. Warren Hastings was succeeded by Lord Cornwallis (1786–1793) as governor-general who thought that “the official indulgence toward Oriental forms of social organization, especially government, was directly responsible for the lax morals of the Company servants. . . To Cornwallis, the abuse of power was the most serious of evils afflicting the East India Company, not only jeopardizing the British hold over India but, worse still, dividing the English nation on the legitimacy of the colonial enterprise” (30).

Cornwallis’ successors were shrewd enough to see that support for Orientalism would help to preserve the feudal character of British colonial administration. Briefly, however, there were various compelling reasons for the promotion of native Indian culture and learning although there were also opposing reasons for carrying out such reforms as would bring Indians closer into the circle of western influences. This was related to the compulsions of British rule which was moving towards the greater consolidation of power. Partly as a result of these diverse negotiations by the British of the Indian situation, the Charter Act of 1813 opened up India to missionary activity which allowed scope for missionaries to carry out the reforms they thought were necessary in relation to native morals. What we should note is that English education was intricately linked with the British government’s policies of exerting and reinforcing its power and domination over India.

SAQ:

How would you describe the circumstances in which Indian writing came into existence? (100 words)

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The Anglicist-Orientalist controversy revealed the close involvement of Englishmen like James Harington, J.P.Larkins, W.W.Martin, John C.Sutherland, Henry Shakespear, Holt Mackenzie, Horace Wilson, Andrew Stirling, William B.Bayley, Henry Prinsep, Nathaniel Halhed, and John Tytler, with Indian political and cultural life. This was during the period from 1805 to 1820. Horace Wilson was probably the best known of the group. Wilson was secretary to the Committee of Public Instruction and in this capacity he advocated various reforms in the Indian curriculum to bring in the teaching of European science and English literature along with the Oriental languages. In this controversy the most prominent were people like Macaulay, Charles Trevelyan and Alexander Duff. The controversy itself was triggered off by the General Council of Public Instruction in Calcutta proposing to withdraw financial support to Oriental learning in favour of promoting the study of English and literature (101).

According to the Charter Act of 1813, a sum of not less than one lakh rupees was to be kept aside for the improvement of native education, although there were no definite instructions in the Act regarding how the amount of one lakh should be spent. As Viswanathan continues, “The policy in the years immediately following the Charter Act was to establish institutions devoted to the teaching of Oriental languages and literature”. But this policy was not without its problems – “For as the British swiftly learned, to their dismay, it was impossible to promote Orientalism without exposing the Hindus and Muslims to the religious and moral tenets of their respective faiths—a situation that was clearly not tenable with the stated goal of “moral and intellectual improvement” (37).

How does this story connect with that of English education in India? The introduction of English literature in India came as the solution to the “tension between increasing involvement in Indian education and enforced noninterference in religion”. A clause within the Charter Act itself, mentioned the “revival and improvement of literature”. The term, “literature”, having been left vague, came to be later interpreted by Thomas Babington Macaulay (about twenty years later) as Western literature. In the wake of Macaulay’s well-known ‘Minute’ of 1835, William Bentinck, the Governor-General, adopted the English Education Act under which the teaching of English was

taken out of “the Sanskrit College and the Madrassa and confined to institutions devoted to studies entirely conducted in English” (41). William Bentinck, on 7 March 1835, declared that “the great object of the British Government ought to be the promotion of European literature and science among the natives of India, and all funds appropriated for the purpose of education would be best employed on English education alone”.

K.R.Srinivasa Iyengar narrates that from 1835 onwards came a period of ‘Anglicization’ which also found eager support among Indians as it held out the apparent promise of “new life, opened new vistas of knowledge”. In 1854, Sir Charles Wood’s (a member of the Select Committee of the British Parliament in 1852-53) despatch to Lord Dalhousie (then Governor-general) took note of the problems arising out of this new situation. Today, Sir Charles Wood is remembered for the spread of English education in India, but his despatch was guided by colonial concerns and acknowledged the need to create a class of people who would “emulate us in the development of the vast resources of their country, . . . secure to us a large and more certain supply of many articles necessary for our manufactures and extensively consumed by all classes of our population, as well as an almost inexhaustible demand for the product of British labour” (*Masks of Conquest* 146).

During the twenty years between 1835 and 1855 – the period of Macaulay’s ‘Minute’, the English Education Act of Bentinck and Wood’s Dispensations – the number of English-speaking persons increased which contributed to the emergence of Indian English literature. Iyengar gives interesting details: “It is said that even in 1834-5, 32,000 English books sold in India as against 13,000 in Hindi, Hindustani and Bengali, and 1,500 in Sanskrit, Persian and Arabic. The vogue for English books increased, and the demand came even more from the Indian than the Englishman in India” (28).

Gauri Viswanathan sums up the significance of these policy moves in relation to education in India: “The English Education Act of 1835, proposed by Governor-General William Bentinck on Macaulay’s advice, made English the medium of instruction in Indian education. But . . . Bentinck’s resolution was not as revolutionary in the introduction of a new language (the English

language was already being taught in India even before 1835) as in endorsing a new function and purpose for English instruction in the dissemination of moral and religious values. In withdrawing funds from support of Oriental studies in favor of English, the act dramatically reversed England's commitment to a non-partisan, eclectic policy. Administrators preceding Bentinck, including Minto, Mountstuart Elphinstone, Charles Metcalf, Thomas Munro, and John Malcom, had instinctively advocated a classical approach to the study of language and literature as an end in itself, resisting both Utilitarian and missionary pressures to enlist literary as a medium of modern knowledge and as a source of religious instruction, respectively. With the Charter Act, the conflict between commitments to active intervention and neutrality pressed into existence a new discipline – English literature” (44).

Christianity first dug its deepest roots in South India. Missionary centres of education sprang up alongside Hindu or Native Schools and colleges. (KRSI41) Rabindranath Tagore's father, Maharshi Debendranath, implored Hindu parents to send their children to native schools and not the missionary schools. But western education carried the mass of popular support: “It was the ‘open sesame’ to knowledge, freedom, power; it cut the old bonds of convention and tradition; it let in light into the old dark rooms of an obscurantist faith; and it made a new world and a new life possible for its beneficiaries.” Surendranath Banerjea's words explain this cultural transformation:

“Our fathers, the first fruits of English education, were violently pro-British. They could see no flaw in the civilization or culture of the West. They were charmed by its novelty and its strangeness. The enfranchisement of the individual, the substitution of the right of private judgment in the place of traditional authority, the exaltation of duty over custom, all came with the force and suddenness of a revelation to an Oriental people who knew no more binding obligation than the mandate of immemorial usage and venerable tradition.”

Such a description catches the impulses behind the social acceptance of new ways of conducting the business of life. The prejudices derived through Hindu traditions, the old superstitions, all became targets of cultural change.

This was the core of the process subsequently understood as ‘Westernization’.

Stop to Consider:

Literary Ferment in India:

K.R.S. Iyengar calls the years from 1835 to 1855 the “phoenix-hour that bred Indo-Anglian literature”. The imposition of English-centred education in India led to “the literary renaissance in India.” “The study of English literature stimulated literary creation in Bengali, Marathi, Telugu, Tamil, Gujarati, and the other languages, and some of the greatest writers of the last 100 years have been men and women educated in English, even if they didn’t seek creative expression through English; and . . . some have been unrepentant bilingualists, writing in two languages, English and their mother tongue, with equal facility, and if necessary translating their English into their mother tongue or their Bengali or Marathi or Tamil into English. The filiations between the modern Indian literatures (including Indo-Anglian literature) and English literature have been close, and the links have been renewed” (30).

The eminent critic, Meenakshi Mukherjee, gives some important insights into this phenomenon in her book, *The Perishable Empire*, as regards the writing of novels in English after 1835. To what extent English had already made inroads into the thoughts of Indian writers can only be gauged by taking into account how such individuals were using the colonial language for diverse purposes. You will find it interesting to read her chapter, “Nation, Novel, Language” in the book named above.

6

1.5 Important Writers and Major Trends:

Raja Rammohan Roy is generally considered to be “the morning star of the Indian renaissance”. Indian writing in English in India is a manifestation of the new creative urge in India which is referred to as the literary

‘Renaissance’ in India. In terms of imparting western education and bringing a literary Renaissance to India, Raja Rammohan Roy played a very significant role. His ‘Letter on English Education’ (of 11 December 1823) is almost equated with being a manifesto of the Indian Renaissance. Well educated, and proficient in many languages, he wrote extensively in Bengali, Persian, Hindi, Sanskrit and English. He was the first Indian master of English prose who wrote and spoke forceful English long before Macaulay’s minute was published. Roy wrote almost thirty essays in English on various subjects. “A Defense of Hindu Theism” (1817) is regarded as the first significant piece of writing in English by an Indian. For his iconoclastic views, he suffered expulsion from his parental home at the age of sixteen, although he was restored to his father’s favour in 1794, and took to service with the East India Company in 1804. Most of his writings were on religious, social, historical and political subjects. In the field of journalism, he edited periodicals in English, Bengali and the Persian languages. His writings included articles on religion (Hinduism and Christianity) as well as politics. His contribution as a social reformer is also remarkable. He was concerned with the sad plight of women in orthodox Hindu society and raised his voice of protest against it and various other superstitious beliefs and customs existing in Indian society.

Stop to Consider:

Rammohun Roy’s Writings:

You can read about Rammohun Roy’s writings in any standard literary history. However, some of these are especially notable: his political writing as contained in the two “Petitions Against the Press Regulations” (1823) and the ‘Exposition of the Practical Operation of the Judicial and Revenue Systems of India’ (1832). Such examples show the extent to which Roy was prepared to oppose British policies. About thirty-two essays by him are on various subjects. His compilation “Precepts of Jesus” (1820-21) is remarkable for his knowledge of the scriptures in Hebrew, Greek and Latin.

He is recognised as probably the first Indian master of English prose. He created a valuable impression of himself on leaders of English opinion in his final sojourn in England in 1831-33. Significantly, he started the practice of Indian leaders writing their autobiographies with his own brief, commissioned sketch which was published in the *Athenaeum* and the *Literary Gazette*.

His Social Reform:

K.R.S.Iyengar remarks that “Rammohan, although he could be named as the first of the Indian masters of English prose, was great in so many fields that he belongs to Indian history more than to mere Indo-Anglian literary history” (33). His reform activities began around the time he left the service of the Company and returned to Calcutta. In the period 1823-33, Rammohan Roy undertook reforms within a religious direction which ultimately led to the setting up of the Brahmo Samaj in 1828. This Samaj is important in the history of Indian culture in the 19th century.

You should find out about the social reforms carried out by reformers like Keshub Chunder Sen (1838 – 1884) and Dayanand Saraswati (1824 – 1883) who founded the Arya Samaj, Kashinath Trimbak Telang (1850 – 1893) and Mahadev Govind Ranade (1842 – 1901). K. R. S. Iyengar points to the obvious differences between such leaders and the ‘Derozio men’ in terms of their final goals. Other figures include Dadabhai Naoroji (1825 – 1917), and Phirozeshah Mehta (1845 – 1915).

Dadabhai Naoroji (1825-1917) known as ‘the Grand Old Man of India’ also contributed to the field of Indian English prose through his numerous speeches on various matters which have been collected in ‘*Essay, Speeches, Addresses and Writings*’ (1887) and *Speeches and Writings* (1961). Known as ‘Rishi Ranade’ Mahadev Govinda Ranade (1842-1901) was a patriot, a social and religious reformer and an influential thinker of the 19th century Indian intellectual scenario. *Religious and Social Reforms* (1902), *Miscellaneous Writings* (1915) and *The Wisdom of Modern Rishi* (1942)

are three collection of his speeches and writings which were published posthumously.

As Iyengar points out, despite the many reformist organisations which came into existence at this time (the Brahmo Samaj, Madame Blavatsky and Annie Besant's Theosophical Society, the Arya Samaj, the Prarthana Samaj) nothing could turn back the tide of the challenge of the 'West' and it is in this context that we have to place the significance of figures like Ramakrishna. The Ramakrishna Mission was established by Swami Vivekananda, Ramakrishna's chief disciple, a movement that undertook spiritual and humanitarian enterprises.

Henry Louis Vivian Derozio (1809-1831) was important in expressing a viewpoint which we can, today, identify as the moment of the cultural turmoil caused by the increasing 'westernisation' that took place with the prolonged presence of the British in India. He was fired by the revolutionary principles of Romantic poetry and with his influence on his friends – the 'Derozio men' – gave voice to feelings of iconoclasm brought about through the cultural encounter with western values. Into this mental space stepped the missionaries who were thus enabled to carry on their mission of proselytisation. The new converts to Christianity thus became deployed western values in challenging older forms of Hindu orthodoxy. "The Babu became anglicized overnight in name, dress, manners, speech; in Professor Radhakrishnan's words, the Babu's voice now became an echo, his life a quotation, his soul a brain, and his free spirit a slave to things". . . The new education took long and rapid strides in Western and South India, and Christianity made deep inroads into the former preserves of Hinduism..." (Iyengar 41).

Derozio was the first Indian poet to write notable verse in English. The history of Indian English poetry in the early period started with him. He was a teacher of English literature in Hindu college. A poet as well as a teacher of poetry, Derozio had deep love for the world of Nature. In his short poetic career he published two volumes of poetry, *Poems* (1827) and *The Fakir of Jangheera: a metrical tale and other poems* (1828). As a poet, he was influenced by the English Romantics like Byron, and Scott

besides others, and his shorter poems bear witness to this influence. The satirical poems and long narrative poems also clearly indicate his special affinity with Byron. Another noteworthy feature of Derozio's poetry is its burning nationalistic zeal which gets reflected in poems like "To India - My Native land", and "The Harp of India". He is also a pioneer in the use of Indian myth and legend, imagery and diction in poetry.

Kashiprasad Ghosh, who was a poet of pure Indian blood, published a volume of verse entitled *The Shair or Minstrel and other poems* in 1830, three years after Derozio signalled the birth of Indian English poetry. He was one of the first Indians to publish a regular volume of English verse. **Michael Madhusudan Dutt**, the epoch-making writer in Bengali also wrote verse in English like Derozio. M.M.Dutt was also influenced by the English Romantics. His long narrative poem "The Captive Ladie" (1849) reveals the influence of the English Romantics, especially Byron. *Vision of the Past* (1849) is another long poem in English by him dealing with the Christian theme of temptation, fall and redemption of Man.

However, it was the writer **Toru Dutt** (1856-77) with whom Indian English poetry really developed from imitation to authenticity. The third and youngest child of Govin Chunder Dutt, Toru Lata, born a Hindu, was baptized along with the other members of the family in 1862. She was educated in France and England which enabled her to translate French lyrics - one hundred and sixty-five in all, by about a hundred different French poets - into English. The translated poems were published under the title *A Sheaf Gleaned in the French Fields* (1876) which was the first collection of her poems. Her second collection of poems, *Ancient Ballads & Legends of Hindustan* (1882) was published posthumously. The poems in this collection show her rootedness in the soil of Hindu thought and tradition as well as her attempt to interpret the spirit of the East to the West. The ballads of this collection are replete with Indian myths and legends and show her understanding of the spirit underlying them like Derozio. She was also a Romantic at heart and (like many Romantic poets) she died of tuberculosis when she was 21 years. But she was not a conscious imitator of the English romantics like Derozio and her other predecessors. Her poetry bears the witness of her basic originality and she never attempted to anglicize her 'Oriental' themes.

She is an objective poet who avoids conscious comments. She describes events, scenes and persons clearly without over-elaboration. She is a narrative poet of rare charm. ‘Savitri’, one of the narrative poems by Toru Dutt, reveals her skill in wonderful narration. Her poetry also reveals a keen sensitiveness to nature, specially to colour and her powerful observation of the world of nature, specially the trees and flowers. The elements of story-telling, romantic longing for the past are also noticeable in her poetry.

Toru Dutt is described by her father in a sonnet: “Puny and elf-like, with dishevelled tresses/Self-willed and shy”. Many aspects of her personal history (the family transfer to France and then to England, for instance) and her private, intimate personality provide interesting reading. A French novel she wrote – *Le Journal de Mademoiselle d’Arvers* - was published posthumously by her father, Govin Chunder, in 1879. The reception it was given in Paris testifies to the rare talent that Toru Dutt had been endowed with. A sonnet with which she ended the volume, *A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields*, begins with the lines –

“The flowers look loveliest in their native soil
And their kindred branches; plucked, they fade
And lose the colours Nature on them laid . . .”

Ramesh Chunder Dutt, (1848-1909) a cousin of Toru Dutt’s, was an Indian civil service official who took voluntary retirement in order to devote himself to scholarly and creative writing. He translated the two great Indian epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* into English along with selections from the *Rig Veda*, the *Upanishads* and other important texts. His *Ways Of Ancient India* (1894) is a collection of his verse translations from Sanskrit and Prakrit classics into English.

SAQ:

(1) Why, do you think, did Indian writers find it almost natural to turn to English Romantic poetry? Do you think the assessment made by M.K.Naik is apt? (60 + 30 words)

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(2) How would you judge the significance of translations into English of texts in Indian languages? (70 words)

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Manmohan Ghosh (1869-1924) was the elder brother of Aurobindo Ghosh. He was taken to England by his parents, along with his other brothers, where he had his early education at Manchester and London. English became his first language; it became his mother tongue. But he had to return to India, despite his unwillingness to do so. Returning to India, he felt alien in his surroundings. Unlike Toru Dutt and Sir Aurobindo Ghosh, Manmohan found no inspiration in Indian life and culture. Therefore, he continued the tradition of nineteenth-century English poetry in his work. His poetry includes themes and images which are Western and universal. His sense of exile, loneliness, love for solitude and intense sorrow caused by his wife's death deepens the meditative mood of his poetry. In 1890, came *Primavera* which is a collection of poems by Manmohan, Stephen Phillips, Arthus Cripps and Binyon. *Love Songs and Elegies* is a collection of poems by Manmohan which was published during his own life-time (1898). His short lyrical poems were published posthumously in 1926 under the title *Songs of life and death*. Manmohan had a strong inclination towards Greek literature, Greek art and Greek mythology as well as an intense passion for the world of nature and beauty. However, hovering between two worlds – the one of England, and the other of India – he could not fulfill the early promise of *Primavera*.

Sri Aurobindo Ghosh (1872-1950), a younger brother of Manmohan Ghosh, is a unique figure in the history of Indian English poetry. He had a multitalented personality combining poet, a revolutionary, a thinker, a writer, a playwright, and a sage. Like his brother Manmohan, he was also educated

in England. In 1893, Aurobindo returned to India, Aurobindo discovered his roots in Indian culture and thought which inspired his poetry. During his long poetic career, spreading from 1880 to 1900, Aurobindo tried his hand at different kinds of verse such as lyric, narrative, philosophical and epic. The influence of Milton, Keats, Shakespeare and Tennyson is noticeable in his poetical works. His *Songs to Myrtilla* appeared in 1895 which was followed next year by his narrative poem “Urvashi”. His early short poems are mostly minor verse celebrating familiar poetic themes of love, sorrow, and death in a typically romantic style. But his later poetry is mystical and meditative expressing his originality. Sir Aurobindo’s later poetry includes *Six Poems* (1984), *Poems* (1941), *Last Poems* (1952). “Savitri: A Legend and a Symbol” is a major epic poem by him dealing with the well-known legend of Prince Satyavan and Savitri, his devoted wife who rescued Satyavan from death. The poem remains a landmark in the history of Indian English poetry. Both Manmohan Ghosh and Sri Aurobindo Ghosh started writing poetry in the nineteenth century and continued it to the early twentieth century.

The beginning of Indian English fiction is attributed to the publication of *Rajmohan’s Wife* (1864) in English by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee who became the first Indian novelist in English. It was followed by Raj Lakshmi Devi’s *The Hindu Wife* in 1876, and Toru Dutt’s *Bianca* in 1878, which were also written in English. Romesh Chunder Dutt, whose verse has already been considered, translated two of his own Bengali novels into English namely *The Slave Girl of Agra* and *The Lake of Palms*. Although the real beginning of Indian English fiction took place in the 19th century, its real development was seen in the early twentieth when the Indian English novel was deeply influenced by the Gandhian movement of Indian English fiction will be discussed in the second unit.

Check Your Progress:

1. Comment on the ‘Romantic’ features of Derozio’s poetry.
2. Discuss Toru Dutt as a narrative poet writing across Indian and European cultures.

3. Elaborate on the 'Indian' themes in Manmohan Ghose's poetry.
4. Discuss the 'mysticism' attributed to the poetry of Sri Aurobindo Ghosh.

1.6 Summing Up:

In this unit you have come to know how to react to the history of Indian writing in English. Set in the period of British Colonialism and 'Orientalism', the history of Indian English literature provides scope for a meticulous understanding of the reasons behind the development of what we call the Indian Writing in general. Issues implicitly discussed in this unit include the ideas like-the British possession of India, the spread of the English language, the colonial education policies and the role of English literature, the responses of the nationalist social reformers and its impact on Indian English literature in its early phase.

1.7 References and Suggested Readings:

- Iyengar, K.R.Srinivasa. *Indian Writing in English*. Sterling Publishers, 1962.
- Mukherjee, Meenakshi. *The Perishable Empire: Essays on Indian Writing in English*. OUP, 2000.
- Mukherjee, Meenakshi. *The Twice Born Fiction: Themes and Techniques of the Indian Novel in English*. Heinemann, 1971.
- Naik, M.K. *A History of Indian English Literature*. Sahitya Akademi, 1982.
- Viswanathan, Gauri. *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India*. OUP, 1998.

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Unit- 2
History of Indian English Writing:
Early Twentieth Century

Unit Structure:

- 2.1 Objectives
- 2.2 Introduction
- 2.3 Introduction of the English Language in India: An Overview
- 2.4 Major Thoughts and Socio-cultural Movements
- 2.5 Major Literary Movements
- 2.6 Indian English Prose of the early twentieth century
- 2.7 Indian English Poetry of the Early Twentieth Century
- 2.8 Other Major Categories of Indian Writing in English
 - 2.7.1 Indian English Fiction
 - 2.7.2 Indian English Drama
 - 2.7.3 Short Story
- 2.9 Summing Up
- 2.10 Reference and Suggested Reading

2.1 Objectives

By the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- *sketch* the outlines of the development of Indian Writing in English;
- *identify* the issues that have provided the themes of this canon;
- *trace connections* between the writing itself and the larger history;
- *describe or narrate* the body of writing called Indian English Literature.

2.2 Introduction

As V. Dharwadker points out, literature and its cultures usually exist at the crossroads of various historical influences. However, Indian writing in English and similar literatures face a unique complexity. This complexity arises from the dual connection between literature and language, and between language and its speakers. When a community writes, shares, and enjoys literature in a language that is not historically its own, the process of creating literary works and tracing their history becomes more intricate.

The early twentieth century marked a significant turning point in the development of Indian English literature. This period witnessed the emergence of prominent writers, literary movements, and themes that continue to shape the Indian English literary landscape. Some of the most prominent writers like Rabindranath Tagore, R. K. Narayan, and Mulk Raj Anand were pioneering figures whose literary compositions not only contributed in shaping Indian English literature but also introduced the Indian culture to a global audience. Important literary movements like the Indian Renaissance and the Progressive Writer's Movement had profound impact on Indian English literature, as writers began to address the social issues in their works. The Indian Renaissance, spanning the nineteenth and early twentieth century, sought to revive Indian culture and promote national identity, as writers began to explore themes of nationalism and patriotism, as well as address social evils, and promote cultural revival through their works. It was a transformative period marked by a resurgence of Indian heritage, social reforms, and the promotion of modern education. The Progressive Writer's Movement emerged in the 1930s as a critique of colonialism, focusing on social realism and advocating for social change. This literary and intellectual movement advocated for social justice and equality in pre-independence India, addressing issues like hunger, poverty, and socio-political subjugation. Some of the seminal literary compositions of the period includes Rabindranath Tagore's *Gitanjali* (1910), R. K. Narayan's *The Guide* (1958), Mulk Raj Anand's *Coolie* (1936), among others.

2.3. Introduction of the English Language in India: An Overview

While studying the history of Indian English literature, it is noteworthy to consider the colonial history of India and the introduction of the English language in the country. You will note that English literary studies were introduced in India ahead of their inclusion in educational curricula in England. Schools in Britain began to teach English literature only in 1871 whereas in India the demand for the adoption of English literary study comes as early as 1816, in the setting up of the Hindu College.

Some of the thinking that lay behind English literary study in colonial India can be grasped by looking at the “Observations on the State of Society Among the Asiatic Subjects of Great Britain” written by an official of the East India Company in 1792, Charles Grant. Grant realised the importance of morality or cultural superiority in the reinforcing of British hold over Indian subjects. It was later felt by succeeding British officials that moral education of Indians was as important as material control. It began thus to be seen by such administrators that English literary study was a useful tool of carrying forward of religious ideals through this educational means. This happened most clearly in the case of [GV86] the committee comprising Alexander Duff (missionary), Charles Trevelyan (administrator), and W. H. Pearce who undertook to select and prescribe particular literary texts for Indian libraries and schools. What happened was almost “fortuitous” because the colonial administration faced difficulties in keeping apart the religious and the secular aspects of the British presence in the country. It is revealing to note that English literary texts (Shakespeare, Addison, Bacon, Locke, for example) were found to be infused with religious elements. Thus, what had been proposed by Charles Grant (to undertake the moral education of Indians) became possible through the adoption of the study of English literary texts. In this manner English literary study also became instrumental in the teaching of the tenets of Christianity in India. English literary study in India also had other uses for the colonial administration: the training of administrators. With this aim in sight, Lord Hardinge, governor-general from 1844 – 1848, declared that Indians who distinguished themselves in European literature would be preferred for public office.

The end of the great Revolt of 1857 and the declaration of peace on 8th July, 1858, brought an end to the activities of the East India Company in India. During the period from 1857 to 1947, the Indian spirit underwent a radical transformation from a sense of inferiority and frustration to a newly aroused self-confidence and self-awareness. It was the period when India rediscovered her identity as well as learnt from the West. This period witnessed a remarkable development in Indian English literature. On 1 January 1874, the Company was formally dissolved. There were now radical changes in relations between Indians and the British.

2.4 Major Thoughts and Socio-cultural Movements

Among the great changes that were visible now came the spread of ideas from a generation which had received its higher education. A common language now spread among the people – English – even as, interestingly, the vast network of the Indian railways also began to expand over the subcontinent. The culture of print had by now grown in the bigger cities. A period of religious, social, and political reform now began similar to 1828 when Raja Rammohun Roy had first established the BrahmoSamaj. After his death, this movement was further propagated by KeshabChunder Sen while similar organizations like the PrarthanaSamaj were set up by M.G.Ranade and R.G.Bhandarkar in 1867 in Bombay. Swami DayanandSaraswati set up the Arya Samaj in 1875 in the cultural turn towards an earlier, purer form of Hinduism. Another kind of support to this wave of revivalism came from the Theosophical Society founded in New York by Madame H.P.Blavatsky, Col. H.S.Olcott, W.O.Judge besides others. This movement moved its base to India in 1878 but it was an eclectic creed combining the teachings of Hinduism, Buddhism, ancient Egyptian thought, early Christianity, the teachings of Plato and Pythagoras.

Swami Vivekanand, following the teachings of his leader, Swami Ramakrishna, led the movement that brought back life to ancient Hindu thought. This movement has come to be better known as the Ramakrishna Mission. Among the Muslims the climate of resurgence led to the establishment of the Anglo-Arabic College at Aligarh in 1875 by Syed Ahmed

Khan. This later became the Aligarh Muslim University. Even earlier, Abdul Latif had founded in 1863 the Mohammedan Literary and Scientific Society of Calcutta. The National Mohammedan Association had been started in 1878 by Ameer Ali.

In 1876, Surendranath Banerjea founded the Indian Association. The Indian National Congress, following upon various protests against the Arms Act, the Vernacular Press Act, the Ilbert Bill and for the lowering of the age limit for entry into the civil services, came into existence in 1885 with the support of liberal Englishmen like A.O. Hume, Sir William Wedderburn and Sir David Yule. Political events of that time both in India (as the sense of resentment caused by the partition of Bengal in 1905 by Lord Curzon) and elsewhere in the world (the fall of Russia to Japan in 1905, revolutionary movements in China and Turkey, the Persian liberal movement) helped to reinforce the strength of the Congress. With World War I came the increasing realization that British imperialism can be validly challenged, a challenge probably made possible with the force of American democracy, according to Percival Spear. As M.K. Naik observes, the turn towards more positive attitudes in this period made possible a more confident mode of writing.

SAQ:

How does the question of 'Indianness' or 'identity' and 'authenticity' become a part of the problem of the history of Indian English literature? (80 words)

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2.5 Major Literary Movements

Let us briefly discuss some of the major literary movements of the period:

- **The Indian Renaissance**

The Indian Renaissance was a transformative period for Indian English literature that spanned across the nineteenth and early twentieth century.

The movement aimed to revive and modernize Indian society, drawing inspiration from both Indian traditions and Western thoughts. The primary motivations of the movement were to address and eradicate social ills and promote social and religious reforms. Many pioneering figures like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Swami Vivekananda played crucial roles in social reform, addressing practices like sati, child marriage, and caste discrimination. Various organizations like the BrahmoSamaj and Arya Samaj also contributed significantly to the movement. The Indian Renaissance witnessed a resurgence of classical Indian knowledge and arts, fostering a sense of national pride. The movement played a significant role in shaping Indian English literature as writers began to explore themes of nationalism, independence, and the complexities of national identity as well as address social issues like caste, and gender inequality. Literary works like R.K. Naarayan's *The Guide* (1958) explored the complexities of Indian spirituality and culture, illuminating the author's ability to craft compelling narratives that captured the nuances of Indian life. The movement also promoted modern education, science, and rationality, influenced by British rule and the introduction of new thoughts and ideas. The Indian Renaissance had a profound impact on India's national identity and social structure. It laid the groundwork for the nationalist movement and the anti-colonial struggle, making it a pivotal movement in Indian history.

- **The Progressive Writer's Movement**

The Progressive Writer's Movement emerged in the early twentieth century as a pivotal literary and intellectual movement that sought to use literature as a transformative means to address social issues and advocate social justice and equality. The movement's origin can be traced back to the 1930s when a group of Indian writers including Ahmed Ali, SajjadZaheer, and Mulk Raj Anand came together to form the Progressive Writers' Association (PWA). The publication of '*Angaray*' (Embers), a collection of short stories and a play by Sajjad Zaheer, Ahmed Ali, Rashid Jahan, and Mahmud-uz-Zafar, in 1932, was influential in the origin of the Progressive Writer's Movement. The movement was characterized by its diversity, with writers from different backgrounds and regions of India exploring various genres such as fiction, poetry, and drama, while writing in multiple languages. The

Progressive Writers Movement led to a substantial body of literature that sought to challenge existing socio-political structures, raise awareness about the socio-economic issues, and promote progressive ideas and values in the country. The movement aimed to employ literature as a tool to expose the injustice and oppression of the working class and the marginalized communities in India. The movement's writers sought to challenge dominant narratives and power structures through their works as the core principles of the movement included addressing the oppression of the marginalized class, promoting social justice and equality, as well as advocating for a socialist society. The movement's emphasis on social realism and literary experimentation influenced a horde of Indian writers of the period which played a crucial role in shaping modern Indian literature and culture. Prominent literary works produced during the period includes *Swami and Friends* (1935) by R.K. Narayan which recounts captivating tales about the complexities of Indian life, while *Untouchable* (1935) by Mulk Raj Anand highlighted the struggles of India's marginalized communities and addressed social and economic inequalities prevalent in Indian society.

- **Indian Modernism**

Indian modernism, as a significant literary movement shaped by the complexities of India under British rule as well as post-colonial India, emerged in the 1920s-30s, was marked by a remarkable departure from traditional literary forms and themes. It was characterized by experimentation with form and language as it explored themes of alienation, individual struggle, and psychological depth. The movement introduced fragmented narratives and urban settings to Indian literature. Notable writers associated with the movement include Raja Rao, and R.K. Narayan, among others. Modernism in Indian writing was characterized by a conscious rejection of literary decorum. Modernist writers like Sa'adat Hasan Manto and Ismat Chughtai, who were also associated with the PWA, explored themes of social reality, poverty, and lust in their literary works. The Kallol generation poets in Bengal were also known for their innovative experimentation with form and content in their literary compositions during this era.

2.6 Indian English Prose of the early twentieth century

The rediscovery of the Indian past and a strong awareness of the current problems of India influenced the prose writings of this period. The Indian Renaissance of the 19th century produced different kinds of prose writings like religions, historical, cultural and political which were continued in the early twentieth century also. The prose writers of the 19th century including Rammohan Roy, M.G. Ranade, K.T. Telang, Vivekananda, and others were worthily followed by others during the last part of the 19th century and the early part of the twentieth century. Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, Surendra Nath Banerjee, Rabindranath Tagore, Sir Aurobindo, Sarojini Naidu, V.S. Srinivasa Sastri, A.K. Coomaraswamy, Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Subhash Chandra Bose, Jadunath Sarkar and Radhakrishna are some of the distinguished prose-writers of this period. Some of these writers started writing in the 19th century and continued it to the early 20th century while some others started writing in the early 20th century and continued it to the post-independence period.

Some names stand out in the field of prose-writing: Dadabhai Naoraji (1825-1917), the “The Grand Old Man of India”; Mahadev Govind Ranade (1842-1901); Kashinath Trimbuck Telang (1850-1893); Pherozeshah Merwanjee Mehta (1845-1915) and Sir Dinsha Edulji Wacha (1844-1936); Bal Gangadhar Tilak (1856-1920), “Lokamanya Tilak”; Gopal Krishna Gokhale (1866-1915); Kristo Das Pal (1834-84); Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (1838-94); Romesh Chunder Dutt (1848-1909); and Surendranath Banerjee (1848-1925). The generation belonged mostly to the Presidency towns of Bombay and Calcutta and this is to be seen more in the case which was the birth-place of the Indian National Congress.

Bal Gangadhar Tilak, better known as “Lokamanya”, was a mathematician, a scholar and a researcher, who contributed to Indian English prose writing as in *The Orion : Researcher into the Antiquity of the Vedas* (1893) and *The Arctic Home of the Vedas* (1903) are two books written by him. His English speeches were collected in *Writings and Speeches* (1922).

Gopal Krishna Gokhale (1866-1951) also contributed to Indian English prose through his various speeches which have been collected in *Speeches* (1908-1916) and *Speeches and Writings*: 3 Vols, (1962).

Surendranath Banerjee (1848-1925) was one of the founding fathers of the Indian National Congress. He was acclaimed as the most powerful orator in English of this period, who delivered numerous speeches on various contemporary issues. His autobiography *A Nation in Making: Being the reminiscences of fifty years of public life* (1925) is more public than a private document tracing the growth of the Indian National movement.

Rabindranath Tagore is the most outstanding figure of modern Bengali literature who wrote primarily in Bengali, but had a mastery over English also. He was a versatile genius whose achievements were many-sided. His active literary career spread over a period of 60 years in which he produced numerous lyrics, poetic plays, social plays, short stories, essays, autobiographical fragments, novels, and letters. His prose writings in English establish him as an internationalist and a humanist spreading the gospel of universal harmony between Man, Nature and the Divine. Tagore wrote prose both in English and Bengali. His prose writings in Bengali had been translated in English by others and hence they cannot be considered as a part of Indian English prose. However, his prose writings in English were delivered as lectures. *Sadhana* (1913) was the earliest collection of his lectures delivered at Harvard University which reveals his philosophical views. *Personality* (1917) and *Nationalism* (1917) are his other two collections of speeches. *Personality* includes various subjects including the relationship between Man and Art, Man and Woman, Man and Nature and Man and God. In *Nationalism*, Tagore makes a distinction between society and nation and denounces western imperialism. His ten lectures collected in *Creative Unity* (1922) analyses the East-West relationship. *The Religion of Man* (1930) is a collection of his lectures delivered at Andhra University in 1937 which deals with issues like the basic duality of man's nature, the essential unity of all religions, and related themes.

Sir Aurobindo Ghosh contributed to Indian English prose producing a considerable number of prose writings on religion, metaphysical, social,

political, cultural subjects and so on. His earliest prose writings were a series of nine essays published in *Induprakash* under the caption ‘New Lamps for Old’. In 1905, Aurobindo wrote *Bhavani Mandir* – a handbook for revolutionaries dedicated to the service of Goddess Bhavani. His unsigned articles in *Bandemataram* dealt with current politics. In 1909, Aurobindo started a new weekly *Karmayogin* in which he published essays dealing with science, philosophy, religion, literature etc. In 1914 Sir Aurobindo launched a monthly philosophical journal dedicated to the revelation of an integral view of life and existence. The various series of essays published in the journal which were re-issued in book-form were *The Life Divine* (1939-40), *The Synthesis of Yoga* (1948), *The Ideal of Human Unity* (1919), *The Human Cycle* (1949), *The Future Poetry* (1953), *The Foundations of Indian Culture* (1953), *The Renaissance in India* (1920), *Heraclitus* (1941) and so on. The last of Aurobindo’s prose writing was *The Supramental Manifestation* comprising eight essays. *The Future Poetry* is the collection of Aurobindo’s essays on literary criticism in *Arya*.

Swami Vivekananda’s oratorical brilliance which came into sparkling display in 1893 at the Parliament of Religions in Chicago, earned for him the American sobriquet of “the Hindu hurricane” dedicated to spreading the message of India’s Hinduism through the Western world. His speeches and lectures are contained in the *Complete Works*.

There were many prominent names from the south of the country like Sir SubramaniaIyer (1842-1924) who was also known as the “grand old man of South India”. Of these names one of the best remembered is V.S.SrinivasaSastri, one of the Southern Moderate leaders, who contributed to Indian English prose mainly through his biographical writings. His biographical writings include – *Life and Times of Sir Pherozezshah Mehta* (1945), *My Master Gokhale* (1946) and *Thumb-nail Sketches* (1946). Sastri’s *Lectures on Ramayana* delivered in 1944 have been included in his *Speeches and Writings*, Vol. II.

A.K. Coomaraswamy (1877-1947) is another Indo-Sinhalese writer of Indian English prose whose principal works include – *Medieval Sinhalese Art* (1908), *Essays in National Idealism* (1909), *Art and Swadeshi* (1911),

Introduction to Indian Art (1913), *Buddha and the Gospel of Buddhism* (1916), *A New Approach to the Vedas* (1933), *The Transformation of Nature in Art* (1933) to name only a few. Among his many articles are some like “Some Pali Words”, “Symbolism of Archery”, “Indian Coins”, and “Sati”.

Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948) who was a humanist, a man of religion, nationalist and a patriot influenced the language and literature of his period, both directly through his writings in English and Gujarati and indirectly through the movements aroused by his revolutionary thoughts and practices. However, his English writings fall into three periods – London period, the South African period and the Indian period. The London period (1888-91) includes – the *London Diary* which chronicles his sojourn in London, and is in addition to ten brief essays, and *Guide to London* dealing with his own experience in London. The South African period (1893-1951) establishes Gandhi as a journalist, and author. His writings of this period include ‘An Appeal to Every Briton in South Africa’ (1895), ‘The Indian Franchise’ (1895), and ‘Grievances of the British Indians in South Africa’ (1896). During this period Gandhi launched a journal called *The Indian Opinion* which was published both in Gujarati and English.

Hind Swaraj is Gandhi’s first major work expressing the Gandhian doctrine of soul-force, passive resistance, and non-violence. It was originally written in Gujarati which was later translated into English with the title *Indian Home Rule* by Gandhi himself. In the Indian period (1915-48), Gandhi ran two well-known journals namely *Young India* (1919-32) and *Harijan* (1933-48). His writings of this period appeared in these two journals since, most of these writings were originally written in Gujarati and later translated into English by others, therefore, legitimately they cannot be considered as a part of Indian English Literature. His autobiography *The Story of My Experiments with Truth* was also originally written in Gujarati. But at the same time, he delivered many historic speeches, published several articles and letters in English during this period.

Jawaharlal Nehru (1889-1964) the first Prime Minister of India, was also a prolific writer of Indian English prose. His writings, like Gandhi’s, have to

be seen as extensions of his public career as a nationalist whose life was devoted to the movement for India's independence from British colonial rule. His first book, *Soviet Russia* (1928) is a collection of sixteen articles delineating his impressions of Russia, *Letters from a Father to his Daughter* (1934) is a collection of thirtyone letters written by him to his ten years old daughter. *Glimpses of World History* (1934) also consists of letters written by him to his daughter from prison during 1930-33. *An Autobiography* (1936) is a unique creation of Nehru presenting a vivid picture of both the man and his milieu. The autobiography is also a living account of the eventful course of Indian history. The *Discovery of India* (1946) is a vision of the past seen through the eyes of Nehru. Moreover, he has contributed numerous speeches, essays, letters and press-statements to Indian English prose. Undoubtedly, he is one of the most outstanding figures of Indian English prose.

SarvepalliRadhakrishnan (1888-1975) was a leading figure of religious and philosophical prose in the twentieth century. *The Reign of Religion in contemporary Philosophy* (1920) was his first major work examining western philosophical thought. *The Hindu View of Life* (1926) is a forceful defense of Hinduism as a way of life. His early writings include – *The Philosophy of Rabindra Nath Tagore* (1918), *East and West in Religion* (1933), and *Eastern Religion and Western Thought* (1939). His later works include – *Religion and Society* (1947), *The Principal Upanishads* (1953), and *Religion in a Changing World* (1967).

The retrospective glance at Indian political history was a significant theme of Indian prose in English. In the field of historical prose, Jadunath Sarkar contributed a lot with his *The History of Aurangazeb* (Vols. I – V, 1912-24), *Shivaji and His Times* (1919) and *The Fall of the Mughal Empire* (Vols. I–IV, 1932-50). Apart from the religious, historical and philosophical prose contributed by the makers of Indian English prose, biographies, autobiographies, travel books, essays on art and criticism also contributed to the bulk of Indian English writing.

Check Your Progress:

1. Recount the impulses behind development of Indian English Prose in the early twentieth century.
2. Whose names are prominent among the early twentieth-century writers of Indian English prose? What were the themes that they generally focused on?
3. What are Gandhi's thoughts on colonial rule, Western civilization, and Indian culture?

2.7 Indian English Poetry of the Early Twentieth Century

Some of the most influential Indian writers who have made a substantial contribution to Indian English poetry, Aurobindo Ghosh, Rabindranath Tagore, Sarojini Naidu and Harindranath Chattopadhyaya may be mentioned.

In the poetry of Rabindranath Tagore, we see the work of one of the versatile geniuses of his age who played the role of a poet, dramatist, novelist, painter, short story writer, educationist, nationalist and internationalist, and philosopher, during his long literary career. He wrote poetry primarily in Bengali which he himself, and others, later translated into English. *The Child* (1931) is the only poem which he wrote in English. Tagore's *Gitanjali*, which is considered as a masterpiece of Indian English poetry, was published in England with an introduction by W.B. Yeats. It is made up of more than a hundred pieces strung together by a unifying theme of the devotional quest expressed through a variety of forms. The *Gitanjali* was followed by *The Gardener* (1913), *The Crescent Moon* (1913), *Fruit Gatherings* (1916), and *The Fugitive* (1921). Some of these works were translated into English by Tagore himself and others were written originally in English by him. In the year 1913 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature. His poetry in English is essentially lyrical in quality.

Sarojini Naidu (1879-1949) first drew the attention of the Indian public as an English poet. But in the course of time she came to occupy some of the highest positions in the public life of India. Her career as a poetess began

with the publication of *The Golden Threshold*. It was followed by *The Bird of Time* (1912) and *The Broken Wing* (1917). *The Sceptred Flute* (1946) and *Feather of the Dawn* (1961) are two other collections of poems by her. Her poetry was essentially lyrical which had been strongly influenced by British romanticism. Harindranath Chattopadhyaya, her younger brother, was also a prolific poet whose volume of work was far greater than Sarojini's. He published numerous volumes of verse among which *The Magic Tree* (1922), *Poems and Plays* (1927) and *Spring in Winter* (1955) are more significant.

Apart from the poet mentioned above, there were number of academicians who also published several collections of Indian English poetry. For example, G.K. Chettur (1898-1936) published five collections of verse including *Sounds and Images* (1921) *The Temple Tank and Other poems* (1932), *The Shadow of God* (1934). V.N. Bhushan published eight verse collections in English including *Silhouettes*, *Moon Beans*, *Flute Tunes* and so on. There were many other writers such as Jitendra Mohun Tagore, T. Ramakrishna, Nizamat Jung, A.M. Modi, Ananda Acharya, Roby Dutta, of this category whose contributions are also noteworthy.

Check Your Progress:

1. Outline the major changes in Indian poetry after the Great Revolt of 1857.
2. Enumerate the various English poetic influences on Indian poets writing in English in the early twentieth-century.

2.8 Other Major Categories of Indian Writing in English

Let us briefly discuss some other major categories of Indian English literature of the period:

2.8.1 Indian English Fiction

Although the beginning of the Indian English novel was with the publication of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's *Rajmohan's Wife* in 1864, its real

development was seen in the 20th century. Of the Indian writers of English fiction who came into prominence during this period, K.S Venkataramani (1891-1951) was one of the earliest novelists of the period. The influence of Gandhian thought is quite evident in his first two novels namely *Murugan, The Tiller* (1927) and *Kandan, The Patriot*. Another novelist of this period was KrishnaswamyNagarajunwhose *Athawar House* and *Chronicles of Kedaram* are two novels reflecting the changing aspects of the contemporary society.

The most significant contribution to Indian English fiction was made by the appearance of Mulk Raj Anand, R K Narayan and Raja Rao on the scene. The fiction of Mulk Raj Anand was influenced by his experience of the European tradition as well as the Indian past. His first five novels appeared in the following sequence: *The Untouchable* (1935), *Coolie* (1936), *Two Leaves and a Bud* (1937), *The Village* (1939) and *Across the Black Water* (1940). In his novels the portrayal of Indian social life comes with a sense of sympathy for the down-trodden. For example, in his first novel ‘*Untouchable* (1935), he describes the story of a young sweeper, Bakka, who represents a whole class of social outcasts and the exploited poor. Similarly, his second novel *Coolie* also deals with the story of Munoo who lives a life of poverty, exploitation and starvation. His other novels include – *The Sword and the Sickle*, *The Big Heart*, *Private Life of an Indian Prince* etc. A concern for the social problems of the Indian Society and an attempt to eradicate the social evils are noticeable in his writings.

R.K.Narayan published his first novel, *Swami and Friends*, in 1935 which is an Indianized version of Richmal Crompton’s ‘William’ novels. It was followed by his other two novels namely *The Bachelor of Arts* (1936) and *The Dark Room* (1938). *The Bachelor of Arts* deals with the story of Chandran, a sensitive youth caught in a conflict between the western ideas of love and marriage and his traditional social set up in which he lives. *The Dark Room* is a tale of silent suffering undergone by Savitri – a traditional, middle class Hindu wife. *The English Teacher* (1946) was the last novel by Narayan written before independence. His art achieved its maturity in the post-independence period with the appearance of novels like *The Financial Expert* (1952), *The Guide* (1958), *The Man Eater of Malgudi*

(1962), *Waiting for the Mahatma* (1955), *The Vendor of Sweets* (1967), and *The Painter of Signs* (1976). Most of his novels have their setting in an imaginary town named Malgudi. Therefore, his novels are generally described as the ‘Malgudi novels’. He has created many memorable characters like Swami, Sampath, Margayya etc. A blend of humour, irony, sympathy, quite realism and fantasy can be perceived in his novels.

Raja Rao was the youngest of the Trio (Anand, Naryan and Rao himself). He has written only four novels of which *Kanthapura* (1938) was the first one. The novel presents a vivid, realistic and graphic picture of the Gandhian freedom struggle movement of 1930 and its impact on the Indian masses. The whole story of the novel is narrated by an old grandmother named Achakka. His other works include – *The Serpent and The Rope* (1960), *The Cat and Shakespeare* (1965) and *Comrade Kirillov* (1976). Raja Rao’s most significant contribution to the Indian English fiction is his development of a suitable medium for expressing essentially Indian sensibility by using English in an Indianized way.

Check Your Progress

1. Critically examine the impact of ‘Gandhian Movement’ on Indian English fictions produced in the early 20th century.
2. Assess the contribution of Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand and RK Narayan to the field of Indian English fiction.
3. Comment on R.K. Narayan’s use of irony in his novels.

2.8.2 Indian English Drama

The beginning of Indian English drama dates from 1831 when Krishna Mohan Banerji wrote the first Indian English play, *The Persecuted or Dramatic scenes of the present state of Hindu Society*. It was a social play depicting the conflict between Indian orthodoxy and the new ideas which came from the west.

Michael Madhusudan Dutt, the poet, translated his play *Ratnavali* (1958) and *Sermista* (1859), originally written in Bengali, into English. He also wrote a play in English *Is This Called Civilization?* in 1871. Indian English drama made a humble beginning in the 19th-century Bengal but could not make much headway in the local setting. Since actual performance could not feed a dramatic tradition, early Indian English drama was closet drama.

The most significant contribution to the Indian English drama of this period is made by Rabindranath Tagore, Sri Aurobindo Ghosh and Harindranath Chattopadhyaya. Of the verse plays written by Sri Aurobindo, two belong to his student days in London and show the fascination the Elizabethan drama held out for him. Sri Aurobindo's plays reveal his knowledge of and his fascination for a wide variety of periods and locales, from ancient Greece to many foreign lands such as Spain, Iraq, Syria, Norway, India, and Britain. His poetic plays have not been considered to be best suited to the stage. He wrote a total of eleven verse-dramas of which five are complete and six are incomplete. The five complete plays by Aurobindo include – *The Viziers of Bassora*, *Perseus the Deliverer*, *Rodogune*, *Eric* and *Vasavadatta* of which four are comedies and *Rodogune* being a tragedy. All the five plays are full-length five act plays in blank verse. The influence of Elizabethan drama was strong on him. He was also given us a few unlimited plays namely, *The Maid in the Mill*, *The House of Brut*, *The Witch of Ilni*, and *Prince of Eduri*.

Tagore wrote almost more than forty plays of all kinds including social comedies, allegorical plays, and symbolic plays and so on. Among those that he himself translated into English, Tagore's plays include – *Chitra* (1913), *The Cycle of Spring* (1917), *Red Oleanders* (1924), and *Sacrifice and Other Plays* (1917). All these plays were translated into English by Tagore himself. However, his plays as a whole, have failed to be successful on stage because of being too symbolic and lyrical. *Sanyasi*, *The Cycle of Spring*, *Chitra*, *Malini*, *Sacrifice*, *Natir Puja*, and *Red Oleanders* are mostly labelled as 'thesis' plays. *The King and the Queen*, *Kacha and Devayani*, *Karna and Kunti*, and *The Mother's Prayer* are categorized as 'psychological' dramas.

Harindranath Chattopadhyaya was more eminent as a poet than as a dramatist. His first play is *Abu Hassan* (1918). The most significant social plays of Harindranath Chattopadhyaya have been included in *Five Plays* (1937). The plays of this collection reveal the playwright's socialist sympathies. Sympathy for the exploited, revolt against the evils of imperialism, are among the themes of his plays.

The history of early Indian English drama in Bombay was primarily limited to staging performances of visiting European theatre companies. In Madras, the situation was more productive and centered on the Madras Dramatic Society founded in 1875. This was followed by the Oriental Drama Club founded in 1882 and The Sarasa Vinodini Sabha founded by Krishnamachary of Bellary in 1890. In this period the most productive dramatist was V.V. Srinivasa Aiyangar (1871-1954).

Another playwright T.P. Kailasam has also occupied a secure place in the history of Indian English drama. His English plays include – *The Burden* (1933), *Fulfilment* (1933), *The Purpose* (1944), *Karna or The Brahmin's Curse* (1946), *Keechaka* (1949). The Indian epics, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* provided the plots for his plays. His plays reveal his conscious attempt to idealize the characters of his epics. As he himself was a performing artist, he plays show a greater stage sense than the plays of Tagore and Aurobindo. A.S. Panchapakesa Ayyar was another prolific writer who wrote almost half a dozen plays on various themes. *In the Clutch of the Devil* (1926) was his first play. *Sita's Choice and other plays* (1935) and *The Slave of Ideas and Other Plays* (1941) were two collections of his plays. *The Trial of science for the Murder of Humanity* (1942) was the last play by Ayyar. All his plays deal with contemporary problems and situations and they are written with a reformist zeal.

Bharati Sarabai is another eminent dramatist of the pre-independence period. She wrote plays under the influence of Gandhian thoughts and ideas. Her two plays – *The Well of the People* (1943) and *Two Women* (1952) reflect the influence of Gandhi on his writings. *The Well of People* has dramatic strengths which make it a memorable and significant contribution to the development of Indian English drama in this period.

SAQ:

What could have been, in your opinion, the main impediments to the development of drama in English in India? (80 words)

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2.8.3 Short Story

The history of Indian English short story began with the publication of *Realities of Indian Life: Stories collected from the Criminal Reports of India* by S.C. Dutta and *The Times of Yore: Tales from Indian History* by S.C. Dutta and S.M. Tagore in 1885. But the real development of the Indian English story, like the Indian English novel, took place in the early twentieth century or the Gandhian age.

At the beginning of this century, Cornelia Sorabji, a Parsi lady educated in Britain, published her four collections of short-stories. They include – *Love and Life Behind the Purdah* (1901), *Subabies: Studies in the Child Life of India* (1904), *Between the Twilights: Being Studies of Indian Women by one of themselves* (1908) and *Indian Tales of the Great ones among Men, Women and Bird People* (1916).

T.L. Natesan is another notable short-story writer of this period who wrote under the pen-name, “Shankar Ram”. *The Children of Kaveri* (1926) and *Creatures All* (1933) are two collections of his short stories most dealing with the rustic life in Tamil Nadu. A.S.P. Ayyar, the playwright and the novelist, also published three collections of stories namely, *Indian After Dinner Stories* (1927), *Sense in Sex and Other Stories* (1929) and *The Finger of Destiny and other Stories* (1932). The short stories also, like his plays, reflect his concern for social reform. Manjeri Isveran is another productive short-story writer of this period who authored *The Naked Shingles* (1941),

Siva Ratri(1943), *Angry Dust* (1944), *Fancy Tales* (1947)and many more short stories. Her stories are filled with fantasy and supernatural elements.

The most significant contribution to the Indian English short story was made by the three major novelists of this period, namely, Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan and Raja Rao. Mulk Raj Anand has published seven collections of short stories including *The Lost Child and Other Stories* (1934), *The Barber's Trade Union and other Stories* (1944), *The Power of Darkness and Other Stories* (1959)and so on. His short stories are wide-ranging in mood and tone with a strong sense of social awareness inherent in them. R.K. Narayan's *Cyclone and other Stories* (1943), *Dodu and other Stories* (1943)and *Malgudi Days* (1943)are his three collections of short stories written before independence. Like his novels, his short stories are also filled with irony and humour. Raja Rao has also published a dozen stories which have been collected in *The Cow of the Barricades and other Stories* (1947) and *The Policeman and the Rose* (1978).

2.9 Summing Up

The history of Indian Writing in English during the period after the Great Revolt displays some characteristics different from what was typical of the writing in the earlier period. From the earlier unit you have learnt that Indians took up the colonisers' language from a very early moment of the cultural encounter. By the time of the Great Revolt and its aftermath this cultural transaction became heavily burdened with political conflict. The early twentieth century marked a significant period in the history of Indian English writing. This era witnessed the emergence of prominent writers, literary movements, and themes that laid the groundwork for the rich and diverse literary landscape. Prominent writers like Rabindranath Tagore, Mulk Raj Anand, and others have made significant contribution to Indian English literature during this period.

2.10 References and Suggested Readings

- M.K.Naik – *A History of Indian English Literature*, SahityaAkademi
- K.R.SrinivasaIyengar – *Indian Writing in English*, Sterling Publishers, Delhi
- Gauri Viswanathan – *Masks of Conquest*, Oxford India Paperbacks, Delhi
- Meenakshi Mukherjee – *The Twice Born Fiction: Themes and Techniques of the Indian Novel in English*, Pencraft International, Delhi
- Meenakshi Mukherjee – *The Perishable Empire: Essays on Indian Writing in English*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi

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Unit- 3

History of Indian English Literature: Post-Independence Period

Unit Structure:

- 3.1 Objectives
- 3.2 Introduction
- 3.3 The New Phase in Indian English Writing
- 3.4 Indian English poetry in the post-Independence period
- 3.5 The Rise of the Indian English Novel
- 3.6 Indian English Drama in the Post-Independence Period
- 3.7 Indian English Prose in the Post-Independence Period
- 3.8 The Indian English Short Story in the Post-Independence Period
- 3.9 Major Literary and Intellectual Movements of the Period
- 3.10 Summing Up
- 3.11 References and Suggested Readings

3.1 Objectives

By the end of the unit, you should be able to:

- *sum up* this history in brief terms;
- *name* the important figures who gave it shape;
- *describe* the relations among the different elements of this history.

3.2 Introduction

A new period of Indian life started with the achievement of independence by India on 15th August 1947. Many challenges and changes occurred in different spheres of Indian life. For example, in the political sphere, the most traumatic transformation was the partition between India and Pakistan. In the economic sphere, also, many developments came into view including

the implementation of Five-Year Plans, the opening of large industrial projects in the public sector, community-development projects and the nationalization of Life Insurance and the banks, multi-purpose river projects, agrarian reforms, and so forth.

Boundaries of states were re-drawn on a linguistic basis in 1956. In the social sphere, traditional social inequalities and superstition were sought to be eradicated by means of progressive measures such as the Untouchability Offences Act of 1955, The Hindu Code Bill, etc. Moreover, several schemes were launched to look into various issues related to social development. Consequently, there were some social gains as the rise in national literacy rates by 75% between 1951 and 1971.

3.3 The New Phase in Indian English Writing

The political decision to retain Indian membership of the British Commonwealth meant the continuity of the cultural trends already in place through the colonial era. For Indian English Literature this meant the institution of the Sahitya Academy awards for English writing in the year 1960. The period after the achievement of political independence from colonial rule, in 1947, brought gains for the Indian English writer in affirming the sense of identity, the capacity for self-scrutiny, and the widening of his/her vision. There was a growth in the readership and even though the role of English in post-Independence India was sought to be circumscribed in various ways, the recognition that English is a world-language further led to greater study of English language and literature.

3.4 Indian English poetry in the post-Independence period

The poetry of this period is remarkable for its experimentation and clear presentation of contemporary Indian reality and consciousness. But at the same time, the continuation of Indian English Romantic tradition was also noticeable in the works of the poets belonging to the school of Aurobindo and many other poets. However, by the fifties, the new poetry imbued with a sense of protest, made its appearance in the world of Indian English poetry.

The organization of the 'writers workshop' in Calcutta in 1958 by P. Lal and his associates, soon became an effective forum contributing to the growth of new poetry or modernist poetry.

The first of the new poets to publish a collection was Nizzim Ezekiel whose first volume of poetry *A Time to Change* appeared in 1952. It was followed by his other collections namely *Sixty Poems* (1953), *The Third* (1959), *The Unfinished Man* (1960), *The Exact Name* (1965) and *Hymns in Darkness* (1976). Ezekiel is of Bene-Israel origin which makes him a natural outsider in the Indian scene. But he tries to connect himself with contemporary India and regards himself essentially as an Indian poet writing in English. His poetry embraces a wide range of themes including life in the city, sexuality, the problems of marriage, poverty, search for identity, parody of the Indian colloquial English idiom, and a shift towards morality and alienation. Nizzim Ezekiel is known as a city poet as the city of Bombay occupies a very significant position in his poetry. The city, Bombay, becomes the 'locale' of most of his poems indicating his sense of belonging to this city. Here, Bombay has become a symbol for any modern city submerged by ugliness, inhumanity and wickedness. The dehumanizing influence of the city on human beings gets reflected in some of his poems such as 'A Morning Walk,' and 'Urban'. One of his famous poems 'Background Casually' reveals his commitment to India and to Bombay as well his cultural and social alienation for having a Jewish origin. The 'Very Indian Poem in Indian English' 'The Truth About the Floods' and 'The Railway Clerk' show the many-levelled functioning of irony in Ezekiel's poetry. The superstitions and folk-beliefs are found reflected in poems like 'The Visitor', 'Night of the Scorpion' and 'Cow'. He frankly writes about sex and human body in 'At Hotel' expressing the sexual motives of men. In 'A Woman observed', Ezekiel gives a graphical depiction of the sexuality of a pregnant woman. Marriage is another dominant theme of Ezekiel's poetry. Being a critical observer of marital life, Ezekiel deals with the various problems of marital life in poems like 'Marriage' and 'To a Certain Lady'. It is with Nissim Ezekiel, that postcolonial poetry came into existence which starts representing the voice of the urbanized, western educated Indians.

SAQ:

How does the poetry of this period reflect both a sense of continuity and the sense of change ? (80 words)

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Purushottam Lal, the organizing spirit behind the organization of Writers' Workshop in Calcutta in 1958, has been a pioneer and a popularizer of the new poetry. He has published many collections of verse which include *The Parrot's Death and Other Poems* (1960), *"Change!" They Said* (1966), *Draupadi and Jayadratha and Other Poems* (1967), *The Man of Dharma and the Rasa of Silence* (1974), and *Calcutta: A Long Poem*. He is a lyrical and a romantic poet. Like Don Moraes and Nissim Ezekiel, Lal's poetry also conveys a confessional note.

Adil Jussawalla is another new poet who has also made a significant contribution to the Indian English poetry of post-independence period. *Land's End* (1962) is his first collection of verse which contains poems written in England and some parts of Europe. *Missing Person* is another collection of poems which was published in 1974. Jussawalla spent more than a dozen years in England but, he decided to return to India and his poetry reflects his conscious involvement with the Indian ethos.

A.K. Ramanujan (1929-1993), an Indian expatriate in USA is another outstanding poet of the post-independence period. Born in India, he went to the University of Chicago in 1962 where he was a professor of Dravidian linguistics. He enjoyed teaching there and unlike Jussawalla, did not choose to return to India. Living in USA Ramanujan looked back to his past life in India for the themes of his poetry. His poetry is a combination of his 'outer' and his 'inner' forms. The 'outer' forms of his poetry include — "linguistic, metrical, logical and other such ways of shaping experience ... first thirty years in India, my frequent visits and field trips, my personal and professional preoccupations with Kannada, Tamil, the classics and Folklore ..." Thus,

his poetry can be said to express an 'Indian' sensibility encouraged by his 'American' experiences. His poetic output contains only two volumes namely *The Striders* and *Relations*. But what he has written in these two volumes is remarkable for their inherent poetic worth. In most of his poems, his themes revolve around the family, relations, insects and Tamil traditions.

Another modern Indian English poet is Keki.N. Daruwalla (1937-2024) who has enriched the field of Indian English poetry in a variety of ways. He was a police officer by profession and the very fact influenced his poetry. His poetry is dominated by the images of violence, disease, fire, corruption, etc. Daruwalla's poetical works include – *Under Orion* (1970), *Apparition in April* (1971), *Crossing of Rivers* (1976), *Winter Poems* (1980), *The Keeper of the Road* (1982). In 1984, he was awarded the prestigious Sahitya Academy Award for *The Keeper of Road*. A sense of concern for the socio-political conditions of India gets expressed in his poetry. Landscape occupies a dominant place in Daruwalla's poetry covering the vast countryside of North India with its widespread network of rivers, hills, plains, and so on. His poetry also deals with the theme of love and sex. However, it is his excellence in the realistic, vivid and striking use of imaginary which gives him a unique position in the world of Indian English poetry.

Jayanta Mahapatra (1928 -2023) is the first Indian English poet to win the Sahitya Academy Award for his book of verse *Relationship* in 1981. Mahapatra started his career as a poet at the age of forty for which he is called 'a late bloomer' in the world of Indian English poetry. *Close the Sky, Ten by Ten* is Mahapatra's first volume of poems containing forty-nine poems on a wide variety of themes. His other poetical works include – *Swayamvara and Other Poems* (1971), *A Rain of Rites* (1976), *Waiting* (1979), *The False Start* (1980), *Life Sings* (1983), and *Dispossessed Nests* (1986). Mahapatra's poetry is remarkable for its exploration and vivid portrayal of the Orissa landscape. The physical landscape of Orissa represents the deeper levels of Indian consciousness and psyche which have been shaped by India's cultural and religious past. Alienation, rootlessness and emptiness in modern existence, human relationships, love, sexuality, prostitution, poverty and socio-political reality of contemporary

India form the subject matter of his poetry. Like the poetry of Keki N. Daruwalla, Mahapatra's poetry is also filled with realistic images and symbols.

Arun Kolatkar (1932 -2004) is a bilingual poet writing both in English and in his mother tongue Marathi. He wrote many short poems in English some of which still remain uncollected. His long poem, *Jejuri*, was published in 1970 which won the Commonwealth Poetry prize. The poem contains thirty-one short sections describing a visit to Jejuri, a famous temple near Pune.

One of the most leading figures of the new school of poetry is Kamala Das. She is a bilingual poet, who writes both in her native Malayalam and English with equal mastery. She has published three books of verse in English – *Summer in Calcutta* (1965), *The Descendants* (1967) and *The Old playhouse and other poems* (1973). Her poetry is an expression of her feminine sensibility, its exploitation, its suppression in a male-dominated society. Her frustrations want of love and sufferings as a woman and wife are frankly portrayed in most of her poems. Therefore, her poetry is called confessional and autobiographical to a great extent. Love and sex, rebellion against the conventions and restraints of society, loneliness and incompleteness, disease and decay are some of the recurrent themes of her poetry. The images and symbols of her poems are drawn from the familiar and the commonplace and they are suggestive of her own personal experience.

Apart from the above-mentioned writers of Indian English poetry, P. Parthasarathy, Gieve Patel, A.K. Mehrotra, Pritish Nandy, Shiv K. Kumar, Monika Verma, Mary Erulkar, Eunice de Souza and many others have contributed to the enrichment of Indian English poetry in the post-Independence period.

Check Your Progress:

1. Discuss the poetic technique with which Nissim Ezekiel as a 'city poet' highlights the theme of modern 'isolation'.

2. A.K. Ramanujan's poetry is the product of the combination between his 'outer forms' and 'inner forms'. How does the poet achieve this combination?
3. Describe the poetic response to Indian nationalism around 1947 in terms of theme and technique.
4. Comment on the 'confessional' tone in the poetry of Kamala Das.

3.5 The Rise of the Indian English Novel

Many novelists of the pre-independence period such as Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, R.K. Narayan and many others have continued their writing in the post-independence also. These novelists, at the same time, become a source of inspiration for the upcoming novelists of this period. The prominent figures of Indian English novel who started their career after independence are Bhabani Bhattacharya, Manohar Malgonkar and Kushwant Singh. These novelists made their appearance during the nineteen fifties and the early sixties. Chaman Nahal and Arun Joshi are two other outstanding figures of Indian English novel making their appearance in the late sixties and the seventies. Moreover, a group of women novelists emerged in the post-independence period which includes the prominent figures such as Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal and Anita Desai.

Bhabani Bhattacharya (1906-1988), a social realist of this period, made a significant contribution to the world Indian English fiction of the post-independence period. In his theory and practice of fiction-writing, Bhattacharya shares a close affinity with Mulk Raj Anand. Like Anand, he also believes that a novel must have a social purpose. *So Many Hungers* (1947) is his first novel. Later novels include *Music for Mohini* (1952), *He who Rides a Tiger* (1952), *A Goddess Named Gold* (1960), *Shadow from Ladakh* (1966) and *A Dream in Hawaii* (1978). Among these novels, *Shadow from Ladakh* was selected for the prestigious Sahitya Academy Award in 1967. His fiction has been translated into many European languages.

Manohar Malgonkar(1913-) is another eminent novelist of this period who believes that the main purpose of art is to provide pure entertainment. His novels present a limited view of human life and nature. Malgonkar started his novelistic career with *Distant Drum* in 1960 which depicts a story of army life. *The Princes* (1963), *Combat of Shadows* (1962), *A Bend in the Ganges* (1964) and *The Devil's Wind* (1972) are some of the novels authored by him. The male characters occupy a dominant position in his novels while the women characters appear to be nothing more than the objects of masculine pleasure.

Khushwant Singh's (1915-2014) first novel was *Train to Pakistan* (1956) depicted the impact of Partition on a small village on the Indo-Pakistan border. His other novel namely *I shall not Hear the Nightingale* (1959) presents an ironic picture to the freedom struggle movement. *The Company of Women* (1999) and *Delhi* (1992) are two new novels by him. *Delhi* seems to be a chronicle covering more than eight hundred years in the life of the city Delhi. *The Company of Women* deals with the story of Mohan, the protagonist and his adulterous relationships with eight women.

Arun Joshi wrote three novels namely *The Foreigner* (1968), *The Strong Case of Billy Biswas* (1971) and *the Apprentice* (1974). The theme of alienation in its different aspects is predominant in his novels. He wrote two more novels before his untimely death in 1993. These two novels are – *The Last Labyrinth* (1981) and *The City and the River* (1990). *The Last Labyrinth* won Sahitya Academy Award in 1982. As a novelist, Joshi is seriously interested in the existential dilemmas faced by man in the modern world.

Chaman Nahal started his novelistic career with *My True Faces* in 1973. His most outstanding creation *Azadi* appeared in 1975 which was one of the most prominent novels of Partition. The same novel won the Sahitya Academy Award in the year 1977. His other novels include – *Into Another Dawn* (1977), *The English Queen* (1979), *The Crown and Leincloth* (1981), *The Salt of Life* (1990) and *The Triumph of the Tricolor*.

A significant development in the literary world of post-independence period is the appearance of a group of new novelists and their new fiction. The first of the new novelists to appear in the scene was Salman Rushdie. His best novel '*Midnight's Children*' won the Booker Prize in 1981. It is the story of Saleem Sinai, who was born on the midnight of 15th August, 1947, the time and year of the birth of modern Indian nation. *Grimus* (1975), *Shame* (1983), *The Satanic Verse* (1988) and *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* (1999) are some other famous novels authored by him.

Vikram Seth also contributed to the spread of this new fiction by producing novels on social realism. *A Suitable Boy* (1993) and *An Equal Music* (1999) are two best known novels by him. His *The Golden Gate* (1986) is a novel in verse set in contemporary American society. The entire novel is in the sonnet form. Rohinton Mistry, who lives in Canada, is the author of the award-winning novel '*Such a long Journey*' (1991). In his novels the Parsi character plays a dominant role. *A Fine Balance* (1995) is another of his novels dealing with the theme of hope and despair.

Amitav Ghosh, one of the most outstanding figures of Indian English fiction, has written many novels such as *Circle of Reason* (1986), *In an Antique land* (1992), *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1996), *The Glass Palace* (2000) etc. His novels stand as testimony to his versatility. For example, in *The Shadow Lines*, the novelist that divide people and nation causing a lot of misery among human beings, while his another different one dealing with the imaginative reconstruction of history.

Another notable development in the history world of post-independence period is the emergence a number of women novelists. Ruth Praver Jhabvala (1927 -2013), one of the leading figures of Indian English fiction by women has produced many novels such as *To whom She Will* (1955), *The Nature of Passion* (1956), *The Householder* (1960), *A New Dominion* (1973), *Heat and Dust* (1975), poet and Dancer (1993) and so on. Born in Germany and educated in England, she got married to an Indian and lived in India for many years. The novel which she wrote during her stay in India clearly reveals her preoccupation with Indian social life. But she herself refuses to be considered as an Indian writer. In 1975, she left India for

good and went to the USA. In her recent works she makes use of her American experience, but at the same time her preoccupation with India continues to be dominant.

Kamala Markandaya (Purnaiah Taylor, 1924-2004) is an expatriate who has been living in England for a number of years. Her novels deal with a wide variety of themes that include – the East-West encounter, different roles played by women in society and so on. *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954) is her first novel which deals with the story of Rukmani, a rustic woman, and her hard peasant life. *Some Inner Fury* (1955), *Possession* (1963), *A Silence of Desire* (1960), *The Coffin Dams* (1969) are some other novels by her. She has produced only one novel after 1980, namely *Pleasure City* in 1982. It is one of her best novels dealing with the cultural confrontation between tradition and modernity. *The Golden Honeycomb* (1977) is her longest novel, which is an attempt at historical fiction, being a chronicle of three generations of the princely family of Devapur.

Nayantara Sahgal (1927) is generally associated with political fiction, politics being one of her major concerns – inevitable, given that she is the daughter of Vijayalakshmi Pandit, and the niece of Jawaharlal Nehru. Her first novel, *A Time to be Happy* (1958), seems to be a chronicle dealing with two north Indian families during the last phases of the Indian freedom struggle movement as well as with the advent of Independence. *The Time of Morning* (1968), *Storm in Chandigarh* (1969) and *A Situation in Delhi* (1977) are three novels by her dealing with different political matters. *The Day in Shadow* is another novel by her which was inspired by personal experience. Here the plot deals with a broken marriage. *Rich Like Us* (1985) is Sahgal's best novel which was written towards the later part of her career. The novel presents a satirical picture of India in 1975 to 1976, the time of the declaration of National Emergency by Indira Gandhi. *Plans for Departure* (1985) and *Mistaken Identity* (1988) are two latest novels by her.

Anita Desai (1937), in contrast with Nayantara Sahgal, appears to be more interested in the interior landscape of the mind. In her novels she explores the disturbed psyche of the modern Indian women and also tries to strike a balance between their instinctual needs and intellectual aspirations. One of

her major themes is the existential predicament of an individual which she portrays through incompatible couples, for example the very union between sensitive wives and ill-matched husbands. Her first novel *Cry, The Peacock*, was published in 1963. The novels depict the story of Maya, the chief protagonist, who fails to establish an effective communication with her husband Gautam. Gautam's indifference to her sensitive nature creates a deep sense of loneliness in her, finally making her hysteric. Her other novels include – *Voices in the City* (1965), *Bye-Bye Blackbird* (1971), *Where shall we go this Summer* (1975), *Fire on the Mountain* (1977), *Clear height of Day* (1980), *Village by the Sea* (1982), *In Custody* (1984), *Baymartner's Bombay* (1988), *Journey to Ithaca* (1995) and *Fasting Feasting* (1999). In most of her novels, the narrative is woman centric, except in *In Custody* which is a male-centred narrative, about a poorly paid lecturer in a provincial town. *Fasting Feasting* is her latest novel which was nominated for the Booker Prize in 1999 in which she tries to recapture the family life of two different cultures. The novel is in two parts – one dealing with Indian life and the other with life in the United States of America.

Another outstanding figure of Indian English fiction by women in the post-independence period is Shashi Deshpande. She has already written eight novels, six collections of short stories and four children's books. Her novels emerge from her rootedness in middle class Indian society and avoid mentioning about the events like partition, Emergency etc. *The DARK Holds No Terror* is her first novel. *If I Die Today* (1982) and *Come up and Be Dead* (1983) are two novels by her which have the elements of detective fiction. *That Long Silence* (1988) is her fifth novel which was selected for the prestigious Sahitya Academy Award. Through the narrator Jaya, the novelist portrays the hollowness, boredom of modern Indian life as well as the silence imposed on women by many factors. *Roots and Shadows* (1983), *The Building Vine* (1993), *Small Remedies* (2000) are some other novels authored by her. Almost all her novels deal with a crisis in the heroine's life which is portrayed through the use of stream of conscious technique and other devices. Her novels are woman oriented depicting the meaning of being a woman in modern Indian society.

Apart from the novelists mentioned above, there are many other distinguished novelists (both men and women) such as Arundhati Roy, Anita Nair, Namita Gokhale, Gita Mehta, Allan Sealy, Shashi Tharoor, Upamanyu Chatterjee, Jhumpa Lahiri and so on. The contribution of these novelists to the world of Indian English fiction in the post-independence period is also equally noteworthy.

Check Your Progress:

1. Discuss the progressive stages in the development of the Indo-anglian novel.
2. Define the 'new' elements in Indo-Anglian fiction after 1947.
3. Discuss the contribution of the women novelists to the field of Indian English fiction in the post-independence period. Highlight their main concerns.

3.6 Indian English Drama in the Post-Independence Period

Indian English drama began with the appearance of Krishna Mohan Banerji's *The Persecuted or Dramatic Scenes Illustrative of the Present State of Hindu Society* in 1831. The growing interest abroad in Indian English literature led to some works by Asif Currimbhoy, Partap Sharma, and Gurcharan Das which were successfully staged in Europe and the U.S. The tradition of poetic drama of the Tagore-Aurobindo-Kailasam school continued with variations brought in by Manjeri Isvaran, G.V. Desani and Lakhan Deb. Nissim Ezekiel, Girish Karnad, Gieve Patel, Mahesh Dattani, Manjula Padmanabhan are some of the leading figures of Indian English drama.

Girish Karnad (1938-2019), an actor, a film producer and a director, is one of the most prolific writers of Indian English drama. Being associated with the "Theatre of Roots" movement, Karnad has made a concentrated effort to go back to the Indian tradition and recreate it in the contemporary context. *Tughlaq* (1972) and *Hayavadana* (1975) are two plays by him

written in the early part of his career. His play, *Hayavadana*, is a bold experiment in the use of folk motifs. *Naga-Mandala* (1990), *Tale-Danda* (1993) and the *Fire and the Rain* (1998) are three other plays translated by the playwrights himself into English. In *Naga-Mandala*, the playwright depicts the story of Rani who suffers from isolation, loneliness in the company of her husband Appanna who neglects her and locks her up in the house. In *Tale-Danda*, Karnad deals with the crisis in the life Basavanna, the great social reformer of the 12th century Karnataka. In *The Fire and the Rain*, the novelist draws upon a story from the *Mahavarata*. The 'Fire' in the title of the play is suggestive of lust, anger, vengeance, envy, violence etc. while the 'rain' symbolizes self-sacrifice, compassion, divine grace, forgiveness, etc.

Mahesh Dattani is the first Indian playwright to win the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award in 1998 for his *Final Solutions and Other Plays*. Like Karnad, he is also a director and a filmmaker. He is also the founder of *Playpen*, a performing arts group dedicated to promoting plays written originally in English and translations from regional languages into English. *Final Solution and Other Plays* include four full-length plays, namely, *Where There's A Will*, *Dance like a Man*, *Bravely Fought the Queen* and *Final Solutions*. The Indian joint-family and its impact on the individual, the sad plight of woman in Indian society, homosexuality, communalism, conflict between tradition and modernity, child's sexual abuse, incest, are some of the themes handled by him. His plays reveal his preoccupation with social and political realities in contemporary India. *Seven Steps around the Fire* and *Thirty Days in September* are two other plays written by him.

The two plays by Dina Mehta, namely, *Brides are not for Burning* (1993) and *Getting Away with Murder* (2000) also deal with the plight of women in contemporary Indian society. Apart from the playwrights discussed above there are many other play wrights like Uma Paramer Waran, Poile Sengupta, Gieve Patel, etc., whose contribution to the growth of Indian English drama is also significant.

Check Your Progress:

1. Analyse the line of growth of Indian English drama and try to account for its impeded development.
2. Discuss Karnad's use of 'Myth' and 'History' in his plays taking into consideration its relevance in the contemporary content.
3. How do the contemporary Indian English playwrights react to the plight of women in Indian society?

3.7 Indian English Prose in the post-Independence Period

Indian English prose in the pre-independence period was essentially political in character but with the attainment of Independence a fresh thinking developed covering many areas. A large number of autobiographies, biographies, historical and religious writings and travelogue appeared written by bureaucrats and other public servants.

One of the eminent writers of Indian English prose in the post-independence period is Nirad C Choudhury. He has written almost ten books, all of which have received critical attention and appreciation from the reader. *Defence of India or Nationalization of Indian Army* (1935) was his first literary effort which is a study of military organization in British India. *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* (1951) is one of his best books revealing the basic ideas that have shaped his individualistic world-view. The book gives an account of Chaudhuri's childhood and student days till 1921. His other book, *Thy Hand! Great Anarch* (1987) is an account of the decline and end of British rule in India. His '*A Passage to England* (1959) was the product of his short visit to England in 1955. *The Continent of Circe: An Essay on the People of India* (1966), *Culture in the Vanity Bag* (1976) are some other non-fictional prose works produced by Chaudhuri. His biography of Max Muller, *Scholar Extraordinary: The Life of Friedrich Max Muller* (1974) won Sahitya Akademi Award in 1975. This was his first attempt at biographical writing. The style of his prose is almost Victorian and he uses quotations in French, Latin, etc., in his work. However, his prose-writings reveal his wide reading and knowledge.

Autobiography – Apart from *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*, a number of auto-biographies have been published during this period. R.K. Narayan, of the members of the ‘big three’ wrote *My Days* (1975) and *My Dateless Diary* (1960). Mulk Raj Anand’s *Pilalisahib : The Story of a childhood under the Raj* (1985) was published as the first part of an autobiographical series, although no subsequent volume has come out yet. Ruskin Bond’s *Scenes from a writer’s life: A memoir* (1977) and *The Lamp is lit: Leaves from a Journal* (1998) are two autobiographical works written in the same lucid style as his short stories. Dom Moraes, the poet, has published two autobiographical works namely *Never at Home* (1992) and *My Son’s Father* (1971). P. Lal, best known for his poetic translations of the Sanskrit classics, has published his autobiographical book *Lessons* in 1991. Vijayalakshmi Pandit, the sister of Jawaharlal Nehru, published her autobiography entitled *The Scope of Happiness: A personal Memoir* in 1979. Manjula Padmanabhan, the contemporary Indian English playwright, has published *Getting There* in 2000 which is a semi-autobiographical work. Shobha De narrates some incidents from her personal life in *Selective Memory: Stories from My Life* (1998). Apart from those writers mentioned above, there are many autobiographical works produced by numerous persons of different fields.

Biography - Numerous biographical works have been produced in the post-independence period. Among them S. Gopal’s *Jawaharlal Nehru* (Vol. I & II) won the Sahitya Academy Award in 1976. *Radhakrishna : A Biography* is another remarkable work by him which was published in 1989. Another eminent biographer of this period is Rajmohan Gandhi. His biographical writings include *Rajaji : A Life* (1997), *Patel : A Life* (1990), *The Good Boatman : A Portrait of Gandhi* (1995), *Eight Lives : A Study of Hindu Muslim Encounter* (1986) etc.

Raja Rao has published a biography named *The Great Indian Way : A life of Mahatma Gandhi* (1998). Dom Moraes has written *Mrs. Gandhi* (1980) on Indira Gandhi with a beautiful narrative style. The industrialist

Jamnalal Bajaj is the subject-matter of Mulk Raj Anand's *Homage to Jamnalal : A Pictorial Biography* (1989). Ved Mehta's *Mahatma Gandhi and His Apostles* (1978), Manohar Malgonkar's *The Man who killed Gandhi* (1978), K.R. Srinivas Iyengar's *Sri Aurobindo : A Biography and a History* (2 vol.s, 1972), and *On the Mother* (1978), Padmini Sen-Gupta's *Sarojini Naidu* (1965), are some other notable biographical works produced after independence.

Travel-writing - Apart from the biographical and autobiographical works, letters, travel literature, personal essays, religious and philosophical writings and history criticism contribute to the world of Indian English prose. Among letters, Nehru's *Letters from a Father to a Daughter*, Anand's *Old Myth and New Myth: Letters from Mulk Raj Anand to KVS Murti* (1991) and *Anand to Atma: Letters of Mulk Raj Anand to Atma Ram* (1994), Shobha De's *Speed Post : Letters to My Children About Living, Loving, Caring and Coping with the World* (1999) are some of the notable literary works of this period.

The significant part of travel-literature in the post-independence period consists of the contribution made by eminent novelists like Vikram Seth, Salman Rushdie, Allan Sealy and Amitav Ghosh. Seth's *From Heaven Lake : Travels through Sinkiang and Tibet* (1983), Rushdie's *The Jaguar Smile : A Nicaraguan Journey* (1986), Allan Sealy's *From Yukon to Yucatan : A Western Journey* (1994) and Amitav Ghosh's *Dancing in Cambodia, at Large in Burma* (1998) are some of the outstanding creations in the field of travel writing. The personal essay is a very popular form of prose writing which is generally published in newspapers and journals. The eminent novelist, R.K. Narayan has produced many personal essays which reveal his keen observation of life in Indian society. In the field of religious and philosophical prose, the most remarkable contribution is made by J. Krishnamurti, one of the greatest philosophical minds of the 20th century. His philosophical writings include – *The First and Last Freedom* (1954), *Freedom from the known* (1969), *Life Ahead* (1963) among others.

Check Your Progress:

1. Discuss the contribution of Nirad C. Chaudhury to Indian English prose in the post-independence period.
2. What are the various forms of prose writing that have achieved popularity in the post-independence period? Elaborate.

3.8 The Indian English Short Story in the Post-Independence Period

The writing of the short story in the post-independence has continued to be a by-product of novel writing in Indian English literature from its beginnings. One of the outstanding figures of this genre is B. Bhattacharya who has published two collections of short stories namely *Indian Cavalcade* (1948) and *Steel Hawk* (1968). Khushwant Singh is the author of four volumes of short stories namely *The Mark of Vishnu and Other Stories* (1957), *A Bride for the Sahib and Other Stories* (1967) and *Black Jasmine* (1971). Manohar Malgonkar has produced many volumes of short story which include *A Toast in Warm Wine* (1977), *Four Graves and Other Stories* (1990). Ruskin Bond has published a number of short-story collections including *Neighbour's wife and other Stories* (1966), *My First Love and Other Stories* (1968), *The Maneater of Manjari* (1972) and so on. K.N. Daruwalla, the poet, has published his first volume of short stories, namely, *The Sword and the Abyss* in 1979. Seventeen years later he has published another volume, namely, *The Minister for Permanent unrest and other stories* (1996). Jayanta Mahapatra has published his first collection of short stories, namely, *The Green Gardener and Other Stories* in 1997. Rohinton Mistry's *Tales from Firozsha* (1987) is one of the most remarkable short-story collections of recent times.

Among the women short story writers of the older generation, Ruth Praver Jhabvala and Anita Desai are the only major ones to publish their short stories in book form. Jhabvala's short-story volumes include *Like Birds, Like Fishes and Other stories* (1964), *A Stronger Climate* (1969), *An Experience of India* (1972) and so on. Anita Desai's first volume of short stories is *Games at Twilight and other Stories* (1978) which

achieved a great success. She has published her second volume entitled *Diamond Dust* in 2000. Shashi Deshpande's short-story collections include *The Legacy and other Stories* (1971), *The Miracle and other Stories* (1986), *It was the Nightingale* (1986), *The Intrusion and Other Stories* (1993). Dina Mehta's short story collections include *The Other woman and Other Stories* (1981) and *Miss Menon did not Believe in Magic and Other Stories* (1994).

Check Your Progress:

1. Consider the growth of short story in the postindependence period with special reference to the works of its major practitioners.
2. 'Plight of woman in Indian society' is one of the major concerns of Shashi Deshpande and Dina Mehta's short stories. Discuss.

3.9 Major Literary and Intellectual Movements of the Period

Let us discuss some major literary and intellectual movements of the era:

- **Post-colonial Literary Movement:**

The post-colonial literary movement in India was a significant literary phenomenon that emerged in the mid twentieth century, particularly in the aftermath of India's independence in 1947. The movement was characterized by its emphasis on the experiences and struggles of Indians during and after the colonial period as writers examined the impact of colonialism on Indian society, culture, and politics through their works. The post-colonial Indian writers challenged the dominant colonial discourse, which had perpetuated negative stereotypes and reinforced the notion of Indian inferiority, while exploring the complexities of Indian nationalism and identity, grappling with issues of culture, history, and nationality. The writers addressed issues of social injustice, inequality, and discrimination as they sought to represent the experiences and perspectives of marginalized communities, including women, Dalits, and tribal groups. They mainly explored the struggle for ethnic,

cultural, and political autonomy and independence, and dealt with themes of cultural exchange, diversity, and hybridity. They sought to examine the lasting effect of British rule on Indian society, culture, and psyche, including the legacy of colonialism, imperialism, and cultural hegemony, along with the experiences of resistance, rebellion, and nation-building. The writers experimented with form, content, and narrative structures, with a unique blend of traditional and modern techniques to create a distinct Indian literary voice. Major writers of the period include Salman Rushdie, R.K. Narayan, Amitav Ghosh, and Arundhati Roy, among others. Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) is a seminal work of post-colonial Indian literature. R.K. Narayan's *The Guide* (1958) and *The Man-eater of Malgudi* (1961) offers nuanced portrayal of Indian life and culture. Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* (1988) and *The Glass Palace* (2000) explore the complexities of Indian history, culture, and identity. Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) is a powerful exploration of Indian society, politics, and culture. The post-colonial literary movement in India has had a profound impact on Indian literature and culture, shaping the nation's literary voice and influencing generations of writers.

- **Little Magazine Movement:**

The Little Magazine Movement, which emerged in the 1950s and 1960s, spanned across various parts of India and played a pivotal role in shaping Indian literature. The movement was characterized by its non-commercial approach, predominantly emphasizing on editorial independence and the liberty to commit to avant-garde and experimental literature. It was a revolutionary literary phenomenon, marked by a surge in experimental writing and non-conformist ideas. It provided a vital space for the marginalized voices, including those of women, Dalits, and other subjugated communities, as it challenged mainstream narratives, thus playing a significant role in shaping India's literary landscape. The movement's politics revolved around caste and class analysis, focusing on issues that were hardly addressed or represented in mainstream literature. The movement manifested in several Indian languages, including Bengali, Tamil, Marathi, Hindi, Malayalam, Gujarati, and others. In Bengal, the Little Magazine movement had a

significant impact, with magazines like *Kallol* (1923) and *Krittibas* (1953), playing crucial role in shaping Bengali literature. In Maharashtra, the movement dominated Marathi literature between 1955 to 1975, with magazines like *Shabda*, *Aso*, *Vacha*, *Bharud*, *Lru*, and *Rucha*, promoting modernism and Dalit movement. It played a crucial role in cultivating literary and artistic taste, fostering literary creativity and intellectual discourse. The movement has also been instrumental in promoting Indian writing in English, providing a platform for a new and experimental range of themes, styles, and genres for writers across the country.

- **Dalit Literary Movement:**

The Dalit literary movement has played a crucial role in providing voice to the marginalized, and challenging dominant narratives. The movement originated in 1960s in Maharashtra, with the establishment of the Maharashtra Dalit Sahitya Sangh, as a response to the historical oppression and discrimination faced by the Dalit community. The Dalit literary movement has its roots in the nineteenth century reformist campaigns and the writings of saint-poets, which laid the groundwork for the emergence of Dalit consciousness. The movement advocated for human dignity, agency, and equality, seeking to challenge and dismantle the entrenched caste-based hierarchies in Indian society. It is characterized by its emphasis on the intersectionality of castes, systematic discrimination, and social inequality, highlighting the ways in which these structures perpetuate the marginalization and exclusion of Dalit communities. The influence of B. R. Ambedkar and Jyotibai Phule was significant in shaping the movement's ideology. Though of Marathi origin, the literary movement spread to other Indian languages, including Hindi, Kannada, Telegu, Malayalam, as well as English writings and translations, thus facilitating a broader representation of Dalit experiences and perspectives, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of the complexities of caste-based oppression. The movement provided a powerful platform for Dalit voices to be heard as well as a space for Dalit writers to express their experiences, emotions, and struggles. The movement challenged the hegemony of upper-caste narratives and dominant discourses in Indian society and literature. The movement critiques the ways in which dominant

narratives perpetuates the marginalization and exclusion of Dalit communities, advocating for a more inclusive representation of Dalit experiences and perspectives. The early pioneers of Marathi Dalit writings laid the foundation of the movement. Prominent Dalit writers like Baburao Bagul, Bandhu Madhav, Shankarao Kharat, Namdeo Dhasal, and Arjun Dangle made significant contributions in voicing out the experiences and struggles of the Dalit community. Their works, often autobiographical and poetic, explored themes of caste oppression, social discrimination, and the struggle for identity and equality. Dhasal's collection, *Golpitha* (1972), is considered a landmark work in Dalit literature. There exists a horde of Dalit literature in English as well as translations from various Indian languages into English, thus adding to the rich Indian English literary tapestry. Bama's *Kurukku* (1992), a Tamil Dalit woman's autobiography, written in English is a seminal work of the period. Namdeo Dhasal's *Poisoned Bread: Translations from Modern Marathi Dalit Literature* (1992), a poetry collection, is a prominent translated work of Indian English literature of the era.

- **Hungry Generation Movement:**

The Hungry Generation (also known as Hungryalists) was a pioneering Indian literary movement that emerged in Kolkata in the early 1960s. The movement was led by Malay Roychaudhary, Shakti Chattopadhyay, Samir Roychaudhary, and Debi Roy (also known as Haradhon Dhara), but also included several other notable poets and artists like Binoy Majumdar, Utpal Kumar Basu, Falguni Roy and Rabindra Guha, among others who contributed to the movement's diversity and creativity. This avant-garde movement sought to challenge traditional literary norms and colonial canons, promoting a new perspective of Indian literature. The movement was born out of the tumultuous socio-cultural landscape of post-colonial India, driven by a desire to disrupt established literary conventions and create a new avant-garde aesthetic that was unapologetically Indian. The early 1960s were marked by a sense of disillusionment and discontent among young Bengali as well as other Indian writers who felt stifled by the conventional literary establishment and its adherence to colonial-era norms. This sentiment was echoed in the movement's manifesto which called for a radical break from the past and the creation of a new experimental literature that reflected the

complexities of modern Indian life. The Hungryalists were deeply influenced by Oswald Spengler's "The Decline of the West", a philosophical treatise that critiqued Western civilization. The movement's leaders also drew inspiration from movements like Surrealism and Beat poetry, as well as from indigenous folk traditions and oral story-telling practices. Furthermore, they also established connection with prominent literary figures like Allen Ginsberg, Octavio Paz, and Ernesto Cardenal, who befriended Malay Roychaudhary and promoted his works globally. Malay Roychaudhary's poems were also translated and published by Lawrence Ferlinghetti, a prominent American poet and publisher, earning him international recognition. The Hungryalists' literary output was characterized by its experimentation with form, language, and narrative structure. Their poetry and prose work often featured fragmented, stream-of-consciousness narratives, imbued with elements of folklore, mythology, and popular culture. The Hungry Generation movement was a groundbreaking literary phenomenon whose emphasis on experimentation, non-conformity, avant-garde aesthetics, and post-colonial perspectives has had a lasting impact on Indian literature and culture, and its influence can still be witnessed in contemporary literary and artistic movements.

3.10 Summing Up

You have, by now, obtained a fair idea of the main categories of Indian Writing in English. You have surely realised that the field is complex and fraught with issues related to the political history of the English language and the status of the Indian writer both during the colonial situation as well as after 1947. Indian English literature in the post-independence period is characterized by a diverse range of voices, themes, genres, and narrative styles. This period saw the emergence of a new generation of Indian writers in English, who explored the complexities of Indian identity, culture, and nationhood. Indian English literature in the post-independence period has had a significant impact on the literary landscape as it challenged dominant narratives and discourses, offering alternative perspectives as well as a powerful reflection of Indian experiences, influencing global literary trends and contributing to the growth of postcolonial literature and theory.

3.11 References and Suggested Readings

- M.K.Naik – *A History of Indian English Literature*, SahityaAkademi
- K.R.SrinivasAiyengar – *Indian Writing in English*, Sterling Publishers, Delhi
- Gauri Viswanathan – *Masks of Conquest*, Oxford India Paperbacks, Delhi
- Meenakshi Mukherjee – *The Twice Born Fiction: Themes and Techniques of the Indian Novel in English*, Pencraft International, Delhi
- Meenakshi Mukherjee – *The Perishable Empire: Essays on Indian Writing in English*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi

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Unit- 4

Ashish Nandy: The Uncolonized Mind: A Post-Colonial View of India and the West

Unit Structure:

- 4.1 Objectives
- 4.2 Introduction
- 4.3 Reading the Essay
 - 4.3.1 Section I
 - 4.3.2 Section II
 - 4.3.3 Section III
 - 4.3.4 Section IV
 - 4.3.5 Section V
 - 4.3.6 Section VI
- 4.4 Summing Up
- 4.5 References and Suggested Reading

4.1 Objectives

After going through this unit, the learner will be able to—

- *identify* the main theme of the text;
- *understand* Nandy's perspective on the psychological effect of colonialism;
- *write* on the basic arguments offered by the author;
- *evaluate* the contrast in the lives of Rudyard Kipling and Sri Aurobindo in the light of perspectives offered in the essay;
- *assess* the significance of Mahatma Gandhi in the postcolonial thinking.

4.2 Introduction

Ashish Nandy, the author of the essay *The Uncolonized Mind*, is a distinguished Indian political psychologist, social theorist, and cultural critic, whose work spans across Asia and the Global South. Born in 1937 in Bhagalpur, Bihar, Nandy witnessed the traumatic events of the Partition of India at the age of ten—a formative experience that profoundly shaped his understanding of political violence, identity, and the human psyche. His early academic training was in psychology, but it was during his association with the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) in New Delhi that he began to explore clinical psychology more deeply, eventually integrating it with sociological inquiry.

Nandy's intellectual contribution lies in his unique approach to the analysis of socio-political phenomena. By blending the insights of clinical psychology with the frameworks of sociology and cultural studies, he developed a distinct method for addressing complex issues such as colonialism, nationalism, identity, and postcolonial consciousness. What sets Nandy apart is his insistence on viewing political and cultural problems not as abstract or detached entities but as deeply intertwined with the personal realm of human experience. He often identifies the site where personal traumas and public histories intersect, allowing for a more nuanced and empathetic exploration of political realities.

In his analyses, Nandy applies the tools of clinical psychology—traditionally used to understand individual mental health—to examine collective experiences and societal pathologies, especially those rooted in the colonial encounter and its aftermath. His work foregrounds the psychological damage inflicted by colonialism, not only on the colonized but also on the colonizers, and advocates for a process of mental and cultural decolonization. A staunch proponent of non-violence and pluralism, Nandy critiques both authoritarianism and the hegemonic imposition of Western modernity, urging instead for the reclamation of indigenous knowledge systems and alternative ways of being.

Recipient of several prestigious accolades, including the Fukuoka Asian Culture Prize, Ashish Nandy's scholarship remains vital to contemporary

debates on postcolonial identity, cultural resistance, and the politics of knowledge. His essay “The Uncolonized Mind” exemplifies these concerns, offering a compelling critique of the internalization of colonial values and exploring the potential for mental liberation in postcolonial societies.

What follows is a detailed analysis of Nandy’s essay. The essay is part of his book *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism*.

Stop to Consider:

Here is a list of books edited and/or edited by Ashish Nandy:

- *Alternative Sciences: Creativity and Authenticity in Two Indian Scientists*
- *At the Edge of Psychology: Essays on Politics and Culture*
- *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism.*
- *Traditions, Tyranny and Utopias: Essays in the politics of Awareness*
- *Science, Hegemony and Violence: Requiem for Modernity*
- *The Tao of Cricket: On Games of Destiny and Destiny of Games*
- *The Blind Eye: 500 years of Christopher Columbus* (Co-author)
- *The illegitimacy of Nationalism: Rabindranath Tagore and the Politics of Self*
- *The Savage Freud and other Essays in Possible and Retrievable Selves*
- *Creating a Nationality: The Ram-janmabhumi Movement and Fear of the Self* (Co-author)
- *The secret Politics of Our Desires: Innocence, Culpability and popular Cinema* (Editor)

- *An Ambiguous Journey to the City: The Village and Other Odd Ruins of the Self in the Indian Imagination*
- *Time Warps: The insistent Politics of Silent and Evasive pasts*
- *The Romance of the State and the Fate of Dissent in the Tropics*
- *The Future of Knowledge and Culture: A Twenty-first Century Dictionary* (Co-editor.)

SAQ:

Formulate your idea of Ashish Nandy as a postcolonial thinker. (50 words)

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4.3 Reading the Essay

4.3.1 Section I

In the essay “The Uncolonised Mind: A Postcolonial View of India and the West”, Ashish Nandy examines the psychological and cultural impact of colonialism by analyzing the lives and writings of two emblematic figures—Rudyard Kipling and Sri Aurobindo. Nandy’s thesis is on how colonialism shaped, and often distorted, the inner worlds of both the coloniser and the colonised.

Born and brought up in India, experiencing its people, culture, and landscape through the wonder-filled eyes of a child, Kipling later viewed India as something of an idyll, and its peasants as ‘children’. At the age of six, he was sent back to England for education and further upbringing. But in England, he faced restrictions, bullying, persecution, and was treated like a stranger, in stark contrast to his life in India. At school in England, military and masculine virtues were appreciated, while he was sedentary, and loved art and the life of the mind. His alien-looking, effeminate, ‘non-white’ appearance pushed him to a condition of marginality there. Thus, he was taught to disown his Indianness and embrace Britishness.

Nandy understands this peculiar psychological and cultural condition of Kipling in the light of psychoanalysis. Identification with the aggressor is a condition of the subject who internalizes the aggressor's values and learns to cope with the fear and anxiety arising from the threats posed by the aggressor. Traits of himself—effeminate, weak, rebellious, aversion to utilitarian values—thus became qualities he would come to despise in others. He developed antithetical traits within himself—Indian and British—and internalized the binaries of inferior Indian and superior British. He now had no sympathies for the victims of colonialism, and therefore for a past version of his self too. The fallout of this splitting of the self was enormous.

Between the two identities—westernised Indian and Indianised Westerner—the common element was violence. British violence was direct and driven by power, and linked to the project of colonialism. The violence of the subjugated Indians, on the other hand, was deemed effeminate, an act of desperation and cowardice.

This moral blindness—lack of sympathy with the victims—helped Kipling to refuse to look within, forcing him to avoid deep conflict. All his life, as Nandy contends, Kipling repressed his other, more creative and softer self, avoiding self-hatred. In this transfigured self, he began to respect the more masculine, military past of India—a self of India more in sync with the West. Thus, from being born and brought up in the more joyful, serene atmosphere of India, his transportation to England forced him to transform into a different self that celebrates values of martial arts, violence, soldiery, and self-righteousness.

4.3.2 Section II:

Nandy does not focus on the trajectory of Kipling's life merely out of biographical interest; rather, he presents a thesis about the psychological impact of colonialism through the biographical account of the British colonial author, thereby illuminating a crucial dimension of the historical process of colonialism. Kipling finds himself caught in a dilemma: whether to identify as Indian or Western. This *either-or* situation is not a self-induced existential crisis, but a historically imposed choice. Kipling ultimately chooses to identify

with the West and the coloniser, which necessarily entails being antithetical to Indian identity.

In other words, colonialism compels white individuals involved in the imperial machinery to become ‘typical men of the West’, prompting them to define the West psychologically in opposition to the ‘non-West’. Kipling, now a non-Easterner, retains the privilege to explore the East—but only as a negative mirror of the West. The *new Orient* constructed in Western discourse—of which Edward Said’s *Orientalism* is a landmark critique—is a negation of the Orient that had once earned a degree of respect from medieval Europe. Colonialism, rooted in power, governance, and economic exploitation, required the construction of the Orient as the Other—the inferior and irrational counterpart to the West.

At the same time, colonialism also produced an Indian self-image that was, in essence, a Western construction. The stereotypes upon which the West’s vision of the non-West rests—effeminacy, weakness, religiosity, superstition, and irrationality—were internalised by the colonised. Thus, colonialism did not merely establish external dominance, but universalised these cultural stereotypes among both the coloniser and the colonised, shaping the very framework within which anti-colonial resistance would later emerge.

Stop to Consider:

For instance, many anti-colonial struggles are grounded in the idea of India as the *non-West*. This *non-West* is seen as good, pristine, and deserving of esteem. However, in European discourse, the *non-West* often connotes backwardness or inferiority. Ironically, the very category of the *non-West* is constructed and validated through Western discourses. It thus provides a framework—shaped by the West—within which Indians have come to articulate their own identity and resistance.

When the idea of being *non-Western* becomes a political stance, it prompts the Indian subject to suppress those elements of their culture that resonate

with the West, and instead emphasise antiquarian, pre-modern, or mystical aspects that appear to set them apart. Ironically, in striving to be the *antithesis* of the West, the Indian self becomes even more deeply entangled with Western categories of identity and difference. Colonialism thus limits the cultural options available to the colonised and confines their self-expression within a binary defined by the West.

Yet, while these grand polarities—India and the West—are being examined, Nandy reminds us of the internal cultural polarities that exist within each. That is why he asserts, “*If there is another India, there is also another West.*” Nandy argues that both cultures contain Apollonian (rational, ordered) and Dionysian (emotive, spontaneous) dimensions. However, while the West negotiates its internal contradictions largely without reference to the East, in the East, these contradictions are experienced **in relation to the West**. The West has not historically required the East in forming its self-image, but because of colonialism, the West has become a potent and inescapable force in shaping the Indian mind.

Stop to Consider:

The Apollonian and the Dionysian: The Apollonian dimension of culture represents reason, logic, order, civilization, structure, and harmony, while the Dionysian evokes passion, spontaneity, emotion, and creativity. An overemphasis on the Apollonian is characteristic of modern Western technocratic societies. In contrast, in colonised societies, elements such as myth, emotion, spontaneity, mysticism, and other non-rational tendencies are integral features of culture.

As a result, in modern Indian culture, certain Western values exist as inherently meaningful, not merely as external impositions. To be Indian, therefore, is also—inevitably—to be partially Western. The reverse, however, does not hold true. In this broader context of asymmetrical cultural conditioning and fractured selfhood, Nandy reads Kipling’s dilemma as emblematic of the pressures faced by those caught between imposed and

inherited identities, between the coloniser's role and the colonised landscape of memory.

4.3.3 Section III

As India remained separated and imagined as an unknown 'Other' by the West, it became a symbolic Other—a canvas onto which the West could project its own repressed fantasies and anxieties. Therefore, all Western interpretations of India are, in a sense, autobiographical, revealing more about the interpreter than about India itself. For instance, when a Western writer demonizes India, they are often expressing their own inner fears and insecurities. A section of Indians who resorted to military means to emancipate the country from colonial rule unwittingly mirrored this projective tendency of the Kiplings, adopting a Western model of power and masculinity. Another section, in contrast, asserted spiritualism as the true essence of Indianness, opposing the West with what they saw as India's superior inner life. In this way, colonial intervention split open the Indian consciousness, creating a division between materialist and spiritualist frameworks of identity.

Nandy argues that empirical evidence does not support the dominance of either model. Instead, both materialism and spiritualism coexist in Indian life as part of the same cultural cycle. The idea of a wholly spiritual India versus a wholly materialist India is a false binary, yet it is reinforced by Indian scholars on both sides of the divide—who often continue to use Western categories to articulate their views.

In reality, diverse cultures and ideologies coexist and contend within a single life-cycle in India, however strange that may appear to the Western analyst. To highlight the material realities of India does not require one to dismiss Indian spiritualism as false—and vice versa.

These contrary visions of India are echoed both in the modern spiritual gurus who depend on consumerism and the global market, and in figures like V. S. Naipaul and Nirad C. Chaudhuri, who harshly critique India for failing to become either a true replica or a worthy counterpoint to the West.

Nandy's project is not to defend some 'authentic' India, but to understand the historical conditioning and cultural complexities produced by colonialism.

India, like any other country, has striven to build a civilised society and has had to negotiate with more powerful nations on multiple fronts. However, the restricted and binary framework of colonial thought—which sees cultures only in oppositional terms such as modern/traditional or rational/mystical—is far too narrow to capture the real conditions of India’s cultural existence.

4.3.4 Section IV

Nandy focuses now on the life of Sri Aurobindo—an Indian philosopher, poet, and spiritual leader who played a significant role in the Indian independence movement and in the development of Indian philosophy and spirituality. In fact, the author illustrates the ideological difference between Kipling and Aurobindo in the context of their varying relationships to colonialism. Kipling, born and brought up in India, moved to England and later disowned India, identifying himself with the West. Aurobindo Ghosh spent fourteen years in England, and did not have to disown the West from his ideological location in India. Western culture remained with him as a means of creative self-expression. His vision of Indian civilization had a place for the West. Moreover, he did not replicate the West–non-West binary through a simple reversal. He could not see Western people as mere objects.

Nandy offers an even more personal and intimate account of the effect of Aurobindo’s encounter with the West. In the westernised convent at Darjeeling, he felt lonely among his white co-students and oppressed by the hegemony of the English language. Then in London, he was debarred from mingling with Indians. On the constructive side, he learned European languages and imbibed classical traditions. Poverty and financial difficulties added to his misery, leading to depression. Further, the idealistic vision of England under these circumstances turned murkier. The result was his deliberate withdrawal from academic accomplishments. His break with the West was marked most clearly by his act of dropping his British middle name, “Ackroyd.”

As he turned quieter in his personal life, he learned Bengali, Gujarati, and Marathi, and began to explore spiritualism. His marriage did not bring him back to earthly domesticity, and he joined the nationalist movement, where he viewed India as a powerful mother being oppressed by the West. During his tenure in jail, he explored spirituality further and began to have mystic visions. After his acquittal in 1909, facing the threat of re-arrest, he moved to Pondicherry to practise asceticism, penance, and yoga with a group of his followers.

Nandy contends that the West intervened in Aurobindo's life further when a woman named Mira Paul Richard joined him, eventually making him more otherworldly and secluded, while imposing formal discipline and hierarchy on the group. As his seclusion deepened, her control became tighter. Under her dispensation, Aurobindo's imaginative self and open-mindedness eroded, while she remained more this-worldly. Aurobindo's ashram turned more politically conservative and highly status-conscious.

Here Nandy departs from what would be a conventional reading of Aurobindo's relationship with Mira Paul Richard—a person transformed through a domineering woman's influence. Nandy argues that Aurobindo's relationship with the Mother (as Mira was called, Shree Ma) symbolised the relationship of the emancipated East with the non-oppressive West. Here, his East is incomplete without the Mother's West, and her West was partial without his East. The summary of his complicated relationship with the West, as evidenced by the biographical account, is this: from love and proximity, he was separated by the West, and now a part of the West joins him. It is as if he discovered the East by surrendering himself to the Mother in the West. After the disjunctions, loneliness, and emptiness that the West inflicted on him, Aurobindo re-aligns with the West to find protection against these.

4.3.5 Section V

In the face of the imperialist onslaught—especially the pain caused by the destruction of cultural selfhood—Aurobindo found mysticism to be his only viable refuge. For a long time, he managed to keep his mysticism both non-

conformist and humane. Through this secluded spiritualism, he strove to protect values that were negated by colonial reason. At this point, Nandy raises an important question: did Aurobindo symbolize a larger societal suffering?

Through mysticism, Aurobindo articulated a response to the West that transcended the binary oppositions offered by Western culture. He resisted the stereotype that rationality and spirituality are mutually exclusive. Colonialism imposed rigid binaries—such as male/female, science/tradition, and mind/body—on the colonized. Aurobindo's vision challenges these, being shaped by the antithesis between an exclusive part and an inclusive whole. He envisioned an integrated identity—recognizing similarities with aspects of the colonizer's culture, while protecting the inner self from colonial intrusion. The split created by colonialism is, in an odd way, integrated into a whole in Aurobindo's thought.

This is not about asserting the superiority of Indian culture over the West or vice versa. Such relativistic claims still operate within the power-laden categories established by colonialism. Declaring Indian culture as superior merely reaffirms the binary of materialism vs. spiritualism—ultimately a colonial construct.

Gandhi, however, offered a different critique of the West. He judged colonialism using Christian ethical standards and critiqued it on both ethical and rational grounds. In doing so, he exposed its internal contradictions and illegitimacy. Gandhi's critique attacked colonialism using its own moral yardstick, unlike other anti-colonial thinkers who argued that colonialism's historical role in progress might justify its evils. Such arguments—whether about cultural superiority or capitalism as a vehicle of progress—ultimately reinforced the West's cultural dominance. Gandhi instead offered a non-modern, alternative reading of the West.

Nandy favors this inclusive, unselfconscious Indian culture over the essentialist articulations of Indianness that define it in opposition to the West. He argues that the traditional notion of Hindu identity was inclusive and that the modern,

rigid concept of the Hindu emerged only during colonial religious reforms. Indian identity, he claims, was historically fluid and compromising—not rigid or community-bound. This liminality is key. As Nandy writes: “The alternative to Hindu nationalism is the peculiar mix of classical and folk Hinduism, and the unselfconscious Hinduism by which most Indians, Hindu and non-Hindus, live” (104).

Nandy is not opposed to recognizing the uniqueness of Indian culture. However, he insists that the aggressive West sometimes exists within us too, while the self-declared ‘native’ is also often a construct shaped by external forces. What makes Indian culture unique, he suggests, is its ability to live with ambiguity—a powerful defense against cultural invasion.

Stop to Consider:

Cultural invasion requires us to view ourselves through rigid binary categories imposed by the West. But if we embrace ambiguity, these binaries lose their power to shape our perceptions.

Why, then, is nurturing ambiguity important in a context where identity is politically crucial in postcolonial society? Because the fluidity of identity becomes a mode of survival. It helps resist the cultural hegemony of the West while ensuring our own form of progress. Whether we assert our identity against the hostile ‘Other’ or assimilate completely into it, we still accept the West’s terms. Culture, however, does not have fixed boundaries.

Nandy adds that in a moment of crisis—such as forced conversion—a Brahmin might adopt a new religion under the principle of *apadharma* (duties in times of crisis), thereby splitting the self. The humiliation of conversion would be experienced as if by someone else, protecting the core self. This mimics a psychosomatic state where the immediate reality is partially suspended for the sake of survival—a form of controlled inner schism (110).

4.3.6 Section VI

In the concluding section of the essay, Nandy ties together the threads of his argument developed across the text. He observes that most discourses on the East and the West—both during colonial times and in postcolonial contexts—are structured around rigid polarities such as sane/insane, parochial/universal, and material/spiritual. His central argument is that, because people had to cope with or resist conditions of oppression, they often found themselves negotiating between the terms of these oppositions rather than fully inhabiting either side. Nandy does not reject the rational and materialist dimensions of the West only to uphold the irrational or the mythic in the East. Instead, he suggests that when colonial oppression is a lived experience—affecting both psychological and cultural survival—these binary categories begin to collapse. In such moments, victims of colonialism become dimly aware of a larger, more integrated reality that lies beyond the analytical frameworks imposed by colonial discourse.

Check Your Progress:

1. Elaborate Ashish Nandy's Assessment of Mahatma Gandhi's critique of the West. (100 words)
2. How does Nandy use the psychoanalytical framework to illustrate the psychological effect of colonialism? (100 words)
3. Do you think that Nandy elaborates an anti-colonial political ethic in this essay? Give a reasoned answer. (100 words)
4. In what context does Nandy compare and contrast the lives of the two figures—Rudyard Kipling and Aurobindo Ghosh? How does he link it to the question of the psychological effect of colonialism? (150 words)

4.4 Summing Up

In the essay "The Uncolonized Mind: A Post-Colonial View of India and the West," Ashis Nandy argues that colonialism is not merely a political or

territorial enterprise but also a psychological one. The most enduring legacy of colonialism, he contends, lies in the colonization of the mind, which continues to shape how societies think, feel, and evaluate themselves long after formal colonial rule has ended. Nandy explains how postcolonial elites often internalize colonial values, privileging Western norms over indigenous traditions, and thereby unconsciously become agents of the colonizer's worldview.

Through an analysis of the lives and writings of two emblematic figures—Rudyard Kipling and Sri Aurobindo—Nandy explores the psychological and cultural impact of colonialism on both the colonizer and the colonized. His central thesis examines how colonialism distorted the inner worlds of individuals, creating deep contradictions in their identities and worldviews.

Nandy highlights traditional and local knowledge systems as crucial sources of resistance to this internal colonization. These systems, rooted in moral and philosophical principles distinct from the West, offer alternatives to the dominance of colonial modernity. He critiques Western modernity as a culturally specific construct that falsely claims universal validity and calls for epistemological humility and the recognition of diverse rationalities grounded in other civilizations.

Figures like Gandhi are presented as exemplars of this resistance—not through overt confrontation, but through a refusal to internalize the colonial idea of progress. Gandhi's commitment to indigenous ethics and alternative visions of modernity exemplifies the possibility of decolonizing the mind.

Finally, Nandy warns that postcolonial societies risk perpetuating colonial patterns if they merely reverse the roles of colonizer and colonized without questioning the underlying value systems. He urges these societies to reclaim their own cultural resources and rethink development on their own terms, rather than continuing to imitate the West.

4.5 References and Suggested Reading

- Boni, Livio. *"Psychoanalytic Sociology and Post-Colonial Predicament: An Interview with AshisNandy."* *Breakfast with Evil: The Non-Essential AshisNandy*, edited by AshisNandy and Saccidanandan, Oxford University Press, 2021

- *Domingues, Jose Mauricio. "Ashish Nandy and the Vicissitudes of the Self: Critiques, Subjectivity and the Indian Civilization". Mana, vol. 16, no. 1, Apr. 2010, pp. 31–58.*
- *Gandhi, Leela. Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction. Allen & Unwin, 1998.*
- *Nandy, Ashish. The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism. Oxford University Press, 1983.*

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Unit- 5

Amitav Ghosh: *In an Antique Land* (Introduction)

Unit Structure:

- 5.1 Objectives
- 5.2 Introduction
- 5.3 Biography of Amitav Ghosh
- 5.4 Literary Works of Amitav Ghosh
- 5.5 Placing the work
- 5.6 Summing Up
- 5.7 References/ Suggested Reading

5.1 Objectives

This unit is an attempt to help you gain an overview of Amitav Ghosh's works, to familiarize you with certain aspects of his life and career as a writer and enable you to situate *In an Antique Land* (the novel discussed here) vis-à-vis the social conditions and times that he depicts in the novel.

This unit is designed to assist you to—

- *acquaint* yourself with the author's life and background;
- *familiarize* yourself with Ghosh's other works;
- *locate* Ghosh and his works in the gamut of Indian English literature;
- *evaluate* some critical responses towards Ghosh.

5.2 Introduction

This is the first unit of Block I which is about Amitav Ghosh's *In an Antique Land*. As you all know, Amitav Ghosh is one of those hugely acclaimed writers from the Indian subcontinent who has enriched the notion of Indian English Literature itself. In this unit, attempts have been made to acquaint you with the life-history of the writer and the works he has produced. Known

for the exploration of history and the author's contemporary era, Amitav Ghosh's *In an Antique Land* most vividly presents the condition of displaced identities. This is perhaps one of those themes that inform most of his other novels also.

5.3 Biographical Information

Amitav Ghosh is one of the most prominent voices in Indian English Literature. He is widely acclaimed in the literary world for his works of fiction, travel writing and journalism. Born in 1956 in Kolkata, Amitav Ghosh has been raised and educated at the same time in different places like Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Iran, Egypt, India and the United Kingdom. His father was in the Indian army, and this enabled Ghosh as a child to come across different cultures in diverse locales. Ghosh completed his schooling from Doon School (Dehradun) where he was a younger contemporary of Vikram Seth. After graduating from St. Stephen's College in 1976 with a B.A. degree in History, he obtained an M.A. in sociology from the University of Delhi in 1978. He went to St. Edmund Hall, Oxford, and in 1979 obtained a diploma in Social Anthropology. Ghosh also spent some time at Tunis where he learnt Arabic. He was awarded the prestigious Oxford D. Phil in Social Anthropology for his thesis on "Kinship in Relation to the Economic and Social Organization of an Egyptian Village Community" in 1981. In 1999 Ghosh joined the faculty at Queen's College in the City University of New York as Distinguished Professor in Comparative Literature. He has also been a visiting professor to the English Department of Harvard University since 2005.

Ghosh has been bestowed with accolades by readers and critics from various sectors. His works have won different literary prizes in India and abroad and is required reading at several universities. He was awarded the Prix Medicis Etranger for *The Circle of Reason* (1986), the Sahitya Akademi Award for *The Shadow Lines* (1988), the Arthur C. Clarke Prize for *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1996), the Pushcart Prize for his essay, "The March of the Novel through History: My Father's Bookcase" and the Grand

Prize for Fiction at the Frankfurt International e-book awards for *The Glass Palace*. He was awarded the Padma Shri by the Indian Government in 2007.

The preceding paragraphs give you a cursory idea regarding Ghosh's early life and his achievements as a writer. Now, in the remaining part of this section, we shall concern ourselves with his style, themes, techniques and certain issues, which occupy a place of paramount importance in his fictions. In his novels, Ghosh's prime obsession is with "history" and his endeavour in his fictions is especially to recuperate the silenced voices of those not documented in the historical records and archives. At this stage of discussion you might ask about the early influences that inculcated in Ghosh such abiding interest in history and national consciousness. To be able to answer such questions, one has to go back to his early years of childhood when he was immensely influenced by the stories of Partition, Independence and the Second World War. These stories made a profound impression on his mind and have formative influence on Ghosh, the writer. From the stories of his father which dealt mainly with the Second World War and the Indian soldiers of the British Indian army, Ghosh learnt about the many minor and failed rebellions that went unrecorded in the process of history-making. It is this aspect of historical reality that fascinated Amitav Ghosh.

We live in a world informed by history, but Ghosh as a writer is persistent in his questioning of the authenticity of documented records. Whom does history claim to represent? Who is writing that history? For whom is it written? In the process, he takes a critical stance at the knowledge and ideological systems produced by the Western world. Due to the wide spatial stretch of his novels Ghosh is able to invoke rich cultural contexts and explore the intricate cross-cultural relations across time, place, and history. One of Ghosh's persistent themes is the ephemerality of concepts of national and ethnic identity. In the novel under discussion, he uses the revealing force of memory to reconstruct the concept of freedom and its numerous connotations in the modern world. In away, the quest in this novel is universal as it examines and investigates the meaning of freedom for human beings in the present day world.

SAQ:

How does a variety of real-life experiences permeate Ghosh's writings?
(60 words)

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5.4 The Works of Ghosh

In this section, I shall acquaint you with some of the major works of Amitav Ghosh, which will give you a fair idea about his literary output and enable you identify his major themes and concerns. If we arrange his novels chronologically by the order of their publication, it will be like this: *The Circle of Reason* (1986) that comes first, followed by *The Shadow Lines* (1990), *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1996), *Countdown* (1999), *The Glass Palace* (2000) and *The Hungry Tide* (2004) and *Sea of Poppies* (2008). In addition to his works of fiction, Ghosh has also authored a travelogue entitled *Dancing in Cambodia, At Large in Burma* (1998), and his other works include *In An Antique Land* (1992), and *The Imam and the Indian* (2002) which deal with various themes such as cross-cultural matrix, literature and fundamentalism. Ghosh is presently working on a trilogy of novels and his *Sea of Poppies* is the first of the three.

I shall discuss them in brief to facilitate your understanding of Ghosh's techniques and handling of some of his recurrent themes. Ghosh's first-published novel *The Circle of Reason* uses the oral tradition of story-telling as its narrative device. Here a linear plot-structure is abandoned and the time-sequence is shuffled back and forth that subtly depicts the connections between the present and the past. The narrative is woven with stories of the different characters and each story unfolds a distinct episode that forwards the plot movement in the novel. *The Circle of Reason* depicts Ghosh's first attempt at exploring the complications of migrancy and displaced identities-a theme which is carried over to his next novel *The Shadow Lines*. Both the novels offer a gripping critique of history, historiography, nationalism and political freedom by interrogating the positions and experiences of migrant

individuals and by consolidating the power of memory (both individual and collective) to tell different tales about the history of nation-making. *The Circle of Reason* revolves around the lives of different characters assembled in an imaginary island, al-Ghazira (a prosperous sea-port) from different parts of the country. The different narratives concerning different characters in the novel enable Ghosh to interrogate and explore sensitive issues like crisis in identity and search for meaning in the lives of a displaced population.

Ghosh's in *An Antique Land* displays an innovation at the level of form with a blending of fiction, history, anthropological and travel records. Speaking about this work in an interview Ghosh says, "I have tried to capture a story, a narrative, without attempting to write a historical novel. You may say as a writer I have ventured on a technical innovation" (Dhawan 24). *In An Antique Land* tells the tale of Bomma, an Indian slave who some eight hundred years ago was under the service of Ben Yiju, an Egyptian merchant. As in all his novels, *In an Antique Land* too takes us on a journey to different places and times. In narrative structure the book oscillates between the past (Ben Yiju and his Indian slave) and the present (Ghosh among the Egyptian villagers); between documented history and undocumented story. The narrative is rich in cultural overtones, historical relics and anecdotes. It is the result of his work as a researcher at Oxford University during which he got a chance to stay in Egypt. In the course of his stay, Ghosh retrieved from an ancient Cairo synagogue the accounts and letters related to the life of the twelfth century Jewish merchant Abraham Ben Yiju and Bomma, his slave, business agent, and a respected member of his household. The book begins with Ghosh's arrival in an antique land (an Egyptian village) and his reaction to the new environment, its customs, practices and rituals, which also induces him to critically interrogate his own culture. The findings of antiquity in the novel alternate with Ghosh's interaction with the village community and his interesting portrait of the villagers with all their idiosyncrasies and beliefs. Ghosh was not always welcomed with open arms as the villagers had reservations about an outsider and his society that burns its dead and worships cows. A reading of the novel depicts Ghosh as an astute writer, exploring the nuances of the ties between India and Egypt in two different time-planes: one, in the twelfth century through the trade

relations between these two countries and manifested by the Indian Bomma and his Egyptian master, Ben Yiju; the other in the late twentieth-century, between himself and the Egyptian villagers, in a world changing fast under the forces of globalization.

The Glass Palace is a novel of epic proportions and encompasses several generations of an Indo-Burmese family. It explores the relationship between India and Burma during the period of colonial expansion of the British Empire. The novel opens in Mandalay in Burma in 1885 with the invasion of the British army and the exile of the Burmese Royal family to Madras and then to Ratnagiri (hundred and twenty miles south of Bombay). The fate of the Royal family is knotted with the story centring an Indian orphan, Rajkumar who makes his fortune as a timber merchant in the teak plantations of Burma. Rajkumar starts off in the novel as a destitute and impoverished child of eleven years, earns name and fame in his own right and ends up marrying Dolly, the youngest and most beautiful maid of the Burmese queen, Supayalat, who accompanies them to India in their exile. It is at Ratnagiri that Rajkumar and Dolly come into contact with the family of a political activist, Uma Roy, which furthers the plot movement of the novel and shapes subsequent events. Through the character of Arjun, Uma's nephew, the writer casts a critical glance at the position of an Indian soldier in the Imperial military service. Early on, in the novel, Ghosh reminds us that two-thirds of the soldiers in the Imperial army that brought about the downfall of Burma were Indians. As the demand for India's independence became vehement, the role of the Indians in the British army became more controversial. Ghosh always locates his novels in a particular time in history and against such a historical backdrop, his characters engage themselves in personal struggle, ambition, love and material progress that knits together time and place. *The Glass Palace* offers crucial insights into issues like colonialism, racialism, the Indian Independence movement, the World Wars and the socio-political scenario of India and Burma. The novel once again testifies to Ghosh's resourcefulness as a storyteller, his literary acumen to present a welter of characters from different classes, conditions and cultures and to weave several interacting and interrupting strands within the plot.

The Calcutta Chromosome earned Amitav Ghosh the Arthur C. Clarke prize for science fiction in 1997. The novel presents an intriguing plot with a blending of science fiction, medical mystery, an engrossing tale of malaria research. The novel starts some time in the future New York City; the reader finds himself in the apartment of Antar, a programmer at the International Water Council. Antar locates a torn and tattered ID card of a long lost acquaintance, a man named L. Murugan who had disappeared mysteriously several years ago in Calcutta while searching for the truth behind the discovery for the cure of malaria. Murugan is possessed with Sir Ronald Ross' discovery of the malarial parasite and is suspicious that Ross, who by his standards was a dim and amateur scientist could have actually made this groundbreaking discovery, working in a laboratory in India in 1898. Antar's investigation into the life of Murugan leads him to the discovery of the Calcutta chromosome and some intriguing aspects about medical science. At one point in the novel the reader feels that the discovery of the malarial parasite is hit upon by the two Indian assistants in the laboratory of Cunningham namely Mangala and Laakhan, with Ross snatching away international acclaim from their hands. There are three time-planes set in the novel and the narrative constantly shifts between them: one is Antar in the New York of future, investigating into the past; next is Murugan's errand in Calcutta and his subsequent disappearance in 1995 and finally, there are glimpses into the nineteenth century through letters and records of the times of Sir Ronald Ross and his contemporaries. By grounding his novel in a factual discovery of the clinic, Ghosh races through time, history and geography and suggests an alternative story to the historical discovery.

The Hungry Tide is set in the Sunderbans, the world's largest mangrove forest situated in the eastern coast of India. Forty two years old, Kanai Dutt is on his way to this delta region, summoned by his aunt Nilima to have a look at the journal which her deceased husband, Nirmal had left behind specifically for him. Piyali Roy, a cetologist of Bengali descent and working at the Scripps Institute of Oceanography in California arrives there too for research work on the dolphins and tigers that are unique to that topography. Integral to the narrative are the characters of Kusum, Horen and Moyna and the plot that is woven around them helps to unfold the nuances of the

narrative. These characters in the novel partake in the drama of everyday existence. Through Piyali and Fokir, Ghosh explores the sense of connection between people that transcends the barriers of culture, class, status, language and gender and fosters an understanding that strengthens human bonds. Against the backdrop of a land that is constantly under the threat of tidal waves, Ghosh depicts the ephemerality of life itself through the plight of a displaced people (highlighted by the Morijhapi incident), the struggle for land and the constant effort for survival in a perilous and fragile ecosystem. These natural calamities obliquely underscore the disasters that human history is throughout fraught with. This again draws the reader's attention to Ghosh's handling of the lives of an uprooted populace, the Bangladeshi refugees who swarm the region in the hope of shelter. Piyoli and Fokir's relationship stands in stark contrast to that between Nilima and Nirmal who are married to each other but lack understanding of each other's view of life. Unlike Ghosh's other novels that are set across a vast geographical expanse *The Hungry Tide* is located in a specific locale and emphasize environmental factors which are central to his thesis.

Check Your Progress:

1. How does geographical setting become central to Ghosh's novels? To what extent is it linked with the question of identity in the novel?
2. Comment on the use of the metaphor of travel and the motif of the map as involved with the concept of space and nation/home in the novel.
3. Sketch briefly Ghosh's central themes in his novels.

The affinity towards history and culture is also resonant in Ghosh's non-fictional writings as manifested in his travel account *Dancing at Cambodia*, and *At Large in Burma*. The author made a visit to Cambodia in 1993. *Dancing at Cambodia* alludes to the first visit of King Sisowath to France along with a troop of Cambodian dancers in 1906. The present work recreates the atrocities and violence during the regime of Pol Pot and makes

an assessment of the human and cultural losses during 1975- 1978, the period of socio-political turmoil in the region. Ghosh also locates Pol Pot's village and speaks to some of his family members and relatives. He gives insights into Pol Pot's background and the impact of his brutal regime. The tenacity with which Cambodian people held on to their culture is deeply moving and provides an illuminating account of cultural courage. 'At large in Burma' is the last piece in this volume and brings alive the recent history of the place, from the death of the political leader Aung San in 1947 to his daughter Suu Kyi's struggle for the restoration of democracy in Burma. Amitav Ghosh also includes his interviews of Suu Kyi in this piece. This non-fictional work depicts his insightful understanding of the socio-political patterns across different cultures.

Ghosh's *Countdown* interrogates and challenges the issue of nuclear weapons in India and Pakistan. Here Ghosh questions the views of Defense Minister George Fernandez, in the Cabinet of Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee who had reacted against the idea of India becoming a nuclear power, but surprisingly supported the nuclear blasts in Poldiaran. The five tests were carried out on 11 May 1998. Whatever enthusiasm may have been felt by some in India soon died away when Pakistan carried out its own tests on 28th May, a few days later. The repercussions of the tests were gruesome as the rupee fell to a historic low, the stock -market index plummeted and prices of commodities soared. Ghosh makes a visit to Pokharan and meets the local inhabitants of the place and gets to know how, after the first nuclear test in 1974, many of his friends contracted cancer and other physical problems. Ghosh sums up his observations very tersely in this book. The primary intention behind the tests according to Ghosh is to force India within the circle of powerful nations so that the nation could be counted as one of the great powers.

The Imam and the Indian is a collection of essays on a wide variety of themes and subjects. The piece after which the collection is named was published in 1986. The essays under this collection were published separately in various journals. 'The Imam and the Indian' depicts Ghosh's interaction with the Egyptian villagers which he recreates in *In An Antique Land*. Some of the other essays in this collection include 'Tibetan Dinner', 'Four

Corners’, ‘An Egyptian in Baghdad’, ‘The Ghosts of Mrs. Gandhi’, ‘The Human Comedy in Cairo’, ‘The Relations of Envy’, ‘Categories of Labour and the Orientation of the Fella Economy’, ‘The Global Reservation’, ‘The Fundamental Challenge’, ‘The March of the Novel through History’ (which won him the Pushcart Prize) and so on. The Imam and the Indian is not a unified work as it consists of essays written over a period of years. As a writer, Amitav Ghosh, in his fiction, as well as in his non-fiction, is engaged in the political and cultural wars that shape a postcolonial and globalized world.

SAQ:

Is there any similarity of concerns between Ghosh’s fiction and non-fiction? (70 words)

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5.5 Placing The Work

Amitav Ghosh’s *In an Antique Land* is a multifaceted work that intertwines historical narrative with anthropological exploration, and so, it offers a profound commentary on identity, culture, and the interconnectedness of human societies. Published in 1992, the novel defies conventional genre classifications, blending elements of travelogue, history and memoir. With this section, I will attempt to analyse the intricate layers of Ghosh’s narrative, examining the historical context, summarizing the dual narratives, and exploring the themes that make this work a significant contribution to contemporary literature.

The genesis of *In an Antique Land* can be traced back to Ghosh’s doctoral research in social anthropology at the University of Oxford. In the early 1980s, Ghosh conducted fieldwork in the Egyptian villages of Lataifa and Nashawy, immersing himself in the local culture and forging deep connections with the villagers. This period coincided with Egypt’s gradual opening to

global economic influences, leading to socio-cultural transformations within rural communities. Ghosh's observations during this time provided a contemporary backdrop to his historical inquiries. Along with his anthropological fieldwork, Ghosh became engrossed in the study of the Cairo Geniza documents – a vast repository of medieval Jewish manuscripts discovered in the Ben Ezra Synagogue in Cairo. Among these documents, Ghosh encountered letters referencing a 12th-century Indian slave, referred to as “Bomma”, who served under the Jewish merchant Abraham Ben Yiju. This discovery served as a catalyst for Ghosh's exploration into the historical connections between India and the Middle East, particularly during the medieval period when trade routes facilitated cultural and economic exchanges across the Indian Ocean.

The story is based on two narratives: first, the historical narrative consisting of the life of Abraham Ben Yiju, a Jewish merchant from Tunisia who settled in Mangalore, India, in the 12th century. Through a meticulous examination of the Geniza documents, Ghosh finds out details about Ben Yiju's personal life, his business endeavours across the Indian Ocean, and his relationship with his Indian slave Bomma. Through this narrative, Ghosh throws light on the cosmopolitan nature of medieval trade networks and the cultural interactions that ensued because of these networks. The second narrative is the contemporary one that chronicles Ghosh's experiences in the Egyptian villages during his fieldwork in the 1980s. He provides vivid portrayals of the villagers and their customs, as well as the socio-economic changes impacting their lives. Through this narrative, we understand the complexities of cross-cultural interaction and the lingering effects of colonial histories. The novel intertwines historical narrative with ethnographic study; it fuses the medieval past with the late-20th century contemporary time.

Ghosh's narrative technique is characterized by its non-linear structure. The novel transitions seamlessly between the historical and contemporary narratives; this essentially shows us the continuity of human experiences across time and geography, emphasizing on the enduring nature of cultural exchanges. Ghosh challenges the Eurocentric historiography that often marginalizes non-Western perspectives. He highlights the historical ties

between India and Egypt and advocates for a more inclusive understanding of global history, one that acknowledges the contributions and interactions of diverse cultures. Moreover, by juxtaposing the narratives of Ben Yiju and Bomma with the lives of contemporary Egyptian villagers, Ghosh explores what constitutes identity, displacement, and belonging. Ghosh explores how individuals understand their identities amidst socio-political upheavals and cultural transformations. As an Indian researcher in Egypt, he reflects on memories of colonial encounters and on the lingering aspects of colonialism, especially how it has impacted interactions between different cultures, and shaped cultural perceptions. The novel also explores the nature of the artificial boundaries imposed by modern nation-states, and how cultural exchanges in the past transcended these boundaries. The fluidity of identities and the permeability of cultural boundaries are recurrent motifs; readers are encouraged to reconsider rigid classifications of culture and nationality.

As far as the novel's critical reception goes, the novel was lauded for its innovative narrative style and depth of research. Ghosh's ability to weave together personal memoir with historical information has been praised extensively, since it creates a narrative that is both informative and evocative. Therefore, the text is often cited as a seminal text in postcolonial literature. Through the dual narratives, the rich tapestry of human connections that span centuries and continents is illuminated, and this begs reconsideration of the ways in which histories are told and remembered. Ghosh examines the changes caused by colonialism historically while questioning the impacts of modern globalization. *In an Antique Land* reminds us of the enduring bonds that link disparate cultures, of the shared humanity that underlies our diverse experiences.

Stop to Consider:

Amitav Ghosh is also a prolific essayist. In recent times, Ghosh has written extensively about the impact of climate change. In non-fiction such as *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, he critiques the literary world's inadequate response to the climate crisis. In fiction such as his novel *Gun Island* (2019), he continues this focus, weaving climate change into a narrative of migration and myth.

5.6 Summing Up:

One of the hallmarks of Amitav Ghosh's storytelling is his meticulous research and vivid portrayal of historical settings, particularly those surrounding the Indian Ocean. One such example is the Ibis Trilogy, in which he explores the intricacies of 19th-century opium trade and its profound ramifications on individuals and societies. Beyond his narrative prowess, Ghosh is celebrated for his incisive critique of imperialism, colonialism, and the enduring impacts of both. His work challenges Eurocentric historical narratives, and instead focuses on the rich history of interactions between Eastern cultures. This concern is especially evident in the text we are studying, *In an Antique Land*, where the 12th and the 20th centuries are juxtaposed to highlight the longstanding relationship between India and Egypt. In the next two units, we will study the novel in detail, as well as its themes and the techniques used.

5.7 References/ Suggested Reading:

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Unit- 6

In an Antique Land (Reading the Novel)

Unit Structure:

- 6.1 Objectives
- 6.2 Summary of the Novel
- 6.3 Section-wise Summary and Analysis
- 6.4 The Characters
- 6.5 Critical Reception
- 6.6 Summing Up
- 6.7 References and Suggested Reading

6.1 Objectives

The objectives of this unit are to

- *outline* the key events in the novel;
- *provide* an overview of the major characters and important incidents;
- *help analyze* various critical receptions of the novel.

6.2 Summary of The Novel

We have already covered a brief introduction to *In an Antique Land* in the previous unit. In this section, we will cover a detailed summary and analysis of the work. At the beginning of the text, Ghosh describes a medieval letter written by the merchant Khalaf ibn Ishaq from the city of Aden in Yemen to another merchant Abraham Ben Yiju, who settled in Mangalore, India, with his slave “Bomma”. In the letter, Khalaf focuses on their trade, not on important historical events of the time such as the Second Crusade. He also sends a greeting to Abraham’s enslaved Indian. According to Ghosh, this letter is a “trapdoor”, wherein much like the present time, the lives of ordinary

people continued uninterrupted during major historical events that took place in the times they lived in. This happens largely because the present becomes important as history due to hindsight and retrospective evaluation. A second letter from ibn Ishaq to Ben Yiju also focused on trade, while again containing a greeting for “Bomma”. Ghosh read these letters first as a twenty-two years old graduate student at Oxford, and these inspired him to go to the Egyptian town of Lataifa and learn Arabic.

Two narrative strands run parallel to each other in the story. The first is set in the contemporary time, narrated in the first person, during his trips to Egypt in 1980-81 and 1988. Ghosh visited the Egyptian villages of Lataifa and Nashawy. He details his time living in the Egyptian village of Lataifa with a greedy shop-owner named Abu-Ali, whom Ghosh disliked. He befriends an elderly agricultural worker (or ‘fellah’) called Shaikh Musa, who tells Ghosh about the village and invites him into his family. Later, during Ramadan, Ghosh leaves Lataifa to go to Cairo; he decides then to leave Lataifa for the nearby village of Nashawy. Concurrently, the historical narrative deals with Ben Yiju’s later years in Egypt, where he resided in Fustat, Cairo, and attended a synagogue in nearby Babylon. In this synagogue, Ben Yiju deposited his correspondence in a chamber known as the “Geniza”, intended as a storage space until the writings could be ritually disposed of to prevent disrespecting God’s name. Contrary to contemporary practice, the chamber was never cleared out. When historians discovered its contents, the documents were distributed worldwide for study and analysis. Ghosh utilizes evidence from this Geniza to reconstruct the lives of Ben Yiju and his slave. He learns Judeo-Arabic, the hybrid language of Ben Yiju’s letters, and discovers that its dialect closely resembles that of Lataifa.

Throughout his Egyptian sojourn, Ghosh encounters various individuals who enrich his understanding of the local culture. In Nashawy, he meets Khamees the Rat, a local wit who belongs to the largely-disliked Jammal family (and who was nicknamed ‘the Rat’ because he would gnaw at things), and Nabeel, a young man who later becomes stranded in Baghdad during the outset of the Gulf War. Ghosh befriends Ustaz Sabry, an emerging intellectual, as well as Nabeel’s cousin Isma’il. However, tensions arise between Ghosh

and Imam Ibrahim, a once-respected religious leader. Ghosh often faces rude inquiries about Indian customs, leading to a heated argument with Imam Ibrahim about the global standings of India and Egypt. These interactions bring to light the villagers' perspectives on religion, tradition, and the outside world. For example, Ghosh engages in discussions about Indian customs, where the villagers express surprise at practices like cremation and the lack of circumcision among Hindus; this reflects the cultural chasm between their worlds.

Upon returning to Nashawy in 1988, Ghosh observes significant changes. Many young villagers, including Nabeel and Isma'il have migrated to Iraq for work, bringing back money that has transformed the village with electricity, modern appliances, and property renovations. He reflects on these developments and reconnects with the remaining residents. Before departing, he attempts to visit the tomb of a Sidi – a revered figure who was Jewish before converting to Islam. However, guards prevent him from entering, and they question his interest. Ghosh realizes that he cannot explain his fascination with Egypt's multicultural figures due to the erasure of such histories. An officer dismisses the tomb's significance as mere superstition, prompting Ghosh to take a deep dive into regional folklore upon his return to America. He discovers that the Sidi was venerated by both Jews and Muslims across North Africa and the Levant, symbolizing enduring multicultural connections.

Parallel to his Egyptian experiences, Ghosh investigates the historical trajectory of Abraham Ben Yiju. He traces Ben Yiju's rise as a merchant, his relocation to Aden in Yemen – where he established the significant contacts evident in his Geniza letters – and his subsequent move to Mangalore, India. Ghosh believes that Ben Yiju's two-decade stay in Mangalore might not have entirely voluntary. During this period, Ben Yiju acquired an Indian slave named Bomma, as we have already covered. He married an Indian woman, Ashu, who might have been a former slave, and started a family. In 1990, Ghosh heads to India to uncover more about Bomma. Analyzing clues in Ben Yiju's letters suggesting the slave's name contained the letters B-M-A or B-M-M-A, and consulting with a respected Mangalore folklorist,

he concludes that the slave's name was Bomma. Ghosh looks into Bomma's cultural background and contends that Bomma's enslavement differed from the chattel slavery of the trans-Atlantic trade. Instead, it resembled a master-apprentice relationship, with Bomma receiving training in trade and gradually assuming a more significant role in Ben Yiju's business. Ghosh concludes his exploration of Mangalore by noting that until the Portuguese arrival in the 16th century, no power had attempted to militarily dominate the Indian Ocean trade routes. He argues that this absence of militarization was a deliberate cultural choice, reflecting the pacifist beliefs of many participants in these trade networks.

Shortly before the Gulf War, Ghosh revisits Egypt. While most of the villagers who had gone to Iraq had returned, Nabeel remains abroad. The narrative concludes with Ghosh and Nabeel's family watching the news, anxiously awaiting any information about Nabeel's fate.

Stop to Consider:

Similar to Ghosh's text, here are three works that fuse history and anthropology to create immersive fiction:

***The Clan of the Cave Bear* by Jean M. Auel (1980):**

Jean Auel's immersive saga transports readers to Ice Age Europe, following Ayla, a Cro Magnon child raised by Neanderthals. Auel's meticulous research into prehistoric ecosystems, tools, and social customs brings ancient life vividly to the page. Though set in prehistory, it feels anthropological: Ayla must decode the language, rituals, and hierarchies of her adoptive clan. The novel explores encounters between divergent hominin species through themes like cultural assimilation, identity, and adaptive knowledge. Auel's vivid depictions of gender roles, survival strategies, and clan dynamics echo anthropological field studies, wrapping academic detail in a compelling narrative. Recommended by readers for its grounding in scholarly research into human origins, it mirrors Ghosh's dedication to authenticity and cross cultural understanding.

***Tell Them of Battles, Kings, and Elephants* by Mathias Énard (2010):**

In this lyrically speculative novel, Énard imagines Michelangelo traveling to 16th century Constantinople, summoned by Sultan Bayezid II to design a bridge. Though the journey is speculative, Énard uses it to explore Renaissance–Ottoman cultural exchanges, framing East and West as interwoven rather than oppositional civilizations. The narrative, rooted in historical figures and factual possibilities, blurs the line between travelogue, diary, and cultural ethnography. Énard’s stream of consciousness structure allows readers to “witness” Parisian, Venetian, Ottoman, and papal worlds through a Renaissance artist’s eyes. This porous world — where science, art, faith, and politics intermingle — echoes Ghosh’s fluid narrative style and effort to recover histories that conventional chronicles often obscure.

***Anil’s Ghost* by Michael Ondaatje (2000):**

Set against Sri Lanka’s civil war, Ondaatje’s novel follows forensic anthropologist Anil Tissera, newly returned from abroad, as she investigates a skeletal find. The narrative weaves together science, deep local knowledge, and layers of memory and mythology. Ondaatje’s attention to burial rites, forensic methods, and oral histories transforms the novel into an ethnographic investigation of violence and cultural loss. Critics have praised its fusion of meticulous archaeological detail with lyrical prose—a combination that parallels Ghosh’s blend of historical reconstruction and ethnographic observation. Anil’s quest to uncover identity through bones resonates with Ghosh’s search for buried human connections across time and place.

6.3 Sectionwise Summary and Analysis

In this section, we will cover the novel according to its given parts:

- **Prologue**

In *In an Antique Land*, Amitav Ghosh recounts the 1942 emergence of “The Slave of MS H.6” in an obscure academic article (p. 13). This

publication featured translations of medieval documents, including a 1148 letter (catalogued as MS H.6) from Khalaf ibn Ishaq, an Iraqi merchant in Aden, to his friend and business associate, Abraham Ben Yiju, residing in Mangalore on India's southwestern coast. Notably, during that summer, the Second Crusade advanced through the Middle East toward its eventual defeat at Damascus. Ghosh describes Khalaf's letter as a "trapdoor" into the everyday lives that persisted largely unaffected amidst significant historical events (15). Although Khalaf was likely aware of the crusade, his correspondence centres on personal matters and business affairs. He concludes by requesting Ben Yiju to convey "plentiful greetings" to his enslaved person (16). Ghosh emphasizes that such mentions offer rare insights into individuals typically absent from historical narratives. While history often highlights prominent figures, this letter sheds light on the lives of ordinary people, including the enslaved.

Thirty-one years after the initial article, another collection of letters was published, featuring a 1139 letter from Khalaf to Ben Yiju. Despite the era's political turmoil, including wars among Muslim principalities in the Levant, Khalaf focuses on goods lost in a shipwreck and again sends greetings to the enslaved man. The translator identified the enslaved individual as an Indian man, with Ben Yiju being a Jewish merchant of Tunisian origin. Ben Yiju spent 17 years in India before relocating to Egypt, where he eventually died in Cairo. His letters were discovered in a synagogue chamber known as the Geniza. Ghosh first encountered these letters as a 22-year-old student at Oxford. In 1980, while in the Egyptian village of Lataifa learning Arabic, he knew little about the enslaved person of MS H.6 but felt a connection, believing that this historical figure exemplified earlier links between India and Egypt.

Ghosh juxtaposes the Geniza letters with significant historical events to emphasize the theme of personal histories within the broader historical narrative. By focusing on personal stories rather than major historical events, Ghosh intentionally distances himself from traditional historical narratives. He employs a stage-play metaphor to illustrate this perspective, suggesting that figures like Bomma, an enslaved man, make only a "brief debut, in the

obscurest of theatres” and do not become “a recognizable face in the cast” (13). This analogy underscores Ghosh’s commitment to highlighting individuals who have been marginalized in historical records. He also explores the complexities of identity, aligning his personal narrative with historical accounts. He introduces the multicultural world of the Indian Ocean trade by detailing the life of Ben Yiju, a Tunisian Jewish merchant who lived in Mangalore and corresponded with the Iraqi merchant Khalaf ibn Ishaq. Ghosh connects this historical context to the modern world by citing Bomma’s presence as validation of his “right to be there [in Egypt]” (19). By highlighting Bomma’s precedent as an Indian residing in Egypt, Ghosh demonstrates his approach to questions of modern and historical identities, emphasizing personal connections across cultures and time periods. He challenges the notion of rigid cultural and temporal boundaries, advocating for a more fluid understanding of identity.

- **Part 1:**

Part 1 is titled “Lataifa” and, it consists of twelve chapters. In the first chapter, we learn that Ghosh’s guide to Lataifa, the eminent anthropologist Dr. Aly Issa, was fooled by the empty promises of golden hospitality made by Abu-’Ali, a wealthy merchant of the village. The latter is a hated figure who becomes Ghosh’s landlord, and the author feels trapped in the situation. In Chapter Two, Ghosh describes Cairo as “Egypt’s metaphor for itself” (32), since the Egyptian name for both Cairo and the country itself is Masr. He details the rise and fall of Fustat as an important trading town from the time of Ben Yiju; in the 1980s, Fustat is described as a “shanty town” (39). In Chapter Three, Ghosh grows close to Shaikh Musa’s family; he is invited to dine with the family instead of in the guest room. He learns about Musa’s family. In Chapter Four, Ghosh meets Ustaz Mustafa, a relative of Abu-’Ali and the father of Shaikh Musa’s second wife, through Mustafa’s son Jabir. Mustafa and Ghosh debate on their religious and cultural differences, and Mustafa vows to convert Ghosh to Islam, but drops the matter when Ghosh tells him that his father would be upset if he converted. In Chapter Five, Ghosh details the history of the Synagogue of Ben Ezra (also called the

Synagogue of the Palestinians), where Ben Yiju prayed, and from whose 'geniza' historians discovered the treasure trove of documents that included Ishaq and Yiju's correspondence. In Chapter Six, Jabir spreads some rumours about Ghosh.

In the seventh chapter, Jabir takes Ghosh to a 'mowlid' (a fair) to visit the tomb of Sidi 'Abbas of Nakhlatain, where he gossips about Ghosh's lack of knowledge, nationality, and religion. In the eighth chapter, Ghosh's standing in Jabir's eyes is improved when Mabrouk, Shaikh Musa's nephew, asks Ghosh to inspect an "Indian Machine" that he had bought. Ghosh pretended that he had the requisite knowledge and praised Mabrouk's choice; his 'knowledge' made Jabir respect him. In Chapter Nine, Ghosh thinks about leaving Lataifa for Cairo with Doctor Issa's help. He was more anxious to leave because he had been discouraged to join the Ramadan fasting, which he later realizes was done because the fasting was a part of Islamic identity. Before leaving for Cairo, he promises Shaikh Musa that he will relate all that he experiences in Cairo to them. In the next chapter, Ghosh discusses the rising scholarly interest in Egyptian history in the 18th century, beginning with the report of Jacob Saphir in 1864 on the contents of the Ben Ezra 'geniza'. Over time, the 'geniza' was emptied of its documents, which were taken by Western scholars as part of 'research'. The documents were essentially stolen by imperialists and never returned to Egypt. In Chapter Eleven, Ghosh returns to a grief-stricken Lataifa – Shaikh Musa's son Hasan passed away. Ghosh is unable to tell Shaikh Musa about his travels in Cairo, as well as the fact that Doctor Issa has secured new accommodations for him in the nearby town of Nashawy. In Chapter Twelve, we see that Ghosh has returned to Egypt in 1988, seven years after his first trip. He tracks all references to the enslaved man through the enormous body of work left behind by the scholar Shelomo Dov Goitien. He realizes that to know the enslaved man's full story, he would have to read and translate the 'Geniza' letters themselves. A former student of Goitien tells him that the letters were written in the Judeo-Arabic dialect, and as he starts translating them, Ghosh realizes that the Judeo-Arabic dialect is startlingly similar to the one used in 1980s Lataifa. His stay in that village proved precious for his purpose.

In the first section, Amitav Ghosh sets the foundation for the text. In Lataifa, he explores the origin of the Geniza letters, as well as introduces key characters and recurring conversations that shape his Egyptian journey. He lays essential groundwork for the life of Ben Yiju. Ghosh's stay in Lataifa brings to light how his interactions were shaped by his Indian and Hindu background and the Egyptian Muslims' identities. For example, Jabir remarks that Ghosh "doesn't know our Lord!" (67), implying that he knows nothing. Ustaz Mustafa offers Ghosh a "better" life, provided that he converts to Islam. The observance of the Ramadan fast makes the villagers "doubly conscious of the value of its boundaries" (76). The Egypt of the 1980s possessed a distinct cultural identity, which made it difficult for outsiders to fully integrate. The Egypt of the 12th century, however, was a melting pot of cultures. Cairo's rulers were open-minded and diverse; the city was also home to several established Jewish merchant communities. This open-mindedness is exemplified in the hybrid Judeo-Arabic dialect of Ben Yiju which, strangely enough, was very similar to the dialect spoken in contemporary Lataifa. Additionally, Ghosh focuses on the effects of colonialism and globalization. He notes that that Abraham Firkowitch's extraction of the 'Geniza' items is an example of colonialism, where the coloniser sees the colony and its history as its property. Ghosh argues that the West's interaction with Egypt was primarily through a colonialist lens, leading to an internalization of these priorities among Egyptians. Ghosh also records the personal histories of the otherwise ordinary people he encounters in Lataifa, such as Abu-'Ali's temper and Shaikh Musa's grief over his son's death. He focuses on individuals who may otherwise have remained unstudied, and draws a parallel between them and historical figures like Ben Yiju. He writes that he can imagine Shaikh Musa writing Ben Yiju's letters, suggesting a cultural and linguistic continuity across centuries.

- **Part 2:**

Part 2 is titled "Nashawy", and it consists of seventeen chapters. The first chapter opens in December 1988, when Amitav Ghosh revisited Lataifa, and was warmly welcomed by Shaikh Musa, who says, "Everything's changed in all these years that you've been away" (115). They discuss the mourning ceremony for Hasan, whose uniformed photo hangs beside his

father's. Musa also shows Ghosh the Quran that he had previously gifted him as a souvenir from Cairo. In Chapter Two, we see that after moving from Lataifa to Nashawy, Ghosh frequently returns to consult Shaikh Musa, who shares tales of his youth in Nashawy. Shaikh Musa recommends to Ghosh to meet Imam Ibrahim Abu-Kanaka, a descendant of Nashawy's founding families, known in his youth for scriptural knowledge and traditional healing. He cautions, however, that Imam Ibrahim had become a recluse. In Chapter Three, Ghosh is introduced to a man named Ustaz Sabry by the headmaster of the primary school in Nashawy. Sabry invites Ghosh to his home, but this leads to an encounter between Ghosh and an elderly woman who questions him about Indian customs such as cremation and cow worship. She suggests that cremation aims to "cheat" divine judgement and urges Ghosh to "civilize" (126) his people. In the next chapter, we learn that in Nashawy, Ghosh resides in a house maintained by Taha, an eccentric vendor who knows much about the villagers and who takes on various odd jobs, including casting restorative spells. Once, when Taha falls ill, he attributes it to envy and seeks both medical treatment and a woman's help to break the spell. Ghosh inquires about Ustaz Sabry, and Taha advises him to visit about an hour after the sunset prayers.

In the fifth chapter, Ghosh visits Ustaz Sabry's home, finding him lecturing visitors. Sabry introduces Ghosh, highlighting similarities between Egypt and India, both being agricultural, and poor after being colonized. A discussion on ghosts ensues, with a man named Zaghloul sharing a tale about Sidi Abu-Kanaka's undecayed body halting canal construction. Ghosh notes that local religious festivals in Nashawy have declined, as many consider them un-Islamic and superstitious. Ghosh learns that the locals prefer Sabry's sermons over Imam Ibrahim's, and they consider the latter's medicine less effective as well. Ghosh is escorted home by the cousins Nabeel and Isma'il. In Chapter Six, we jump to 1988, where Ghosh learns from Shaikh Musa that Nabeel and Isma'il have unexpectedly gone to Iraq, contrary to their initial plans to work for the Agriculture Ministry. The cousins, once aspiring to be technical advisors to *fellaheen*, are now described by Musa as "good boys", though he previously criticized their lack of respect for Imam Ibrahim. Back to 1980, during the walk back, Isma'il discusses

upcoming nuptials in the family; he praises Ustaz Sabry's piety, recounting his debate with an East German communist about God's existence. Nabeel remains quiet, as usual, but later asks Ghosh if boiling water for one makes him miss home, marking the first instance of empathy from a villager from Ghosh. Back again in 1988, Ghosh absorbs the shock of the cousins' departure, and on asking why they had left, he is told that they left when the opportunity presented itself. In Chapter Seven, Ghosh returns to the historical narrative, exploring in detail the life of Abraham Ben Yiju, born in Ifriqiya (modern Tunisia) around 1100. Coming from a modest background, Ben Yiju received a comprehensive education. Following his community's tradition of trading in the East, he travelled to Aden in the 1120s, where he met a prominent Jewish merchant, Madmun ibn al-Hasan ibn Bundar. Initially his mentee, Ben Yiju later became Madmun's business partner. Early letters from Madmun reveal affectionate guidance, though they also express doubts about Ben Yiju's efficacy. In Aden, Ben Yiju corresponded with associates like Khalaf bin Ishaq, who later writes about Ben Yiju's Indian slave. Ghosh focuses on Ben Yiju's personal talents in building relationships, crucial for his trade success. Before 1132, Ben Yiju relocated to the Malabar coast in India, remaining there for nearly two decades without returning to Aden. This prolonged absence was unusual and might have stemmed from a dispute with Aden's local ruler, possibly involving a blood feud, as suggested by a letter from Madmun attempting to mediate the situation. In Chapter Eight, we return to the Egyptian narrative, where Ghosh introduces Khamees, nicknamed "the Rat" possibly due to his "thin face with darting eyes". Belonging to the disreputable Jammal family, Khamees had divorced and remarried, with his ex-wife attributing the separation to his infertility. Upon meeting Ghosh, Khamees inquired if Indians "burn their dead", a question Ghosh faced "almost daily" (168). This curiosity led to discussions about Indian customs, with Khamees expressing admiration for the practice, viewing it as a clever way to "escape judgement". Their conversations deepened, and along with Zaghloul, they formed a close friendship, bonded by a shared fascination with the wider world. In the next chapter, Ghosh describes medieval travel from Egypt to India, highlighting the route down the Nile to Aidhab, a now-destroyed port. A letter to Ben Yiju references his debt to someone in Aidhab.

In Chapter Ten, Ghosh converses with Busaina, Khamees's sister, who seeks his patronage to establish her independent business after leaving her husband. When Ghosh attempts to purchase grapes from another vendor, Busaina intervenes and accuses the vendor of overcharging him. This altercation attracts Yasir, Imam Ibrahim's son, who had inherited his father's barber-shop and made it successful. Yasir invites Ghosh to meet his father. In Chapter Eleven, Ghosh visits Yasir's barber-shop several days after their introduction. He meets Imam Ibrahim, and inquires about his healing practices and lineage. Ibrahim becomes defensive, asserting he is moving away from traditional methods in favour of modern medicine, and he takes out some syringes to make his point. Later, during lunch at Yasir's home, Ibrahim reflects on the transformations in Egypt after the 1952 Revolution. He notes that previously, villages under Nashawy were under the control of individuals who treated them as personal property, but now there is comparatively more freedom. While the older villagers deeply value their liberation from forced labour, the younger generations often take these freedoms for granted. The gathering takes a tense turn when Ghosh asks about Yasir's siblings; he inadvertently touches on a sensitive family matter, leading to Imam Ibrahim's abrupt departure. In Chapter Twelve, Taha accurately predicts that at 'Ali's wedding, Ghosh will be invited inside and questioned extensively, as few attendees have met an Indian before. Despite Ghosh's attempt to remain outside, Nabeel and his father bring him in, where he does face numerous questions. One individual suspects that he might be a spy. Many questions revolve around India's living conditions, and the guests are sceptical when Ghosh mentions that many Indians live similarly to the Egyptian *fellaheen*. This scepticism reveals their strong desire to modernize, viewing their own conditions as outdated. After dinner, Ghosh tries to rejoin the crowd but is again brought inside for more questions, this time about religious customs including circumcision. He realizes they are referring to both male and female circumcision, the latter still practised in parts of Egypt despite being illegal. Uncomfortable with the interrogation, Ghosh leaves the event, and Nabeel advises him not to take offense, explaining that the people are merely curious. In Chapter Thirteen, Ghosh reflects on a childhood memory from January 1964 in Dhaka, East Pakistan

(now Bangladesh). His father, on a diplomatic mission, often hosted visitors who, Ghosh later realized, were Hindu refugees fleeing Muslim attacks. One day, an unusually large number of refugees sought shelter in their home. Ghosh recalls being hidden, and later, seeing a mob with lit torches outside. His father takes a pistol with him, thereby showing his fear of potential violence. Fortunately, Muslim friends alerted the police, who dispersed the crowd. Ghosh learned that similar riots occurred in Calcutta, where Muslims were at the receiving end, but in both cities, members of the other religion provided rescue. He reflects that symbolic violations like dead cows in temples and dead pigs in mosques incited violence. He hesitates to share this story with Nabeel, believing that the village's relative peace meant that its residents could not grasp the profound fear such events instilled in Indians.

In Chapter Fourteen, during a winter respite from the rain, Ghosh ventures to a tree on Khamees's land to read. There, he encounters 'Eid, Khamees's youngest brother, playing with two girls. After they depart, 'Eid claims the girls wish to marry him, but he is uninterested, expressing instead his desire to marry a girl from the Badawy family, despite familial tensions. Zaghloul joins them, recounting how Ahmed Effendi of the Badawy family mistreated villagers, and get away due to his government connections. He also teases 'Eid about his infatuation, remarking that since they were *fellah*, they did not get to love. Ghosh then informs Khamees about 'Eid's interaction with the girls. Khamees, concerned, asks if the girls were carrying fodder, and Ghosh realizes that they might have been distracting 'Eid to steal it. Khamees hopes that 'Eid will soon settle down with a cousin. In Chapter Fifteen, we jump to 1988, where Ghosh learns from Shaikh Musa about the development of the Jammal family. Ahmend Badawy Effendi, the son of their former oppressive landlord, intended to purchase an apartment in Cairo and thus decided to see his land. Tradition required him to offer this land first to Jammal family, who requested a month to gather the necessary funds, and went into debt to acquire the property. They were able to repay the debt fully within a few harvests. As a result, Khamees became prosperous, his sister Busaina became a skilled businesswoman, with her sons in school. 'Eid worked in construction in Saudi Arabia for several years, and his wealth enabled him to marry the girl he liked from the Badawy family, in what was

considered a “real love match” (226). In Chapter Sixteen, Ghosh returns to the historical narrative. Shortly after his arrival in Mangalore, Ben Yiju freed a female slave named Ashu in October 1132. Ghosh suggests that Ashu likely became his wife and the mother of his children, including his son Surur and an unnamed daughter, as indicated by letters mentioning gifts for Surur by 1135. A note in the Geniza documents records Ben Yiju’s debt to his brother-in-law, Nair, implying Ashu was from the Nair community. The absence of references to his wife in his correspondence – a “pointed silence” (230) – supports the theory that she was a non-Jewish former slave. Despite the presence of a Jewish community in Mangalore, Ben Yiju did not marry within it, leading Ghosh to propose that his union with Ashu was likely a marriage of love, though definitive evidence is lacking. In Chapter Seventeen, we are back in Egypt where Khamees is troubled by his childlessness and asks Ghosh to consult Imam Ibrahim for traditional infertility remedies. Despite Ghosh’s reservations about his rapport with the Imam, he agrees. However, the conversation takes an unexpected turn when Imam Ibrahim criticizes Indian customs, questioning how India hoped to be like Europe when Indians burned their dead. He extols Europe’s scientific and military advancements, asserting that it has the mightiest military prowess in the world. Provoked, Ghosh retorts that India possesses comparable achievements, including nuclear weapons, and criticizes Egypt’s lack. Later, Ghosh laments his part in a conversation which equated progress with military prowess, feeling that he had dissolved the cultural link that existed between India and Egypt. Khamees then suggests visiting India with Ghosh but expresses a desire to be buried there if he dies.

In the second part, Ghosh intricately weaves together narratives from his initial visit to Egypt in 1981, his return in 1988, and his historical research into the life of the 12th-century Jewish merchant, Ben Yiju. This tripartite structure allows Ghosh to present information as he discovered it, about both the past and the evolving lives of his Egyptian acquaintances. For example, he introduces the Jammal family during his first stay; he details their struggles and their later achievements, hence linking contemporary experiences with historical parallels. He also juxtaposes the lives of Nashawy’s residents with that of Ben Yiju’s. The latter’s life he reconstructs

from fragmented evidence, acknowledging the challenges of limited sources and the necessity of informed conjecture. He describes himself as “at last hot upon the Slave’s trail” (109), and employs a sleuth-like approach in unravelling historical mysteries. Ghosh also draws parallels between the medieval and the modern worlds, noting that just as Ben Yiju might have fled due to a blood feud, just as Jabir had earlier believed that a blood feud was imminent due to a local murder. He also refers to recurring themes of migration: both Nabeel and Isma’il, like Ben Yiju, seize the chance to relocate when “the opportunity comes” (152). Additionally, he presents two love stories- ’Eid and the Badawy girl, and Ben Yiju and Ashu – both considered unconventional yet genuine “love-matches” (226). These narratives suggest a timeless consistency in human experiences, and emphasize on the enduring relevance of personal histories within broader historical contexts.

However, Ghosh’s interactions in Nashawy show us the complexities inherent in cultural identity. The villagers are both intrigued by and wary of him, particularly regarding the practice of cremation, a topic he was frequently questioned about. A conversation with Imam Ibrahim leads to mutual offense, and Ghosh reflects on the difficulties of conveying one’s life experiences to someone with a vastly different life experience. Unlike him, the Egyptians in Lataifa and Nashawy have no fear of religious strife in their homeland. Yet, moments of empathy, such as Nabeel’s understanding of Ghosh’s loneliness, offer hope that genuine connection across cultures is still attainable. The impacts of imperialism and globalization are also addressed, particularly through the lens of Nashawy and Lataifa’s modernization by 1988. Ghosh observes that traditional authorities like Imam Ibrahim have been supplanted by figures like Ustaz Sabry, new beliefs have gained traction, and modern technology has become prevalent. The transition is seen in the preference for contemporary medicine over traditional medicine. Ghosh attributes this rapid change to a collective desire to ascend the “ladder of ‘Development’” (200), driven by comparisons to Western nations. His confrontation with Imam Ibrahim epitomizes this theme, as they debate their respective countries’ scientific and military standings, inadvertently reinforcing a colonial hierarchy that prioritizes Western benchmarks. Ghosh is disillusioned by himself for participating in this

discourse, and for the rest of his stay, he endeavours to envision a perspective that transcends the “realist” paradigms established by European powers.

- **Part 3:**

Part 3 is titled “Mangalore”, and it consists of ten chapters. In the first chapter, Amitav Ghosh offers a vivid portrayal of Mangalore, emphasizing its natural beauty and strategic location. He explains that the lagoon entering the city once functioned as a harbour, likely the first sight of Mangalore for the medieval Jewish merchant Ben Yiju. While the city’s topography remains unchanged, its historical essence has faded due to repeated invasions. The name of the “Old Port,” Bandar — a Persian term for “port” — still exists, signifying its former status as a hub for foreign traders. Although it is now difficult to imagine Bandar attracting visitors, it was once a thriving centre of commerce. Historically, Mangalore was part of the larger Malabar region and marked its northern boundary. The surrounding area, Tulunad, named after the local Tulu language, remained politically autonomous until the 15th century, enabling Mangalore to flourish as a significant Indian Ocean port. Ben Yiju would have been lured by its trade prospects. Over time, colonial interests eroded its traditional identity. Yet in Ghosh’s era, economic migration to the Persian Gulf seems to revive historical trade ties, subtly preserving Mangalore’s medieval character. In the second chapter, Ghosh meets B.A. Viveka Rai, a scholar of Tulu folklore and philology, the morning after his arrival in Bangalore in 1990. Ghosh was seeking help in uncovering the real name of an enslaved Indian man referred to in the Cairo Geniza document MS H6. An 1139 letter translated by Goitein identified the man as “Bama,” suggesting it was a vernacular form of the Hindu god “Brahma.” Initially, Ghosh accepted this, but his later research into the Geniza documents revealed the name repeatedly appeared as B-M-H in consonantal Arabic script. Understanding that the “H” often represented an open vowel, Ghosh reinterpreted the name as B-M-A, but this too seemed problematic as “Bama” was not a typical abbreviation for “Brahma.” Realizing the name held the key to the man’s identity, Ghosh focused on linguistic patterns, especially those relevant to the Mangalore region. Considering that Judeo-Arabic often reduced double letters to single ones, he hypothesizes that B-M-A could stand for B-M-M-A. This leads him to believe the actual name

was likely “Bomma” or “Bamma,” both common names in southern India. He turns to Rai to explore the origins of this name further. In the third chapter, Viveka Rai, intrigued by Amitav Ghosh’s pursuit of the name’s origin, suggests that the name was likely “Bomma” rather than “Bamma,” a name historically common among the Tulu people. The Tulu community was traditionally organized into a strict matrilineal caste system and was deeply engaged in the worship of spirit-deities known as Bhutas. These Bhuta cults were significant in Tulu culture and had notable overlaps with mainstream Hindu traditions, leading to a blend of religious identities. One such Bhuta-deity was linked to the origin of Bomma’s name. Contrary to Ghosh’s expectation of visiting a traditional temple, Viveka Rai instead shows him a film based on a Tulunad legend. In the story, two brothers, resisting a local ruler, repeatedly invoke a deity they call “Brahma.” However, the visual representation was not the Hindu Brahma but a wooden figure bearing a sword and moustaches. Rai clarified this was “Berme” or “Bermeru,” a major deity in the Tulu pantheon later associated with Brahma. This finding suggested that Bomma likely belonged to a Tulunad community before being enslaved by Ben Yiju, allowing Ghosh to restore his historical identity.

In Chapter Four, Amitav Ghosh highlights a singular documented episode from Bomma’s life, recounted in a 1135 letter by Madmun to Ben Yiju. The letter details a pirate raid on Aden, but its focus shifts to Bomma’s conduct. Bomma had been sent on a business mission to Aden by Ben Yiju to purchase gifts for Mangalore. Despite managing substantial trade sums — including the sale of goods worth 685 dinars in a single season — his personal salary was a modest two dinars per month. Aden’s commercial wealth attracted pirates, and when the ruler of Kish’s ships were denied protection money, they attempted an attack on the harbour, which ultimately failed. Madmun, however, dwelled more on Bomma’s troubling behaviour than the raid, complaining that Bomma repeatedly showed up at his office drunk, demanding money. Ghosh speculates that Bomma might have been one of those cheering the skirmish from shore in an intoxicated state, adding a vivid human dimension to the event. In Chapter Five, although the Geniza documents provide no details on how Bomma came to be enslaved by Ben Yiju, Ghosh emphasizes that this form of slavery differed from the trans-

Atlantic slave trade. He frames it more as a patron-client or master-apprentice relationship within a flexible social hierarchy. In this context, enslaved individuals often participated in the profits of their owner's business and could eventually gain freedom and establish their own enterprises. This surrender of autonomy was considered a strategic step toward entering trade. Ghosh also highlights that enslavement held deep religious meaning in Indian and Islamic traditions, frequently serving as a metaphor for devotion to the divine. In poetry and spiritual discourse, the loss of personal freedom symbolized a transcendence of worldly ties. Ben Yiju, influenced by Sufi ideas within Judaism, would have recognized these concepts. While such beliefs may not have consciously influenced either man, Ghosh suggests Bomma's enslavement might have been viewed as elevating rather than degrading, forming rare common ground between their distinct cultures. In the next chapter, in Mangalore, Ghosh frequently comes across Bhuta shrines — well-maintained yet dismissed by authorities as superstition or "devil worship." By chance, he visited one when his taxi driver stopped to pray there. Inside, he saw a simple image featuring a moustached face with a sword, resembling the Tulu Brahma. The shrine's caretaker described an annual festival during which he became possessed by the Bhuta, calling it an extraordinary experience. He also recounted an incident when the government attempted to build a road through the shrine, ignoring local opposition. However, construction halted mysteriously when the machinery failed to function, forcing the authorities to alter the road's path. Later, the taxi driver, amazed by the story, asked Ghosh if he'd heard anything similar. Ghosh recalled a parallel tale from Egypt involving the tomb of the Nashawy Sidi. Despite his episodes of drunkenness, Bomma's importance in Ben Yiju's business steadily increased, as seen in Chapter Seven. Evidence of this trust appears in a letter where a correspondent addressed Bomma as "Shaikh," an honorific title. From early on, Ben Yiju entrusted Bomma with transporting goods to and from Aden. Among the key imports were expensive fabrics, likely used for clothing, as Ben Yiju and other Indian-based merchants continued wearing garments typical of the Middle East. In contrast, visitors often remarked on how Malabar's men and women traditionally went topless, indicating status through jewelry. Another significant import for Ben

Yiju was paper, which he preferred over Malabar's palm leaves. Almost every shipment to him included high-quality paper, often praised by his associates. His fondness for sweets is also evident, with frequent mentions of candy being sent to him. In the next chapter, Ghosh's exploration of Bomma's story revealed something profound about how history functions in shaping identity. Among the various communities in the region, he found the Magavira caste particularly compelling. Traditionally a seafaring, fishing community, the Magavira had longstanding connections with the wider world. Their guardian spirit, Bobbarriya-Bhuta, was believed to be the soul of a Muslim sailor who had perished at sea. Intrigued, Ghosh arranged with a local friend to visit a Magavira village to see the shrine dedicated to this spirit. Contrary to his assumptions of a rustic, underdeveloped fishing hamlet, the village was clean, orderly, and evidently prosperous. During his visit, Ghosh spoke with the mother of a local student and asked whether the name Bomma was still in use. She replied that the name had fallen out of favour, representing a less dignified past when the village lacked education and recognition. Now, she proudly showed him a professionally printed pamphlet that illustrated the village's transformed image. On the way to the shrine, Ghosh noticed a conservative cultural shift: campaigns against alcohol and the rise of an anti-Muslim political presence. He saw this as an attempt by a historically marginalized community to assert respectability through religious discipline and social reform. At the shrine, they found that the Bobbarriya-Bhuta figure remained but had been demoted beneath an image of Vishnu, symbolically absorbed into the Hindu framework. Ghosh reflected on the irony of venerating an Arab Muslim spirit within a Hindu temple. During Bomma's time, this area had witnessed the rise of egalitarian Vachanakara saints, whose defiance of caste might have influenced Bomma himself.

In Mangalore, Ben Yiju lived a life that Amitav Ghosh describes in Chapter Nine as "extraordinarily rich in relationship," marked by intricate social ties and a vibrant network of interactions. His marriage to Ashu expanded his social world, drawing in a web of in-laws. Yet, these relations were not without conflict. One particularly strained connection was with Kardar, an agent who had accepted payment for goods but failed to deliver them.

Letters between Ben Yiju and his friends reflect their frustration with Kardar. A revealing piece of Geniza documentation shows that Kardar was a close relative of Nair, Ashu's brother. This suggests that Nair may have urged Ben Yiju to trust Kardar, who in turn exploited this trust for personal gain. Despite such betrayals, Ben Yiju's circle remained notably diverse. Among his associates were Hindu Gujaratis from the Vania caste, known for their significant role in trade. Ben Yiju and his contemporaries operated beyond the boundaries of caste, religion, and region, engaging with a multiplicity of communities. These connections were not entirely novel but rooted in long-standing traditions of cross-cultural exchange that preceded him. Ghosh explores the question of how such diverse traders communicated and suggests the existence of a shared commercial language or "trading argot," likely blending Perso-Arabic with elements of North Indian dialects. In the next chapter, we see Ben Yiju reluctant to travel far inland from the Malabar coast. His knowledge of India's geography was limited, and he moved primarily along established trade routes that have since faded into obscurity. Southern India, at the time, was considered the region's heart, and when he did travel, one notable destination was Srikandapuram—then known in Arabic as Jurbattan. This town, with its cool climate, spice trade, and Ashu's family ties, was a place of both business and personal significance. Ghosh draws a historical arc from Ben Yiju's time to the arrival of the Portuguese. On May 17, 1498, Vasco da Gama landed near this area, marking what Ghosh calls "the beginning of the end" for the cosmopolitan world that Bomma and Ben Yiju inhabited. By 1500, the Portuguese returned with demands for Muslim expulsion from Calicut, and when denied, bombarded the city. In a dramatic shift, they attempted to dominate the Indian Ocean not through trade, but military force. Ghosh contends this lack of militarization among Indian traders wasn't due to oversight, but deliberate cultural choices, influenced by Jain and Vania nonviolence. Their pacifist ethos, however, could not withstand the might of the West, and the 1509 Battle of Diu sounded the death-knell for these ancient, peaceful maritime networks.

In this section, Ghosh shifts his primary focus from Egypt to India, both in historical and contemporary contexts. At the heart of this shift lies Bomma,

the enslaved Indian man whose life gradually emerges as a central thread in Ghosh's narrative. Bomma becomes more than a historical footnote; he is reclaimed as a character in his own right. Ghosh's approach to Bomma reflects his broader narrative technique: carefully measured, dramatically effective, and deeply humanizing. Instead of introducing Bomma as a mere background figure, Ghosh waits until he can fully acknowledge Bomma's personhood, then begins to draw on the sparse details of his life. Through this technique, Ghosh illustrates the ways in which marginalized individuals can be brought to light within larger historical discourses. Every mention of Bomma's activity—from carrying merchandise between Aden and India to receiving the respectful title of "Shaikh" in correspondence—builds towards a fuller, more nuanced portrait of a man once lost to history.

This narrative strategy underscores Ghosh's belief in the historical value of those typically overlooked. By analyzing even the smallest fragments of Bomma's life, Ghosh not only reclaims an individual story but also reflects on entire communities and their cultural trajectories. For example, his inquiry into the name "Bomma" leads him to consider the rise of the Magavira community, illustrating how personal histories can serve as doorways to wider socio-economic developments. These micro-histories, in Ghosh's hands, become ways of viewing the world as experienced by ordinary people, across time and geography. Bomma's story also allows Ghosh to reflect on cultural identity, especially within the vibrant, fluid world of the Indian Ocean trade networks. The lives of Bomma and his master Ben Yiju provide insight into the coexistence and exchange that characterized this trade ecosystem. Ghosh highlights how diverse cultures intersected peacefully, without collapsing into homogeneity. Indeed, the refusal of expatriate traders like Ben Yiju to adopt the local Mangalore custom of going topless symbolizes this retention of cultural identity amid diversity. Cultural boundaries existed, but they did not necessarily produce conflict. Rather, as Ghosh suggests, the multicultural harmony of the Indian Ocean world was a conscious and deliberate choice—a choice rooted in dialogue and cooperation rather than force or assimilation.

Ben Yiju, who maintained traditions from his Middle Eastern background while integrating himself into a diverse community of traders, becomes a symbol of this dialogic culture. Ghosh describes his network of associates as “startlingly diverse,” underscoring the cosmopolitan fabric of the trade routes. This ideal of a pluralistic, tolerant society becomes a central thesis of Ghosh’s historical investigation. He argues that remnants of this culture persist, even today—evident in Mangalore’s rekindled trade ties with the Middle East and the enduring veneration of a drowned Muslim sailor’s spirit by the Magavira. Yet, Ghosh also captures a growing dissonance between this past and the present. Modernity, for many of the communities he studies, appears to involve a rejection of pluralistic traditions. In both Nashawty and the Magavira village, he observes a rise in religious fundamentalism that turns people away from local shrines and shared heritage. This regression is encapsulated in a pamphlet given to Ghosh by the woman from the Magaviravillage, which recasts the community’s identity through the lens of strict Hinduism, effectively replacing a diverse past with an invented history tailored for developmental narratives.

Across the cultural landscapes Ghosh traverses, he sees a pattern: the abandonment of the past to ascend the hierarchical model of “development.” This, he suggests, leads not to true progress, but to a loss of valuable, syncretic traditions. In this context, he brings in the Portuguese conquest of the Indian Ocean, particularly the Battle of Diu, to examine the theme of colonialism and globalization. He portrays the conflict not just as a clash of arms, but as a cultural confrontation—a unified, militarized Europe against a disjointed but tolerant Indian Ocean world. The defeat of the latter is not an endorsement of Western superiority, but rather a tragic reminder that such pluralistic systems depend on the voluntary engagement of their participants. When imperial domination is introduced, the delicate balance is irrevocably disrupted. Ghosh reflects on this historical shift through his own experience, especially his argument with Imam Ibrahim. By choosing to narrate this confrontation before his reconstruction of the Indian Ocean trade culture, Ghosh underscores the enduring influence of colonial power structures. His dialogue with Imam Ibrahim illustrates how modern interactions are still shaped by colonial residues, in contrast to the more

inclusive ethos of the past. Through Ben Yiju and Bomma, Ghosh seeks to resurrect that ethos—to show that a world rooted in dialogue, not dominance, once existed and, perhaps, can be imagined again. Ultimately, Ghosh’s literary and historical excavation becomes an act of cultural resistance: a reclaiming of forgotten voices and suppressed histories to challenge the hegemony of colonial narratives. Through his careful reconstruction of lives like Bomma’s, he offers a compelling vision of a world connected not by conquest, but by conversation.

- **Part 4:**

Part 4 is titled “Going Back”, and it consists of seven chapters. Ghosh delicately weaves together the threads of past and present, capturing the profound shifts in village life in Egypt while simultaneously bringing the narrative of Ben Yiju to a close. Through reflections drawn from his 1988 return to the villages of Lataifa and Nashawy, Ghosh meditates on the deep transformations these places had undergone, economically, socially, and culturally. In Chapter One, as he converses with Shaikh Musa, Ghosh senses a new awareness in his old friend—a man now viewing his village with a different lens, one sharpened by time and change. The arrival of new technology—fridges, cassette recorders, and other household appliances—heralds more than just material modernization. It reflects a shift in cultural values and aspirations, particularly among the youth. This divergence is vividly seen when Shaikh Musa, dressed in the modest attire of a *fellah*, hesitates to enter a shop in Damanhour where refrigerators are sold. In contrast, the younger generation strides in confidently, unfazed by attire or class divisions. The rural exodus to Iraq had played a monumental role in this shift. Beginning in the early 1980s, Iraq’s need for labourers, driven by the pressures of war, created an employment vacuum eagerly filled by millions of Egyptians—at one point comprising nearly one-sixth of Egypt’s population. For those left behind in villages, dreams of prosperity in Iraq were intoxicating. However, with the return of Iraqi soldiers and mounting resentment toward Egyptian workers, that dream began to sour. Elsewhere, Abu-‘Ali, Ghosh’s former landlord, exemplifies the success brought by remittances. His sons had ventured early to Iraq, sending back funds that allowed the expansion of the family business and the house itself.

In the next chapter, parallel to these contemporary shifts, Ghosh narrates the concluding chapters of Ben Yiju's life. In the mid-1140s, prompted by news about his brother Mubashshir, Ben Yiju begins contemplating a return to the Middle East. Khalaf, an associate, conveys messages from Mubashshir, who is then in Egypt, seeking permission to travel to India. Despite repeated efforts, travel arrangements prove difficult. In a cruel twist, Ben Yiju remains unaware that many of his family and fellow Jews from Ifriqiya have been taken to Sicily following the incursions of King Roger II. Simultaneously, anti-Semitic fervour brews in Europe, while the Almohads advance westward, brutally targeting non-converting Jewish communities. By 1148, Mubashshir pivots his plans from India to Syria, likely catalyzing Ben Yiju's decision to leave India. With business matters in Aden settled by Madmun, Ben Yiju travels there by 1149 with his two children. From Aden, he writes to his brothers in Sicily, hopeful for a reunion and even proposing a marriage between his daughter and his nephew. Unfortunately, while Mubashshir receives the letter, he fails to forward it to Yusaf. Still, word of the proposal reaches Yusaf, prompting his son Surur to journey eastward in search of more information. In Chapter Three, in this climate of uncertainty, Ghosh meets Jabir, one of his younger friends who still resides in Lataifa. Jabir, who once beamed with the optimism of youth and education, now appears aged and forlorn. He proudly shows Ghosh photos from college, but a sense of futility shadows his words. Having failed to secure a job in Iraq, Jabir laments his decision to pursue education, seeing it now as a delay in accessing financial stability. While working as a bricklayer's apprentice, he watches his younger brother Mohammad build a future in Jordan, already contemplating marriage. In a cultural setting where age hierarchy is paramount, Jabir dreads the humiliation of his younger sibling marrying before him. When Ghosh departs, he perceives the young man's unspoken despair, masked by claims of an imminent departure to Iraq.

In Chapter Four, we go back in the twelfth century narrative, with Ben Yiju's return to Aden being short-lived and tumultuous. Within three years, he leaves for Egypt, narrating in a letter to Yusaf that Mubashshir had deceived him, stealing a considerable sum. Compounding his grief, Ben Yiju loses his son. Now focused on safeguarding his daughter's future, he

relocates inland to Dhu Jibla, entrusting his daughter to Khalaf's care. Khalaf attempts to arrange a marriage between his son and Ben Yiju's daughter, possibly with her support. Yet Ben Yiju refuses, disapproving of an alliance with an Iraqi "foreigner," and still harbouring hope for a union between his daughter and Surur, Yusaf's son. This rejection seemingly alienates him from his Aden network. The Geniza letters offer no further correspondence from his associates there, implying a social rupture that likely influenced his decision to settle in Egypt. Meanwhile, in Chapter Five, Ghosh resumes his journey in Nashawy, visiting Nabeel's home. There, he is welcomed by Fawzia, 'Ali's wife, who recounts Nabeel's life trajectory. Having missed the deaths of both parents while serving in the military, Nabeel had left for Iraq in 1986, prodded by Isma'il. Now working as a photography assistant, Nabeel regularly sends cassette recordings to his family. One such tape, recently received, is a poignant reminder of his absence. The money he sends enables the family to modernize their home, yet he remains a distant presence in the physical landscape of Nashawy. Reflecting on this, Ghosh recognizes that change in the village extends beyond material acquisitions. It affects interpersonal dynamics. Families once poor are now wealthy; former outcasts are landowners. This economic transformation mirrors a broader pattern Ghosh observes—villagers who once occupied lower rungs of the social ladder now emerge as local elites. This upending of traditional hierarchies speaks volumes about the reconfiguration of rural identity and power through the influx of foreign income. Ustaz Sabry warns Ghosh that the newfound wealth will come at a price. The emotional toll on those left behind, like Jabir, and the emotional distance felt by those abroad, like Nabeel, are already clear indications of that cost. As Ghosh and Fawzia listen to Nabeel's cassette, the moment is charged with the contrast between the vibrant past and the distanced present. Later, when 'Ali and his younger brother Hussein return, the trio plays the tape, which includes updates from others in Iraq. That night, Hussein and a young cousin of Isma'il accompany Ghosh to the main road, forming a mirror image of their older relatives—a symbolic continuation of past relationships, yet altered by time and circumstance. It is a touching echo of the generational cycles that persist even amidst transformation.

In the next chapter, we see that the second letter from Ben Yiju does eventually reach Yusaf in Sicily. Surur sets out east, accompanied initially by his brother Moshe. Their journey begins in Messina, where mutual acquaintances help fund the passage. Though Moshe desires to continue, his father refuses permission. Later, Surur requests legal documents, and Moshe sees an opportunity to join him. However, en route, he is captured by crusading pirates and taken to Tyre. His family remains anxious until a letter arrives confirming his safety. By 1156, the brothers reunite in Egypt, and Surur marries Ben Yiju's daughter. Though Yusaf invites them back to Sicily, it appears he joins them in Egypt instead. Both Surur and Moshe become judges in a rabbinical court. Ben Yiju disappears from historical records after the wedding of his daughter. Ghosh speculates he may have returned to India or more likely died in Egypt. As for Ashu, she vanishes from the narrative. Bomma, though absent from Ben Yiju's later letters, resurfaces in a final record. Ghosh's final days in Egypt, narrated in Chapter Seven, coincide with the *mowlid* of Sidi Abu-Hasira, a legendary Jewish man believed to have flown into Egypt on a mat, converted to Islam, and acquired disciples. Though Ghosh misses the celebration, he and his driver Mohsin visit the tomb afterward. What he finds is far from a humble resting place. The tomb is encased in a modern structure, heavily guarded. Stopped and questioned, Ghosh cannot convincingly explain his interest in a Jewish saint's tomb. His inquisitors dismiss the place as mere superstition, unconnected to true Islamic faith. Escorted to a colonial-style building, he is further interrogated by an officer. The official insists that relics like the tomb are meaningless, and Ghosh is told to take the first train to Cairo. This unsettling episode prompts a moment of reflection. Back in America, Ghosh contemplates the officer's words. The man was right: his investigation was less about religion and more about cultural memory. Saints like Abu-Hasira were once revered across faiths, part of a shared heritage that blurred the lines between Judaism and Islam. These figures belonged to a lineage of Zeddikim, Jewish counterparts to Sufi saints, venerated across North Africa and Egypt. Yet, as Ghosh sees, modern ideologies have forcibly divorced this syncretic past from present consciousness; he recognizes that little tangible evidence remains to validate his story of Indo-Egyptian connections.

He laments that within the official worldview, nothing could substantiate his narrative.

Ghosh revisits the tensions wrought by globalization and colonial legacies, drawing a clear line between Egypt's changing rural landscape and the historical Indian Ocean trade. The influx of wealth from Iraq is not merely economic—it is part of a larger pattern of cultural transformation. Ghosh had earlier highlighted the growing distance between generations: the decline of traditional healing by Imam Ibrahim in favour of modern medicine symbolized by Ustaz Sabry was one sign. The villagers' aspirations for Western-style development had long been embedded, and when the opportunity came through Gulf remittances, the changes were swift and dramatic. However, these advancements were not without consequence. Ustaz Sabry's warnings, the personal anguish of Jabir, the disconnection of Nabeel—all point to a complex cost. The reshaping of village life disrupts more than economic structures; it affects identity, belonging, and continuity. Ghosh's skepticism about equating material progress with civilizational advancement is especially significant. This critical stance mirrors his view of colonial interference in the Indian Ocean trade, which once enabled vibrant multicultural exchanges.

Ghosh carefully offers brief conclusions for the people of Nashawy and Lataifa, humanizing the broader historical arc. Yet, in the case of Ben Yiju and his contemporaries, such closure remains elusive. The archival gaps, the fragmented nature of their stories, reflect the broader tendency of historical records to forget those deemed "inconsequential." Ghosh's reconstruction is thus not just historiography, but also an act of reclamation—an attempt to restore dignity to forgotten lives. The final insight into the legacy of Indian Ocean trade routes enriches Ghosh's exploration of cultural identity. The confrontation at Abu-Hasira's tomb illustrates the difficulty of reviving a once-interconnected world. Modern nationalism, state power, and religious orthodoxy have largely obliterated the remnants of trans-religious memory. Still, Ghosh finds a glimmer of hope. Despite suppression, figures like Abu-Hasira continue to be honoured by local communities. This lingering reverence suggests that not all connections have vanished. Though fragile

and threatened, the legacy of shared histories has not been entirely erased. The world of Bomma and Ben Yiju, though distant, may still echo in subtle, persistent ways.

- **Epilogue:**

Shortly after arriving in New York, Ghosh reached out to Nabeel, surprising him with a call from America. They exchanged updates, and Ghosh mentioned his upcoming trip to India, with hopes of passing through Baghdad—though this visit never materialized. Instead, he resolved to return to Egypt in 1990, convinced that by then, Nabeel would have returned as well. Bomma's tale, Ghosh notes, finds an unexpected conclusion in Philadelphia, where a fragment discovered at the Annenberg Research Institute contains a set of Ben Yiju's accounts. Likely originating from Fustat, this document includes a mention of money owed to Bomma—concrete evidence of his involvement in the Egyptian chapter of Ben Yiju's business. Ghosh reflects with a wry tone on the irony that Bomma's final trace emerged so far from the world he inhabited. Three weeks after Iraq invaded Kuwait, Ghosh departed Calicut for Cairo. While global powers organized a military coalition, Ghosh was travelling, reading about the mass exodus of Egyptian labourers fleeing Iraq. He had heard rumours that Jabir tried to journey there until the war's outbreak, and that Mabrouk remained in Iraq, worrying Shaikh Musa. Upon arriving in Nashawy, Ghosh visited Nabeel's still-unfinished house. Isma'il, who had successfully escaped Iraq, asked why Ghosh hadn't kept his promise to visit. He relayed that Nabeel had stayed behind, hoping to earn enough to complete the house. He also shared distressing accounts of attacks on Egyptians by Iraqi civilians. Watching the refugee crisis on TV, Ghosh felt Nabeel had "vanished into the anonymity of History" (353).

In the epilogue, Ghosh turns his attention to Bomma and Nabeel—figures lost to the official annals of history, yet deeply significant in the contexts of their own lives. He reflects on the strange irony that the final trace of Bomma—a "toddy-loving fisherman from Tuluand" (349)—exists in a world so detached from his reality, underscoring the limitations of traditional historical inquiry, which often fails to capture the texture of lived experience. Alongside this, Ghosh shares his concern about whether Nabeel managed to flee Iraq

after the invasion of Kuwait, using this uncertainty to emphasize the invisibility of individuals like Nabeel in sweeping narratives. His remark that Nabeel “vanished into the anonymity of History” (353) underscores how history frequently erases the nuanced humanity of those it ostensibly records. Through Bomma, Ghosh critiques how separating historical data from individual context creates an incomplete account. Through Nabeel, he argues that privileging grand narratives over personal ones strips people of their unique identities. Ghosh’s narrative technique, blending memoir, fiction, and history, emerges as a deliberate response to these shortcomings—an attempt to restore the human voice to the historical record.

Check Your Progress:

1. How does the introduction of TVs, gadgets, and migrant remittance wealth disrupt village life? (100 words)
2. Given the fragmentary evidence from the Cairo Geniza, how does Ghosh negotiate between historical fact and creative speculation when reconstructing Bomma’s life? (200 words)
3. How does Ghosh’s identity as an Indian Hindu in a Muslim majority Egyptian setting challenge assumptions of belonging? (100-150 words)

6.4 The Characters

1. **Amitav Ghosh:** Ghosh acts as the narrator for the first-person narrative set in Egypt. Simultaneously, he adopts a more detached narrative voice when recounting his historical investigations into the lives of the 12th century Jewish merchant, Abraham Ben Yiju, and his Indian slave, Bomma. Despite this shift in narrative perspective, Ghosh’s personal struggles and beliefs permeate his historical analyses. Ghosh is profoundly impacted by the enduring effects of colonialism and how this relates to the formation of identity. He explores the identities of contemporary Egyptians, the historical personas involved in the Indian Ocean trade routes, and his own connection to these narratives. This introspective

approach lends the book an autobiographical dimension. Ghosh is also the recipient of several of the villagers' questions and jibes, particularly related to the seeming lack of 'civilization' in India. He strives to remain non-judgemental, but is occasionally annoyed by these perceptions. This shows us the rigid cultural boundaries that persist in the modern era.

Therefore, Ghosh uses his personal encounters and deeply individual historical research to explore his connection to a pre-colonial past that remains elusive to both him and those he meets. It is noteworthy that Ghosh positions himself not as the central figure but as an observer; this approach allows him to slip into the lives of others, and offer nuanced perspectives to the readers.

2. **Abraham Ben Yiju:** Ben Yiju was a Jewish merchant whose letters were found in the Cairo Geniza. Born in Ifriqiya (modern-day Tunisia), he received a comprehensive education before moving eastward. He established connections with the prominent merchant Madmun ibn Al-Hasan in Aden, which facilitated his involvement in the Indian Ocean trade network. Sometime before 1132, Ben Yiju relocated to Mangalore, India, possibly due to external pressures. In Mangalore, he manumitted a female slave named Ashu, whom he later married, and they had children together. After nearly two decades, he departed India, leaving Ashu behind, and returned to the Middle East, eventually settling in Egypt. His records cease following the marriage of his daughter to his nephew. Ghosh utilizes Ben Yiju's correspondence as a lens to explore the lives of medieval individuals along the Indian Ocean trade routes. He draws parallels between Ben Yiju's experiences and those of contemporary Egyptians: of migration driven by economic opportunities. Both Ben Yiju and a modern individual named 'Eid are portrayed as engaging in relationships that transcend cultural norms. However, Ghosh also differentiates between Ben Yiju's extensive travels and multicultural interactions and the more localized experiences of modern Egyptians.
3. **Bomma:** Bomma was an enslaved Indian man from the Tulunad region near Mangalore. Drawing primarily from the Cairo Geniza documents, Ghosh uncovers that Bomma was acquired by the Jewish merchant

Abraham Ben Yiju shortly after his arrival in Mangalore. Over time, Bomma became integral to Ben Yiju's commercial ventures, assuming increasing responsibilities. One notable episode details Bomma's inebriated behaviour during a pirate attack. Evidence also indicates that Bomma accompanied Ben Yiju to Egypt, where he continued his active involvement in the merchant's affairs. Ghosh's initial awareness of Bomma stemmed from a letter, which he describes as "his own story" (254). Discovering that Bomma had travelled to Egypt instilled in Ghosh a sense of connection, as he, too, was an Indian residing abroad. Bomma's journey—from enslavement in India to life in Yemen and Egypt—epitomizes the multicultural and harmonious interactions characteristic of the Indian Ocean trade routes. Despite remaining unnamed for much of the narrative, Bomma represents the quintessential anonymous individual whose story Ghosh endeavors to illuminate. His connection allows Ghosh to explore central themes of the book, highlighting both personal and broader cultural resonances.

4. **Imam Ibrahim Abu-Kanaka:** Imam Ibrahim, the aging and irritable barber and healer of Nashawy, belongs to one of the village's founding families and holds deep knowledge of Egypt's traditional herbal remedies. Yet his life has turned bitter—soured by a troubled marriage, a profession he despises, and the growing dominance of modern medicine. These frustrations have driven him into seclusion, where only figures like Shaikh Musa still offer him respect. When Ghosh approaches him, their interaction is fraught from the start: Imam Ibrahim takes offense at Ghosh's inquiries into traditional practices—which he has now disavowed—and personal family matters. Their relationship worsens during a fierce argument over the global standing of Egypt and India, an exchange that later fills Ghosh with regret. Within the village, many view Imam Ibrahim as a relic of a fading era, his influence steadily eclipsed by modernists like Ustaz Sabry. Yet Ghosh reveals a more nuanced portrait—of a man striving to reinvent himself, quietly studying modern medicine in a bid to remain significant. Beneath this effort lies a deep anxiety about Egypt's declining status in a rapidly changing world. He exalts military strength and scientific advancement, adopting a colonial

lens that puts him at odds with Ghosh, who seeks to revive an older, more inclusive vision of the Indian Ocean culture.

5. **Nabeel:** Nabeel is a resident of Nashawy, who is the brother of Ali and cousin to Isma'il. Nabeel is portrayed as a quiet and thoughtful individual who dislikes manual labour but uniquely empathizes with Ghosh's experiences. Initially, he and Isma'il aspired to become technical advisors to *fellaheen* in the Ministry of Agriculture. However, after his parents' passing and at Isma'il's encouragement, Nabeel moved to Iraq in 1986 to work as an assistant in a photography shop. The remittances from his job improved his family's financial situation, but he remained in Iraq during the Gulf War's onset. The narrative concludes with Ghosh and Nabeel's family anxiously awaiting his return. In the Epilogue, Ghosh parallels Nabeel's disappearance from the narrative with that of Bomma, noting how both vanish "into the anonymity of History" (353).
6. **Shaikh Musa:** Shaikh Musa emerges as one of the first individuals Ghosh forms a close bond with during his initial journey to Egypt. An aging *fellah*, Shaikh Musa has two sons from his first marriage—Ahmed, who received a formal education, and Hasan, who remained engaged in agricultural labour. Just before Ghosh's arrival, Shaikh Musa remarries, tying him to Abu-'Ali's family, a connection that leaves him reluctant to voice open disapproval of Abu-'Ali, despite underlying tensions. During Ghosh's time in Cairo, tragedy strikes as Hasan, Shaikh Musa's beloved son, passes away, a loss that leaves a profound mark on the old man. Yet, he continues to stay in contact with Ghosh after his move to Nashawy, often reminiscing about the former residents. By Ghosh's second visit, Shaikh Musa shares his observations on the transformations overtaking the village, changes that seem to unsettle even him. Ironically, he finds himself with fewer possessions than many fellow villagers. As a character, Shaikh Musa stands as both Ghosh's ally and a symbol of unwavering tradition—supporting figures like Imam Ibrahim, avoiding modern liberties such as entering shops in traditional robes, and refusing to rebuke family despite discord. Through him, Ghosh captures the tension between continuity and inevitable change.

7. **Ustaz Sabry:** Ustaz Sabry, a young and articulate teacher in the village, commands deep respect for his piety and rhetorical skill. Villagers often recall, with admiration, the time he convincingly won a debate against an atheist on the subject of God. Although he appears only briefly throughout the book, Sabry represents a significant ideological shift taking root in the village. Ghosh first encounters him at the local school and is struck by his sharp intellect. He later visits Sabry's home during a gathering of friends, and on a subsequent trip, hears of his skepticism regarding financial aid arriving from Iraq. Sabry is portrayed as a symbol of the village's younger generation—intelligent, persuasive, and committed to a stricter, more fundamentalist vision of Islam that actively rejects local folklore and so-called superstition in favour of eradicating “all exploitation and unbelief” (147–8). This outlook wins him the loyalty of youth like Isma'il but also earns disapproval from elders such as Shaikh Musa. Sabry stands in clear contrast to Imam Ibrahim, and through him, Ghosh examines the shifting tides of belief. Similar currents are later seen in India, notably in the Magavira town.

6.5 Critical Reception

Amitav Ghosh's *In an Antique Land* was met with widespread acclaim for its ambitious fusion of genres—history, travel narrative, anthropology, and memoir. *Kirkus Reviews* applauded its “enormous lucidity and flashes of gentle humor,” praising the seamless narrative transition between Ghosh's immersion in rural Egyptian life and his meticulous reconstruction of 12th-century trader-slave relationships. *Publishers Weekly* highlighted its “leisurely blend of travelogue, history and cross-cultural analysis,” noting Ghosh's challenge to modern notions of slavery and his vivid portrayal of medieval Indian-Ocean commerce. Bruce King (*World Literature Today*) commended Ghosh's “skillful mixture” of historical reconstruction and ethnography, framing the book as a provocative counter-narrative to European imperial histories. Pico Iyer (*Los Angeles Times Book Review*) celebrated Ghosh's evocative evocation of Egyptian village life and the “agelessness” of cultures that intersect space and time. Likewise, Robert Irwin (*Washington Post Book World*) praised the intricate weaving of

medieval letters with contemporary field observations, calling it a “social history of people who would otherwise have little or no history”.

Some critiques, however, questioned whether Ghosh achieved all he set out to do. Ahdaf Soueif (*Times Literary Supplement*) described the work as “generous” and heartfelt, but ultimately felt it fell short of delivering on some intriguing historical hints. And while Bruce King noted that Ghosh might sentimentalize this lost world, he nonetheless valued the restoration of its interconnected cultural map.

Overall, *In an Antique Land* is celebrated for its narrative elegance, depth of anthropological insight, and its challenge to Eurocentric historiography—crafted as both a scholarly investigation and a moving testament to shared Middle Eastern–South Asian pasts.

SAQ:

1. What does the multilingual pidgin and Jewish Muslim Indian interaction in Ben Yiju’s circles suggest about premodern globalization? How does Ghosh juxtapose that against the rigid cultural borders he experiences? (150+150 words)

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2. In what ways do figures like Abu Ali and Ustaz Sabry reflect differing forms of social authority, and how does Ghosh navigate these relationships as an outsider? (200 words)

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3. In what ways does the dependency on colonial archives and Western scholarship expose contradictions in how non-Western histories are preserved or marginalized? (150-200 words)

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6.6 Summing Up

In this unit, we have discussed Amitav Ghosh's *In an Antique Land* in detail. In the following unit, we will discuss the themes and techniques used in the text. For further reading, refer to the section below.

6.7 References and Suggested Reading

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Unit- 7

Amitav Ghosh: *In an Antique Land* (Themes and Techniques)

Unit Structure:

- 7.1 Objectives
- 7.2 Introduction
- 7.3 Themes
 - 7.3.1 Fragmented Dual Narrative
 - 7.3.2 Anthropology Meets Fiction
 - 7.3.3 Postcolonial Critique and Knowledge Politics
 - 7.3.4 Cultural Encounter and Identity
- 7.4 Stylistic Techniques and Genre-Blending
- 7.5 Summing Up
- 7.6 References and Suggested Reading

7.1 Objectives

In this unit, we will:

- *understand* how Ghosh employs dual narrative in the text;
- *discuss* how the author's background in anthropology makes his examination of the past richer;
- *analyse* the different stylistic techniques, as well as the genre-blending nature of the text;
- *recognize* how postcolonialism and the politics of knowledge are imbued in the text.

7.2 Introduction

Ghosh interrogates the pervasive influence of colonialism on knowledge and identity. The title nods to Shelley's "Ozymandias" – a gesture aimed at de-centring the Western gaze over ancient cultures. Through his dual frame—

narrating fieldwork in two villages in Egypt and reconstructing a 12th-century Jewish-Indian narrative — Ghosh rescues submerged pre-colonial ties across the Indian Ocean world. He vividly evokes trade, religious syncretism, and everyday life shared between Jews, Muslims, Hindus, and archipelago communities, prior to the rupture imposed by European modernity. As a trained anthropologist, Ghosh mines his lived experiences; his personal interactions disrupt the idea of detached scholarly authority. He becomes the “Other,” questioned by villagers on his Indian and religious identity. By exposing his own biases, he critiques Western epistemological claims and invites readers to reconsider how knowledge is constructed.

The modern narrative tracks change in Egypt between Ghosh’s visits in the early 1980s and 1988, including the effects of migration, remittances, and consumerism, which reshapes social bonds in the villages. The parallel medieval storyline emphasizes that such social flux and movement existed centuries earlier, often in more peaceful, interwoven ways. Yet, Ghosh remains ambivalent: cultural exchange does happen, but borders, memory, and colonial wounds endure. Ghosh masterfully interweaves two timelines: his 20th century ethnographic fieldwork in Egyptian villages and the 12th century stories of Abraham Ben/ Yiju and his Indian slave, Bomma. He likens this to a “double helix,” allowing the centuries to echo one another without forcing direct interaction. *In/ an/ Antique/ Land* deliberately resists classification. It veers between memoir, travelogue, detective story, anthropology, historical investigation, and literary narrative. Its fragmentary, past-tense narration deliberately undercuts the illusion of definitive scholarly objectivity.

Ghosh foregrounds the errors, misreads, and engagements of fieldwork: his awkwardness with local dialects, dependence on locals, and cultural missteps are all narrated candidly. This self-awareness disrupts the standard anthropologist-as-authority mold. Mining the Cairo Geniza, Ghosh reconstructs medieval lives using fragmented letters and documents. These archival “ghost voices” are interwoven with imaginative fleshing-out — balancing rigorous history with literary empathy. This creative reconstruction is not fictionalization for drama but disciplined storytelling that honours gaps

in the historical record. Rather than resolving the tensions between personal and historical, insider and outsider, Ghosh leaves them unresolved, mirroring real-world complexity. There's no tidy reconciliation; just an invitation to live with ambiguity and appreciate the ethical dimensions of reconstructing silenced histories.

Thematically, *In an Antique Land* challenges colonial knowledges, resurrects pre-modern cosmopolitan histories, and probes the ethical limits of scholarly intervention. Methodologically, it destabilizes epistemic hierarchies, embraces reflexivity, and honours archival silences. Its fragmentary, dual helix structure is itself a critique of linear history, and its refusal to wrap up narratives neatly respects the enduring complexity of identity, culture, and memory.

7.3 Themes

7.3.1 Fragmented Dual Narrative

- **Double helix Structure:** Amitav Ghosh deliberately frames *In an Antique Land* through a dual timeline: his own fieldwork in rural Egypt during the 1980s, and the reconstructed life of Abraham Ben Yiju and his Indian slave, Bomma, in the 12th century. Rather than presenting two separate stories one after the other, Ghosh entwines them like a double helix: each strand maintains its chronological integrity, yet constantly loops around the other, creating a narrative symmetry. From the opening chapters, the story shifts back and forth: one moment Ghosh is living among *fellaheen* in Lataifa or Nashawy in 1980–81, and the next he is piecing together letters from the Cairo Geniza to illuminate Ben/ Yiju's world.

The modern-day ethnographic narrative begins with Ghosh's arrival in Lataifa as a graduate student, where he immerses himself in village life, learns Nile Delta Arabic, befriends locals, and begins to experience cross-cultural friction and warmth firsthand. In parallel, the medieval narrative reconstructs Ben Yiju's voyages from Ifriqiya to Aden, then to Mangalore, and Bomma's role as trusted Indian business agent and eventual successor, drawn from Cairo Geniza letters. Each time Ghosh introduces a personal anecdote from

contemporary Egypt—say, a comment by his interpreter about Hindu rituals—it triggers a segue into the 12th-century cultural context where Ben Yiju married an Indian woman and embraced syncretic networks across faiths. This interlacing is more than a stylistic ornament; it reflects Ghosh’s thesis that past and present are co constitutive. He described the structure as “a double helix,” in which two chronological strands are mutually illuminating but never collapse into a single timeline. Importantly, neither narrative is subordinated; both move forward in time independently while their juxtaposition invites connections. A transformation observed in Nashawy between Ghosh’s visits (1980 and 1988) echoes the disruptions in Ben Yiju’s era following the arrival of Europeans—both eras experience trade driven cosmopolitanism and its erosion under new global forces. Thus this double helix structure ensures that his modern ethnography and his medieval historiography remain distinct yet mutually resonant threads in the same literary and intellectual tapestry.

- **Interconnected Cultural Histories:** Ghosh’s narrative choice underscores profound thematic resonances: past and present cultures mirror and reinforce one another, revealing long buried connections between Egyptian, Indian, Jewish, Muslim, and Hindu peoples. As he lives in Nashawy and Lataifa, he encounters villagers bound by migration, religious identity, work, and social change, echoes of the medieval Indian Ocean world where Abraham Ben Yiju, Bomma, and Ashu negotiated identity across culture and geography.

In both eras, trade functions as a unifying force. The 12th-century network linking Ifriqiya, Aden, Mangalore, and Cairo becomes a symbol of pre colonial cosmopolitanism: Jews, Hindus, Muslims, and others exchanged goods, language, and ideas freely across the Indian Ocean. Ghosh reconstructs how letters in Judeo Arabic and hybrid terms like the Arabic *sukkar* (sugar) derived from Sanskrit, and the Hindi *misri* from Masr (Egypt), reflect fluid linguistic and commercial interconnection. Centuries later, Ghosh notes similar syncretisms: villagers employ borrowed words, share stories, and react to his Indian identity—with reactions that reveal lingering cultural distance as well as shared past frames.

The motif of migration reinforces the mirror. In the 1980s, many Nashawy villagers work in Iraq or the Gulf, return with remittances, new homes, and altered relationships, a transformation Ghosh documents vividly upon revisiting in 1988. Similarly, Ben Yiju travelled to India, lived there for decades, married, sent Bomma back to Aden on business, then returned with family; his world is defined by mobility, diaspora, and cultural negotiation. Both narratives reflect how displacement and commerce reshape social bonds and identities.

Critics note a counter history emerges through this pairing: the medieval world appears more ecumenical, tolerant, commercially integrated, and flexible than Ghosh's modern Egypt, which seems more insular and affected by materialism, nationalism, and Western knowledge systems. The comparison serves as both critique and lament: modernity's rigid borders and postcolonial residues contrast starkly with the earlier era's braided cultural histories. By weaving narratives of Ben Yiju and Bomma with his own experience, Ghosh demonstrates that seemingly disparate times and peoples share a connective tissue of trade, language, and human relationship, which colonialism later partitioned and obscured. Histories are intertwined, identities are hybrid, and cultural exchanges transcend official boundaries. The modern and medieval stories reinforce each other: the past gives depth to present social realities, and Ghosh's fieldwork in turn makes the medieval narrative present tense in its vividness. Through this double helix, cultural histories are revealed not as isolated epochs, but as ongoing dialogues across time.

7.3.2 Anthropology Meets Fiction

- **Ghosh's Critique of Traditional Ethnography:** In *In an Antique Land*, Amitav Ghosh subverts traditional ethnographic authority by deliberately foregrounding the researcher's subjectivity. Instead of adhering to the detached, empirical voice that characterizes classical anthropological texts, Ghosh openly acknowledges his personal involvement, emotional entanglements, and evolving understanding during his fieldwork in rural Egypt. The narrative resists the positivist

ideal of objective observation; rather, it interrogates the very premise that a researcher can exist apart from the community being studied. Ghosh's self-reflexivity, that is, his admission of linguistic missteps, cultural awkwardness, and personal vulnerabilities, exposes the myth of the neutral ethnographer and instead renders anthropology a human, relational act.

Crucially, Ghosh reverses the traditional anthropologist–subject hierarchy. Instead of being the sole interpreter of another culture, he becomes a subject of scrutiny himself. His Egyptian interlocutors question his Indianness, his religion, his political affiliations, and even mock his scholarly intentions. For instance, the villagers not only interrogate him but sometimes dismiss his answers, revealing how power dynamics in the field can shift unpredictably. This reversal dismantles the colonial legacy of the Western ethnographer documenting the “Other” from a superior vantage point. Ghosh, despite being a postcolonial Indian, experiences a disempowering gaze from his Egyptian hosts, complicating simplistic binaries of East and West or observer and observed.

Moreover, Ghosh's dual narrative juxtaposes the medieval life of Ben Yiju with his own late-20th-century fieldwork; it also shows that ethnographic representation is always mediated and incomplete. The archival recovery of Ben Yiju's life is full of interpretative gaps, while Ghosh's ethnographic present is marked by political barriers and cultural misrecognitions. He does not claim definitive knowledge; rather, he embraces uncertainty and multiplicity. By doing so, Ghosh critiques the anthropological compulsion to fix cultures within explanatory frames and instead foregrounds the fluid, dialogic, and often ambiguous nature of cross-cultural encounter.

Ultimately, *In an Antique Land* challenges the foundational premise of traditional ethnography: its claim to authority. Ghosh offers a more democratic and ethically aware mode of cultural narration, where the ethnographer is no longer an omniscient interpreter but a participant, shaped and sometimes destabilized by the very context he seeks to document.

- **Sensory Descriptions and Episodic Anecdotes:** *In an Antique Land* is distinguished by its vivid sensory descriptions and anecdotal

storytelling, which together construct a textured experience of cultural immersion while deliberately resisting epistemic finality. Ghosh's prose is rich with tactile detail: scents of cumin and dung smoke, the harsh clang of tools in an Egyptian forge, the oppressive desert heat, or the visual intricacies of a dusty market in Lataifa. These sensual evocations immerse the reader in lived realities, rendering the cultural landscape not as a sterile object of study but as a sensuous, breathing environment. Through these embodied descriptions, Ghosh bridges the gap between reader and subject, making foreign worlds intimate and perceptible.

The use of episodic anecdotes enhances this immersive strategy while simultaneously introducing structural openness and narrative ambiguity. Rather than unfolding in a linear or didactic fashion, the book advances through loosely connected moments: conversations with villagers, bureaucratic absurdities, encounters with imams, or fragments from the Geniza archive. These moments rarely culminate in resolution; instead, they evoke partial understandings and underscore the limits of interpretation. For instance, Ghosh's dialogue with Abu-Ali about religion and politics is not presented as a closed argument but as an ongoing negotiation, marked by misinterpretations and moments of shared humor or tension. This narrative form also mirrors the thematic core of the book: the impossibility of a singular, authoritative account of culture or history. The historical narrative of Ben Yiju is not reconstructed as a seamless biography but as a series of archival glimpses, shadowed by uncertainties. Similarly, the modern ethnographic encounters are filtered through Ghosh's incomplete knowledge of Arabic and his own sociopolitical displacement. By eschewing narrative closure, Ghosh invites readers to inhabit uncertainty as an ethical stance, resisting the anthropological urge to generalize or essentialize.

Furthermore, Ghosh's storytelling blurs genres, combining travelogue, memoir, history, and fiction, to underscore the constructed nature of cultural knowledge. His self-aware narrative structure becomes a methodological critique: knowledge, like story, is pieced together through fragments, silences, and negotiations. The use of anecdote thus becomes not merely a stylistic choice but a philosophical one, highlighting that truth in intercultural understanding is provisional, not absolute. In combining vivid sensory language

with fragmented, anecdotal structure, Ghosh reimagines ethnography as a form of lived experience rather than detached study. This method invites readers into a world of textured multiplicity while affirming the value of ambiguity and human complexity in cultural representation.

Stop to Consider:

Let us discuss some novels in which the past meets the present, like in *In an Antique Land*:

1. A.S. Byatt's *Possession: A Romance* (1990)

A.S. Byatt's *Possession* masterfully weaves together two narratives: one set in the Victorian era and the other in contemporary England, creating a layered exploration of love, scholarship, and historical recovery. The novel follows Roland Michell and Maud Bailey, two modern academics, who uncover a secret romantic correspondence between two fictional Victorian poets, Randolph Ash and Christabel LaMotte. Through the process of archival discovery: letters, diaries, poems, the boundaries between the researchers' lives and the lives of their subjects begin to blur.

Like *In an Antique Land*, *Possession* interrogates the ethics and mechanics of historical reconstruction. Byatt reveals how knowledge of the past is always mediated, often fragmentary, and influenced by present-day desires. The novel plays with academic obsession and literary detective work, exposing the gaps and assumptions inherent in scholarly interpretation. Byatt's use of embedded texts (such as faux-Victorian poetry and letters) reflects her deep engagement with historical voice, much as Ghosh uses historical documents to bring medieval figures like Ben Yiju and Bomma to life. Both novels critique disciplinary authority and embrace the fluidity of historical meaning, reminding us that the past is never fully knowable, but always intimately entangled with the present.

2. Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* (1992)

Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* unfolds in the ruins of an Italian villa during the final days of World War II, where four displaced characters—Hana, Caravaggio, Kip, and the titular “English patient”—confront the fragmented aftermath of global conflict. The narrative is deeply non-linear, blending the present-tense suffering and intimacy of the villa with flashbacks to the mysterious patient's past as Count László Almásy, a desert explorer and mapmaker in North Africa. Through memory, storytelling, and disjointed recollection, the novel slowly reveals a buried love affair, political betrayal, and the emotional fallout of imperial war.

Much like Ghosh in *In an Antique Land*, Ondaatje resists linear historiography. He constructs a palimpsest of past and present, where personal histories mirror the collapse of empire and the fluidity of identity. The novel foregrounds the unreliability of memory, the limitations of documentation, and the human cost of abstraction, especially in colonial mapping and wartime espionage. Ondaatje's lyrical prose and multi-voiced narrative echo Ghosh's novelistic pacing and resistance to fixed categories. Both novels explore how individual lives are shaped by broader historical forces, yet resist being flattened into official accounts. In both, the past remains active, haunting, and unresolved within the present moment.

Check Your Progress:

1. How does Amitav Ghosh's use of a non-linear, dual narrative structure challenge conventional boundaries between history and fiction? (150 words)
2. How does Ghosh complicate the figure of the ‘Other’ in anthropological writing through his representation of informants and historical characters? (150 words)

7.3.3 Postcolonial Critique and Knowledge Politics

- **Ghosh's Interrogation of Western Archive-Dependency**

Amitav Ghosh's *In an Antique Land* is a powerful critique of the Eurocentric epistemology that privileges written archives, especially those constructed during or through colonial encounters. His use of the Cairo Geniza—specifically, the letters relating to Abraham Ben Yiju, a 12th-century Jewish trader in Egypt and India—serves both as a narrative backbone and a point of interrogation. These Geniza fragments were “salvaged” by European scholars like Solomon Schechter, who transplanted them from their original cultural-religious context to the Bodleian Library in Oxford. Ghosh frames this act not as scholarly benevolence but as colonial appropriation, wherein knowledge systems are uprooted and reinterpreted through Western categories. Ghosh challenges the authority of this archive in multiple ways. First, he reveals its incompleteness: the Geniza letters, despite their aura of factuality, offer only fragmented glimpses of Ben Yiju's life, filtered through impersonal transactional language. Second, he contrasts the sterile reading-room environment of Oxford's Bodleian Library with the lively, oral traditions and embodied histories he encounters in rural Egypt and India. This juxtaposition foregrounds the limitations of textual archives and points to the violence of epistemic extraction. The archive, far from being neutral, is exposed as a space of erasure and distortion, especially of subaltern voices like that of Bomma, the Indian slave who served Ben Yiju.

Ghosh subtly yet insistently argues that alternative ways of knowing through oral memory, embodied traditions, and lived experience often resist the neat categorizations of the Western archive. He embeds his ethnographic self into the narrative, highlighting how his own access to these documents is mediated by colonial power structures. Thus, *In an Antique Land* becomes both a historical reconstruction and a meta-commentary on the act of historiography itself. Ghosh refuses to draw definitive conclusions from the documents, instead drawing attention to their silences and gaps. This approach destabilizes the Western belief in the supremacy of textual

evidence and reveals the archive as a site of imperial control rather than objective truth. In doing so, Ghosh crafts an alternative historiography, one that questions who gets to write history, which sources are privileged, and how the voices of the colonized can be restored or reimagined. The Geniza letters thus become both a resource and a critique, a space of encounter and a symbol of loss.

- **Cultural Hybridity and Porous Identities:** *In an Antique Land* presents a strikingly fluid vision of identity that transcends the rigid boundaries imposed by modern nation-states, religions, and ethnicities. Ghosh excavates the world of Ben Yiju and Bomma to reveal a medieval Indian Ocean cosmopolis where cultural and religious syncretism was not exceptional but the norm. Through the interweaving of his historical and ethnographic narratives, Ghosh contests Eurocentric historiography which often posits identity as fixed, linear, and anchored in state or ethnicity. Instead, he foregrounds the historical reality of hybridity, showing how identities were, and continue to be, formed in relation, negotiation, and migration.

Ben Yiju himself is emblematic of such hybridity. A Jewish merchant from Tunisia, living in Egypt, married to an Indian woman, and conducting business in the Malabar Coast, he defies modern notions of cultural purity. The absence of rigid religious or racial boundaries in his interactions—employing Muslim scribes, marrying outside his faith, and partnering with a Hindu slave—speaks volumes about the pluralistic ethos of the Indian Ocean world. This fluidity contrasts starkly with the communal and nationalist identities that dominate contemporary political discourses, especially in postcolonial India and Egypt. Ghosh's own presence in the narrative as an Indian researcher in a rural Egyptian village in the 1980s reinforces the continuing reality of cultural permeability. His complex positionality as both an insider and outsider disrupts binaries of East and West. Though he shares a historical and linguistic affinity with the people of Lataifa, his presence is still framed through the lens of postcolonial suspicion and bureaucratic scrutiny. Yet, moments of warmth, shared meals, and humour underscore that cultural affinities persist despite the distancing effects of modern borders and political ideologies.

Language, too, becomes a key vehicle for hybridity. Ghosh navigates between Arabic, English, Hindi, and medieval Judeo-Arabic, revealing how multilingualism was a fundamental aspect of premodern cosmopolitanism. In contrast to colonial modernity, which often imposed monolingual, homogenized identities, the world Ghosh recovers thrives on translation, code-switching, and intercultural dialogue. Through this lens, the very idea of “hybridity” becomes not an anomaly but a historical norm.

By showcasing these porous, entangled lives across centuries, Ghosh resists the hegemonic model of linear, Western history. He reimagines history as a palimpsest—layered, dynamic, and constituted by cross-cultural flows. *In an Antique Land* thus becomes not just a historiographical intervention but an ethical one, reminding readers of the deep histories of connectedness that predate and challenge modern regimes of exclusion and purity.

7.3.4 Cultural Encounter and Identity

- **Cultural Belonging and Outsider-ness:** Amitav Ghosh’s *In an Antique Land* is as much a journey into the medieval past as it is a meditation on the modern self. At its core lies a deeply felt tension between cultural belonging and outsider-ness, with Ghosh often caught between his Indian identity and his ambiguous place in Egyptian society. Despite geographical and cultural proximities between India and Egypt, Ghosh finds himself both a kindred spirit and an alien in the small village of Lataifa. His Indian nationality and scholarly status earn him initial curiosity, but this quickly morphs into suspicion, especially when locals attempt to “anthropologize” him. They ask probing questions, define his religious affiliations, and even speculate about his caste and his language, in a reversal of the anthropological gaze that problematizes colonial-era ethnographic authority.

This inversion of roles, where Ghosh becomes the observed rather than the observer, compels him to reflect on how deeply constructed cultural categories can be. The villagers’ inability to place him within a recognizable framework reveals the rigid modern demarcations of religion and nationality. Ironically, while Ghosh came to Egypt to study the cosmopolitan past, he

ends up confronting the insularities of the present. He is seen not merely as an Indian but as a Hindu, perhaps even as an Israeli spy due to his interest in Jewish history. The discomfort he feels reflects a broader cultural fragmentation that no longer allows for fluid identities or layered affiliations.

In contrast, the historical figure of Ben Yiju, the 12th-century Jewish merchant Ghosh studies, inhabits a world where identities are multiple and porous. Yiju's life in Mangalore, marriage to an Indian woman, and adoption of local customs demonstrate an acceptance of cross-cultural mingling that is inconceivable in the world Ghosh traverses. Yet, despite his admiration for this medieval cosmopolitanism, Ghosh's own experiences are marked by suspicion and bureaucratic obstruction. His presence in Egypt sharpens his awareness of his outsider status. Thus, his exploration of the past becomes entangled with his own present-day experience of dislocation, revealing how cultural belonging has become more circumscribed in a postcolonial world governed by borders, identities, and geopolitical anxieties.

- **The Collapse of Ancient Syncretism and the Rise of Modern Divisions:** One of the most poignant undercurrents in *In an Antique Land* is Amitav Ghosh's reflection on the collapse of ancient syncretism, especially as it relates to language, religion, and everyday life. In tracing the story of Ben Yiju and his Indian slave, Bomma, Ghosh uncovers a world where the boundaries between Jew, Hindu, Muslim, and Arab were far more fluid. Their communications occurred in hybrid dialects, including Arabic tinged with Gujarati or Malayalam, showing how language itself was a product of constant cultural negotiation. The ease with which people moved between linguistic and religious codes testified to an openness that Ghosh sees as lost in the present.

This past is contrasted with the rigidity of the modern moment, where national and religious identities are entrenched and jealously guarded. In the village of Lataifa, where Ghosh lives during his fieldwork, there is little room for syncretism. The villagers exhibit an anxiety about purity—religious, national, and linguistic—which has replaced earlier modes of cultural blending. For instance, Ghosh notes the villagers' obsession with determining whether he is a Muslim or Hindu, revealing how contemporary affiliations leave little

room for ambiguity. The once porous boundaries that allowed for shared rituals, marriages across communities, and mutual reverence for saints or languages have hardened into impermeable divisions.

Religious syncretism, which once thrived in rituals that blurred lines between Sufi Islam and Hindu *bhakti*, has become suspect or erased under modern nationalism. Ghosh laments how these rich traditions have been marginalized in both India and Egypt, often due to colonial legacies that emphasized classification, and postcolonial ideologies that sought unity through uniformity. As political identities became tied to religious and national loyalty, the possibility of plural belonging became diminished. Ben Yiju's India, where a Jewish man could thrive in a Hindu society, feels almost utopian in contrast.

Furthermore, Ghosh's archival research is constantly interrupted by the bureaucratic apparatus of the modern nation-state—visas, checkpoints, letters scrutinized—making the historical past of syncretism not just a scholarly curiosity, but an ethical imperative. Through these contrasts, Ghosh subtly critiques the present's intolerance for multiplicity. His excavation of the past serves not only to recover forgotten histories but also to expose what has been lost in the modern drive toward exclusivity, purity, and division. The book thus becomes both an elegy and a plea for the possibility of a world where cultural blending is not feared, but celebrated.

7.4 Stylistic Techniques and Genre-Blending

Amitav Ghosh's *In an Antique Land* challenges the conventional boundaries of academic ethnography by blending literary storytelling with historical inquiry. Unlike traditional anthropological texts that adopt a detached, objective tone, Ghosh embraces subjectivity and introspection through his narrative structure. He employs a dual narrative, one rooted in his personal experiences in rural Egypt during the 1980s, and the other reconstructing the life of a 12th-century Jewish merchant's Indian slave; each is interwoven with novelistic techniques that prioritize human depth over disciplinary neutrality.

The use of a prologue and epilogue frames the book in a self-reflexive manner, acknowledging the incompleteness and positionality of the author. This framing device serves as a reminder that the ethnographer is not a neutral observer but a participant embedded in socio-cultural contexts. By opening and closing the narrative with personal reflection, Ghosh subtly critiques the disembodied stance of Western academia and invites the reader into a dialogic relationship with the text. Ghosh's choice of recollective past tense further enhances this intimacy. His first-person accounts are laced with memory, uncertainty, and emotional nuance, which stand in stark contrast to the empirical tone expected of ethnographic monographs. The act of remembering becomes a narrative act, revealing the tension between lived experience and its documentation. The unreliable yet honest narrator exposes the limits of absolute knowledge and resists the temptation to universalize or flatten cultural difference.

Additionally, Ghosh structures the text with novelistic pacing—building suspense, using cliffhangers between chapters, and developing character arcs for both historical and contemporary figures. This allows for a layered exploration of time and identity that invites empathy rather than objectification. His informants, whether the modern-day villagers or historical actors like Ben Yiju and Bomma, are presented with nuance, voice, and agency. By blurring the line between fiction and ethnography, Ghosh not only subverts disciplinary norms but also reclaims storytelling as a legitimate epistemology. He elevates the ethnographic subject from data point to protagonist, encouraging a deeper, more humane understanding of cross-cultural encounters. In doing so, Ghosh offers a form of “literary ethnography” that privileges emotional truth and contextual resonance over impersonal analysis, forging a new model for writing about the other without erasure or domination.

Ghosh also explores the theme of cultural dislocation through the twin devices of descriptive imagery and linguistic encounters. His richly evocative prose functions as more than aesthetic embellishment; it becomes a means of translating lived experience across cultural boundaries, often highlighting the inadequacies and paradoxes of translation itself. Throughout the book, Ghosh's use of vivid descriptive imagery immerses the reader in the physical

and emotional landscape of his field sites. From the oppressive heat and dust of rural Egyptian villages to the minutiae of architecture, gestures, and communal rituals, these sensory details construct a palpable world that resists abstraction. However, this attention to environment also foregrounds the ethnographer's own outsider status. His perception is filtered through cultural difference, and the very act of describing often betrays a subtle alienation. For instance, his fascination with everyday objects and customs reflects both curiosity and estrangement, making the descriptive act a site of both translation and misapprehension.

Language, however, is the more explicit battleground of cultural encounter. Ghosh's repeated struggles with Arabic, and the villagers' amusement or frustration at his linguistic limitations, function as narrative motifs. These barriers are not mere inconveniences but structural challenges to mutual understanding. Ghosh frequently reflects on his reliance on dictionaries, the gaps in his vocabulary, and the emotional undertones lost or mangled in translation. In doing so, he dramatizes the impossibility of fully conveying meaning across linguistic divides, especially when the translation is entangled with power dynamics, colonial histories, and differing epistemologies.

Moreover, Ghosh extends this awareness to historical texts. In reconstructing the story of the Jewish merchant Ben Yiju and his Indian slave Bomma, Ghosh grapples with Arabic, Hebrew, and Tamil sources. He is acutely aware of how archival documents, even when 'translated,' remain sedimented with cultural assumptions and inaccessible references. The disjunctures between languages, both living and dead, serve as metaphors for larger epistemic ruptures between civilizations. This preoccupation with translation and miscommunication underscores Ghosh's central thesis: that history and culture are not static truths to be decoded but dynamic, polyphonic encounters shaped by gaps, silences, and approximations. Through poetic description and linguistic self-awareness, Ghosh reveals not just the difficulty of understanding the Other, but also the ethical imperative to acknowledge that difficulty without erasing it.

SAQ:

1. To what extent can *In an Antique Land* be considered a postcolonial text? How do its techniques reflect resistance to Eurocentric modes of knowledge production? (100+100 words)

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2. In what ways does the theme of translation operate both literally (in language) and metaphorically (in cultural understanding) throughout the text? (150-200 words)

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3. How do the prologue and epilogue serve as framing devices to subvert the authority of the academic narrator? (100 words)

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7.5 Summing Up

In this unit, we have discussed the themes and techniques used by Ghosh in *In an Antique Land*. For further reading, refer to the section below.

7.6 References and Suggested Reading

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Block- 2

Unit 1: An Introduction to Nissim Ezekiel

Unit 2: “Night of the Scorpion”; “Background, Casually”; “Poem of the Separation”

Unit 3: Kamala Das: An Introduction (Partial)

Unit 4: Kamala Das: “My Grandmother’s House”, “A Hot Noon In Malabar,” “The Sunshine Cat” (Partial)

Unit 5: Keki N Daruwalla: Hawk, the King Speaks to the Scribe, Fish are Speared by Night

Unit 6: Agha Shahid Ali: Postcard from Kashmir, Snowmen, the Season of the Plains

Unit- 1

An Introduction to Nissim Ezekiel

Unit Structure:

- 1.1 Objectives
- 1.2 Introduction
- 1.3 Biographical Sketch
- 1.4 Literary Career and Major Works
- 1.5 Thematic Explorations
- 1.6 Stylistic Features
- 1.7 Critical Reception and Legacy
- 1.8 Summing Up
- 1.9 References and Suggested Reading

1.1 Objectives

With this unit, you will be able to:

- *understand* the development of Indian-English poetry, and Nissim Ezekiel's role in it;
- *read* about the literary career and major works of Ezekiel;
- *analyse* the themes and stylistic features explored by Ezekiel;
- *appreciate* his legacy and the critical reception to his oeuvre.

1.2 Introduction

Indian English poetry, often termed Indo-Anglian poetry, traces its origins to the late 18th century, emerging from the confluence of British colonial influence and India's rich literary traditions. Early poets like Henry Louis Vivian Derozio laid the groundwork by blending Western literary forms with Indian themes. This period was marked by a strong adherence to

British Romantic and Victorian styles, with poets such as Rabindranath Tagore and Sarojini Naidu infusing their works with spiritual and nationalistic fervour. Their poetry often reflected a longing for India's past glory and a vision for its future, encapsulating the nation's struggle for identity under colonial rule.

However, as India approached and eventually gained independence in 1947, there was a palpable shift in the thematic and stylistic concerns of its English-language poets. The post-independence era demanded a new poetic voice—one that could articulate the complexities of a modern, urbanizing India. It was in this milieu that Nissim Ezekiel emerged as a transformative figure. Born in Bombay in 1924 to a Bene Israel Jewish family, Ezekiel's multicultural background and Western education equipped him with a unique lens through which to view Indian society.

Ezekiel's poetry marked a departure from the romanticized and often idealistic portrayals of India. Instead, he introduced a candid, introspective, and sometimes satirical perspective on contemporary Indian life. His works delved into the mundane realities of urban existence, exploring themes like alienation, identity crises, and the ironies of modernity. In poems such as 'The Railway Clerk' and 'Night of the Scorpion,' Ezekiel employed simple language and everyday scenarios to highlight deeper societal issues, while in 'Background, Casually,' he reflects on his own identity and experiences in urban India. His use of Indian English (colloquially called "Babu English"), replete with local idioms and speech patterns, not only added authenticity to his voice but also challenged the colonial hangover of linguistic elitism in Indian poetry.

By embracing the vernacular and focusing on the ordinary, Ezekiel redefined the contours of Indian English poetry. He moved away from grandiose themes and instead spotlighted the individual's experience in a rapidly changing society. This shift resonated with a generation of poets who sought to express their realities without the constraints of traditional poetic forms or colonial legacies. Ezekiel's influence is evident in the works of subsequent poets like Arun Kolatkar and R. Parthasarathy, who continued to explore urban themes and experiment with language.

Nissim Ezekiel's contribution to Indian English poetry lies in his ability to bridge the gap between tradition and modernity. He offered a new poetic paradigm that was introspective, grounded, and reflective of the contemporary Indian ethos. Through his innovative use of language and focus on everyday experiences, Ezekiel not only expanded the thematic scope of Indian English poetry but also democratized it, making it more accessible and relatable to a broader audience.

1.3 Biographical Sketch

Nissim Ezekiel (1924–2004) stands as a seminal figure in Indian English literature, often hailed as the father of modern Indian poetry in English. His life and work reflect a confluence of cultural identities, intellectual pursuits, and artistic endeavors that significantly shaped the postcolonial literary landscape of India.

Born on December 16, 1924, in Bombay (now Mumbai), Ezekiel hailed from the Bene Israel community, a Marathi-speaking Jewish group with ancient roots in India. His father, Moses Ezekiel, was a professor of botany and zoology, while his mother served as the principal of a school she founded. This academically inclined environment fostered Ezekiel's early interest in literature and the arts. He received his primary education at the Convent of Jesus and Mary and later attended Antonio De Souza High School, both Roman Catholic institutions. These formative years exposed him to diverse cultural and religious influences, shaping his multifaceted world.

Ezekiel pursued higher education at Wilson College, University of Mumbai, earning a Bachelor of Arts in English Literature in 1945 and a Master of Arts in 1947. During his college years, he began publishing poems in the college magazine, marking the inception of his literary journey. In 1948, he traveled to England to study philosophy at Birkbeck College, University of London, under the tutelage of renowned philosopher C.E.M. Joad. While in London, he faced financial hardships, working various jobs to support himself. Despite these challenges, he published his first poetry collection, *A Time to Change*, in 1952, signaling his emergence as a significant poetic voice.

Upon returning to India in 1952, Ezekiel embarked on a multifaceted career encompassing teaching, editing, art criticism, and playwriting. He began as a lecturer at Khalsa College in Mumbai and later served as a professor of English and vice-principal at Mithibai College from 1961 to 1972. Subsequently, he joined the University of Mumbai as a reader and later as a professor of American literature, contributing significantly to academic discourse. Ezekiel's editorial roles included positions at prominent journals such as *Poetry India*, *Quest*, *Imprint*, and the Indian branch of PEN. His work as an art critic and broadcaster further showcased his versatility and commitment to promoting Indian arts and literature. As a playwright, he authored several plays, including *Nalini*, *Marriage Poem*, *The Sleepwalkers*, and *Do Not Call It Suicide*, exploring themes of identity, morality, and societal norms. Ezekiel's contributions to Indian English literature were recognized with prestigious awards, including the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1983 for his poetry collection *Latter-Day Psalms* and the Padma Shri in 1988. His legacy endures through his profound impact on Indian poetry, his mentorship of emerging writers, and his exploration of complex themes that continue to resonate with readers today.

STOP TO CONSIDER:

The Bene Israel Community:

The Bene Israel community, from which poet Nissim Ezekiel hailed, is one of the oldest and most significant Jewish communities in India. According to tradition, the Bene Israel trace their ancestry to seven Jewish couples who survived a shipwreck off the Konkan coast of western India over 2,000 years ago. They settled in the village of Navgaon, approximately 20 miles south of present-day Mumbai. Over time, they assimilated into the local Marathi-speaking population, adopting regional customs while retaining essential aspects of Jewish practice, such as observing the Sabbath and dietary laws.

The Bene Israel community maintained a distinct identity by blending Jewish traditions with Indian cultural elements. They spoke Judeo-Marathi, a dialect combining Marathi with Hebrew terms, and developed

unique rituals like the ‘malida’ ceremony—a thanksgiving offering involving prayers and a special dish made of flattened rice, coconut, and fruits. In the 18th century, a Jewish emissary named David Rahabi recognized the Bene Israel’s Jewish roots and helped them reconnect with mainstream Judaism. He educated them in Jewish laws and traditions, leading to the establishment of synagogues and the appointment of religious leaders known as ‘Kajis’.

Under British colonial rule, the Bene Israel community experienced social mobility, with many members serving in the British Indian Army and holding administrative positions. They also made significant contributions to India’s burgeoning film industry in the early 20th century, with individuals like Ezra Mir becoming prominent figures in cinema. Following India’s independence in 1947 and the establishment of Israel in 1948, a significant portion of the Bene Israel community emigrated to Israel, the United States, and other countries. Despite this migration, a small but active Bene Israel population remains in India, primarily in Mumbai and the surrounding regions. They continue to preserve their unique heritage through religious practices, cultural events, and community organizations.

1.4 Literary Career and Major Works

Nissim Ezekiel’s literary career is marked by a profound engagement with themes of identity, urban life, spirituality, and the human condition. His works span poetry, drama, and prose, each reflecting his nuanced understanding of the complexities of modern existence.

Poetry Collections

- ***A Time to Change (1952)***: Ezekiel’s debut collection, *A Time to Change*, is considered a seminal work in Indian English poetry. Published in England, it marked a departure from the romanticism prevalent in Indian poetry, introducing a modernist sensibility. The collection delves into themes of personal identity, existential angst, and the quest for meaning in a rapidly changing world, as well as

into the complexities of language, identity, and the human condition, reflecting a poet deeply engaged with the challenges of articulating authentic experiences in a postcolonial context.

The titular poem, 'A Time to Change,' serves as an *ars poetica*, where Ezekiel portrays the poet as a "stubborn workman" labouring over language to achieve "precise communication of a thought". This metaphor underscores the poet's commitment to authenticity and the transformative power of language. However, Ezekiel also acknowledges the limitations of language; in 'On Meeting a Pedant,' he critiques language as a barrier to genuine experience, likening it to a 'Chinese Wall' that "rots the impulse" of lived reality. The collection is characterized by its formal structure, with symmetrical stanzas and consistent line lengths, reflecting Ezekiel's early reliance on strict poetic form. This formalism complements the thematic concerns of the poems, which grapple with the tension between the desire for order and the chaotic nature of human experience. Nature imagery recurs throughout the collection, often serving as a metaphor for internal states. In 'A Word for the Wind,' Ezekiel laments the inadequacy of language to capture the essence of the wind, symbolizing the broader struggle to articulate the ineffable aspects of existence.

A Time to Change reflects Ezekiel's engagement with Western literary traditions while simultaneously forging a distinct voice that addresses the specificities of Indian life. The collection's emphasis on introspection, linguistic precision, and the exploration of personal and societal transformation laid the groundwork for a new era of Indian English poetry, influencing subsequent generations of poets. Ezekiel's use of irony and introspection set the tone for his subsequent works.

- ***The Unfinished Man (1960)*:** In *The Unfinished Man*, Ezekiel explores the fragmented nature of human existence. The poems reflect a deep concern with the image of man, the city, and the woman, forming an ironic myth that underscores the ethical anxieties of modern life. The collection also reflects Ezekiel's deep introspection into the complexities of urban existence, personal identity, and existential dilemmas. Comprising ten poems, it delves

into the fragmented consciousness of individuals navigating the challenges of modern life.

In 'Urban,' Ezekiel portrays the city of Bombay as both a physical and psychological landscape, illustrating the tension between the desire for escape and the inescapable pull of urban life. The poem captures the protagonist's internal conflict, highlighting the city's impact on his psyche. 'Case Study' offers a confessional narrative of a man plagued by indecision and a lack of purpose. The poem serves as a psychological exploration of a weak-willed individual, possibly reflecting the poet's own introspections. The character's journey through failed relationships and unfulfilled ambitions underscores the theme of the 'unfinished' human experience. 'Enterprise' employs the metaphor of a pilgrimage to depict the disillusionment that often accompanies the pursuit of lofty goals. The poem suggests that the true essence of fulfilment lies not in grand achievements but in the grace found within one's own home and self.

Throughout *The Unfinished Man*, Ezekiel's use of precise language and structured form reflects his modernist influences, while his exploration of personal and societal themes resonates with universal human experiences. The collection stands as a testament to his ability to intertwine personal introspection with broader cultural commentary. It marks a maturation in Ezekiel's poetic voice, exhibiting a refined use of imagery and a more profound philosophical engagement with the human condition.

- ***The Exact Name (1965):*** *The Exact Name* continues Ezekiel's exploration of identity and reality. The collection is noted for its precise language and the poet's endeavour to capture the essence of experiences through exact naming. Poems like 'Night of the Scorpion,' which we will discuss in the next unit, exemplify his ability to portray complex social and cultural dynamics with clarity and subtlety.

The collection opens with an epigraph from Juan Ramón Jiménez's poem 'The Rose': "Intelligence, give me / The exact name of things!"—a declaration of Ezekiel's intent to capture reality through exact nomenclature. Central to this collection is the poem 'Philosophy,' where Ezekiel critiques

abstract reasoning detached from sensory experience. He writes: “The mundane language of the senses sings / Its own interpretations,” emphasizing the value of everyday language in conveying truth. This approach underscores his belief in the poet’s role as a precise observer, naming the world with clarity. A standout poem, ‘Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher,’ draws parallels between the patience required in poetry, love, and bird watching, emphasizing the virtue of waiting for inspiration to emerge naturally. This approach reflects Ezekiel’s belief in the organic development of poetic thought. In ‘In India,’ Ezekiel presents a vivid tableau of urban life, depicting scenes of beggars, hawkers, and slum dwellers. The poem reflects his nuanced perspective on Indian society, blending empathy with critical observation. ‘Night of the Scorpion,’ perhaps Ezekiel’s most renowned poem, recounts a childhood memory of his mother being stung by a scorpion. The poem delves into themes of superstition, maternal sacrifice, and communal response, offering a nuanced portrayal of Indian rural life.

The collection also explores gender dynamics, as seen in poems like ‘A Woman Observed’ and ‘A Warning,’ where Ezekiel examines societal perceptions of women and the complexities of male-female interactions. These poems reflect his introspection on personal relationships and societal norms. Stylistically, *The Exact Name* represents a departure from strict poetic forms, embracing a more colloquial tone and free verse. This evolution aligns with Ezekiel’s desire to authentically represent Indian experiences and sensibilities, moving beyond Western poetic conventions.

- ***Latter-Day Psalms* (1982):** In *Latter-Day Psalms*, Ezekiel engages with religious and philosophical themes, employing irony and metaphor to examine the paradoxes of faith and modernity. The collection reflects his commitment to social, personal, and religious introspection, showcasing his linguistic precision and depth of thought.

Composed during his stay at the Rotterdam International Poetry Festival in 1978, the collection reimagines nine biblical psalms (1, 3, 8, 23, 60, 78, 95, 102, and 127), infusing them with contemporary sensibilities and personal introspection. Ezekiel employs irony and metaphor to bridge ancient religious

texts with modern existential concerns. For instance, in his adaptation of Psalm 1, he writes: “Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the conventional, and is at home with sin as with a wife.” This line exemplifies his approach of juxtaposing traditional religious motifs with the complexities of contemporary life.

The collection also reflects Ezekiel’s philosophical explorations, drawing from Hindu scriptures and the Bhagavad Gita. Themes of action without attachment, acceptance of human limitations, and the pursuit of self-awareness permeate the poems. In ‘Counsel,’ he advises: “Express your gratitude by giving what you have to give. You may get nothing in return. And bear your restlessness with grace.” *Latter-Day Psalms* garnered critical acclaim, earning Ezekiel the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1983. The collection is lauded for its linguistic precision, thematic depth, and the seamless integration of diverse religious and philosophical traditions. Through this work, Ezekiel offers a nuanced meditation on faith, morality, and the human condition in the modern world.

Dramatic Works

- ***Nalini***: *Nalini: A Comedy in Three Acts* is a play that delves into the complexities of human relationships and the interplay between reality and fantasy. It is a satirical exploration of gender dynamics, artistic pretensions, and societal expectations in postcolonial urban India. The play centres on Nalini, a painter striving for independence, and Bharat, a writer whose romanticized ideals clash with Nalini’s pragmatic worldview. Bharat’s infatuation with Nalini is rooted in his idealistic notions of love and art, leading to a portrayal of her that aligns with his fantasies rather than her reality. Nalini challenges this by asserting her autonomy, stating, “You have a formula; you can’t imagine an individual woman” (Ezekiel 38). This confrontation highlights the tension between individual identity and societal projections.

The play critiques the objectification of women, exemplified when Bharat unhooks Nalini’s bra during an art exhibition, symbolizing the reduction of her identity to mere spectacle. Such scenes underscore the pervasive

misogyny and the commodification of female bodies in the name of art. Furthermore, *Nalini* satirizes the intellectual elite's disconnect from reality, as characters like Bharat and Raj are depicted as self-absorbed and out of touch with genuine human experiences. Through sharp dialogue and character interactions, Ezekiel exposes the superficiality of societal norms and the challenges faced by women seeking self-definition in a patriarchal context. Ezekiel employs various theatrical devices to enhance the play's thematic depth. The use of music, shifting from classical to jazz, mirrors the characters' emotional transitions and the oscillation between reality and fantasy. Lighting changes and the recurring sound of a bell serve as metaphors for the characters' internal states and the intrusion of reality into their constructed illusions.

- ***Marriage Poem*** (1969): Featured in his collection *Three Plays*, "Marriage Poem" offers a critical examination of marital dynamics within a patriarchal framework. The play centres on Naresh, a self-absorbed husband, and Mala, his submissive wife, highlighting the emotional and psychological complexities of their relationship. Naresh's character embodies male dominance and emotional detachment. He engages in an extramarital affair with Leela, seeking the affection and understanding he perceives as lacking in his marriage. Mala, on the other hand, is portrayed as the quintessential traditional wife—devoted, accommodating, and enduring. Her unwavering commitment is evident when she pleads with Naresh to accept her gestures of care, even as he responds with sarcasm and disdain. For instance, when Mala offers to serve him tea, Naresh mockingly requests her to "dip a slice of bread in it" and feed him, to which she complies, saying, "I will, I will."

The play delves into themes of female subjugation and the societal expectations imposed on women. Mala's identity is confined to her roles as wife and mother, with little room for personal agency. Even upon discovering Naresh's infidelity, she refrains from confrontation, rationalizing her silence for the sake of their children. This portrayal underscores the internalized

oppression and the sacrifices women are often expected to make within the institution of marriage. Ezekiel's narrative critiques the traditional marital structure, exposing the emotional toll it exacts on women. The play serves as a commentary on the imbalance of power in relationships and the societal norms that perpetuate gender inequality. Through *Marriage Poem*, Ezekiel invites audiences to reflect on the complexities of marital relationships and the need for a more equitable understanding of partnership.

- ***The Sleepwalkers (1969)***: Nissim Ezekiel's *The Sleepwalkers*, subtitled "An Indo-American Farce," is a satirical examination of India's postcolonial elite and their uncritical emulation of Western—particularly American—ideals. Published in 1969 as part of his collection *Three Plays*, the work critiques the superficial adoption of Western modernity by Indian intellectuals, exposing the resulting cultural dissonance and identity crises. The play centres on a gathering of Indian intellectuals anticipating the arrival of Mr. Morris, an American advisor. These characters, depicted as 'sleepwalkers,' are portrayed as being in a metaphorical slumber, blindly accepting Western ideologies without critical thought. Their eagerness to impress Mr. Morris leads them to adopt Western mannerisms and discard their cultural identities, highlighting the absurdity of their actions.

Ezekiel employs irony and satire to underscore the hollowness of this blind Westernization. The characters' dialogues are laced with contradictions and clichés, reflecting their internal confusion and the superficiality of their beliefs. For instance, Mr. Morris's magazine, *Blank*, aims to help people "give up thinking," a notion that satirizes the passive consumption of Western culture without understanding or context. The title *The Sleepwalkers* aptly encapsulates the theme of the play. It symbolizes the characters' unconscious drift away from their cultural roots, as they navigate the complexities of a postcolonial society still grappling with the remnants of colonial influence. Ezekiel's portrayal serves as a cautionary tale about the dangers of cultural erasure and the loss of self-identity in the pursuit of modernity.

- ***Do Not Call It Suicide (1993):*** *Do Not Call It Suicide* is a poignant exploration of familial grief, societal expectations, and the complexities of human relationships. The narrative centres around Mr. Nanda, a middle-aged man grappling with the suicide of his 25-year-old son, who took his life without apparent reason fourteen years prior. The incident resurfaces when Mr. Nanda confides in his friend, Mr. Sathe, leading to emotional turmoil within the family. Mrs. Nanda, embodying societal norms and the desire to maintain family honour, urges her husband to refrain from labelling their son's death as suicide. Her insistence on calling it a mere death reflects a denial rooted in the stigma associated with suicide. This denial is further manifested in her treatment of Meeta, her widowed daughter-in-law, whom she continues to treat as a servant, highlighting the entrenched patriarchal attitudes and lack of empathy within the household.

The play delves into the psychological impact of unresolved grief and the societal pressures that compel individuals to suppress their emotions. Ezekiel critiques the superficiality of middle-class respectability, where appearances are maintained at the expense of genuine emotional expression. The family's attempt to move on without addressing the underlying issues culminates in a dinner gathering that unravels into a confrontation of suppressed emotions and truths. Ezekiel's portrayal of the Nanda family serves as a microcosm of broader societal dynamics, where the fear of social ostracism leads to the marginalization of mental health issues. The play underscores the necessity of open dialogue and emotional honesty in healing and challenges the audience to reconsider their perceptions of suicide and familial obligations.

Ezekiel's literary oeuvre reflects a consistent engagement with the intricacies of human experience, marked by a commitment to exploring the nuances of identity, society, and spirituality. His works continue to resonate, offering insights into the challenges and contradictions of modern life.

1.5 Thematic Explorations

Nissim Ezekiel's poetry delves deeply into themes of identity and alienation, urban life, and the interplay between spirituality and rationalism. His works reflect a nuanced understanding of the complexities of modern existence, particularly within the Indian context.

Identity and Alienation

Ezekiel's exploration of identity is profoundly influenced by his unique position as a Bene Israel Jew in India. This dual heritage often placed him at the margins, leading to a persistent sense of alienation. In his poem 'Background, Casually,' he articulates this feeling: "My ancestors, among the castes,/ Were aliens crushing seed for bread." This line encapsulates the historical displacement and the struggle for acceptance within Indian society. Ezekiel's Western education further complicated his sense of belonging, as he often felt disconnected from both Indian traditions and Western norms. His poetry frequently grapples with this in-betweenness, reflecting a quest for self-definition amidst cultural dissonance.

Critics have noted that Ezekiel's work embodies the modern poet's detachment from surroundings, a result of losing traditional religious anchors. This detachment is evident in his portrayal of characters who, despite being surrounded by people, experience profound loneliness and disconnection. His poetry becomes a medium through which he navigates his fragmented identity, seeking coherence in a world that often denies it.

Urban Life

Ezekiel's portrayal of urban life, particularly in Bombay (now Mumbai), is marked by a stark realism that captures the city's vibrancy and its underlying chaos. In the poem 'Urban,' he writes: "The city like a passion burns./ He dreams of morning walks, alone,/ And floating on a wave of sand." These lines reflect the paradox of city life—a place of intense energy and isolation. Ezekiel presents Bombay as a city that both entices and alienates, offering opportunities while simultaneously overwhelming its inhabitants.

In 'Island,' Ezekiel further explores this ambivalence: "I cannot leave the island,/ I was born here and belong." Here, the city becomes a metaphor for entrapment and identity. Despite its flaws, it is an integral part of the poet's existence. Ezekiel's urban poetry does not romanticize city life; instead, it presents a candid depiction of its complexities, highlighting issues such as overcrowding, pollution, and the erosion of human connections.

His work also addresses the moral and spiritual decay in urban settings, where traditional values are often compromised. Through vivid imagery and introspective narratives, Ezekiel captures the existential dilemmas faced by individuals navigating the modern metropolis.

Spirituality and Rationalism

Ezekiel's poetry often reflects a tension between spiritual longing and rational skepticism. He approaches religious themes with a critical eye, questioning dogmas while acknowledging the human need for spiritual connection. In 'Philosophy,' he writes: "There is a place to which I often go,/ Not by planning to, but by a flow/ Away from all existence, to a cold/ Lucidity, whose will is uncontrolled." This passage illustrates his pursuit of a personal, introspective spirituality that transcends organized religion. Ezekiel's work suggests that true understanding comes from within, through self-examination and intellectual inquiry. In 'Night of the Scorpion,' he juxtaposes traditional beliefs with scientific reasoning. The poem narrates an incident where villagers rely on superstitions to cure a scorpion sting, while the speaker's father, a skeptic, attempts a rational approach. This contrast highlights the coexistence of faith and reason in Indian society and the individual's struggle to reconcile the two.

Ezekiel's exploration of spirituality is not confined to religious practices but extends to a broader philosophical contemplation of existence. His poetry invites readers to reflect on the nature of belief, the search for meaning, and the human capacity for introspection.

STOP TO CONSIDER::

Babu English

This dialect, characterized by its ornate, overly formal, and often unidiomatic expressions, emerged during the British colonial era, primarily among Indian clerks and bureaucrats who sought to emulate British administrative language. Over time, it evolved into a sociolect marked by excessive politeness, verbosity, and a penchant for indirectness .

Ezekiel's deliberate incorporation of "Babu English" into his poetry serves multiple purposes. On one level, it functions as a satirical device, highlighting the incongruities and absurdities inherent in the over-formalized English used by certain segments of Indian society. For instance, in his poem 'Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S.,' Ezekiel mimics the speech patterns of semi-educated Indians, employing phrases like "Whatever I or anybody is asking / she is always saying yes" to underscore the grammatical inaccuracies and cultural idiosyncrasies of Babu English.

Beyond satire, Ezekiel's use of Babu English reflects a deeper commentary on postcolonial identity and the complexities of linguistic inheritance. By embedding this dialect into his work, he acknowledges the hybrid nature of Indian English—a language shaped by colonial history, indigenous languages, and the socio-political milieu of India. This linguistic hybridity becomes a medium through which Ezekiel explores themes of alienation, cultural dislocation, and the quest for authenticity in a rapidly modernizing India. Moreover, Ezekiel's portrayal of "Babu English" challenges the hegemony of "Standard" English, asserting the legitimacy of localized linguistic expressions. In doing so, he democratizes the English language, making space for voices that deviate from normative linguistic standards.

Check Your Progress:

1. How does Nissim Ezekiel employ Babu English in his poetry to satirize the linguistic habits of Indian English speakers? (100 words)
2. In what ways did Ezekiel's poetry contribute to the modernization of Indian English literature, moving away from traditional themes? (100 words)

1.6 Stylistic Features

Ezekiel's poetry is distinguished by its nuanced stylistic features, encompassing language and diction, imagery and symbolism, as well as form and structure. These elements collectively contribute to the authenticity and depth of his poetic expression.

- **Language and Diction:** Ezekiel's linguistic approach is marked by a deliberate use of colloquial language and Indian English, which lends authenticity to his poetry. He often incorporates the syntactic and lexical peculiarities of Indian English, reflecting the speech patterns of the urban Indian milieu. This is evident in poems like 'The Professor,' where the speaker's language mirrors the idiosyncrasies of Indian English: "You were so thin, like stick,/ Now you are man of weight and consequence/ That is good joke." Such usage not only adds a layer of realism but also serves as a subtle commentary on the postcolonial linguistic landscape of India.

Moreover, Ezekiel's diction is characterized by precision and clarity. He eschews ornate language in favour of simplicity, ensuring that his poetry remains accessible while still conveying profound insights. This stylistic choice aligns with his broader objective of crafting poetry that resonates with the contemporary Indian experience.

- **Imagery and Symbolism:** Ezekiel employs vivid imagery and symbolism to convey complex emotions and situations. His poems are replete with concrete images drawn from everyday life, which he uses to explore abstract themes. For instance, in 'Night of the Scorpion,' he vividly describes the villagers' reactions to a scorpion

sting: “The peasants came like swarms of flies / and buzzed the name of God a hundred times.” Here, the imagery of swarming peasants not only paints a vivid picture but also underscores the communal aspects of rural Indian life.

Ezekiel also utilizes natural elements as symbols to reflect human emotions and societal conditions. In his poem ‘Enterprise,’ the journey undertaken by a group of people serves as a metaphor for life’s spiritual quest, with various natural obstacles symbolizing the challenges encountered along the way. Such symbolism enriches his poetry, allowing readers to engage with multiple layers of meaning.

- **Form and Structure:** Ezekiel’s mastery of form and structure is evident in his ability to balance traditional poetic forms with free verse. While he often employs free verse to mirror the rhythms of natural speech, he also demonstrates proficiency in structured forms when the subject matter demands it. For example, ‘Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher’ is crafted as a sonnet, adhering to a strict rhyme scheme and meter, which complements the poem’s contemplative tone.

His poems typically progress from observation to reflection, a structural choice that mirrors his philosophical approach to poetry. This progression allows readers to journey alongside the poet, moving from concrete experiences to abstract insights. Additionally, Ezekiel’s careful attention to line breaks and stanza divisions enhances the musicality and clarity of his work, ensuring that form serves content effectively.

1.7 Critical Reception and Legacy

Nissim Ezekiel’s critical reception and enduring legacy in Indian English poetry are profound, reflecting his pivotal role in shaping the contours of modern Indian literature. His contributions have been acknowledged through prestigious awards and the profound influence he exerted on subsequent generations of poets.

In 1983, Ezekiel was honoured with the Sahitya Akademi Award for his poetry collection *Latter-Day Psalms*. This recognition by India’s National

Academy of Letters underscored his significant contribution to Indian English poetry, particularly his ability to infuse modernist sensibilities into the Indian context. The award highlighted his role in steering Indian poetry away from traditional themes towards more contemporary and urban concerns. Further cementing his stature, Ezekiel received the Padma Shri in 1988, one of India's highest civilian honours. This accolade acknowledged not only his poetic achievements but also his broader contributions as a playwright, art critic, and educator. His multifaceted engagement with the arts enriched India's cultural landscape, making him a seminal figure in the nation's literary history.

Ezekiel's influence extended beyond his writings; he was a mentor to many emerging poets, including Dom Moraes, Adil Jussawalla, and Gieve Patel. His guidance helped shape their poetic voices, fostering a community of writers who would continue to evolve Indian English poetry. Ezekiel's role as a mentor was instrumental in nurturing a generation of poets who explored new themes and forms, reflecting the complexities of contemporary Indian life.

Ezekiel is often regarded as the father of modern Indian English poetry. He introduced a modernist approach that broke away from the romantic and spiritual themes prevalent in earlier Indian poetry. His work emphasized realism, urban experiences, and individual introspection, aligning Indian poetry with global literary movements while retaining its unique cultural identity. This shift opened avenues for poets to explore diverse subjects and experiment with form and language.

Beyond his poetry, Ezekiel contributed significantly as an editor and critic. He edited literary journals and anthologies, providing platforms for emerging voices and shaping the discourse around Indian English literature. His critical essays offered insights into the evolving literary scene, advocating for a poetry that was both rooted in Indian realities and conversant with international trends.

Ezekiel's poems have been incorporated into educational curricula in India and abroad, reflecting their enduring relevance and appeal. Works like 'Night of the Scorpion' are studied for their thematic depth and stylistic innovation,

introducing students to the nuances of Indian English poetry. Scholars continue to study Ezekiel's work, exploring its themes, stylistic features, and cultural significance. His poetry serves as a touchstone for discussions on identity, modernity, and the evolution of Indian literature in English. This ongoing engagement underscores the lasting impact of his contributions to the literary canon.

SAQ:

1. What role did Ezekiel play in mentoring emerging Indian English poets, and how did this influence the literary landscape? (100 words)

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2. In what ways does Ezekiel's poetry engage with the concept of Indianness, and how does this manifest in his language and themes? (100 words)

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1.8 Summing Up

In this unit, we have covered a detailed introduction to Nissim Ezekiel. In the next unit, we will study three of his poems – 'Night of the Scorpion,' 'Background, Casually,' and 'Poem of the Separation' – in detail.

1.9 References and Suggested Reading

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Unit- 2

“Night of the Scorpion”; “Background, Casually”; “Poem of the Separation”

Unit Structure:

2.1 Objectives

2.2 Introduction

2.3 Contexts of the Poems

2.3.1 Context of “Night of the Scorpion”

2.3.2 Context of “Background, Casually”

2.3.3 Context of “Poem of the Separation”

2.4 Reading the Poems

2.4.1 Reading “Night of the Scorpion”

2.4.2 Reading “Background, Casually”

2.4.3 Reading “Poem of the Separation”

2.5 Summing Up

2.6 References and Suggested Readings

2.1 Objectives

In this unit, we will cover:

- an understanding of Ezekiel through the three prescribed poems;
- the contexts of the poems;
- the critical analyses of the poems;
- references to critical texts for greater understanding.

2.2 Introduction

In this unit, we will cover three of Nissim Ezekiel’s prominent poems – “Night of the Scorpion,” “Background, Casually,” and “Poem of the

Separation.” The first poem relates an incident where a scorpion bites the poet’s mother during his childhood; the poet watches with fear and fascination the conflict between rationalism and superstition play out before his eyes. In the second poem, the poet relates his history and experience growing up as a Jew in India, to put it quite simply. In the third poem, the passionate love and the eventual deterioration of the relationship between a man and a woman is narrated. The woman “grows out of love,” and leaves the man behind; in her latest letter, she asks the man to let her “get burnt”.

2.3 Contexts of The Poems

2.3.1 Context of “Night of the Scorpion”

The poem “Night of the Scorpion” was published in Ezekiel’s collection *The Exact Name* (1965). On a storm-lashed night, a scorpion, driven by the relentless rain, seeks refuge beneath a sack of rice. When it stings the poet’s mother, a wave of panic sweeps through the village. Neighbors flood the home, their prayers and chants filling the air, their flickering lanterns casting monstrous shadows on the walls. They believe that each movement of the scorpion intensifies the poison in her blood, and their superstitions become a tapestry of hope and fear. Amidst this, the poet’s father, a man of science, attempts to counteract the venom with powders, herbs, and even fire, applying paraffin to her toe and igniting it in a desperate bid to draw out the poison. The poet watches, helpless, as both faith and reason fail to alleviate his mother’s agony. After twenty hours, the pain subsides, not due to rituals or remedies, but with time. In a moment of profound maternal love, the mother expresses gratitude—not for her relief, but because the scorpion spared her children. This poignant conclusion underscores the depth of a mother’s selfless love, transcending her own suffering.

2.3.2 Context of “Background, Casually”

Nissim Ezekiel’s poem “Background, Casually” is a poignant autobiographical reflection that delves into the poet’s lifelong quest for identity amidst cultural dissonance and personal introspection. Published in *Hymns*

in Darkness (1976) and structured into three sections, the poem traverses his journey from a marginalized childhood to a reconciled maturity.

In his early years, Ezekiel portrays himself as a frail child, alienated in a Roman Catholic school where, as a Jew, he faced hostility from Christian, Muslim, and Hindu peers. He recalls being accused of Christ's crucifixion and physically assaulted, encapsulating the religious intolerance he endured. Despite these challenges, he excelled academically, winning a scripture prize, which underscores the irony of his situation.

The second section chronicles his adult life, marked by a sojourn in London funded by a family friend. There, he grappled with solitude and existential questions, accompanied metaphorically by "philosophy, poverty, and poetry." His return to India was facilitated by working on a cargo ship, symbolizing his resilience and determination. Back home, he confronted societal alienation, familial expectations, and the complexities of marriage and career, leading to a deeper understanding of his place in the world.

In the final section, Ezekiel reflects on his heritage, acknowledging his ancestors' humble occupations and the lingering effects of colonialism. He transitions from dreams of confinement to those centered on words and poetry, signifying his embrace of his identity and craft. The poem culminates in his acceptance of India as his home, despite its imperfections, affirming his commitment to his roots and his role as a poet within the Indian milieu.

2.3.3 Context of "Poem of the Separation"

Nissim Ezekiel's "Poem of the Separation," featured in his 1976 collection *Hymns in Darkness*, delves into the emotional aftermath of a romantic relationship that has ended. The poem reflects Ezekiel's characteristic blend of personal introspection and broader human themes, set against the backdrop of urban Indian life. The narrative unfolds as a monologue addressed to a former lover who has left the speaker. Their relationship, which began during the tumultuous period of the Indo-Pakistani conflict over Kashmir, is described with intense passion. The juxtaposition of personal intimacy with national turmoil underscores the depth of their connection.

The speaker reminisces about their fervent meetings in various public places, highlighting the all-consuming nature of their love.

However, the relationship deteriorates as the woman seeks new experiences, leading to their separation. Despite her physical absence, she continues to communicate through letters, photographs, and newspaper clippings, which only intensify the speaker's sense of loss and longing. He reflects on how her presence once brought joy and a new perspective to his life in a city he describes as "squalid" and "crude." The poem concludes with the woman expressing a desire to embrace new challenges, even at the risk of pain, as she quotes from a Kannada poem translated by A.K. Ramanujan. Her decision to "play with fire" symbolizes a pursuit of self-discovery and autonomy, leaving the speaker to grapple with the void left by her departure. "Poem of the Separation" poignantly captures the complexities of love, loss, and the human yearning for connection amidst the chaos of life.

2.4 Reading the Poems

2.4.1 Reading "Night of the Scorpion"

I remember the night my mother
Was stung by a scorpion. Ten hours
Of steady rain had driven him
To crawl beneath a sack of rice. Parting with his poison – flash
Of diabolic tail in the dark room –
He risked the rain again.
The peasants came like swarms of flies
And buzzed the Name of God a hundred
Time to paralyse the Evil one.
With candles and with lanterns
Throwing giant scorpion shadows
On the mud-baked walls
They searched for him; he was not found.
They clicked their tongues.

With every movement that the scorpion made
his poison moved in Mother's blood they said.
May your suffering decrease
the misfortunes of your next birth, they said.
May the sum of evil
balanced in this unreal world
against the sum of good
become diminished by your pain.
May the poison purify your flesh
Of desire, and your spirit of ambition,
They said, and they sat around
On the floor with my mother in the center,
The peace of understanding on each face.
More candles, more lanterns, more neighbours
more insects, and the endless rain.
My mother twisted through and through
groaning on a mat
My father, sceptic, rationalist,
trying every curse and blessing,
powder, mixture, herb and hybrid.
He even poured a little paraffin
upon the bitten toe and put a match to it.
I watched the flame feeding on my mother
I watched the holy man perform his rites
to tame the poison with an incantation.
After twenty hours it lost its sting.
My mother only said
Thank god the scorpion picked on me
and spared my children.

Nissim Ezekiel's "Night of the Scorpion" is a compelling narrative that delves into the complexities of rural Indian life, juxtaposing deep-seated superstitions with rational thought, and highlighting the profound selflessness inherent in maternal love. Through a vivid recollection of a childhood incident, Ezekiel not only narrates a personal experience but also offers a broader commentary on societal beliefs and human emotions.

The poem opens with a stark depiction of a scorpion, driven indoors by relentless rain, seeking refuge beneath a sack of rice. When the poet's mother enters the room, she is stung by the creature, which then vanishes into the night. This sudden act sets off a chain of reactions, drawing villagers to the scene, each bringing their own interpretations and remedies. Ezekiel employs alliteration in the phrase "Parting with his poison," emphasizing the suddenness of the sting, and describes the scorpion's "diabolic tail," likening it to a devilish entity.

The villagers, described metaphorically as "swarms of flies," converge upon the household, their collective murmurs and prayers filling the air. Their belief systems, rooted in traditional Indian ethos, lead them to perceive the scorpion as an embodiment of evil. They chant fervently, hoping to immobilize the creature and halt the spread of venom. Their incessant prayers are described with the onomatopoeic phrase "buzzed the name of God," allowing readers to almost hear the cacophony. Their actions, though driven by superstition, stem from genuine concern and communal solidarity. The scorpion is further demonized as "the Evil One," reinforcing the villagers' superstitious beliefs. Ezekiel employs vivid imagery to capture the scene: the flickering lanterns casting "giant scorpion shadows" on the walls, the incessant clicking of tongues, and the relentless rain creating an atmosphere of tension and urgency. The villagers "clicked their tongues," another use of onomatopoeia that adds to the sensory experience. They believe that each movement of the scorpion causes the poison to move in the mother's blood. The poet, as a child, observes these events with a mix of fear and fascination, his narrative voice remaining detached yet deeply evocative; the haunting atmosphere mirrors his fear.

Beginning at line eighteen, a fourteen-line section captures the villagers' hopeful incantations, many starting with "May," reflecting their religious convictions. They speak of past and future lives, the absolution of sins, and the purification of the mother's flesh and spirit. Ezekiel notes the "peace of understanding" on their faces, suggesting a communal acceptance of suffering as a spiritual cleansing. In lines thirty-two and thirty-three, the repetition of "More"—"More candles, more lanterns, more neighbours, more insects"—emphasizes the escalating chaos. The mother's agony is vividly portrayed as she "twisted through and through," groaning in pain

In contrast to the villagers' spiritual remedies, the poet's father, characterized as a skeptic and rationalist, resorts to a blend of traditional and scientific methods, and ultimately abandons his scientific principles as he resorts to "every curse and blessing". He applies herbal concoctions, pours paraffin on the wound, and even sets it alight in a desperate attempt to neutralize the poison, a moment Ezekiel describes as "I watched the flame feeding on my mother," highlighting his helplessness as a child. This juxtaposition of faith and reason shows us the diverse approaches to healing and the coexistence of differing worldviews within the same community.

A holy man performs rituals to "tame" the poison. After twenty agonizing hours, the mother's pain subsides. Her first words, expressing gratitude that the scorpion chose her over her children, encapsulate the essence of maternal sacrifice. This poignant three-line stanza conclusion elevates the narrative, transforming it from a mere account of an incident to a profound reflection on selfless love.

Ezekiel narrates the incident from an observer's perspective, allowing a detached yet detailed portrayal of the events. This vantage point offers insights into rural Indian life, where community involvement and superstition intertwine. The poem serves as a window into the collective psyche of a village, revealing how cultural beliefs shape responses to crises. The poem, while rooted in a specific cultural context, resonates universally.

Structure and Imagery

Ezekiel's "Night of the Scorpion" is structured in free verse, eschewing a regular rhyme scheme or meter, which mirrors the chaotic and unpredictable nature of the events it recounts. The poem unfolds as a single, continuous stanza, reflecting the relentless progression of the night's ordeal. This structure allows the narrative to flow organically, capturing the urgency and tension of the situation. The poem concludes with a brief, poignant line that encapsulates the mother's selfless love: "Thank God the scorpion picked on me / And spared my children."

Ezekiel employs vivid imagery to engage the reader's senses and bring the scene to life. Visual imagery is prominent, as seen in descriptions like "flash of diabolic tail in the dark room" and "throwing giant scorpion shadows on the mud-baked walls," which evoke the suddenness of the scorpion's attack and the eerie atmosphere of the room. Auditory imagery is also utilized; phrases such as "buzzed the name of God a hundred times" and "They clicked their tongues" allow readers to hear the villagers' frantic prayers and reactions. Tactile imagery is evident in lines like "My mother twisted through and through" and "He even poured a little paraffin upon the bitten toe," conveying the physical agony experienced by the mother.

The poem also incorporates various poetic devices to enhance its impact. Alliteration is present in phrases like "Parting with his poison," emphasizing the scorpion's action. Similes are used effectively, as in "The peasants came like swarms of flies," highlighting the overwhelming number of villagers who gathered. Onomatopoeia appears in "buzzed the name of God" and "They clicked their tongues," adding a sensory layer to the villagers' responses. Repetition is employed through the villagers' repeated phrases beginning with "May," reflecting their superstitious beliefs and prayers for the mother's recovery.

Through its free verse structure, rich imagery, and diverse poetic devices, "Night of the Scorpion" immerses readers in a vivid portrayal of a community's response to crisis, contrasting superstition with rationality, and highlighting the profound selflessness of maternal love.

Stop to Consider:

Nissim Ezekiel often grappled with issues of identity in his poetry, especially as an Indian Jew writing in English in postcolonial India. While “Background, Casually” is his most explicit poem on personal identity, several other poems also engage with questions of cultural, religious, linguistic, and national selfhood.

One significant example is “Enterprise,” where Ezekiel addresses the conflict between collective and individual identity. The poem follows a group pilgrimage, which begins with shared purpose and spiritual idealism. However, as the journey progresses, the group’s unity dissolves into disillusionment and ego-driven conflict. The speaker, though initially committed, ends up alienated, reflecting Ezekiel’s sense of not fully belonging—whether to religion, nation, or ideological group. This poem can be read as an allegory for the poet’s inner journey of self-exploration and estrangement.

Another key poem is “The Professor,” a satirical dramatic monologue delivered in Indian English. Through it, Ezekiel subtly critiques the performative identity of a Western-educated Indian middle-class man, drawing attention to the hybridization of postcolonial identities. The poem plays with stereotypes and cultural affectations, revealing the tension between authenticity and mimicry in a colonized psyche.

In “Night of the Scorpion,” Ezekiel captures rural Indian life with both empathy and distance. While he depicts the superstitions of his community with sensitivity, there is also a subtle assertion of his rational, skeptical stance—highlighting his partial insider-outsider position in Indian society. Poems like “Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S.” and “Very Indian Poems in Indian English” also engage with linguistic identity. By mimicking Indian English idioms and syntax, Ezekiel not only celebrates but also questions the authenticity and performativity of cultural expression in a postcolonial context.

2.4.2 Reading “Background, Casually”

A poet-rascal-clown was born,
The frightened child who would not eat
Or sleep, a boy of meager bone.
He never learned to fly a kite,
His borrowed top refused to spin.
I went to Roman Catholic school,
A mugging Jew among the wolves.
They told me I had killed the Christ,
That year I won the scripture prize.
A Muslim sportsman boxed my ears.
I grew in terror of the strong
But undernourished Hindu lads,
Their prepositions always wrong,
Repelled me by passivity.
One noisy day I used a knife.
At home on Friday nights the prayers
Were said. My morals had declined.
I heard of Yoga and of Zen.
Could I, perhaps, be rabbi saint?
The more I searched, the less I found.
Twenty two: time to go abroad.
First, the decision, then a friend
To pay the fare. Philosophy,
Poverty and Poetry, three
Companions shared my basement room.
The London seasons passed me by.
I lay in bed two years alone,
And then a Woman came to tell

My willing ears I was the Son
Of Man. I knew that I had failed
In everything, a bitter thought.
So, in an English cargo ship
Taking French guns and mortar shells
To Indo China, scrubbed the decks,
And learned to laugh again at home.
How to feel it home, was the point.
Some reading had been done, but what
Had I observed, except my own
Exasperation? All Hindus are
Like that, my father used to say,
When someone talked too loudly, or
Knocked at the door like the Devil.
They hawked and spat. They sprawled around.
I prepared for the worst. Married,
Changed jobs, and saw myself a fool.
The song of my experience sung,
I knew that all was yet to sing.
My ancestors, among the castes,
Were aliens crushing seed for bread
(The hooded bullock made his rounds).
One among them fought and taught,
A Major bearing British arms.
He told my father sad stories
Of the Boer War. I dreamed that
Fierce men had bound my feet and hands.
The later dreams were all of words.
I did not know that words betray
But let the poems come, and lost

That grip on things the worldly prize.
I would not suffer that again.
I look about me now, and try
To formulate a plainer view:
The wise survive and serve—to play
The fool, to cash in on
The inner and the outer storms.
The Indian landscape sears my eyes.
I have become a part of it
To be observed by foreigners.
They say that I am singular,
Their letters overstate the case.
I have made my commitments now.
This is one: to stay where I am,
As others choose to give themselves
In some remote and backward place.
My backward place is where I am.

Nissim Ezekiel's poem "Background, Casually," first published independently in 1965, and later, officially published in his 1976 collection *Hymns in Darkness*, stands as a profound autobiographical exploration of identity, alienation, and acceptance. Structured into three sections, each comprising five stanzas of five lines, the poem traces Ezekiel's journey from a marginalized childhood to a reconciled adulthood within the Indian milieu.

Section I: Childhood and Early Alienation

The poem opens with a self-deprecating tone:

"A poet-rascal-clown was born,
The frightened child who would not eat
Or sleep, a boy of meagre bone.
He never learnt to fly a kite,
His borrowed top refused to spin."

Here, Ezekiel employs alliteration (“poet-rascal-clown”) to underscore the multifaceted nature of his identity. The imagery of a frail child unable to engage in typical childhood activities like flying a kite or spinning a top symbolizes his early feelings of inadequacy and exclusion. Attending a Roman Catholic school, he describes himself as:”A mugging Jew among the wolves.”This metaphor highlights his isolation as a Jewish boy among predominantly Christian peers. The irony is palpable when he notes:”They told me I had killed the Christ,/

That year I won the scripture prize.”Despite excelling in religious studies, he faces baseless accusations rooted in anti-Semitic sentiments. Further, he recounts being physically assaulted:”A Muslim sportsman boxed my ears.”His interactions with Hindu classmates are equally strained:

“I grew in terror of the strong
But undernourished Hindu lads,
Their prepositions always wrong,
Repelled me by passivity.
One noisy day I used a knife.”

The juxtaposition of “strong but undernourished” reflects his complex perception of them—physically intimidating yet linguistically and intellectually lacking. The act of using a knife signifies a breaking point, a desperate assertion of self amidst relentless bullying.

Section II: Adulthood and the Quest for Identity

Transitioning into adulthood, Ezekiel delves into his spiritual and existential dilemmas:

“At home on Friday nights the prayers
Were said. My morals had declined.
I heard of Yoga and of Zen.
Could I, perhaps, be rabbi-saint?
The more I searched, the less I found.”

Here, he reflects on his exposure to diverse religious philosophies, yet none provide the solace or identity he seeks. The use of rhetorical questioning and paradox (“The more I searched, the less I found”) underscores his inner turmoil and the elusiveness of spiritual fulfillment. At twenty-two, with financial assistance from a friend, he travels to London: “Philosophy, Poverty, and poetry, three/ Companions shared my basement room.” This personification of abstract concepts illustrates his isolation and the intellectual pursuits that occupy his time. Despite his efforts, he remains disconnected, leading to a pivotal realization: “How to feel it home, was the point.” This line encapsulates his struggle to find a sense of belonging, both abroad and within himself.

Section III: Return, Reflection, and Reconciliation

Upon returning to India, Ezekiel confronts the complexities of his heritage:

“My ancestors, among the castes,
Were aliens crushing seed for bread
(The hooded bullock made his rounds).”

This vivid imagery connects him to a lineage of labourers, emphasizing a humble origin and a sense of otherness within the caste system. He also recalls tales from a British Major:

“He told my father sad stories
Of the Boer War. I dreamed that
Fierce men had bound my feet and hands.”

These dreams symbolize feelings of entrapment and the lingering impact of colonial narratives on his psyche. As he matures, his dreams shift:

“The later dreams were all of words.
I did not know that words betray
But let the poems come, and lost
That grip on things the worldly prize.
I would not suffer that again.”

Here, he acknowledges the dual nature of language—its power to both express and deceive. His immersion in poetry leads to a detachment from material success, a sacrifice he resolves not to repeat.

In the concluding stanzas, Ezekiel articulates a nuanced acceptance of his place in India:

“The Indian landscape sears my eyes.

I have become a part of it

To be observed by foreigners.

They say that I am singular,

Their letters overstate the case.”

The metaphor “sears my eyes” conveys both pain and indelible connection. Despite external perceptions of his uniqueness, he remains grounded in his reality. He declares:

“I have made my commitments now.

This is one: to stay where I am,

As others choose to give themselves

In some remote and backward place.

My backward place is where I am.”

These lines reflect a conscious decision to embrace his identity and environment, acknowledging imperfections while asserting belonging.

Poetic Devices and Style:

Ezekiel’s use of free verse, devoid of a strict rhyme scheme, mirrors the fluidity of his introspection. The poem is rich in literary devices:

- **Alliteration:** “poet-rascal-clown” emphasizes the multifaceted nature of his identity.
- **Irony:** Winning a scripture prize while being accused of killing Christ highlights societal prejudices.

- **Imagery:** Vivid descriptions like “The hooded bullock made his rounds” ground the poem in tangible experiences.
- **Metaphor:** “The Indian landscape sears my eyes” conveys deep emotional resonance.

Through these devices, Ezekiel crafts a narrative that is both personal and universally relatable, exploring themes of identity, belonging, and self-realization.

“Background, Casually” serves as a testament to Nissim Ezekiel’s introspective journey through the complexities of identity in a multicultural and often prejudiced society. His candid reflections, interwoven with literary finesse, offer readers a profound understanding of the struggles and reconciliations that define the human experience.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS:

1. In what ways does “Background, Casually” function as a confessional narrative, and how does that influence the reader’s perception of the poet’s self? (100-200 words)
2. What is the role of maternal sacrifice in “Night of the Scorpion,” and how does it challenge traditional notions of heroism? (100-200 words)
3. How does “Night of the Scorpion” critique mass psychology and mob mentality in times of crisis? (100-200 words)
4. How does Nissim Ezekiel reconcile his Jewish heritage with his Indian identity in “Background, Casually”? (100-200 words)

2.4.3 Reading “Poem of the Separation”

To judge by memory alone,
our love was happy
when the bombs burst in Kashmir;
my life had burst
and merged in yours.

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The war did not matter
though we tried to care,
the season, time and place
rejected their usual names.
One day you said,
'Suddenly, I feel
grown up.' The price was only
a thousand kisses.

-

Any man may be a whirlwind,
any woman lightning,
but buses take us to our meeting,
trains to our destination.
In these, and in cafés,
on beaches,
and on benches in the park,
our music was made.

-

I ask you to pause
and to hear it again,
but you sweep ahead to hear
another music.
It's true we cannot live on echoes.

-

Ten thousand miles away,
you become a shower of letters,
a photograph, a newspaper cutting
underlined, with pencilled comments,
and a smell at night.

-

In the squalid, crude
city of my birth and rebirth,
you were a new way of laughing at the truth.
I want you back
with the rough happiness you lightly wear,
supported by your shoulders,
breasts and thighs.

-

But you ask to break it up.
Your latest letter says:
'I am enclosing
Ramanujan's translation
of a Kannada religious poem:
"The Lord is playing
with streamers of fire."
I want to play with fire.
Let me get burnt.'

Nissim Ezekiel's "Poem of the Separation", from his celebrated collection *Hymns in Darkness*, is a deeply moving exploration of love, loss, and the bitter-sweetness of memory. It captures the poignant aftermath of a relationship that once burned with intensity but ultimately crumbled under the weight of change and emotional distance. The poem's structure, imagery, and tone combine to create a narrative that is both personal and universally relatable.

At the heart of "Poem of the Separation" is a speaker, seemingly Ezekiel himself or a fictional counterpart, who addresses a beloved from whom he has been estranged. Although the woman is physically absent, her presence dominates the speaker's inner world. The recollections unfold with a painful lucidity: the speaker remembers how their love blossomed during the turbulent days of the Indo-Pakistan conflict over Kashmir. Against the

backdrop of war and destruction, their relationship ignited explosively, “burst” into being, mirroring the violence and urgency of the external world. Yet, paradoxically, while bombs fell and countries clashed, the two lovers became absorbed entirely in each other, detached from the world around them.

Their love, as depicted in the opening stanzas, was all-consuming. Nothing else mattered — not seasons, not wars, not the places they found themselves in. Their union was so profound that the speaker describes feeling that their very beings had merged. This intense passion rendered everything external irrelevant. The poet captures this feeling of timelessness and spacelessness through phrases that suggest their absolute immersion in each other’s presence.

However, time, as it often does, brings change. In a moment that marks the turning point of their relationship, the woman confesses she has begun to feel more mature, attributing this new sense of self to the many kisses they shared. This declaration, seemingly innocent, signals the beginning of emotional distancing. Their passionate encounters, once spontaneous and joyous, now take on a mechanical quality. Despite travelling by buses and trains, meeting in parks, restaurants, or by the seashore, their connection starts to fray. Even amidst the familiar settings of their love, the woman’s heart begins to wander.

Ezekiel skilfully captures the slow death of intimacy. The woman, once enraptured by the speaker’s voice, now seeks “another music,” another emotional tune that promises newness and excitement. The speaker’s helplessness is palpable as he realizes that memories alone cannot sustain a love that has fundamentally shifted. No matter how hard he tries to rekindle the past, the woman is already emotionally gone. Her betrayal is not abrupt but gradual—a painful slipping away rather than a sudden rupture. The physical distance between them becomes literal as well. Now separated by “ten thousand miles,” the woman maintains a distant form of communication through letters. She sends photographs, newspaper clippings with words underlined, and pencilled comments, but these gestures only highlight the chasm that now lies between them. The speaker, left alone with his thoughts,

often finds himself haunted by her scent, by the lingering memory of her perfume.

Ezekiel weaves a contrast between the woman's bright presence and the grim city where the speaker resides—a city described as “squalid” and “crude.” In a place marred by filth and the unrefined behaviour of its inhabitants, the woman had been a beacon of light and laughter. She offered him not just companionship but also a fresh lens through which to view the ugliness around him. Through her, he had learned to laugh, to cope, to survive. Yet, even these warm memories cannot alter the grim reality. The speaker wishes desperately for her return, yearning for the simple happiness she represented. He imagines the comfort of being “supported by your shoulders / breasts and thighs,” craving the physical and emotional security she once offered. However, the woman has moved on irrevocably.

Her final communication encapsulates the ultimate break between them. Enclosed with her last letter is A.K. Ramanujan's English translation of a Kannada poem, where the lines speak of the Lord playing with flames of fire. These lines are symbolic: the woman declares her desire to live adventurously, even at the risk of getting burnt. She seeks freedom, unpredictability, and risk, choosing these over the comfort of a settled love. She no longer wishes to be tethered to the past; she wants to forge new paths, even if they lead to pain. The latter stanzas of the poem seethe with quiet anguish. Ezekiel refrains from overt dramatization; his portrayal of grief is restrained yet all the more powerful for its subtlety. There is no explosive outpouring of sorrow, but a numb acceptance—a poignant realization that the dream has shattered, that the reality of separation must be endured.

“Poem of the Separation” is notable for its artistic detachment. While the emotions are raw and personal, Ezekiel approaches them with a measured voice, allowing pathos to seep naturally into the verses. The delicate sadness that permeates the poem reflects a mature handling of loss, marking a departure from more romanticized portrayals of heartbreak.

Anisur Rehman aptly observes that Ezekiel could not have written “Poem of the Separation” in his earlier phases. The poem represents a deepening

of his emotional and artistic range. It is not merely a recounting of lost love but a profound meditation on the nature of emotional attachment, memory, and letting go. As Rehman notes, this work is a “variation on the theme of love,” enriched by Ezekiel’s seasoned understanding of life’s impermanence.

The technical aspects of the poem also deserve attention. Written in simple, clear, colloquial English, the language mirrors the rhythms of everyday speech. This accessibility enhances the emotional impact, allowing readers to relate easily to the speaker’s experiences. The imagery is vivid but unforced; the sensory details—scents, sounds, touches—are used with economy and precision. There is a symbolic layering too: war represents external chaos, while the stormy passion and eventual breakup mirror internal conflict.

Images like the bombs bursting during the Kashmir war or the metaphor of the woman “playing with fire” are not just decorative—they carry thematic weight. They show how personal relationships are often caught up in larger cycles of destruction and rebirth, how love too can be as volatile and unpredictable as war. Moreover, Ezekiel’s use of rhythm and pacing skilfully reflects the emotional journey. The earlier sections pulse with energy and movement, much like the initial rush of love. Later, the tempo slows, mirroring the speaker’s growing sense of loss and stagnation. By the final stanzas, the tone becomes subdued, resigned, almost meditative.

“Poem of the Separation” stands out as one of Ezekiel’s finest love lyrics. It is a tender, painful, and honest portrayal of the rise and fall of a relationship. Through evocative imagery, understated language, and a mature emotional palette, Ezekiel captures not just the story of two lovers but the universal experience of longing, change, and acceptance. The poem reminds us that while love can be a sanctuary from the world’s chaos, it is also vulnerable to the very forces of change and impermanence that shape human lives. Ultimately, the sadness of the poem lies not just in the loss of the beloved, but in the speaker’s realization that even the most intense connections may fade, leaving behind only memory and the bittersweet ache of what once was.

SAQ:

1. How does Ezekiel portray the tension between physical intimacy and emotional detachment in “Poem of the Separation”? (100-200 words)

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2. How does the structure and form of the poem contribute to its overall impact? (100 words)

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3. How does “Poem of the Separation” fit within the broader context of Ezekiel’s exploration of identity and personal relationships? (200 words)

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2.5 Summing Up

In this unit, we have covered three poems by Nissim Ezekiel in some detail. For further reading, do refer to the following section for texts and articles on the life and works of Ezekiel.

2.6 References and Suggested Reading

- Ahmed, Irshad Gulam. “Nissim Ezekiel’s Critical Nationalism and the Question of Indian English.” *Indian Literature*, vol. 53, no. 2 (250), 2009, pp. 164–69. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23348053>. Accessed 26 Apr. 2025.

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Unit- 3

Kamala Das: An Introduction

Unit Structure:

- 3.1 Objectives
- 3.2 Introducing the Poet
- 3.3 Her Works
- 3.4 Critical Reception
- 3.5 Summing Up
- 3.6 References and Suggested Reading

3.1 Objectives

This unit is designed to provide you:

- An introduction to Kamala Das as an Indian woman poet;
- An analysis of her literary oeuvre within the context of her contemporary era;
- An appreciation of her ‘confessional’ poetry;
- An understanding of the critical reception toward her works.

3.2 Introducing The Poet

Kamala Das is one of the significant Indian poets writing in English. She began writing poetry by the time English poetry by Indian poets had moved away from national themes to more personal experiences. With Das, one confronts a wide range of human feelings and emotions with deep psychological and philosophical complexities. The poet has dealt it all with a candour and freshness which is remarkable.

Kamala Das was born on the 31st of March in 1934 at Punnayarkulam in the coastal region of Malabar in the state of Kerala. Her real name is Madhavi Kutty, ‘Kamala Das’ being her pen-name. Both the parents of Kamala Das

were poets and it is no surprise that Das should take to poetry too. But what is surprising is that she was educated at home and was denied formal school and college education. Before she could really come into her own, Kamala Das was married at the early age of fifteen. She had three children and lived in Mumbai. But Das's married life was fraught with disappointment and disillusionment. A completely unfulfilled woman, she writhes with pain and disenchantment in her writings. It is curious to note that though incomplete as a lover, her husband can be a 'kind' person and is apparently a 'good friend'. But he is a 'friend' who does not care if she is promiscuous. This only adds to her agony and frustration in her married life. Kamala Das records the poignant story of her life in her autobiography *My Story*, serialized in "The Current Weekly" from January to December, 1974. Similar autobiographical prose pieces like "I Study All Men – I had to" was published in the "Illustrated Weekly of India" in 1971.

Stop to Consider:

A Brief Look Backwards:

It is nearly one hundred and fifty years since Indian poets have been grouped together through the single vein of the English language. Starting from 1817 onwards, Toru Dutt, Henry Derozio, Kasiprasad Ghose, Michael Madhusudan Dutt and Manmohan Ghose have made their mark. Of those writing in the first half of the twentieth century, mention may be made of Rabindranath Tagore, Aurobindo Ghose (or Sri Aurobindo), Sarojini Naidu, Joseph Furtado and Harindranath Chattopadhyaya. In the latter half of the twentieth century, much good poetry came to be published. But nothing was accomplished on the scale of Tagore or Sri Aurobindo. This began what is termed as the Modern Period. Nissim Ezekiel, Dorn Moraes, Kamala Das, Gieve Patel, Arvind K. Mehrotra, Keki N. Daruwalla, Arun Kolatkar, Shiv K. Kumar, R. Parthasarathy, Jayanta Mahapatra, A.K. Ramanujan are important names to contend with so far as modern Indian poets are concerned.

Of the modern women poets special mention may be made of poets like Kamala Das, Mamta Kalia, Melanie Silgado, Eunice De Souza, Intiaz Dharker, Smita Agarwal, Sujata Bhatt, Charmayne D'Souza, Tara Patel and others.

Vinay Dharwadkar writes of the changing contexts and their multiplicity in relation to Indian poetry in English. His summary account of the scene of Indian poetry continues with regard to women poets and the context of their writing. "In the post-colonial decades, that world has undergone a new series of far-reaching transformations. For one, during the past thirty years it has been altered increasingly and with great effect by the emergence of women poets in the various languages. Until the end of the British Raj, and even in the first decade after Independence, there were few prominent women poets in the country: in the second half of the nineteenth century, for instance, there was Toru Dutt (English); between the two World Wars there were a handful of figures like Sarojini Naidu (English); and Mahadevi Varma and Subhadra Kumari Chauhan (Hindi); and in the final years of colonial rule there were a few younger women like Indira Sant (Marathi) and Balamani Amma (Malayalam). Since the late 1950s, however, the number of women poets in print has risen sharply. This shift is part of the larger, more dramatic trajectory of change Indian women have been creating for themselves in the domestic and public spheres, especially in the domains of literacy, education, journalism, scholarship, the arts, the entertainment industry, politics, and the various modern professions. Between the 1950s and 1970s, we therefore find women poets like Amrita Pritam (Punjabi), Kamala Das (English), and Nabaneeta Dev Sen (Bengali) working concurrently with fiction writers like Qurratulain Hyder (Urdu), Anita Desai and Kamala Markandaya (both English), and Mahasweta Devi (Bengali), scholars like Irawati Karve (Marathi), Romila Thapar and Meenakshi Mukherjee (both English), translators like Lila Ray (Bengali and English), and editors like Madhu Kishwar (English and Hindi) to bring into existence a large, well-defined emergent community of women intellectuals, and a formidable body of women's post-colonial writing in the various

languages. In the 1980s there has been virtually an explosion of women's poetry in India, with dozens of new names and voices in English, Marathi, Hindi, Bengali, Oriya, Malayalam, Telugu, and Kannada.

The situation of woman poets in Indian English, in fact, may be a good measure of the change as a whole. In the 1960s, the foreground was occupied by relatively isolated figures like Monika Verma and Kamala Das. In the 1970s Gauri Deshpande, Malathi Rao, Anna Sujatha Modayil, Lakshmi Kannan, Mamta Kalia, and Sunita Jain, as well as Eunice de Souza, Melanie Silgado, Priya Karunakar, Debjani Chatterjee, Nasima Aziz, and Meena Alexander entered the picture, giving it the look of a community of women poets. In the 1980s and early 1990s, Imtiaz Dharker, Tilottama Rajan, Charmayne D'Souza, Shanta Acharya, Menka Shivdasani, and Sujata Bhatt, among others, filled the frame, joining (whether they wanted to or not) the poets who had survived from the previous decades, and giving that community an impressive new profile. Together with their counterparts in the other languages, these women writers have effectively displaced Indian writing from its 'traditional male-dominated centres'." [p.204]

SAQ:

Which notable features characterise the 'context' of Kamala Das's poetry? (80 words)

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Irony sears through her poetry as Das writes with passionate candour, and in revolt against the situation she finds herself in. It is entirely unconventional and shocking in the Indian context. But Das continues to be completely sincere, being true to herself, both in her prose and poetry. All the time,

even as she writes her shattering, but not always too perfect poetry, she continues to live with her husband. What is significant is that Kamala Das must be acknowledged as one of the greatest Indian poets writing in English who had the courage to bare her essential feminine sensibility without inhibitions nor any kind of hypocrisy.

3.3 Her Works

In this section you will be introduced to some of the major works of Kamala Das. Although each of her books cannot be discussed in detail, care has been taken to choose those that project the quintessential strains of her writing.

Kamala Das began writing verse in school and had already published her work in the 'Indian PEN' (1948). She started as an amateur poet using traditional verse methods and finally evolved as someone with a strong and strident personal voice though she did not quite improve on her knowledge about poetic technique or theory. As Bruce King opines, "She is a natural poet with an excellent feeling for sound, rhythm, phrasing, image, symbol, word play and drama." Her poetic contributions are to be seen in four volumes of poems which include *Summer in Calcutta* (1965), *The Descendants* (1967), *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* (1973) and *Stranger Time* (1977). *My Story*, Das's autobiography, was published in 1975. Although Kamala Das made her mark as an Indian poet writing in English, her acumen as a writer in the regional language, Malayalam, is also noteworthy. She is known as a writer of short stories in her mother-tongue for which the Kerala Sahitya Akademi honoured her with an award in 1969.

Kamala Das is also renowned for her prose-writing in English. A number of miscellaneous essays project her as a very controversial person among the Indian reading public. Some of her essays are "I Studied All Men", "What Women Expect Out of Marriage and What They Get", "Why Not More Than One Husband?" and, "I Have Lived Beautifully".

In the volume *Summer In Calcutta* (1965), some of the significant poems are- "The Dance of the Eunuchs", "The Freaks", "Spoiling the Name",

“The Fear”, and “My Grandmother’s House”, among others. This first published anthology of Kamala Das’s poetry sets the tone for her entire writing. Of the fifty poems in it, only a few deviate from the theme of love or failure in love. The exceptions include “The Flag” about poverty-stricken Indians and “Sepia” about dissipated and inactive Indians. This volume depicts a harsh sun-scorched tropical world. Against this backdrop, Kamala Das lays bare her unhappy soul, her craving for love in all its dimensions, her longing for her happy carefree childhood and her initiation into a world of lust and physical craving which she tries to rationalize, but all the time inwardly rejects. The poem, “The Dance of the Eunuchs” which starts the volume sets the tone of all her works. The dancing eunuchs, with their colourful whirling movements symbolize Das’s frenzied sex life. But behind it all, she is as devoid of love and true affection as the hollow, pitiful lives of the freaks of nature, the eunuchs. “The Freaks” vents the need for sexual gratification of a woman. She is in bed with a man who is passive and completely unaware of the needs of the woman beside him. The autobiographical strains in the poem are only too obvious.

Stop to Consider:

M. K. Naik and Shyamala A. Narayan write (in 2001) in *Indian English Literature 1980–2000 : A Critical Survey* : “Four decades ago, Kamala Das had urgently articulated “the muted whisper at the core of womanhood,” expressing “the endless female hungers.” During the last two decades, several younger women poets have taken up Kamala’s “brown burden,” and presented many more aspects of the complex fate of being a woman in modern Indian society.

Before the work of these poets is considered, it is necessary to look back at the women poets of the previous generation, and note how many of them have continued to write beyond 1980. Unfortunately, very few of them have, and this includes Kamala Das herself. The publication of the Collected Works of a writer normally indicates that their work is now complete. Kamala Das’s *Collected Poems*, which appeared in 1985 seemed to suggest just that. Later, she published

only one more collection: *The Soul Knows How to Sing: Selections from Kamala Das* (1997). It does contain a few new poems, but they do not constitute a distinctly new departure...

A very large number of the contemporaries of Kamala Das have published virtually nothing after 1980. Among these are : Monika Varma, Gauri Deshpande, Mamta Kalia, Tilottama Rajan, Mary Ann Dasgupta, Gauri Pant, Indira Devi Dhanrajgir, Mary Erulkar and several others.” [p.184]

Kamala Das’s early poems are basically concerned with her marriage, love life, desire for intimacy, and the repercussions- which included guilt, and her fame as an author. Raised in the warmth of the close Kerala matrilineal society, she felt alienated when her father moved to Calcutta. Her early marriage and the life of drudgery at her husband’s home combined with his callous, uncaring attitude towards her shocked her, and made her subsequently angry, confused and rebellious. She longed for her happy childhood in Kerala, and she reminisces about it. This is also noted in the poetry of Ramanujan and Parthasarathy. Kamala Das idealizes her childhood in, ‘My Grandmother’s House’ where she was showered with love and affection that she misses so terribly in her married life. So she says:

“..... you cannot believe, darling,
Can you, that I lived in such a house and
Was proud, and loved ... I who have lost
My way and beg now at strangers’ doors to
Receive love, at least in small change?”

The same theme is also noted in “Corridors”. In “Composition,” Das juxtaposes her present life with the time she spent, ‘lying beside my grandmother’. As she moves so freely as it were in a wild hunt for love, there is a poignant remembrance of her grandmother – ‘I miss my grandmother’. In “A Hot Noon at Malabar,” Das takes us once more to the warmth and charm of her grandmother’s house where she basked in joy, her senses stirred, ready for warm love. This is the mood that Kamala Das wishes to relive but in vain.

Stop to Consider:

The 'Confessional' Mode of Kamala Das:

As an exponent of the 'confessional' mode of Indian poetry, Kamala Das is essentially one of the modern Indian women poets giving expression to her suppressed experiences. It is appropriate to say that Kamala Das creates a free form, shaking all the established norms of life and art. She was unconventional in life, and she is equally unconventional in her diction, and in her verse-form. The crucial factor in all confessional poetry is a matter of tone. The free verse of Kamala Das, by carefully avoiding all clichés of expression, has perfected a way of treating the most intimate experiences without ever being sentimental or having any trace of pathos.

Often the images of Kamala Das are symbolic which helps to increase the expressive range of her language. The 'sun' and 'heat', 'house' and 'window', 'cremation' and 'burning', 'nature', the 'human body', 'sleep', 'sea', the 'mythic grandmother' and 'Krishna' constitute her range of imagery.

Kamala Das may be said to have ushered in a kind of new morality according to which the time-honoured virtues of timidity, submissiveness, chastity, and dependence on men are to be thrown overboard. The reminiscences of Kamala Das's childhood at Nalapat House, her family home, are tinged with nostalgia, as found in "A Hot Noon in Malabar" and "My Grandmother's House". She writes, "From every city I have lived I have remembered the noons in Malabar with an ache growing, inside me, a homesickness."

The Descendants, which is comprised of twenty-nine poem is the second volume published in 1967. Most of the poems in this volume have similar themes as those of the first. But soon one notes a dualism in her writing, where the soul is contrasted with the body. As Bruce King puts it, 'She seems to imagine overcoming this dualism only through death; her poems are filled with longings to die, especially to drown in the sea, water being

associated in her mind with an all – encompassing, universal calm ...’. This is noted in poems like ‘Suicide’, ‘The Descendants’. *The Old Playhouse and other Poems* (1973), contains thirty-three poems including fourteen poems which have been published in the first two volumes. The longing for the innocence of children, the frustrating present of a married woman, the wild search for love, the sexual adventures – hollow and yet demanding, the need to subjugate men with female wiles, and finally the oppressive guilt, making Das yearn for death – are the focus of her poems. This is noted in poems like ‘Glass’, ‘The Prisoner’, ‘Blood’. In *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* she says:

“You called me wife.
I was taught to break saccharine into your tea and
To offer at the right moment the vitamins. Cowering
Beneath your monstrous ego I ate the magic loaf and
Became a dwarf ...”

This is in revolt against the male chauvinism, the dominating male who wishes to subjugate the woman and crush her spirit. Dominant strains of feminism mark Kamala Das’ poetic delineations. In ‘Stone Age’ Das once again airs her extreme feminist views as she ridicules her husband intruding into her privacy of her mind where she fantasizes about different men in her life.

SAQ:

Analyse the idea of candour and revolt in Kamala Das’ poetry. How important is ‘context’ in this case? (80+70 words)

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3.4 Critical Reception

Kamala Das won sudden recognition in 1965, and with her third volume, *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* (1973), which included her earlier work also, she has tried to build on her reputation as a strong feminist in

Indian poetry in English. Critics like K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar compare her 'confessional poetry with that of Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath and Judith Wright. Works like 'Composition' are a sustained exercise in self-exposure. But Iyengar agrees with Vimla Rao, when she says 'Kamala Das finally appears to be a poet of decadence ... a victim of the inadequacies of her life, failing to gain control even over her art'. Her autobiographical 'My Story' has stimulated interest in the poet in her. M. Elias wishes to bring to the fore her Malabar antecedents and concludes that when Kamala Das speaks, it is 'rather the Nair maiden unburdening her collective nightmare.' But there are lines of poetry written by Das that transcend all kinds of monotonous self-exhibitionism, and the deadening sex and sensuality as found in the following lines:

"I also know that by confessing
by peeling off my layers
I reach closer to the soul ..."

M.K. Naik says that the most colourful feature of Kamala Das's poetry is the uninhibited frankness with which she talks about sex, referring nonchalantly to 'the musk of sweat beneath the breasts', 'the warm shock of menstrual blood', and even 'my pubis'. But these are not wanton expressions of a nymphomaniac. The persona in Kamala Das's poems is merely 'every woman who seeks love'. She may 'flaunt a grand, flamboyant lust', but basically she remains the eternal Eve, proudly celebrating her essential femininity. Eunice de Souza lauds the honesty in the writings of Kamala Das. She is also impressed by a control of form and the disciplined expression of painful emotions. However, her poetry is often seen to get out of control due to callous editing. Das's main problem is not knowing when to stop. So, often the cumulative impression of strong feelings results in a whine. Devendra Kohli wishes to draw the reader's attention to compulsions to articulate and understand the workings of the feminine consciousness as in "The Music Party", "Jaisurya" and "Afterwards".

Stop to Consider:

“A breakthrough to poetry about everyday Indian life written in a more colloquial-seeming voice occurred in the volumes published by Ramanujan, Ezekiel, Gieve Patel and Kamala Das in the mid 1960s. Das wrote in a colloquial and open manner about herself, her moods, her love, her marriage, her grandmother, and the cities in which she lived. There was an intimacy with the reader, a spontaneous acceptance of her life and its happenings in a way not seen before in Indian verse:

Our house crouches in dust in the
Evenings, when the buffalos tramp
Up the road, the weary herdsmen
Singing soft Punjabi songs, and
Girls from free municipal schools
Pause shyly at our gate and smile (“The Snobs”)
I don’t know politics but I know the names
Of those in power, and can repeat them like
Days of the week, or names of months, beginning with
Nehru. I an Indian, very brown, born in
Malabar, I speak three languages, write in
Two, dream in one. (“An Introduction”)

The shift from the legendary and sentimentalized India of the pre-independence poets to a more socially conscious, contemporary, localized, personal India can be seen in the titles of her first book, *Summer in Calcutta* (1965), and in the titles of such poems as “The Dance of the Eunuchs”, “My Grandmother’s House”, “Visitors to the City”, “The Child in the factory”, “The Sea Shore”, “To a Big Brother”, “Punishment in Kindergarten”, “Farewell to Bombay” and “A Hot Noon in Malabar”.”

(Bruce King, pp-113-114)

Often the poems of Das offer a version of the carpe diem theme, a seizing the day both in awareness of the passing of time and youth, and in a need to live intensely. If many poems speak of unhappiness and the desire for an all-absorbing love, others are filled with Das's discovery of the life around her on the streets and in bedrooms. The interest of Das's poetry is not the story of sex outside of marriage but the instability of her feelings, the way they rapidly shift and assume new postures, new attitudes of defence, attack, explanation or celebration. Another very significant factor in Das's idea of 'feminism' is that it is her husband who must comfort her from rejection by another man : as seen in 'An Apology to Goutama'. In 'I Shall Some Day', one reads of her own fear of the attraction to domestic comforts and her fear of freedom:

"I shall some day leave, leave the cocoon

You built around me with morning tea."

Das brings a sense of locality to her poems. Although Ezekiel refers to his environment, Das draws on more concrete and defined situations like bedrooms, restaurants, and streets in which she meets her paramours, the rides in cars, the people she meets visits and observes. The most significant achievement of Kamala Das however, is her introduction of 'Indian' English. This unshackles the Indian writers from the language of the colonizers, creating a literature based on local speech. This essentially brings to the fore a new voice, tone, idiom and rhythm to translate what the writer feels with an immediacy as yet unknown.

SAQ:

How important is the reference to gender in reading Kamala Das's poetry? In what way does 'gender' define the context of her poetry?
(70+70 words)

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3.5 Summing Up

In this unit, we have discussed Kamala Das as an Indian woman poet, as well as her 'confessional' mode of poetry. We have also situated her works within the era in which she lived. In the next unit, we will understand the themes and mode of her poetry in depth through the analysis of three of her poems: "My Grandmother's House," "A Hot Noon in Malabar," and "The Sunshine Cat".

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Unit- 4

Kamala Das: “My Grandmother’s House”, “A Hot Noon In Malabar,” “The Sunshine Cat”

Unit Structure:

- 4.1 Objectives
- 4.2 Introduction
- 4.3 Contexts of the Poems
 - 4.3.1 Context of “My Grandmother’s House”
 - 4.3.2 Context of “A Hot Noon at Malabar”
 - 4.3.3 Context of “The Sunshine Cat”
- 4.4 Reading the Poems
 - 4.4.1 Reading “My Grandmother’s House”
 - 4.4.2 Reading “A Hot Noon at Malabar”
 - 4.4.3 Reading “The Sunshine Cat”
- 4.5 Summing Up
- 4.6 References and Suggested Readings

4.1 Objectives

In this unit, we will cover:

- An understanding of Das through the three prescribed poems.
- The contexts of the poems.
- The critical analyses of the poems.
- References to critical texts for greater understanding.

4.2 Introduction

Kamala Das (1934–2009), also known as Kamala Surayya and Madhavikutty, was a pioneering Indian poet and writer who wrote in both English and Malayalam. Renowned for her candid exploration of female

sexuality, personal identity, and the complexities of womanhood, Das's work challenged societal norms and offered a voice to women's inner experiences. Her poetry is often categorized as confessional, drawing parallels with Western poets like Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton. Das's literary contributions have left an indelible mark on Indian literature, making her a seminal figure in contemporary poetry.

In "My Grandmother's House," Das reflects on the profound sense of loss and nostalgia for her ancestral home, symbolizing a time when she felt loved and secure. The house, now desolate, represents the void in her life following her grandmother's death. Das writes, "There is a house now far away where once / I received love..." indicating a deep yearning for the affection she once experienced. The imagery of "blind eyes of windows" and "the frozen air" evokes a haunting atmosphere, emphasizing the emptiness that pervades the abandoned home. This desolation mirrors the poet's internal emptiness, highlighting her longing for the past. The poem encapsulates themes of love, loss, and the inexorable passage of time, reflecting a universal human experience of yearning for bygone days.

In "A Hot Noon in Malabar," Das reminisces about the vibrant and chaotic noontimes in her native Malabar. The poem juxtaposes the lively streets filled with "beggars and bitches," "stray cows," and "fortune tellers," against the poet's current life, which she perceives as monotonous and detached. The "hot noon" symbolizes a period of intensity and vivacity, contrasting with her present sense of alienation. Das's yearning for the "wild men" and the "wild thoughts" of Malabar reflects a desire to reconnect with her roots and the unrestrained spirit of her homeland. The poem serves as an ode to her native place, capturing the essence of its culture and the poet's intrinsic connection to it.

In "The Sunshine Cat," Das portrays the plight of a woman trapped in a loveless marriage, seeking affection but finding only exploitation. The "sunshine cat" symbolizes the woman's suppressed desires and her yearning for freedom. Das describes how the woman's husband and lovers "spoke of love, but their lust was cold," highlighting the emotional and physical neglect she endures. The imagery of the woman being "a cold and half-

dead woman, now of no use at all to men” underscores her dehumanization and the societal tendency to discard women who do not conform to expected roles. The poem critiques the patriarchal structures that confine women, shedding light on their struggles for autonomy and genuine affection.

Kamala Das’s poetry is characterized by its raw honesty and fearless exploration of themes that were considered taboo in her time. Her work delves into the intricacies of female sexuality, the constraints of societal expectations, and the quest for identity. By drawing from her personal experiences, Das crafts poems that resonate with authenticity and emotional depth. Her use of vivid imagery and symbolism enriches her poetry, allowing readers to engage deeply with the emotional landscapes she portrays.

4.3 Contexts of the Poems

4.3.1 Context of “My Grandmother’s House”

The poem ‘My Grandmother’s House’ from her earliest volume *Summer in Calcutta* (1965) is a nostalgic yearning for a life of love and affection that Kamala Das experienced as a child in the proximity of her grandmother in the coastal region of Malabar in Kerala. The poignancy of the poem is heightened as her present morbid married life is subtly juxtaposed with her carefree childhood. Das has written: “From every city I have lived I have remembered ‘noons’ in Malabar with an ache growing inside one, a homesickness.”

4.3.2 Context of “A Hot Noon at Malabar” (*Summer in Calcutta*, 1965)

Like “My Grandmother’s House”, this poem too is considered Kamala Das’s warm recollection of her grandmother’s house at Malabar and her life with happy and colourful images of her past experiences.

4.3.3 Context of “The Sunshine Cat”

Kamala Das’s poem “The Sunshine Cat,” featured in her 1965 collection *Summer in Calcutta*, delves into the emotional and psychological turmoil of a woman ensnared in a patriarchal society that reduces her to an object of desire, neglecting her emotional needs. The poem reflects the protagonist’s descent into despair as she seeks genuine affection but encounters only exploitation and indifference from the men in her life. The narrative begins by attributing the woman’s suffering to “the men who knew her,” highlighting the collective responsibility of those who failed her emotionally. Her husband is depicted as a “ruthless watcher” who neither loves nor engages with her, symbolizing emotional abandonment. In her quest for love, she turns to other men, described as a “band of cynics,” who offer only fleeting physical encounters without emotional connection. Their interactions are characterized by superficial kindness, devoid of genuine affection, leaving her feeling used and unfulfilled.

The poem employs vivid imagery to portray her isolation and deterioration. Confined by her husband to a room with only a “streak of sunshine” resembling a yellow cat for company, this metaphor underscores her loneliness and the fading warmth in her life. As winter approaches, the sunlight diminishes, paralleling her waning vitality. Ultimately, she becomes “a cold and half-dead woman,” symbolizing the devastating impact of emotional neglect and the objectification she endures.

Through “The Sunshine Cat,” Das critiques the societal norms that confine women to roles defined by male desire, highlighting the emotional void and loss of identity that result from such oppression. The poem serves as a poignant commentary on the need for genuine emotional connection and the detrimental effects of its absence.

4.4 Reading the Poems

4.4.1 Reading “My Grandmother’s House”

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

“My Grandmother’s House” refers to the family home in Kerala where she spent her childhood. A poem that recalls the happy childhood days of the poet, it is a poignant pointer to the poet’s painful present devoid of true love. It also conveys the sense of rootlessness and alienation that Das experiences when uprooted from her grandmother’s home. A desperate need to satisfy her love-lorn state makes her almost cringe before strange men, seeking love, even if it is just a little bit of it. But to her utter chagrin, all she receives is callousness, which makes Das dejected, and in a bizarre way, renew her quest for true love once again : “I who have lost / My way and beg now at Strangers’ doors to Receive love, at least in small change”.

SAQ:

Explain the time referred to in lines 1-5, lines 6-8 and lines 12-16.

(80 words)

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‘Love’ or the quest for ‘true love’ is the dominant theme in the poem, “My Grandmother’s House” as in most other ‘confessional’ poems of Das. Failure in the search for true love in her married life suffocates the poet. She is now a broken woman, sad, devastated and terribly lonely. But she has not always been the same. She had a warm rich and happy past in the house of her grandmother:

“There is a house now far away where once

I received love”(Lines: 1-2)

We see ‘Love’ in more than the romantic sense it is a synonym for human affection and security. So, closely associated with the theme of ‘love’ is that of ‘rootlessness’ and acute sense of alienation. The kind of freedom that Das’s husband offers to her as a writer shocks her. In “I Study All Men I Had To,” Das writes “Last week the editor of a Kerala Weekly, a well-known capitalist, offered in return for any autobiography, a month’s holiday at the most expensive hotel ... I was thrilled. My husband said: why not take ‘K’ along with you as a diversion? You seem to find him attractive. After working hard, I shall not grudge you a bit of relaxation. This is what I mean by friendship. It is hard to find a friend as good as my husband.’ The irony of the situation is clear and indeed tragic. So, Das imbued with a flux of feminine sensibility revolts at this insensitive attitude of her husband and all other men, and takes on a strong feminist stand. She revolts against all kinds of male domination. As she defies male chauvinism, she also celebrates the body, her sexuality. Hence, suggestions of private moments ‘... lie / Behind my bedroom door like a Dog ...’ show her brooding candour in her treatment of love.

Even as Kamala Das speaks in a nonchalant, uncaring tone about her various acts of physical relationships, one cannot ignore the sad and poignant cry for a fuller and more serene kind of love in her poem.

“....you cannot believe, darling
Can you, that I lived in such a house and
Was proud, and loved”

One certainly does not miss the heart-rending voice that speaks of lost values from a lost world, one which had once been so dear to Das.

Kamala Das is said to be a ‘natural’ poet. Hence, there is nothing very planned, calculated nor artistic in her style. However, one cannot ignore the imaginative use of ‘diction’ in her poetry nor the easy, flexible rhythm which lends variety and control to her poetry. Also, the use of images is lively, original and realistic. In “My Grandmother’s House,” ‘house’ is a dominant image, running through the poem as a firm leitmotif. It symbolizes love, security, sanctity and an identity for the self.

Stop to Consider:

The essential nature of irony points to ‘What it seems’ as against what ‘it is’. It is the product of the inherent ambiguousness of the whole concept and eludes definition. This elusiveness is the basis of irony. Irony has many functions. It is often the witting or unwitting instrument of truth.

The use of irony in Kamala Das as in Sylvia Plath, Emily Dickinson, Judith Wright is poignant and subtle. The life of Kamala Das with her husband, which she so hates is something which she cannot totally abjure. This ambiguity is the root of her ironical stand in her works. Besides, also a feminist, Kamala Das’s initiation into feminist ideas is ironical. She is given complete freedom to pursue her career by her husband. In fact, she is not stopped from indulging in extra-marital relationships. This again is a queer and ironical situation. But what Kamala Das revolts against is the humiliation of her sexual relationship with her husband, where she is treated without love and affection. Her

sorrow is that he treats her as a mere object of sexuality and nothing more. So, although she enjoys much liberty, her deprivation in true love makes her rebel through ironical nuances in her poetry. Her excessive candour about the act of sex, her adventures with different men, and even her craving for the physical act is a pathetic depiction of the irony of her life. Finally while Kamala Das plays out her various roles in the poems of the unhappy woman, the unhappy wife, the reluctant nymphomaniac, she also talks of the 'sad lie / of my unending lust.'

According to Bruce King, Das's most remarkable achievement is writing in an Indian English: "Often her vocabulary, idioms, choice of verbs and some syntactical constructions are part of what has been termed the Idealization of English. This is an accomplishment. It is important in the development of a national literature that writers free themselves from the linguistic standards of their colonizers and create a literature based on local speech; and this is especially important for women writers. Such a development is not a matter of national pride or linguistic equivalent of 'local colour'; rather it is a matter of voice, tone, idiom and rhythm, creating a style that accurately reflects what the writer feels or is trying to say instead of it being filtered through speech meant to reflect the assumptions and nuances of another society.

As soon as 'that woman' (her grandmother) died, "The house withdrew into silence." The simple lucid narration has a quiet poetic intensity. The apprehension roused at 'death' and 'decay' is projected through the image of cold 'snakes' slithering around the dark lifeless house. The ideas of snakes moving "Among books I (Das) was too young to read" is a painful as it is poignant. For, Kamala Das, perhaps fantasizes about other loving, rich and more fulfilling treasures like the 'books' in the house, and rues the fact that she had to lose them all before she could even relish them. The two lines emphasize the painful longing of the poet for her grandmother and the house with all that it embodies. So, after her grandmother's death, she felt like an orphan – and so became cold and aloof. The simile of 'coldness' as

embodied in the moon, in contrast to the childhood full of pride and love, emphasizes the decline into darkness already realized in the metaphor of a house falling into decay. The decay of the present is the cause of the poet's nostalgia. The distance between the past and present is comparable to that between earth and moon.

Critics have expressed distaste for the simile of a 'brooding Dog' even as they have lauded 'an armful of Darkness'. They have opined that Das has degenerated into 'bathos' in her use of the simile. The metaphor of the subhuman species, 'Dog' enters a note of shock, and shocking change. We soon realize that it is meant to formulate her present state of lonely submission. Her life with her husband was reduced to that of a dog, so demeaning it seemed to her. The metaphor of 'small change' in '... I who have lost/ My way and beg now at strangers' doors to Receive love, at least in small change?' reinforces the completely degraded 'self' that Kamala Das's married life has reduced her too. In such a plight 'an armful of Darkness ...' of her grandmother's house can perhaps be her only succour and sustain her in her sordid existence in which, as she says in "The Freaks" : 'Its only to save my face, I flaunt, at times, a grand, flamboyant lust.'

By juxtaposing the two utterances in the two poems of Kamala Das, we can read the sexuality in her poetry. Bruce King emphasizes that the "interest of Das's poetry is not the story of sex outside of marriage but the instability of her feelings, the way they rapidly shift and assume new postures, new attitudes of defense, attack, explanation or celebration. Her poems are situated neither in the act of sex nor in feelings of love; they are instead involved with the self and its varied, often conflicting emotions, ranging from the desire for security and intimacy to the assertion of the ego, self-dramatisation and feelings of shame and depression."

"My Grandmother's House" is dramatic like the dramatic monologue. The conversational tone, the concrete images, the narrative tone, the 'invisible' second person (the husband here) whose presence is so pregnant throughout, help to exact a forceful and poignant drama. '...you cannot believe, darling, Can you, that I lived in such a house, and was proud ...' The heavy sarcasm, the cold irony in the highly dramatic utterance serves Das to give vent to her

acutely disturbed mind in a very effective way. Thus, in “My Grandmother’s House” the poet has effectively cast her psychological trauma at the loss of her childhood innocence with the stark reality of marriage and adulthood.

4.4.2 Reading “A Hot Noon at Malabar”

This is a noon for beggars with whining
Voices, a noon for men who come from hills
With parrots in a cage and fortune-cards,
All stained with time, for brown *Kurava* girls
With old eyes, who read palm in light singsong
Voices, for bangle-sellers who spread
On the cool black floor those red and green and blue
Bangles, all covered with the dust of roads,
Miles, grow cracks on the heels, so that when they
Clambered up our porch, the noise was grating,
Strange..... This is a noon for strangers who part
The window-drapes and peer in, their hot eyes
Brimming with the sun, not seeing a thing in
Shadowy rooms and turn away and look
So yearningly at the brick-ledged well. This
Is a noon for strangers with mistrust in
Their eyes, dark, silent ones who rarely speak
At all, so that when they speak, their voices
Run wild, like jungle-voices. Yes, this is
A noon for wild men, wild thoughts, wild love. To
Be here, far away, is torture. Wild feet
Stirring up the dust, this hot noon, at my
Home in Malabar, and I so far away.....

“A Hot Noon at Malabar” captures a mood of warm lassitude in the poet. There seems to be a sense of quiet indolence, of reflection and a deep longing to relive a world lost in time.

The poet reminisces about her youthful experiences in the house of her family. A pageant of fascinating scenes flashes upon her mind’s eye. It is a hot afternoon in Malabar. The poet remembers the beggars coming up to the house, crying for alms. Then come the men from the hills carrying caged parrots to sell and the old dirty fortune cards which they use to forecast the future. Kamala Das remembers the ‘Kurava’ girls with their deep looks reading the palms with soft musical voices. The bangle-sellers are fascinating as they spread their colourful wares on the cool, black floor. They are all from a mysterious, altogether different world. The dust on their feet bear testimony to the distance they covered to reach Malabar. The poet almost hears the grating sounds of their feet as they clamber up the porch, so different were they. They are strangers in the world of Kamala Das and her family in Malabar. They peer curiously into their cool, ordered lives, into the ‘shadowy rooms’, towards the ‘well’, uncertain of their reception. Then there are the wild suspicious lot, who live life recklessly, wildly—their voices wild, untamed, ‘like jungle-voices’. Das remembers the pantheon of mysterious and mystifying folks invading her afternoons and stirring her wildest fantasies. A wild abandon consumes her. But those moments hold no sense of guilt or regret. They were glorifying, happy and wild. Kamala Das longs to revel in the past experiences she enjoyed in her grandmother’s house. But she is elsewhere, sad, lonely and quite unconnected—”To/ Be here, far away, is torture.”

The heady romance for Kamala Das of the colourful and wild group of people from the hills is fascinating. The romance associated with the hills is a contrast brought out in the last lines (Lines 22-24): “Wild feet/stirring up the dust, this hot noon, at my/Home in Malabar, and I so far away.” In her adulthood, Das encounters different men. They invade her privacy. But they cannot hold her fancy for long, leaving her with distaste. She is unfulfilled and lonely. The wild folks of the hills however, continue to fascinate and beckon her for years. Das rues the fact that she is so far removed from the fairyland of her childhood.

SAQ:

Does the poet succeed in building up a string of associations for the name/signifier, 'Malabar'? Explain the lines 16-20: Who are the "dark, silent ones."? (Words 50+80)

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The theme of alienation, loneliness and nostalgia for a happy childhood is thus once again dominant in 'A Hot Noon at Malabar'. The narration becomes a collage of vibrant childhood fantasies. As Das recalls the people, one by one, the lethargic afternoon comes to life, filling Das with fancies of every timber and hue. At the same time it projects her agonizing married life by contrast.

The uninhibited sexuality that Das writes about with such candour is apparently absent in the poem. But to a keen reader, the projection of 'the physical' (albeit in a more mature fashion) is clearly evident in, 'A Hot Noon at Malabar'. The different groups of wild men from the hills invade the privacy of young Kamala on a hot afternoon.

"Yes, this is

A noon for wild men, wild

thoughts, wild love."

The 'local' setting fills out the language with an almost exotic quality. So, words like 'Kurava' and 'bangles' are easily assimilated into the body of the poem. Besides, the pictures that Das conjures up of 'whining beggars', men with caged parrots, the fortune-tellers and gypsy girls, the bangle-sellers, strange unkempt wild men are very Indian in a south Indian ambience of Malabar

The lines

"..... all covered with the dust of roads,

For all of them, whose feet, devouring rough

Miles, grow cracks on the heels". (Lines: 8-10)

highlight the strangeness of the figures, but also their rough homeliness. As the poet proceeds, one finds her talking of ‘their hot, eyes/ Brimming with the sun’. Their eyes, dark, silent ones ...’ Here, the eye for detail of the poet is noted. Then Das uses the very apt simile of ‘jungle-voices’ to describe the wild voices of the men. The repetition of the word ‘wild’ towards the end of the poem reiterates the unreal, rather surreal fantasies that take hold of the poet in the afternoons similar to the afternoons of Malabar which she gives expression to, with the pageant of the different groups of wild men from the hills.

SAQ:

Select an apt subtitle for the poem from among the following. Justify your selection. (50 words)

- a. Bangle sellers in Malabar
- b. Hot Afternoons: Then and Now
- c. Childhood and Adulthood
- d. Love and longing in Malabar
- e. Past Happiness and Present Reality

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The structure and rhythm of the poem is in keeping with its mood. The prolonged narrative stance, punctuated with a leisurely rhythm creates an indolent mood of fanciful imagination. It is an apt vein to relive the happy memories of Malabar. It is also the right frame to embrace a need to unfurl inner urges dormant in the mind of the poet. The concluding line without a full stop, ‘wild feet stirring up the dust, this hot noon, at my home in Malabar, and I so far away ...’ suggests the happy possibilities that await Das at Malabar, but which are all denied in her married life away from home.

Check Your Progress:

1. Assess the significance of the 'feminine sensibility' displayed in the poems of Kamala Das. Discuss the strategies by which it is projected.
2. Highlight and discuss the sense of alienation that Kamala Das constructs in her poems.
3. Discuss the thematic significance of "My Grandmother's House" and "A Hot Noon at Malabar" in terms of both 'Indianness' and the 'Feminine'.

4.4.3 Reading "The Sunshine Cat"

They did this to her, the men who know her, the man
She loved, who loved her not enough, being selfish
And a coward, the husband who neither loved nor
Used her, but was a ruthless watcher, and the band
Of cynics she turned to, clinging to their chests where
New hair sprouted like great-winged moths, burrowing her
Face into their smells and their young lusts to forget
To forget, oh, to forget, and, they said, each of
Them, I do not love, I cannot love, it is not
In my nature to love, but I can be kind to you.
They let her slide from pegs of sanity into
A bed made soft with tears, and she lay there weeping,
For sleep had lost its use. I shall build walls with tears,
She said, walls to shut me in. Her husband shut her
In, every morning, locked her in a room of books
With a streak of sunshine lying near the door like
A yellow cat to keep her company, but soon
Winter came, and one day while locking her in, he
Noticed that the cat of sunshine was only a

Line, a half-thin line, and in the evening when
He returned to take her out, she was a cold and
Half dead woman, now of no use at all to men.

Kamala Das's "The Sunshine Cat" is a poignant exploration of a woman's slow disintegration under the crushing weight of emotional neglect, betrayal, and forced isolation. Drawn from her own life experiences and confessional in tone, the poem charts a sensitive and rebellious woman's descent from vitality to a half-dead existence, rendered meaningless by the indifference and cruelty of the men in her life. This woman, initially vibrant and seeking emotional fulfillment, is successively betrayed, neglected, and ultimately abandoned by those she had hoped would cherish her.

The woman's tragedy begins with an early heartbreak, when a man she loved fails her—perhaps because of selfishness, cowardice, or societal constraints. This early betrayal leaves a wound that festers, preparing the ground for further disillusionments. The man she marries offers no reprieve; he neither loves nor intimately connects with her. Instead, he becomes a cold, ruthless observer of her suffering, suspicious of her every move, emotionally absent but physically present. His treatment reduces their relationship to a hollow shell, devoid of affection or understanding. In her desperate search for love and connection, the woman turns to other men. However, the men she seeks out, instead of healing her wounds, merely exploit her vulnerabilities. These men, described as cynics, cannot comprehend or offer the deep emotional bond she yearns for. They provide her only with momentary physical solace, a shallow comfort that leaves her more hollow than before. Each encounter becomes a futile attempt to forget – forget the betrayal, the loneliness, the yawning chasm of unmet emotional needs.

Das draws a stark contrast between 'lust' and 'love'. Lust, as depicted in the poem, is a selfish, fleeting act focused solely on physical gratification, neglecting the profound emotional and spiritual nourishment that true love can provide. The woman's experience with these men mirrors this grim reality. Her attempts to find love through physical surrender prove fruitless;

the men's young lusts momentarily consume her but offer no lasting intimacy. Her desperate burrowing into their smells and bodies is a futile attempt to escape an inner sorrow too deep to articulate.

As she spirals deeper into despair, her behavior becomes compulsive, bordering on pathological. Her need for connection becomes an addiction, akin to a gambler's or an alcoholic's dependence. Yet, no matter how many times she seeks refuge in another body, the void inside her remains, growing only more cavernous. Her husband's reaction to her condition is not one of compassion but of cruelty. He responds by imprisoning her in a room, locking her away each morning among dusty books and barren walls. Her only companion is a thin streak of sunlight, which the poet metaphorically likens to a yellow cat. This sunshine, initially a symbol of faint hope and warmth, steadily diminishes as winter sets in, much like the woman's spirit. The symbolic "cat" that once kept her company thins to a mere thread of light, signaling the near extinction of her life force.

The physical confinement parallels her emotional imprisonment. Deprived of love, freedom, and dignity, the woman gradually loses all will to live. By the time her husband returns each evening, he finds her colder, more lifeless, drained of vitality. Eventually, she becomes a cold, half-dead figure, stripped of all youthfulness, passion, and relevance, unfit even for the mechanical sexual role society had once imposed on her.

Throughout "The Sunshine Cat," Kamala Das weaves a devastating indictment of patriarchy. Men, whether lovers or husbands, treat women as objects—either to be controlled, used, or cynically observed. The woman's suffering highlights the pervasive lack of empathy in a male-dominated society, where emotional needs are sidelined, and women's identities are flattened into roles they are forced to inhabit. This decline is not just emotional but also symbolic of a broader societal malaise. A woman's worth, in the world Das paints, is tethered to her ability to fulfill male expectations—youth, beauty, availability. Once she fails or refuses to serve these ends, she is discarded, much like the protagonist of the poem. Her final condition—cold, useless, and emotionally broken—lays bare the brutal consequences of a system that denies women agency, dignity, and emotional sustenance.

“The Sunshine Cat” is also a meditation on isolation. The woman’s entrapment behind walls—both literal and emotional—represents her alienation from the world. Once vibrant and socially connected, she ends up self-exiled, enveloped by her grief. Her tears, described as building walls around her, signify an overwhelming sense of helplessness and surrender. In retreating into herself, she forgoes all hope of external rescue, embracing her loneliness as a grim but inevitable reality.

The poem also carries a deeply personal resonance for Kamala Das herself. Much of her writing is autobiographical, and the female persona in “The Sunshine Cat” echoes her own struggles with love, marriage, and societal expectations. Das’s own life was marked by a quest for authentic love and a rebellion against the stifling norms imposed on Indian women. In this poem, the personal and the universal intertwine, making the woman’s plight emblematic of the silent suffering endured by countless women trapped in loveless marriages and unfulfilling relationships. The emotional and psychological fragmentation of the woman is mirrored by the fragmented structure of the poem. Das’s terse, evocative lines create a rhythm of suffocation, each image building inexorably toward the protagonist’s decline. The imagery is rich and disturbing: the moth-like men, the yellow cat of sunlight, the walls of tears—all evoking a sense of decay and entrapment. Importantly, Das avoids romanticizing the woman’s suffering. There is no false note of hope, no suggestion of redemption. The ending is unrelentingly bleak, underscoring the finality of the woman’s collapse. She is not merely disillusioned; she is effectively erased. Her spirit is extinguished, her body rendered an empty vessel.

This harsh realism sets Das apart from other confessional poets. While she explores themes of sexuality, longing, and despair, she does so with a brutal honesty that refuses to comfort the reader. “The Sunshine Cat” demands that we confront the raw reality of emotional starvation and its devastating consequences. This poem is a searing portrayal of a woman’s emotional collapse, borne out of betrayal, neglect, and societal imprisonment. It highlights the tragic consequences of reducing women to mere objects of

desire or control, ignoring their need for genuine love and companionship. Through vivid imagery, autobiographical undertones, and relentless emotional honesty, Kamala Das crafts a powerful narrative of loss, disillusionment, and existential despair.

Ultimately, the poem serves as both a personal lament and a broader feminist statement. It exposes the cruelty embedded in traditional structures of marriage and relationships, critiques the selfishness and cowardice of men, and mourns the fate of women whose yearning for emotional fulfillment remains unmet. In doing so, “The Sunshine Cat” stands as one of Kamala Das’s most haunting and enduring works.

4.5 Summing Up

In this unit, we have discussed three poems by Kamala Das. In “My Grandmother’s House,” the ancestral home serves as a metaphor for lost love and innocence, reflecting a universal longing for the past. “A Hot Noon in Malabar” captures the sensory richness of her homeland, contrasting it with her current sense of displacement, thus highlighting the theme of belonging. “The Sunshine Cat” addresses the objectification and marginalization of women, critiquing societal norms that confine female identity.

Das’s contribution to Indian literature extends beyond her poetry. Her autobiography, *My Story*, offers an unflinching look into her life, challenging societal norms and providing insight into her literary works. Her fearless articulation of women’s experiences has inspired countless readers and writers, cementing her legacy as a trailblazer in modern Indian literature.

Therefore, Kamala Das’s poetry offers a profound exploration of personal and universal themes, rendered through evocative imagery and candid expression. Her literary oeuvre exemplifies her ability to intertwine personal narrative with broader societal critiques, making her work both intimate and resonant. Through her literary endeavours, Das has carved a niche that continues to influence and inspire the landscape of contemporary poetry.

4.6 References and Suggested Readings

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Unit- 5

Keki N Daruwalla:

Hawk, the King Speaks to the Scribe, Fish are Speared by Night

Unit Structure

- 5.1 Objectives
- 5.2 Introduction
- 5.3 Biography of the Poet
- 5.4 Thematic Concerns
 - 5.4.1 Violence
 - 5.4.2 Nature
- 5.5 Close Reading: Hawk
 - 5.5.1 Summary and Analysis of the poem
 - 5.5.2 Poetic Structure and Form
- 5.6 Close Reading: The King Speaks to the Scribe
 - 5.6.1 Summary and Analysis of the poem
 - 5.6.2 Poetic Structure and Form
- 5.7 Close Reading: Fish are Speared by Night
 - 5.7.1 Summary and Analysis of the poem
 - 5.7.2 Poetic Structure and Form
- 5.8 Summing Up
- 5.9 References and Suggested Readings

5.1 Objectives

This chapter will take the students through Keki N Daruwalla's poetic imagination through analysis of his select poems including Hawk, The King Speaks to the Scribe and Fish are Speared by Night. After going through this unit, you will be able to :

- Analyse the poetic structure and treatment of poetic form by Daruwalla in his poetry.
- Discuss Daruwalla's poetry in the context of the larger corpus of Indian Writing in English.
- Analyse the themes and imagery in his poetry.
- Distinguish his poetic imagination and literary style from others in the genre.

5.2 Introduction

Keki N Daruwalla is a Sahitya Akademi Award winning poet who is one of the leading figures in Indian poetry in English today. Specialising in ecocritical poetry, Daruwalla's preoccupation with naturalistic themes is deeply rooted in his engagement with social issues and awareness. Nissim Ezekiel, the most prominent poet in Indian English poetry, calls Daruwalla's work as an "impressive evidence not only of mature poetic talent but of literary stamina, intellectual strength and social awareness" (Keki N. Daruwalla).

He has an extensive body of poetic work to his name, but his journey to literary recognition began with his debut collection, *Under Orion* (1970). Over the next three decades, he authored nine more poetry books, solidifying his reputation as a distinguished poet, including: *The Keeper of the Dead* (winner of the Sahitya Akademi Award, 1984), *Landscapes* (winner of the Commonwealth Poetry Award, Asia, 1987), *Night River* and *The Map-maker*. His poetry is deeply intertwined with the Indian milieu, drawing on its myths, history, and culture while maintaining an ironic stance that highlights the contradictions of Indian life. The landscape in his poetry spans from the ancient kingdom of Kalinga to modern-day Bombay, tracing a literary tradition that unfolds across the diverse expanse of the Indian subcontinent. Rich in imagery, his verses capture the complexities of tradition and modernity, offering a nuanced reflection on the world he inhabits ("Keki N. Daruwalla Profile").

His poetry also deals with the themes of death, disease and violence, as death is pervasive in the undertones of his poems. His poetic genius is often

paralleled with that of Ted Hughes in the Western literary canon with his treatment of the environment and nature in his written work. Apart from poetry, he has also written short stories and extensively wrote partition ghazals.

5.3 Biography of the Poet

Keki N. Daruwalla has lived a productive life, earning widespread appreciation for his literary contributions—an achievement that may have once seemed uncertain given the upheavals of his early years. Born in Lahore in 1937 to the esteemed professor N.C. Daruwalla, the partition of India forced his family to leave their home and resettle. His penchant for writing began at an early age, nurtured by exposure to multiple languages in various schools across India, a result of the country's rich diversity. This linguistic and cultural immersion played a key role in shaping his literary interests.

Over the years, he has received numerous prestigious accolades. In addition to the SahityaAkademi Award in 1984, he was honored with the Padma Shri by the Government of India for his contributions to literature. He also received the Commonwealth Poetry Award for Asia, further cementing his place in the literary world. Daruwalla returned his SahityaAkademi Award in the year 2015 as a form of protest against

His works are even circulated in translations to various languages including Spanish, Swedish, Magyar, German and Russian. He has made a significant contribution to literature that extends beyond national boundaries. His poetic imagery draws from visual and auditory elements across the world, spanning England, Helsinki, and Moscow. His pursuit of the ultimate creative expression in poetry has taken him to various places, enriching his work with diverse influences. His poems are filled with vivid images, metaphors, and symbols that reflect his expansive poetic imagination.

However, his achievements extend beyond literature. He began his professional career as an IPS officer and went on to serve in several distinguished roles in the field, demonstrating his dedication to public service.

Check Your Progress:

1. Write about the poetic corpus of Keki N. Daruwalla.
2. Which collection of poetry won Daruwalla the Sahitya Akademi Award and in which year?

5.4 Thematic Concerns

In this section of the unit, we will explore some of the themes that Daruwalla engages with in his poetry.

5.4.1 Violence

Keki N Daruwalla is all too aware of the violence that is the reality of post-independence India, especially as someone who grew up during the partition years. Further in his career as an IPS officer, he was involved in the daily realities of everyday life of people and how it is mired in violence. Social criticism is at the heart of his poetry with the knowledge he had acquired over the years both through observation and experience. He talks about violence more overtly in his poem “Ruminations”-

“I can smell violence in the air

Like the lash of rain -

Mass hatreds drifting grey across the moon

It hovers brooding, poised like a cobra.” (Ruminations)

In these lines, the poet evokes a powerful sensory experience, engaging the olfactory and tactile senses to convey the pervasive presence of violence. The comparison of violence to the lash of rain is particularly striking, as it not only highlights the unpredictability of both forces (Rahaman 8) but also emphasises their physical impact—rain that lashes against the body mirrors the brutality of violence inflicted upon individuals.

Furthermore, the brooding cobra serves as an ominous metaphor, embodying a sense of imminent danger and coiled aggression. The image of the poised serpent creates an atmosphere of heightened tension, where violence is not just a possibility but an inevitability waiting to unfold. The

poet masterfully constructs this moment of suspended dread, drawing readers into the unsettling anticipation of an attack.

His preoccupation with violence can further be seen in his poem “Curfew in a Riot Turn City”-

“barracuda - eyes

Searching for prey

among nocturnal glioma.” (Curfew in a Riot Turn City)

In this poem, one can really see the violent nature of riots that the poet uses the metaphor of the barracuda searching for its prey. He deals with the realities of communal violence and intolerance in the country in his poetry.

“his eyelids are sewn with silk

as he is broken to the hood.

He is momentarily blinded, starved.” (“Hawk”)

His poem “Hawk” is equipped with violent imagery where the poet not only shows the violence that the predatory bird can inflict upon the prey, but also mankind’s violence on such a mighty creature of nature. His visceral description presents the raw brutality of the natural world as he explores violence through the predator. However, the predator’s role shifts from the hawk to the human, highlighting the cyclical nature of violence.

“Flashlights stab the sea;

From shoulder-height javelins descend,

Splintering the light as the fish is skewered

And forced down the spear-head.” (“Fish are Speared by Night”)

In “Fish are Speared by Night”, Keki N. Daruwalla vividly captures the theme of violence through the graphic depiction of fishing, where fish are skewered with javelins under the cover of darkness. The poem immerses readers in the harsh realities of rural life, where survival is intertwined with acts of brutality. Daruwalla’s unflinching portrayal of this practice does more than document a traditional method of fishing; it underscores the primal instincts that govern both nature and humanity.

Check Your Progress:

1. Trace the theme of violence in Daruwalla's poetry.
2. How does Keki N. Daruwalla use imagery and symbolism to depict the cyclical nature of violence in his poetry, particularly in *Fish are Speared by Night and Hawk*?

5.4.2 Nature

Keki N Daruwalla's poems are replete with ecological imagery, giving him the status of an ecocritical poet. His works involve a sense of interrogation for human actions affecting nature as a manifestation of his environmental consciousness. Especially in the era of the anthropocene where human impact on the environment has become significant, his poetry delves into a questioning of such behaviour making us confront our own short-sightedness.

Throughout his poetic career, Keki N. Daruwalla has frequently woven themes of animals and nature into his work, using them as powerful metaphors to highlight broader socio-political issues. His poetry not only reflects his deep concern for the environment and the need to protect it from human exploitation but also serves as a mirror, compelling humans to confront their own wrongdoings. By intertwining the natural world with human conflicts, Daruwalla creates a poignant commentary on the fragile balance between civilization and the forces it seeks to control.

Keki N. Daruwalla's poetry delves into a wide range of socially and ecologically significant themes, with environmental consciousness emerging as a central focus. Poems such as "Death of a Bird", "Hawk", "Wolf", "The Last Whale", and "The Last Howl" examine the intricate relationship between humans and the natural world. Through his work, Daruwalla highlights the consequences of human dominance over flora and fauna, emphasizing the resulting environmental crisis. His unique perspective on humanity's interaction with nature challenges conventional viewpoints and warrants deeper reflection. (Dutta)

Despite his deep concern for the natural world, Daruwalla does not romanticize it as an idyllic paradise. Instead, he exposes its raw, often brutal realities, portraying nature as inherently violent rather than harmonious. His environmentalism is deeply intertwined with the Indian context, recognizing that ecological concerns cannot be separated from the lived experiences of its people. By grounding his perspective in reality, he presents environmental issues not as abstract ideals but as urgent, tangible aspects of everyday life.

In his poems “Hawk” and “Fish are Speared by Night”, these ecocritical themes are more prominent. “Hawk” can be read in the context of “the great chain of being”, where the hawk is causing violence to a “lesser” organism, which is the prey only to succumb under his own predator, the human. The poem immediately establishes the bird’s grandeur, highlighting its power and skill by juxtaposing it with symbols of patriarchal authority and oppression. However, soon then the mighty creature’s eyes are sewn shut, he is blinded and starved. The atrocities humans inflict upon the non-human world stem from an anthropocentric mindset, in which humanity perceives itself as the central authority, viewing other beings merely as resources to be exploited for its own gain.

In the next poem, he depicts the killing of fish for human consumption, not as an act of exploitation, but as a natural cycle within the food chain, in contradiction to his poem “The Last Whale”, which is about the exploitation of marine life for capitalistic goals.

Stop to Consider:

According to Oxford Bibliographies, “Ecocriticism is a broad way for literary and cultural scholars to investigate the global ecological crisis through the intersection of literature, culture, and the physical environment.” Daruwalla’s poems are replete with ecocritical issues as the natural world is featured heavily in his poetic works.

5.5 Close Reading: “Hawk”

“Hawk” is one of the most popular poems written by Keki N Daruwalla in the year 1982. It is a part of his poetry collection *The Keeper of the Dead*. The poem is a poignant reflection of the exploitative nature of anthropocentric thought that exploits other life forms for its own greed.

5.5.1 Summary and Analysis of the poem

“Looking up into the well of the sky...

...those black dregs in the cup of his hate!” (“Hawk”)

The first section starts in the middle of the hawk’s hunt. This poem presents a powerful meditation on violence, power, and futility through the image of a hawk circling in the sky. The first stanza introduces the hawk from the speaker’s perspective, assumedly a human, describing it as “drilling the sky” — an invasive and forceful depiction that highlights the hawk’s aggressive presence. The speaker’s description of the land below from the hawk’s perspective, “filmed with salt,” paints a vivid image of sterility and lifelessness, reinforcing the theme of destruction. Since no organism could survive there, the hawk’s frustration stems from its inability to find prey. (“Hawk” by Keki N. Daruwalla) The hawk is labeled a “frustrated parricide,” suggesting that the speaker sees all non-human organisms as part of one collective kinship, making the hawk’s predatory nature comparable to familial violence. This reveals a projection of human emotions onto the hawk, ascribing it with feelings of hate and frustration. The final image of “the fuse of his hate burning still” emphasises the self-perpetuating nature of this aggression, illustrating the destructive cycle of violence.

In the evening, the hawk descends toward the groves where various birds — crow, mynah, pigeon, and parakeet — roost in relative peace, their calm soon shattered by the predator’s violent intrusion. Daruwalla’s description of the hawk as a “rapist in the harem of the sky” is particularly striking, evoking a sense of brutality and violation that underscores the hawk’s ruthless, almost inhuman nature. The use of *he/him* pronouns further aligns the hawk with aggressive masculine traits, reinforcing his dominance and

destructive presence. Daruwalla's vivid detail intensifies this image, describing how the hawk skewers a pigeon to his heel-talon while coldly surveying the remaining birds — his future victims — whom he perceives as "black dregs in the cup of his hate." This chilling metaphor casts the hawk's violence as relentless and insatiable, driven not by instinct alone but by a projected sense of malice and calculated cruelty.

"The tamed one is worse, for he is touched by man...

...of the quarry bird and gouging out his heart." ("Hawk")

In this section, Daruwalla presents the tamed hawk as more dangerous than its wild counterpart because it has been "touched by man," its natural instincts twisted and intensified through human intervention. The poem details the brutal process of taming — the hawk's eyelids are sewn shut with silk, rendering it blind and vulnerable as it is "broken to the hood." This forced blindness, paired with starvation, emphasizes the cruelty inflicted upon the bird. The hawk's sight — vital to its identity as a predator — is then restored gradually, "morsels of vision fed to his eyes" through painstaking, deliberate control. This method, described as "unblended stitch by relenting stitch," evokes a sense of calculated manipulation, as if the hawk's very perception is being reconstructed to suit human desires. Once its vision is restored, the hawk no longer hunts by instinct or need; instead, it kills on command, transformed into a weapon wielded by human hands. Daruwalla contrasts the hawk's earlier predatory passion — once tied to survival or instinct — with this new, mechanical precision, describing hawking as a "ritual" where the hawk's aggression is sharpened into an art form. The disturbing image of the hawk being fed by carving the breast of its prey and gouging out its heart reinforces the unnatural, almost ceremonial violence that now defines the hawk's existence. By portraying the tamed hawk as a product of human cruelty — stripped of autonomy yet more lethal than before — Daruwalla critiques mankind's capacity to distort and exploit nature for control, turning an instinctive predator into a cold, calculated killer.

"They have flushed him out of the tall grasses...

...like the sights of a gun." ("Hawk")

In the following sections, Daruwalla intensifies his portrayal of violence and control through a vivid depiction of a tamed mother hawk and her offspring hunting a hare. The description of the hare's death is particularly harrowing — it is not killed instantly but instead endures a prolonged and fearful struggle. The hare's pounding heart and the blood scattered across the grass become symbolic of its terror and suffering, transforming its death into a grim narrative of victimhood. This graphic imagery underscores the brutality of nature, now manipulated and heightened by human intervention.

The poem's perspective then shifts to the hawk itself, adding a deeply personal and tragic dimension. The hawk's voice recalls the trauma of being "stolen from the eyrie," severed from its natural environment and thrust into a life of violence. While the hawk cannot recall the moment of its capture, the lingering memories of the leather disc that blinded it and the painful stitches over its eyes remain etched in its mind. This fragmented memory reflects the psychological scars of control and conditioning. The hawk's chilling declaration — that it has been trained to "wreak havoc" and intends to do so — reveals how the once-instinctive predator has been reshaped into an agent of destruction, no longer hunting for survival but to fulfill the violent purpose imposed upon it.

"During the big drought that is surely going to come

the doves will look up for clouds, and it will rain hawks."("Hawk")

The concluding lines of the poem show a shift of perspective again, where the doves are anticipating that when the drought comes, it will rain hawks. The imagery of the doves, traditionally symbols of peace and innocence, conveys vulnerability as they gaze skyward in hope of relief. Their expectation of rain — a life-giving force — is cruelly subverted by the ominous prophecy that it will instead "rain hawks." This inversion turns the natural order on its head, transforming the sky — once a space of freedom and renewal — into a site of violence and destruction.

The hawks, now agents of calculated aggression trained by human hands, become an unstoppable force, descending like a plague upon those who seek shelter. This apocalyptic vision suggests that the violence once confined

to individual acts of predation has now expanded into something systemic and inevitable. The drought, often symbolic of hardship or scarcity, heightens this tension — in a world stripped of abundance, survival itself is threatened not just by nature’s cruelty but by man-made violence.

SAQ:

1. Explore the ecocritical themes in Hawk.

5.5.2 Poetic Structure and Form

The poem’s structure is free verse, with no fixed rhyme scheme or consistent metrical pattern. This form allows Daruwalla to explore complex themes of violence, control, and destruction with fluidity and intensity. The poem is divided into several sections, each with shifting perspectives, moods, and imagery to mirror the evolving portrayal of the hawk and its relationship with both nature and human interference.

The poem’s stanzas vary in length, ranging from short bursts of powerful statements to longer descriptive passages. This irregular structure reflects the erratic and unpredictable nature of the hawk itself, evoking its chaotic yet calculated movements.

Lines are often enjambed, allowing thoughts to spill over across multiple lines. This technique builds tension and mirrors the hawk’s relentless and continuous pursuit of violence. For example:

“The fuse of his hate was burning still.
But in the evening he hovered above
the groves, a speck of barbed
passion.” (“Hawk”)

The enjambment draws the reader into the next line, echoing the hawk's hovering presence and calculated aggression.

Shifts in Voice and Perspective: The poem begins with a detached, observational tone where the speaker watches the wild hawk from a distance. This perspective emphasizes the hawk's primal instincts and untamed nature. Later, the focus shifts to the tamed hawk's point of view, adding a tragic introspection as the hawk recalls its capture and conditioning. This shift in voice humanizes the hawk, presenting it as both a victim and an agent of destruction. The final section intensifies the hawk's perspective, transforming it into a chilling voice of vengeance, trained to "wreak havoc."

Imagery and Symbolism: The poem's structure emphasizes stark contrasts between natural and manipulated violence. Early images of the hawk's instinctive aggression are juxtaposed with the cold precision of the trained hawk, where violence becomes ritualistic and calculated. Recurring motifs like eyes, vision, and blindness reinforce themes of control and manipulation. The hawk's sight — a crucial symbol of power — is repeatedly obscured, restored, and exploited. The poem's closing image — "*During the big drought that is surely going to come / the doves will look up for clouds, and it will rain hawks.*" — evokes apocalyptic dread, suggesting that destruction has become systemic and inevitable.

Repetition: The phrase "The tamed one is worse, for he is touched by man" is repeated twice, acting as a structural anchor that underscores the poem's central critique of human interference. This refrain reinforces the unnatural transformation of the hawk from a predator driven by instinct to a weapon of calculated violence.

Check Your Progress:

1. Write about the poetic structure and form of Daruwalla's "Hawk".

5.6 Close Reading: "The King Speaks to the Scribe"

"The King Speaks to the Scribe" is also a part of *The Keeper of the Dead* (1982). King Ashoka speaks to his scribe Kartikeya, telling him about things

he had encountered and learnt in the war. The king directs the scribe to compose a message for the survivors, acknowledging their hardships and expressing his own grief.

King Ashoka was one of the greatest emperors of the Mauryan dynasty. He was the grandson of the great Chandragupta Maurya and the heir to King Bindusara and Queen Devie Dharma in 304 B.C. He was one of the finest warriors of his time, much to the dismay of his enemies. However, he is mostly known for the turn his life took after the Kalinga war, which turned him into a Buddhist. This poem is written after the war from his p.o.v describing the horrors and futility of war (Tewari and Verma).

5.6.1 Summary and Analysis of the poem

“First Kartikeya, there’s no pride involved...

...my chariot-wheels squelching in the bloody mire.” (“The King Speaks to the Scribe”)

The first stanza starts in the middle of the conversation between the king and the scribe, where Ashoka is telling Kartikeya about atonement, instead of pride and humility. The writing of the letter is his form of atonement, a way with words to wipe away the blood shed during the war. His desire to engrave the message on volcanic rock shows the permanence of his message, just like his guilt. The phrase “reek of slaughter” is visceral, emphasising how the land itself is steeped in the horrors of war. He uses hyperbole to show the stench of the battlefield reaching the heavens. He engages our auditory senses to the squelching sound of his chariot wheels in the bloody mire. Through this, Daruwalla not only conveys the horrors of violence but also questions whether words can ever truly erase the weight of bloodshed.

“Nothing stands now between them and destruction...

...Kartikeya, and I will tell you what to write.” (“The King Speaks to the Scribe”)

The opening lines—“*Nothing stands now between them and destruction*”—immediately set a grim tone, portraying the total annihilation of the people affected by his conquest. In saying so, he also paints a picture of what they won’t be able to do anymore, the mundanities of human existence. The absence of *moat, bridge, hut, or door-leaf* emphasizes the complete vulnerability of the survivors, who have lost all means of protection, shelter, and even the symbolic comforts of home. The extinguished tapers reinforce their disconnection from their past lives and communities, heightening the sense of displacement. Ashoka acknowledges that his words will reach the survivors through Kartikeya, but he warns against empty rhetoric like the use of aporisms. Instead just speak the truth, as is. He explicitly rejects religious platitudes—“*don’t enunciate the law of piety*”—and dismisses philosophical moralizing about the difficulty of goodness and the ease of sin. This rejection of traditional doctrine signals his deep disillusionment; he understands that theoretical virtues mean little in the face of immense suffering.

“First talk about the sorrows or conquest...

...but also of separation from loved ones.” (“The King Speaks to the Scribe”)

He asks Kartikeya to start with the “sorrows of conquest and other miseries”. He urges a focus not just on the immediate horrors of war but on the lasting wounds inflicted by enslavement and separation from loved ones. The mention of Brahmins, anchorites, and householders establishes that suffering is universal, affecting all social classes and spiritual paths. Daruwalla’s choice of each enmeshed in the “outer skin of relationships” suggests that human life is fundamentally defined by connections; familial, social, and spiritual. The phrase “that network of duty and herd impulse” captures both the personal and communal aspects of life, emphasizing that people do not exist in isolation but are bound by obligations and attachments. Ashoka acknowledges that war disrupts these bonds, cutting through lives indiscriminately.

“And about my sorrow what will you say?...

...and their aboriginal ways and they will not suffer.” (“The King Speaks to the Scribe”)

This stanza stands as a juxtaposition to the previous stanza with the focus shifting inwards as he explores his own feelings. Ashoka measures his remorse in stark terms, stating that if even “a thousandth part” of those killed or captured were to continue suffering, the pain would be unbearable. This exaggeration underscores the magnitude of his guilt, portraying him as a ruler who is haunted by the consequences of his past. His suffering is not abstract but deeply personal; he does not distance himself from the devastation but internalizes it, allowing it to transform him. The stanza also signals Ashoka’s rejection of power and pride, “Tell them I have abjured pride”, *the lowest can abuse me now and I shall not answer*. This declaration is significant, as it shows a deliberate dismantling of his own authority. This stanza presents Ashoka as a deeply conflicted figure; burdened by guilt, rejecting his former self, and seeking redemption through humility and reconciliation.

“Cut deeper than the cuts of my sword...

...like a tide of black oxen crossing a ford.” (“The King Speaks to the Scribe”)

He asks the scribe to carve the message deep enough to remain visible and withstand the passage of time. Kartikeya should use whatever material is available, even a simple stone sheet, and write in a language accessible to all. Since he is addressing the common people rather than kings, the language must reflect that. The task at hand is far more urgent; so much so that even the gods’ altars can wait. The stanza closes with a striking visual, “Mind you, Kartikeya, between me and them is blood”. The imagery of a “tide of black oxen crossing a ford” suggests both difficulty and inevitability. The oxen represent a slow but relentless force, much like Ashoka’s message that must push through the weight of past violence.

Check Your Progress:

1. Critically analyse Daruwalla’s treatment of history in the poem “The King Speaks to the Scribe.

5.6.2 Poetic Structure and Form

Free Verse: The poem does not follow a strict rhyme scheme or meter, allowing for a fluid and natural expression of thought. This gives the poem a speech-like quality, reinforcing its dramatic monologue form.

Dramatic Monologue: The poem is narrated from the perspective of a king, Emperor Ashoka, who speaks directly to the scribe, Kartikeya. This format creates an intimate yet authoritative tone, reflecting both command and introspection.

Imagery: Daruwalla employs vivid and often brutal imagery, such as “the battlefield stank so that heaven / had to hold a cloth to its nose” and “my chariot-wheels squelching in the bloody mire.” These elements enhance the poem’s evocative power, immersing the reader in the aftermath of war.

Enjambment: Many lines flow into the next without punctuation, which maintains the conversational and reflective rhythm of the poem. This technique mirrors the king’s continuous stream of thoughts and emotions.

5.7 Close Reading: “Fish are Speared by Night”

5.7.1 Summary and Analysis of the poem

“Fish are netted by day here...

...By some primeval instinct of its own.” (*Fish are Speared by Night*)

The poem opens with the lines that establish the rhythmic and cyclical nature of life, set in the rural landscape in the world of fishermen. The fish here are “netted by day” and “speared by night.” This juxtaposition immediately sets a tone of inevitability, emphasizing the continuous labor of the fishermen along with a stark image of violence acted upon the fish.

The imagery of the sea is vivid, with the “tongue of coral” under the tide serving as both a literal description of the landscape and a metaphor for the ever-reaching grasp of nature. The men, standing “loin deep in foam,” are compared to natural elements, their “black-basalt legs” blending into the reef, reinforcing their deep connection to the ocean. The phrase “moss moves towards it, impelled by some primeval instinct of its own” suggests

an ancient, instinctive force that governs both the sea creatures and the men who hunt them, linking all life in a primordial dance of predator and prey. Here, the humans are seen in close connection to nature and not in an exploitative sense.

“Flashlights stab the sea...

...Shell-grit and sand still clinging to their feet.” (“Fish are Speared by Night”)

The second stanza introduces an intense, almost predatory dynamic as the fishermen use javelins to spear their catch. The imagery here is violent: “Flashlights stab the sea,” and “Splintering the light as the fish is skewered / And forced down the spear-head.” While the act of fishing is primarily for sustenance, it is also one of domination, where man exercises control over nature. It reinforces Darwin’s theory of survival and continuation of the food chain. The phrase “splintering the light” suggests a rupture, a breaking apart, reinforcing the brutality of the hunt. The return home is quiet but significant; the wives receive them under the flickering light of “hurricane lanterns,” an image that evokes warmth but also fragility, highlighting the delicate balance of their existence.

“But when clouds go about like shrieking gulls...

...Fish here are speared by night.” (“Fish are Speared by Night”)

The final stanza shifts dramatically in tone and imagery. The peaceful yet violent act of spearing fish is suddenly interrupted by a chaotic storm: “When clouds go about like shrieking gulls” and “each wave descends with its cliff-top like a cataract.” The violence of nature is mirrored in human action. The wicker lamps, symbolic of guidance and routine, are “snuffed out,” signaling a break from normalcy. What follows is an unsettling and ambiguous metaphor: the fishermen “spread their fishing nets on the ground / And spread their women over them / Splay-legged.” This moment is both raw and evocative, paralleling the act of hunting fish with an intimate, almost ritualistic dominance over their women. The phrase “splay-legged” is stark, mirroring the image of the speared fish, suggesting an uncomfortable connection between the violence of the hunt and sexual possession. The Othering of women and the natural world is prominent here.

5.7.2 Poetic Structure and Form

This poem has three stanzas with distinct themes. The first stanza shows the fisherman as one with the natural landscape, establishing the setting. The second stanza looks more into detail about the violent act of fishing by spearheading them. And the third and final stanza shifts to a dramatic scene that links fishing to human relationships.

It is written in free verse, through which the poet could better show the flow of imagery and ideas, with a frequent usage of enjambments. Just like any other Daruwalla poem, this one is also filled with imagistic symbolism, often violent in nature. The poem starts and ends with a nearly identical line reflecting the repetitive and cyclical nature of life and violence, in the fisherman's world in this case.

SAQ:

Critically analyse the poem “Fish are Speared by Night” by Keki N. Daruwalla.

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5.8 Summing Up

Keki N Daruwalla had been a much celebrated poet in his lifetime. His keen observation and deep engagement with nature, history and human existence is highly visible in his poetry through his use of stark imagery. Through his exploration of conflict, nature, and human resilience, Daruwalla leaves an indelible mark on modern poetry, challenging readers to confront uncomfortable truths while appreciating the intricate beauty of his language.

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Unit- 6

Agha Shahid Ali:

Postcard from Kashmir, Snowmen, the Season of the Plains

Unit Structure:

- 6.1 Objectives
- 6.2 Introduction
- 6.3 Biography of the Poet
- 6.4 Agha Shahid Ali as a Diasporic Writer
- 6.5 Themes in Agha Shahid Ali's Writings
- 6.6 Analysis of "Postcard from Kashmir"
- 6.7 Analysis of "Snowmen"
- 6.8 Analysis of "The Season of the Plains"
- 6.9 Summing Up
- 6.10 References and Suggested Readings

6.1 Objectives

This unit will take the students through the writing style of poet Agha Shahid Ali in the context of his diasporic positionality. After going through this chapter, students will be able to-

- *analyse* Agha Shahid Ali's poems and their thematic concerns;
- *identify* the politics of his location and how it informs his poems;
- *understand* the intricacies and expressions of diaspora identity in literature.

6.2 Introduction

The canon of Indian Writing in English and Writings from the Indian Diaspora is incomplete without mentioning the works of Agha Shahid Ali. He is a

distinguished figure who is widely popular for his lyrical style of writing and his ghazals. Hailing from Kashmir, Ali's poetry is deeply intertwined with themes of exile, memory, loss, and longing, often reflecting the political turmoil of his homeland. For many, the first encounter with his work is through the poignant "Postcard from Kashmir," a poem that encapsulates his nostalgic yet fractured relationship with the land of his birth. A Kashmiri-American poet, Ali was instrumental in introducing and popularizing ghazals in the West, bringing the Persian poetic form into contemporary English literature. His love for ghazals was deeply influenced by the legendary ghazal singer Begum Akhtar, whose artistry inspired his engagement with the form. Through works like *Ravishing DisUnities: Real Ghazals in English* (2000), he not only explored the traditional structure but also encouraged its adaptation into the English language. (Kapoor and Sahapedia)

Agha Shahid Ali was a prolific poet and literary scholar, known for his contributions to contemporary poetry and literary criticism. Over the course of his career, he wrote nine poetry collections and a critical work, *T.S. Eliot as Editor* (1986). His engagement with translation brought global recognition to the works of Faiz Ahmed Faiz through *The Rebel's Silhouette* (1992). Additionally, he played a significant role in introducing and shaping the ghazal in English literature by editing *Ravishing DisUnities: Real Ghazals in English* (2000), a collection that highlighted the intricate Persian poetic form characterized by repetition, rhyme, and couplets. Among his major poetry collections, *Rooms Are Never Finished* (2001) became a finalist for the National Book Award, demonstrating his lyrical depth and storytelling. His posthumous collection, *The Veiled Suite* (2009), offers a comprehensive selection of his works, tracing the evolution of his poetic voice. Through his poetry, translations, and editorial contributions, Ali left an indelible mark on contemporary literature, bridging cultures and poetic traditions with elegance and innovation (Agha Shahid Ali).

When Agha Shahid Ali wrote his first poems at the age of twelve, it was not a surprise to anyone that he naturally gravitated toward writing in English. In the introduction to *The Rebel's Silhouette* (University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), his translations of Urdu poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Ali made an interesting distinction between his mother tongue and his first language. While

he did identify Urdu as his mother tongue, he noted English as his first language, embracing both as integral to his identity. He asserts his connection to English and its literary tradition firmly as it was an essential part of the South Asian linguistic heritage as well. (Benvenuto 2)

Check Your Progress:

1. Introduce Agha Shahid Ali as an Indian English Poet.

6.3 Biography of the Poet

Born in 1949 in New Delhi, Agha Shahid Ali spent his early years surrounded by the breathtaking landscape of Kashmir, as is evidenced apparent by his works. Coming from an intellectually distinguished Kashmiri Muslim family in Srinagar, he enjoyed a privileged upbringing that helped him develop his deep appreciation for literature and the arts. Ali said, “There were three languages, Urdu, Kashmiri and English, spoken at home at the time, and poetry recited in these languages, and poets and musicians visiting and I would say it was culturally a very rich atmosphere,” ...”There was never a hint of any kind of parochialism in the home.” (Benvenuto 2)

After moving to the United States, he became associated with the New Formalism movement, a literary wave that wanted to revive metrical and structured poetry in contemporary American literature. In honour of his remarkable contributions to poetry and education, the University of Utah Press annually awards a Poetry Prize in his name, recognising him as both an acclaimed poet and a revered teacher. (Bhattacharya)

Ali pursued his early education in India, earning a master’s degree from the University of Delhi. His academic journey continued in the United States, where he obtained another MA and later a PhD from Pennsylvania State University. Additionally, he completed an MFA in Creative Writing at the University of Arizona, further solidifying his scholarly expertise. His academic excellence was acknowledged through prestigious fellowships, including the Guggenheim and Ingram-Merrill fellowships, reflecting his active engagement in the literary world. (Bhattacharya)

Beyond his achievements as a poet and scholar, Ali was a dedicated teacher. He began teaching at Hamilton College in New York in 1987 before joining the University of Massachusetts Amherst, where he became the director of the MFA creative writing program. His influence extended to the MFA Program for Writers at Warren Wilson College, and he also served as a visiting professor at Princeton University and New York University's Graduate Creative Writing Program. Through his teaching, he mentored aspiring writers and played a significant role in shaping the literary landscape of contemporary poetry. He also won the Pushcart Award for his writing. (Bhattacharya)

Apart from his poetry, Agha Shahid Ali was a distinguished writer and advocate of the ghazal form, as previously mentioned. His deep engagement with the structure and lyrical beauty of ghazals played a crucial role in bringing this classical Persian and Urdu poetic tradition to the forefront of contemporary English literature. In his editorial work for *Ravishing Disunities: Real Ghazals in English*, he explored the nuances of this poetic form and its reception in the West. Reflecting on the constraints and artistic challenges of writing ghazals, he noted, "The ghazal is made up of couplets, each autonomous, thematically and emotionally complete in itself. . . once a poet establishes the scheme—with total freedom, I might add—she or he becomes its slave. What results in the rest of the poem is the alluring tension of a slave trying to master the master." (Ali 2000).

This tension between structure and creative freedom was a defining element of Ali's ghazals, where he masterfully balanced rigid formal constraints with emotional depth and lyrical elegance. His commitment to the form was not merely academic but deeply personal, inspired by his admiration for the legendary ghazal singer Begum Akhtar. He sought to preserve the ghazal's essence while innovating within its structure, making it accessible to a new audience unfamiliar with its cultural and historical significance. The poet Michael Palmer once remarked that Agha Shahid Ali's *ghazals* "offer a path toward a level of lyric expansiveness few poets would dare to aspire to." This statement encapsulates the unique space Ali carved out in contemporary poetry, where he blended traditional South Asian literary forms with modern sensibilities. His *ghazals* were not mere imitations of

their Persian and Urdu predecessors; rather, they were reinventions that infused the form with a fresh perspective, making it both accessible and relevant to an English-speaking audience. (Agha Shahid Ali)

The scholar Amardeep Singh further elaborates on Ali's poetic style, describing it as "*ghazalesque*"—a term that captures not just his frequent engagement with the form but also the broader aesthetic qualities that defined his work. Singh highlights Ali's ability to seamlessly merge "the rhythms and forms of the Indo-Islamic tradition with a distinctly American approach to storytelling." This fusion allowed Ali to create a poetic voice that resonated across cultural and linguistic boundaries. His poetry carried the echoes of Mir and Ghalib while simultaneously drawing from Western literary traditions, demonstrating a rare synthesis of influences. (Agha Shahid Ali)

Ali's had the amazing ability to use the *ghazal's* constraints to heighten emotional intensity. The form's autonomous couplets, repetition, and internal rhyme schemes became tools through which he conveyed themes of loss, exile, memory, and longing, which were themes he constantly grappled with in his writings. His *ghazals* did not simply mourn displacement; they transformed it into a lyrical act of remembrance and resilience. By adapting a historically rich poetic form for contemporary expression, Ali not only introduced Western readers to a tradition largely unfamiliar to them but also expanded the boundaries of English-language poetry itself. ("Agha Shahid Ali")

SAQ:

How did Agha Shahid Ali's upbringing influence his poetic sensibilities and his career?

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6.4 Agha Shahid Ali as a Diasporic Writer

Agha Shahid Ali is recognized as a diasporic writer, both due to his identity as a Kashmiri-American in exile and the recurring themes in his work that explore displacement and belonging. In literature, exile is often depicted as a state of divided loyalty between one's homeland and the host country. The concept of diaspora broadly encompasses the experiences of exiles, expatriates, and those who have faced dislocation, whether politically, existentially, or metaphorically. Diasporic literature revolves around the idea of a homeland, serving as a point of origin from which displacement occurs. Avtar Brah further explains that diaspora signifies a central point, a home, from which dispersion takes place. (Arshiddar 2)

Agha Shahid Ali's poetry collection *The Country without a Post Office* (1997) emerged as a response to the turmoil in Kashmir. In his earlier works, he had always chosen to write in free verse but after the unrest in Kashmir, he was deeply influenced by his annual visits there which can be seen in his works. His writing became more structured in terms of form that could appropriately channel his emotions and address the gravity of the situation. This shift is particularly evident in his collection *Rooms Are Never Finished*, where many poems express his anguish over the destruction of his homeland. Ali was widely recognized for his ability to bring together diverse cultural influences, seamlessly blending traditional poetic forms with refined free verse. His poetry is a testament to his rich heritage, reflecting elements of Muslim, Hindu, and Western traditions. Literary critic Bruce King (2001), in *Contemporary Poets*, describes Ali's work as revolving around themes of insecurity and obsession, capturing memory, death, history, family, ancestry, nostalgia for an unknown past, dreams, Hindu rituals, friendship, and a deep self-awareness of his identity as a poet (Arshiddar 2).

Kashmir has remained a site of conflict since the Partition of India and Pakistan, a political and historical turmoil that shaped the lives of many, including Agha Shahid Ali. In search of academic and creative opportunities, he took a self-imposed exile and moved to America. However, despite the physical distance, Kashmir remained central to his identity and literary expression. The political unrest, cultural richness, and deep personal

connection to his homeland continued to influence his poetry, making it both a lament and a tribute to the place he left behind but never truly abandoned.

His poetry serves as an homage to Kashmir's diverse cultural heritage, capturing its beauty and anguish through evocative language and imagery. Through his verse, he brings to life the cultural traditions of his homeland, blending history and memory. He eloquently articulates this layered identity, stating, "The point is you are a universe, you are the product of immense historical forces. There is the Muslim in me, there is the Hindu in me, there is the Western in me." This statement underscores his recognition of the multiple cultural influences that shaped him, allowing his poetry to transcend geographical boundaries and speak to the universal experiences of displacement, belonging, and identity (Arshiddar 2).

Stop to Consider:

Diasporic writing is often characterized by an internal struggle with identity, as writers navigate the tension between their homeland, rooted in memory and nostalgia, and their adopted country, where assimilation is an ongoing yet incomplete process. Despite their efforts to integrate into a new culture, there remains an inevitable sense of otherness, a gap that cannot be entirely bridged. Homi Bhabha, in his discussions on mimicry, highlights how diasporic individuals attempt to adopt the cultural norms of their new environment, but their assimilation remains partial, always marked by difference. At the same time, their connection to their original cultural identity becomes strained due to displacement, leaving them in a liminal space where they belong fully to neither world. This state of identity conflict is especially pronounced in first-generation immigrants, who experience the tension between cultural preservation and adaptation more acutely than subsequent generations. Through literature, many diaspora writers explore these themes, capturing the complexities of belonging, alienation, and the search for a reconciled self.

6.5 Themes in Agha Shahid Ali's Writings

Exile:

The theme of exile is deeply embedded in Agha Shahid Ali's works, shaped by his self-imposed displacement from Kashmir. Although he was not exiled in the strictest sense, as he could return whenever he wished and made annual visits, he described his condition as a source of this comment "experimental form of exile". This self-awareness adds layers to his poetic exploration of loss, belonging, and identity. While he physically distanced himself from the turmoil of Kashmir, the emotional and psychological detachment was far more complex. Through his poetry, he laments the religious intolerance and violence that plagued his homeland, expressing both grief and longing for a place he could never truly reclaim.

"Kashmir sinks into my mailbox

My home a neat four by six inches.

The pangs of separation from home are rendered thus

This is the home

And this is the closest

I'll ever be to home."

The theme of exile can be seen explicitly in his poem "Postcard from Kashmir". Ali's exile is not merely spatial; it is also deeply temporal. The Kashmir he left behind as a child is not the same as the Kashmir he could return to as an adult. Even if he were to go back permanently, the sense of belonging would remain elusive because his idea of *home* is frozen in time, an inaccessible past that exists only in memory. This dissonance creates a feeling of perpetual displacement, where home is not a physical location but an imagined space, suspended between nostalgia and reality. His poetry captures this sense of spatio-temporal limbo, where the only way to revisit home is through the fragmented recollections that memory allows.

Check Your Progress

1. Discuss the theme of exile in Agha Shahid Ali's poetry.

Memory:

Memory plays a crucial role in shaping the thematic concerns of displaced writers, especially when they engage with the idea of homeland. For diasporic writers, memory becomes a vital yet unstable bridge to the past, a means of preserving connections to a place they can no longer physically inhabit. However, memory is inherently fragmented, as it does not present a complete picture of the past but rather a series of scattered images, emotions, and impressions. As Sigmund Freud suggests, memory is also elusive due to the workings of the unconscious, which both represses and reshapes past experiences. This means that what diasporic writers recall is not necessarily an objective reflection of their homeland but a reconstructed version influenced by nostalgia, loss, and personal longing.

Furthermore, this selective recollection often leads to what psychologists term the “rosy retrospection” phenomenon where individuals remember past events more fondly than they originally experienced them (Rosy Retrospection). For many exiled or displaced writers, the homeland becomes an idealized space, frozen in time and untouched by change, even if the reality of that place was far from idyllic. The gaps in memory are inevitably filled by imagination, transforming personal and collective history into a hybrid space that is both real and mythical. This interplay between memory, imagination, and loss becomes a defining feature of diasporic literature, as writers attempt to reconcile their fragmented sense of belonging with an ever-changing world.

Stop to Consider:

By 1990, the once-dormant movement for self-determination in Kashmir escalated into a full-scale armed uprising against the Indian state. By the decade’s end, the insurgency had gained momentum, bolstered by Pakistani support for militant groups. In response, the Indian government launched a relentless counterinsurgency campaign, marked by extreme measures, month-long curfews in Srinagar, extrajudicial killings, and widespread human rights violations. These

tactics, first seen in the 1990s, have persisted well beyond the decade (Hogan 1).

For the local population, the conflict has been devastating. With an estimated death toll reaching 100,000 and the region becoming the most militarized zone in the world by 2004, Kashmir has been caught in a cycle of violence and repression. The suffocating presence of military forces has only reinforced the desire for self-determination. Yet, with both India and Pakistan showing little interest in Kashmiri independence, the possibility of sovereignty remained elusive (4).

Loss and Longing:

“Pennsylvania became, if not home, certainly a home and sometimes in the bar at 2 am, like so many Americans, I often felt, almost an exile. Night after night, all routes to death opened up, again and again, as the bar closed all over Pennsylvania the taxi hour of loss. Then some years later, I left for Arizona where it always is yesterday, no daylight saving time there and the Sonora desert seems strongly out of time.these locations meant loss. Each of them also means creating rhetoric of loss, the illusion of belonging- to something, to anything that dismal world—roots.” (Ali 54)

The themes of loss and longing for his homeland are deeply woven into Agha Shahid Ali’s poetry, particularly in his ghazals and lyrical verses. His work mourns not only the loss of Kashmir as a physical space but also the fading of its rich cultural and secular heritage, which has been overshadowed by the deepening religious divide between Hindus and Muslims. Ali’s poetry becomes a space where memory and nostalgia intertwine, allowing him to reconstruct the Kashmir of his past—one that existed before conflict fractured its landscape and people.

His verses resonate with an aching lament for a homeland that is slipping away, both in reality and in memory. He grieves not just for Kashmir’s territorial loss but also for its erasure from the collective consciousness, as the region remains engulfed in political turmoil and violence. His poems often serve as elegies, chronicling histories of displacement, suffering, and

longing. As Yerra Sugarman aptly notes, “Shahid’s poetry casts its craft and concerns upon histories of loss, injustices and brutality, particularly those endured by his ravaged Kashmir” (129). His words act as a bridge between past and present, memory and reality, making his poetry an enduring testimony to the wounds of exile and conflict.

SAQ:

1. Discuss Ali’s treatment of the theme of loss and longing in his poetic works.

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6.6 Analysis of “Postcard from Kashmir”

“Kashmir shrinks into my mailbox,
my home a neat four by six inches.
I always loved neatness. Now I hold
the half-inch Himalayas in my hand.”(Ali)

Written in 1989, this poem is a free verse lyric consisting of 14 unrhymed and unmetered lines, drawing inspiration from the traditional sonnet form. Agha Shahid Ali’s multicultural literary influences are evident in the poem’s fusion of Western and Eastern poetic traditions. While its structure hints at the sonnet, its emotional depth and themes of longing mirror the ghazal’s characteristic yearning, reinforcing the poet’s diasporic sensibility.

The poem opens with a realization as the speaker receives a postcard from Kashmir, a place that now exists only as a distant memory, reduced to an image on a small piece of paper. This sense of shrinking space reflects the experience of exile, where home becomes something that can no longer be physically inhabited but only held onto through remnants of the past. The phrase “*half-inch Himalayas*” is particularly evocative, as it both literally refers to the miniature representation of the mountains on the postcard and

metaphorically conveys the vastness of his homeland, now seemingly diminished in exile. The towering peaks of the Himalayas, which once surrounded his childhood, are now confined within the small dimensions of an image, reinforcing the pain of separation and displacement.

Through this poem, Ali captures the tension between physical distance and emotional proximity, portraying how memory and nostalgia keep the idea of home alive even when it is no longer accessible.

“This is home. And this the closest
I’ll ever be to home. When I return,
the colors won’t be so brilliant,
the Jhelum’s waters so clean,
so ultramarine. My love
so overexposed.”(Ali)

The lines from Agha Shahid Ali’s poem poignantly capture the realization that home, as he remembers it, exists only in his mind. The poet acknowledges that the vibrant, untainted Kashmir of his memories is irretrievably lost, altered by time and conflict. The phrase “*this is home*” suggests both acceptance and resignation, as if the poet is convincing himself that the image on the postcard is the last remnant of the Kashmir he once knew.

The gradual diminishing of color and purity in his homeland; “*the colors won’t be so brilliant*” and “*the Jhelum’s waters so clean*”, reflects not only physical degradation but also the erosion of an emotional and cultural connection. The Jhelum, a river that has long been a symbol of Kashmir’s beauty and heritage, now appears tainted, mirroring the poet’s disillusionment.

The phrase “*my love so overexposed*” is particularly notable. The overexposure suggests that his love for Kashmir has been intensified by distance and nostalgia, much like an overexposed photograph that distorts reality. The deeper his longing, the more unreachable his homeland becomes, leaving him with an idealized version of a place that no longer exists in its original form. The postcard, then, becomes more than just a memento—it

is the only bridge between the poet and the Kashmir of his past, a fragile connection that emphasizes the permanent nature of his exile.

“And my memory will be a little
out of focus, in it
a giant negative, black
and white, still undeveloped.” (Ali)

In the concluding lines of his poem, Agha Shahid Ali reflects on the fluid and fragmentary nature of memory, drawing a striking analogy between remembrance and an undeveloped photographic negative. This comparison underscores the idea that memory is neither static nor fully realized; it remains an evolving, unstable entity, subject to distortion, gaps, and reinterpretation over time.

The phrase “*my memory will be a little out of focus*” suggests that recollection is not a perfect replication of the past but rather a blurred, shifting construct. Memory does not provide clarity but instead exists in a perpetual state of transformation, much like a photograph that has yet to be processed. The use of “*giant negative*” reinforces this notion, implying that his memories, though vast and significant, lack the sharpness and vividness of the present moment. They exist in black and white, stripped of the full vibrancy of lived experience, highlighting how the past is often recalled in fragments, devoid of the richness and immediacy of reality.

Ali’s choice of imagery also evokes the idea that memory, like an undeveloped photograph, holds potential but is incomplete. An undeveloped film contains images, but they remain latent, inaccessible, and undefined until brought into focus. Similarly, memory is shaped by time, personal interpretation, and the unconscious mind, often blending reality with nostalgia, distortion, and selective recollection.

Check Your Progress:

1. How does the imagery of the postcard symbolize the poet’s relationship with Kashmir?

2. In what ways does the poem suggest that home is more of a mental construct than a physical place?
3. How does the poem engage with ideas of identity and belonging in the context of exile?

6.7 Analysis of “Snowmen”

“My ancestor, a man
of Himalayan snow,
came to Kashmir from Samarkand,
carrying a bag
of whale bones:
heirlooms from sea funerals.”(Ali)

In this poem, Agha Shahid Ali speaks of his ancestral legacy and starts the poem with metaphors and symbolism. He portrays his ancestors as figures of “Himalayan snow,” evoking a sense of temporality and impermanence, just as snow melts under the sun, so too does lineage fade with time. By tracing their migration from Samarkand to Kashmir, Ali includes autobiographical elements in his poetry, grounding his personal identity within a broader historical and geographical context.

The imagery of “whale bones” as heirlooms from “sea funerals” speaks of the genius of his lyrical symbolism. Whales, often associated with vast, uncharted waters, symbolise both the depth of ancestral memory and the inevitability of loss. The bones serve as relics of a past that is distant and perhaps unreachable, much like the poet’s own estranged homeland.

“His skeleton
carved from glaciers, his breath arctic,
he froze women in his embrace.
His wife thawed into stony water,
her old age a clear
evaporation.

This heirloom,
his skeleton under my skin, passed
from son to grandson,
generations of snowmen on my back.”(Ali)

This stanza again reinforces the imagery of ice, snow, and water to explore the impermanence of ancestry and the burden of inheritance. The ancestor’s “skeleton carved from glaciers” and “breath arctic” evokes a figure frozen in time, embodying both the power and fragility of heritage. His embrace freezes women, while his wife “thawed into stony water,” suggesting that identity, like ice, is subject to dissolution. Her old age is reduced to a “clear evaporation,” emphasizing the fleeting nature of existence and memory. The poet inherits this ancestral legacy, describing his ancestor’s skeleton as “under [his] skin,” an heirloom passed through generations. The phrase “generations of snowmen on my back” captures the weight of history; one that is transient yet ever-present. Through this metaphor of melting and reforming, Ali conveys the experience of exile not just as physical displacement but as an ongoing process of carrying a past that is constantly shifting, much like memory itself.

“They tap every year on my window,
their voices hushed to ice.
No, they won’t let me out of winter,
and I’ve promised myself,
even if I’m the last snowman,
that I’ll ride into spring
on their melting shoulders.”(Ali)

In this excerpt, Agha Shahid Ali explores the inescapable weight of ancestry and tradition, using the recurring motif of ice and snow to symbolize both the presence and absence of his forebears. The ancestors, though long gone, continue to “tap every year on [his] window,” their voices reduced to whispers of ice, showing how their influence lingers despite the passage of time. The phrase “they won’t let me out of winter” suggests that the poet

remains bound to their legacy, trapped within the cycle of inherited traditions and histories that define his identity. Yet, rather than resisting this connection, he embraces it, vowing that even if he is the “last snowman,” the final bearer of his lineage, he will still push forward into “spring” on the melting shoulders of his ancestors. This final image conveys a sense of transformation. His past sustains him, nudging him forward even as it fades. The poem ultimately reflects on both the burden and the gift of inheritance, where memory and legacy, though transient like melting snow, provide the foundation for renewal and continuity.

Check Your Progress:

1. What is the significance of snow and ice in the poem? How do they function as metaphors for ancestry, tradition, and memory?
2. How might the themes of the poem reflect the broader experiences of exile, migration, and cultural displacement in Ali’s work?
3. To what extent does the poem speak to the poet’s personal history versus a larger, collective experience of cultural loss and inheritance?

6.8 Analysis of “The Season of the Plains”

“In Kashmir where the year
has four clear seasons, my mother
spoke of her childhood
in the plains of Lucknow, and
of that season in itself,
the monsoon, when Krishna’s
flute is heard on the shores
of the Jamuna. She played old records
of the Banaras thumri-singers,
Siddheshwari and Rasoolan, their
voices longing, when the clouds

gather, for that invisible
blue god. Separation
can't be borne when the rains
come: this every lyric says.
While children run out
into the alleys, soaking
their utter summer,
messages pass between lovers.
Heer and Ranjha and others
of legends, their love forbidden,
burned incense all night,
waiting for answers. My mother
hummed Heer's lament
but never told me if she
also burned sticks
of jasmine that, dying,
kept raising soft necks
of ash. I imagined
each neck leaning
on the humid air. She only
said: The monsoons never cross
the mountains into Kashmir." (Ali)

"The Season of the Plains" is a poem of separation. Agha Shahid Ali intricately weaves together themes of memory, longing, and cultural hybridity. The poem juxtaposes two distinct geographies; Kashmir, with its four clear seasons, and Lucknow, known for its monsoon season to highlight both physical and emotional distances. The poet's mother reminisces about her childhood in Lucknow, evoking imagery of Krishna's flute and the melancholic songs of Banaras thumri singers, Siddheshwari and Rasoolan, whose voices express longing and separation. The reference to Krishna's flute and the mythological lovers Heer and Ranjha situates her nostalgia

within the larger framework of Indian classical and folk traditions, where love and separation are central motifs.

The contrast between the monsoons of Lucknow and their absence in Kashmir becomes a metaphor for unbridgeable gaps between past and present, home and exile, presence and absence. While in Lucknow, the rains inspire reunions and messages between lovers, in Kashmir, they never arrive, leaving behind a void. The mother's humming of Heer's lament suggests a personal sorrow, but the poet emphasizes her silence regarding whether she, too, performed the ritual of burning jasmine incense, a symbol of longing and unfulfilled desire. This omission intensifies the theme of unspoken grief, where traditions and emotions are passed down through generations but remain partially obscured.

The imagery of "soft necks of ash" brings up a delicate yet haunting visualization of transience and loss, reinforcing the poem's exploration of impermanence. The final statement, "The monsoons never cross the mountains into Kashmir", resonates as both a literal fact and a metaphorical boundary, signifying emotional and cultural distances that remain uncrossed. The poem ultimately reflects on the inescapable nature of longing, exile, and the fragmented sense of belonging that haunts diasporic and displaced individuals.

Agha Shahid Ali draws a poignant parallel between his own separation from Kashmir and his mother's separation from Lucknow, emphasizing how displacement and longing span generations. Just as he yearns for his homeland, his mother too carries a deep nostalgia for the place of her childhood, evoking memories of Lucknow's monsoons, music, and mythology.

Check Your Progress:

1. How does the poet parallel his mother's loss of home with his own displacement through the poem "The Season of the Plains"?
2. List the cultural imagery that Agha Shahid Ali uses in the poem to connect himself to his Indian identity.

6.9 Summing Up

Agha Shahid Ali passed away on December 8, 2001, leaving an indelible mark on the literary world. Through his evocative poetry, he masterfully wove themes of exile, loss, memory, and cultural hybridity, capturing the pain of displacement and the longing for a homeland that exists only in fragments of memory. His contributions to the ghazal form in English and his ability to blend South Asian and Western poetic traditions set him apart as a unique voice in contemporary poetry. Even after his passing, his works continue to resonate, offering readers a poignant glimpse into the beauty and sorrow of a world caught between past and present.

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Block- 3

Unit 1: Girish Karnad: An Introduction

Unit 2: Girish Karnad: Dreams of Tipu Sultan

Unit 3: Raja Rao and Kanthapura: Introduction

Unit 4: Reading the Novel

Unit 5: Themes and Techniques

Unit 6: Gita Hariharan: An Introduction

Unit- 1

Girish Karnad: An Introduction

Unit Structure:

- 1.1 Objectives
- 1.2 Introduction
- 1.3 Girish Karnad: The Playwright and His Legacy
 - 1.3.1 Important Milestones in Karnad's Life
 - 1.3.2 Major Works by the Playwright and Their Significance
 - 1.3.3 Karnad's Contribution Beyond Theatre
- 1.4 Language and Style
- 1.5 Karnad's Contribution to Indian Theatre and Cinema
- 1.6 Critical Reception of His Works
- 1.7 Summing Up
- 1.8 References and Suggested Reading

1.1 Objectives

An influential figure in Indian literature and theatre, Girish Karnad is an artist whose work seamlessly blends tradition with modernity. His plays explored history, mythology, and contemporary issues with remarkable depth and insight. As a playwright, actor, director etc, Karnad significantly contributed to the cultural landscape of India, crafting narratives that continue to resonate across generations. After reading this unit, you will be able to:

- *know* about Girish Karnad, a dynamic figure in Indian literature and drama;
- *understand* how his career spanned across playwriting, acting, directing, and cultural discourse;
- *analyze* his famous works to explore the themes he engaged with, such as history, mythology, identity, and politics;

- *learn* how his contributions shaped the landscape of modern Indian drama, both in Kannada and English.

1.2 Introduction

Indian actor, director, author, and playwright Girish Karnad was one of the most prolific Kannada writers. He was known for exploring contemporary themes through the lens of history and mythology by weaving the way of the present through the lens of the past. Born on May 19, 1938, in Matheran, Bombay Presidency (now in Maharashtra), he was the recipient of the 1998 Jnanpith Award, India's highest literary honour. He spent his early childhood in the rural parts of Maharashtra, where he grew up watching and enjoying the Yakshagana and Nataka Mandali performances in his village. This might have served as the first rendering of artistic notions in him, which inspired him towards the arts. His works are renowned for their exploration of the human condition, often delving into themes of identity, existentialism, and societal norms. His ability to swiftly intertwine classical stories with modern dilemmas has left an indelible mark on Indian literature and theatre. Karnad discovered the Indian dramatic traditions through Bertolt Brecht and Thomas Mann, whom he considered his ideals.

1.3 Girish Karnad: The Playwright and his Legacy

Karnad's educational journey spanned across Sirsi and Dharwad in Karnataka, Mumbai, and eventually Oxford, where he was Rhodes Scholar from the year 1960–63 and obtained his Master of Arts degree in Philosophy, Politics, and Economics. During this time, his interest gradually shifted from science to literature. Karnad, who hailed from the small town of Sirsi, initially aspired to be a poet but realized around the age of twenty-four that he could not pursue poetry. Upon returning to India, he worked at the Madras branch of Oxford University Press till 1970. During this phase he actively acted in and directed English theatre for the Madras Players group. In 1970, he resigned his job to pursue writing full-time, marking the beginning of a prolific and inspiring literary journey. Despite excelling in various fields, he felt most at home in playwriting. He went on to become one of the top

contemporary playwrights alongside Vijay Tendulkar and Badal Sircar. His interviews clearly mention his first love as being theatre, and that films were done solely to meet financial needs. In the year 1978, Karnad won the prestigious Sangeet Natak Akademi Award and the Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay Award for his play *Hayavadana*. His literary career was marked by many achievements of success. He has many accolades to his name including the Sahitya Akademi Award, Padma Shri, Padma Bhushan, and the Jnanpith Award.

1.3.1 Important Milestones in Karnad's Life

1938 – Born on 19th May at Matheran in the Bombay Presidency (now in Maharashtra)

1958 – Graduated from Karnataka University, Dharwad

1961 – *Yayati* (First play)

1963 – Rhodes Scholar at Oxford University

1964 – *Tughlaq* written

1970 – *Hayavadana* written

1974–75 – Served as Director, Film and Television Institute of India

1988–93 – Served as Chairman, Sangeet Natak Akademi (National Academy of Performing Arts)

1989 – *Tale-Danda* written

1996 – Commissioned by the BBC to write *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan* on the occasion of 50 years of Indian independence

1997 – *The Fire and the Rain* written

1998 – Awarded the Jnanpith Award, India's highest literary honour

1998 – *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan* premiered

1999 – *Flowers* written

2002 – Conferred with Padma Bhushan, India's third-highest civilian award

2004 – *Broken Images (Odakalu Bimba)* written

2011 – *The Crossing to Talikota* written

2019 – Passed away on 10th June in Bengaluru, Karnataka

1.3.2 Major Works by the Playwright and their Significance

Karnad, skillfully blends myths, folklores and legends to explore the dilemmas of modern life and the complexities of human psychology. During his tenure as a playwright, Girish Karnad authored numerous plays. However, his major works, *Yayati* (1961), *Tughlaq* (1964), *Hayavadana* (1971), *Nagamandala* (1988), and *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan* (1997), reflect his deep engagement with history, mythology, and socio-political realities.

Yayati (1961)

His first play, *Yayati* (1961), originally written in Kannada, reinterprets the myth of King Yayati, an ancestor of the Pandavas. Written in a modernist style, the play explores existential themes and the burden of responsibility. The play was inspired by his reading of Mahabharata, particularly through Rajaji's (C. Rajagopalachari's) retelling of the epic. The play reinterprets the myth of King Yayati. The narrative centers on Yayati's desire to escape the consequences of his actions by exchanging his old age with his son, Puru. Karnad brings about an exploration of the themes of desire, responsibility, and existential crisis. Karnad's adaptation gives a modern psychological depth to the characters while staying rooted in the classical tale.

Tughlaq (1964)

His second play published in Kannada in 1964, comprises thirteen scenes. *Tughlaq* is a historical play that portrays the turbulent reign of Sultan Muhammad bin Tughlaq. He was an idealist and was well known in history for his visionary ideas that often led to chaos and disillusionment. The play is an allegory of the Nehruvian age. Karnad uses the Sultan's character to mirror the political landscape of contemporary India, drawing parallels between Tughlaq's idealism and the country's post-independence aspirations. The play deals with themes of power, ambition, and the fine line

between genius and madness. Its rich symbolism, irony, and humor offer a critique of political idealism gone wrong .

Hayavadana (1971)

Hayavadana (1971), a two-act Kannada drama deals with the theme of human identity and incompleteness. The plot draws from Br%hatkathā and Thomas Mann's *The Transposed Heads*. Karnad was also inspired by an old tale from the story collection *Vetala Panchvimshati*. The play narrates the story of two friends who end up with their heads transposed through a supernatural occurrence. The play relies heavily on the conventions and techniques of folk drama, incorporating elements like masks, music, and the use of a sutradhar (narrator), making it a rich blend of mythology, folklore, and modern dilemmas. The play is inspired by the Yakshagana theatres and comprises two acts dealing with themes of identity, incompleteness, and the conflict between head and body.

Nagamandala (1988)

Nagamandala was first presented in English by the Guthrie Theater, Minneapolis, on 16 July 1993, as part of its thirtieth birthday celebrations. The play is based on two oral tales narrated to Karnad by A. K. Ramanujan. These stories centered around women protagonists who had the freedom to move and act independently. *Nagamandala* was written during Karnad's tenure as a visiting professor at the University of Chicago and as Fulbright Scholar-in-Residence. The story revolves around a young bride who is neglected by her indifferent husband. In an attempt to win his affection, she tries a magical love potion, but unknowingly gives it to a cobra. The enchanted cobra, begins visiting her every night in her husband's absence. Karnad's use of a story-within-a-story framework is based on two Kannada folktales.

Tale-Danda (1990)

Another significant play written by Karnad was the *Tale-Danda (Death by Decapitation)* . The play revolves around the rise of the radical reform

movement, Lingayatism, in 12th-century Karnataka. It explores themes of caste-based discrimination, religious orthodoxy, and communal tensions, making it highly relevant to contemporary times. *Tale-Danda* was awarded the Karnataka Sahitya Academy Award in 1993 and the Sahitya Akademi Award in Kannada in 1994. The play received widespread appreciation in literary circles for its bold themes and powerful storytelling. The word *Tale-Danda* literally means “head tax” or “capital punishment.” Set in 12th–13th century Karnataka, the play captures the social turmoil of the time and portrays the life and vision of Basavanna, a philosopher, saint, thinker and reformer and the political realities of his age.

Bali : The Sacrifice (1980)

Originally written in Kannada in 1980 as *Hittina Hunja*, *Bali: The Sacrifice* is based on the ancient Kannada epic Yashodhara Charite. The play explores themes of violence, morality, guilt, and religious ritual through the story of a king who discovers that his queen is having an affair with an elephant-keeper. According to an ancient Jain myth, to atone for this sin, the king must perform a sacrificial ritual by offering a cockerel to the gods. However, being a Jain and opposed to animal sacrifice, he substitutes a bird made of dough instead. The play critically engages with the moral dilemmas of substitution and the idea of symbolic versus real sacrifice.

The Dreams of Tipu Sultan (1997)

The Dreams of Tipu Sultan is another important play by Girish Karnad, commissioned by the BBC in 1996 to commemorate the 50th anniversary of Indian independence. The play critically explores the idea of history and how it often misrepresents historical figures. Karnad attempts to reframe the image of Tipu Sultan, who is frequently portrayed negatively in colonial narratives. Through this play, Karnad presents Tipu Sultan as a visionary ruler, far ahead of his time, who challenged British colonial authority and posed a significant threat to their administration. The play highlights how Tipu’s contributions have been misunderstood or overshadowed, offering a

more nuanced and humanized portrayal of the Mysore king. This work challenges monolithic historical narratives, encouraging audiences to reconsider the multifaceted nature of historical figures. Each of these works exemplifies Karnad's ability to weave traditional narratives with contemporary themes, offering profound insights into the human condition and societal structures. Though his stories were set in the past, Karnad stayed rooted in the present to see society clearly and critique it for the better. His plays continue to resonate with audiences, reflecting the timeless nature of the dilemmas they portray.

Stop to Consider:

Hayavadana(1971)

Karnad won his first Sahitya Akademi Award for *Hayavadana* in 1971. This play infuses the folk theatre of 'Yakshagana' incorporating elements like mask, folk music, stylized action and dramatic gestures. This play is inspired from Thomas Mann's 1940 novel, *The Transposed Heads*. The *The Transposed Heads* itself draws from an ancient Indian Sanskrit text called the *Kathasaritsagara*. Karnad portrayed the unquenching human desire in this play through his retelling of this 11th century text. The play revolves around two friends, Devadatta and Kapila, and their love interest, Padmini. *Hayavadana* was originally written in Kannada, and he translated it into English himself. Originally published in Enact, the play was published in an edition by Oxford University Press in 1975 in the New Drama in India series. While talking about the initial rendering of the play Karnad in the introduction to states how "the idea of my play *Hayavadana* 'The Three Plays' started crystallizing in my head right in the middle of an argument with B.V. Karanth (who ultimately produced the play) about the meaning of masks in Indian theatre and theatre's relationship to music."

Self Assessment Questions:

1. How did Girish Karnad use mythology and folklore to comment on contemporary social and political issues? Can you give examples from any of his plays? (30 words)

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2. What does Karnad's use of traditional Indian theatre forms like Yakshagana and NatakaMandali reveal about his approach to modern playwriting? (30 words)

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3. In what ways did Karnad reflect the conflict between tradition and modernity in post-independence India through his characters and themes? (30 words)

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1.3.3 Karnad's Contribution beyond Theatre

Karnad's successful career as a playwright ran parallel to his equally remarkable contributions as an actor, screenwriter, director, and cultural administrator. He served as the Director of the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII), Pune, from 1974 to 1975, and later as the Chairperson of the SangeetNatakAkademi from 1988 to 1993 and the president of Karnataka Nataka Academy from 1976 to 1978. These roles reflected his deep commitment to nurturing the arts in post-independence India.

As an actor, Karnad left an enduring mark on both stage and screen. His theatrical performances in Sophocles' *Oedipus* and Kambar's *Jokumaraswamy* (1972) earned critical acclaim. His most acclaimed performances in cinema include his lead roles in the Kannada films *Samskara* (Funeral Rites, 1970) taken from U.R Ananthamurthy's novel of the same

name, which won him the President's Gold Medal and cemented his reputation as a serious artist. He also appeared in *Vamsha Vriksha* (*Family Tree*, 1971), which he also co-directed.

His talent extended to the Hindi film industry as well, with memorable appearances in films like Shyam Benegal's *Nishant* (*Night's End*, 1975), *Manthan* (*Churning*, 1976), Basu Chatterjee's *Swami* (*Husband*, 1977), Jabbar Patel's *Subah* (*Dawn*, 1981), and Kumar Shahani's *Tarang* (*Wave*, 1984). He continued to act across languages and decades, with later roles in films like *Ahista Ahista*, *Sankeerthana*, *Dharam Chakram*, *Hey Ram*, *Iqbal*, *China Gate*, *Pukar*, *Ek Tha Tiger*, and *Tiger Zinda Hai*, showcasing his enduring presence across decades in Indian cinema. Among his many popular roles, his portrayal of Swami's father in the beloved TV series *Malgudi Days* remains etched in public memory. He also hosted the science magazine "Turning Point" on Doordarshan in the early 1990s, engaging audiences with his intellectual charm and warmth.

As the times demanded, Karnad often had to supplement his income through acting. In various interviews, Karnad candidly acknowledged that acting was primarily a means to meet financial needs, while theatre remained his true passion. In spite of his acting in roles out of compulsion, his performance reflected extraordinary skill and depth.

Apart from his roles as writer, director, playwright, actor Karnad was also a prominent public intellectual and social commentator. He was an outspoken critic of religious fundamentalism and an ardent defender of multiculturalism and freedom of expression. He never backed off from using his freedom of speech for showing his support towards any cause that required his immediate attention even when they provoked controversy or backlash.

1.4 Language and Style

Although Karnad's mother tongue was Konkani, he chose to write in Kannada, a language he gradually adopted over time. He wrote almost all his plays in Kannada, except *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan* (1996), which was originally written in English. In fact, this play was commissioned by the

BBC as a radio play to mark the fiftieth anniversary of Indian independence. Interestingly, Karnad translated most of his Kannada plays into English himself, with the exception of *Yayati* (1961), which was later translated and published in English by Oxford University Press in 2008.

Despite his deep engagement with Kannada language, he was well adept in English which can be credited to his education abroad, particularly in Oxford, which equipped him with a strong command over the English language. His love for Kannada and theatre, however, took root during his early childhood, when he watched Yakshagana and Nataka Mandali performances in his village. In his early childhood in Sirsi, Karnataka, he grew up watching Yakshagana theatres in his surroundings, which deeply influenced his creative vision. He vividly employs this folk form in his play *Hayavadana*, where the traditional performative styles are integrated to enrich the narrative. Through performances, masks, and music, he explores themes of identity, incompleteness, and the human condition, blending folk elements seamlessly with modern theatrical expression. In the process he creates a unique theatrical experience that resonates with both traditional and contemporary audiences. This fusion exemplifies his ability to adapt classical art forms to modern narratives. As a playwright driven by multiple ambitions, Karnad sought to weave together various traditional and folk elements, as seen in *Tughlaq*, where he experiments with a fusion of styles to create a layered theatrical experience. The influence of Parsi theatre is also evident in Karnad's *Tughlaq*, where he incorporates its dramatic techniques. The division of stage through curtains is another feature of Parsi theatre which he has adopted in his plays.

Much of his work deals with mythology and history, engaging with the present through the way of the past. Only in his later works did he begin exploring contemporary urban settings. These later plays were rooted in the confusion faced by the generation after the Emergency. Power, female desire, and identity are themes he regularly dealt with. Many of his plays are also known for being sharp and concise, avoiding excessive length or monotony in dialogue and narrative. His writing style is clear, thought-provoking, and theatrically effective. He often blended folk idioms with formal language, keeping the narrative accessible yet layered. Karnad

focused on depth of thought and structure rather than ornamental dialogue, allowing his plays to resonate with a wide range of audiences. Karnad's linguistic choices and stylistic approach often became a subject of scrutiny among Kannada literary circle, who criticized his works as being "too Anglicised," owing to his Western education, and perceived a detachment from traditional Kannada sensibilities. His language was seen by some as lacking the rootedness expected of regional theatre. However, this perception gradually shifted with *Tale-Danda*, a play written in the regional dialect of North Karnataka and grounded in the life of the 12th-century reformer Basavanna. The play not only displayed Karnad's sensitivity to regional languages but also showcased his ability to blend classical themes with contemporary relevance.

It is the bilingual nature of his work which made it appeal to a larger audience worldwide without compromising on its traditional rootedness. It is this nature of his which made historian Ramachandra Guha aptly describe him as a "linguistrous renaissance man of Indian theatre."

Check Your Progress:

1. How does Karnad use myths and folk forms to comment on contemporary issues?
2. Examine the representation of women and female agency in Karnad's plays.
3. Discuss Karnad's contribution to Indian theatre beyond his role as a playwright.

1.5 Karnad's Contribution to Indian Theatre and Cinema

Karnad's contribution to Indian theatre is marked by his pioneering vision that fused classical narrative forms with modern sensibilities. As Aparna Dharwadker notes in the introduction to the "Collected Plays" that, Karnad "employs traditional Indian narrative material and modes of performance successfully to create a radically Modern urban theatre". The use of myths and legends is essential for Karnad, as it allows him to create a postcolonial

theatre that challenges these ideas, while interpreting and reinterpreting them to create something meaningful. Karnad uses myths not just as narrative tools, but reinvents and reimagines them to reflect the shifting values, dilemmas, and contradictions of a society grappling with its post-independence crisis. Karnad was often caught in the dilemma of representing two different eras, the 1950s and 1960s, a time when people found themselves walking between two schools of thought. He was torn between tradition and modernity. In his own words from the introduction to “Three Plays”, Karnad elaborates on the tensions that shaped his writing, “My generation was the first to come of age after India became independent of British rule. It therefore had to face a situation in which tensions implicit until then had come out in the open and demanded to be resolved without apologia or self-justification, tensions between the cultural past of the country and its colonial past, between the attractions of Western modes of thought and our own traditions, and finally between the various visions of the future that opened up once the common cause of political freedom was achieved. This is the historical context that gave rise to my plays and those of my contemporaries” (Karnad 1). The richness of his work, as Chaman Ahuja observes, lies in its “intricate interplay of mythology, history, and legends, his works make telling comments not only on the human condition in general but also on the specific socio-political goings-on in contemporary India.” (Ahuja, 1999)

Despite his success, Karnad was deeply concerned about the declining state of Indian theatre. In an interview with Chaman Ahuja, he lamented that the commercial pressures had forced writers to create substandard plays, TV serials, and films merely to survive. In the same interview, Karnad remarked that what worried him most is the condition of Indian theatre. He stated that there was no theatre in the true sense of the term anymore. The result was the dwindling of theatre culture, both in terms of audience and institutional support. In a conversation with Aparna Dharwadkar (New Theatre Quarterly, 1995), he compared this scenario to the West: “Playwrights in the West have been able to retire on such successes, or at least, to devote themselves to that activity entirely. I can’t, and that irritates me. The advantage is that the need to earn a living from other sources

keeps me involved in the general flow of life. Otherwise one starts repeating oneself.”

Karnad strongly believed in the subversive potential of folk theatre. As he wrote in “Three Plays”, “The energy of folk theatre comes from the fact that although it seems to uphold traditional values, it also has the means of questioning those values, of making them literally stand on their head. The various conventions- the chorus, the masks, the seemingly unrelated comic episodes, the meaning of human and non human worlds- permit the simultaneous presentation of alternative points of view, of alternative attitude to the central problem.” (14)

Karnad’s career spanned across roles as writer, playwright, director, actor and many more. His legacy lies not just in the plays he wrote or the films he acted in, but rather in the ideological shift he brought into Indian performance traditions. His works blended the classical with the contemporary, the mythical with the modern, and the personal with the political. While talking about the contributions of Karnad, Savita Goel has rightly stated how he “has sought for an appropriate approach, style and form of the theatre which is closer to the consciousness of people, consistent with our cultural traditions, entertaining and yet aesthetically satisfying.” (204) Karnad’s theatre was not just a retelling of the past, it was a space that fostered intellectual reflection, political critique, and cultural dialogue that continues to resonate across generations.

1.6 Critical Reception of his Works

Girish Karnad’s contribution to modern Indian theatre and literature was widely acknowledged through multiple national accolades. Critics have praised his innovative use of language, his nuanced exploration of complex themes, and his commitment to social justice. According to Aparna Dharwadker “he belonged to the first post-Independence generation of artists and created one of the most dense and sustained bodies of dramatic writing Indian theatre has ever witnessed.” Karnad’s work has been a subject of scrutiny for years, with many hailing him as one of the pioneers of modern Indian theatre after independence, alongside Vijay Tendulkar, Mohan Rakesh, Badal Sircar, among others.

However, Karnad's work was not without controversy. For much of his playwriting career, he faced criticism from Kannada literary purists who often dismissed his work as "too Anglicised" due to his Western education and perceived lack of cultural rootedness. His identity as a Kannada writer was frequently questioned. It was only with *Tale-Danda*, a play based on the life of the medieval poet-reformer Basavanna and written in a North Karnataka dialect, that his credibility was firmly established. The play silenced many of his critics and marked his deeper engagement with Kannada cultural contexts. It also served as a direct response to the rise of the Hindu Right as a political force in the late 1980s.

Throughout his career, Karnad has been recognized with numerous awards and honors including the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award for Playwriting (1972) and the Bharatiya Natya Sangh Award for Hayavadana (1972). He also received the Padma Shri (1974) and later the Padma Bhushan (1992) for his significant cultural contributions. His play *Tale-Danda* earned him the Sahitya Akademi Award (1994), while his seminal play *Samskara* won him the President's Gold Medal. In 1999, he was honoured with the Jnanpith Award, India's highest literary recognition, for his achievements in Indian drama.

Karnad was also known for his unwavering support of liberal values and freedom of expression. Girish Karnad was only 26 when he wrote *Tughlaq*, his second Kannada-language play after *Yayati*. Although the play was published in 1964, Karnad had been working on it for several years while pursuing his Master's degree at the University of Oxford. The landmark play, comprising thirteen scenes, revolves around the complex figure of Sultan Muhammad bin Tughlaq and is widely hailed as a powerful political allegory. *Tughlaq* is not merely a historical drama, it is a contemporary critique of power structures and authoritarian rule. In his introduction to the Oxford University Press edition, U.R. Ananthamurthy observes, "It has an irreducible, puzzling quality which comes from the ambiguities of Tughlaq's character."

While talking about his characterization and theatrical innovations, Lekhan Mu states how "his characters, like the troubled Padmini in *Hayavadana*,

the idealistic but imperfect monarch in *Tughlaq*, or the transformational Rani in *Nagamandala*, traverse complex social and personal landscapes. Their experiences and problems mirror larger philosophical and moral conundrums, which makes the plays incredibly thought-provoking and sympathetic” (347).

In an age when female autonomy was rarely explored in theatre, Karnad’s plays stood out for addressing questions of desire, agency, and choice for women. He was a visionary in this sense, as he thought deeply about the inner lives and decisions of his female characters. For instance, in the play *Hayavadana*, the character of Padmini is given the freedom to desire and choose. Aparna Dharwadker has spoken about this; she states that in “Padmini the heroine of the play, there is the representation of woman as ‘desired and desiring’ and possessing the agency and autonomy to make choices.”

Critics have often underlined Karnad’s plays as resisting simplistic readings. J. Vijaya Gowri, while talking about Karnad’s use of myths and history in his plays, states that he regarded them as very much relevant even in contemporary times, and hence, sought to adapt myths and folk forms in his plays. She notes how Karnad “effects a synthesis between the ancient and the modern to serve his purpose of using the past to illuminate the present.” As part of the “Theatre of Roots” movement, Karnad made a conscious effort to reconnect with Indian traditions and reinterpret them in the contemporary context. Influenced greatly by the diverse performative traditions of Yakshagana, Parsi theatre, and ritualistic storytelling, Karnad reimagined the theatrical space of India by infusing these elements with modern dramaturgy. This hybridity not only enhanced the sensory appeal of his plays but also disrupted conventional narrative structuring.

Stop to Consider:

The Rise of Modern Indian Drama:

In the aftermath of India’s independence in 1947, the nation’s cultural landscape underwent a significant transformation. Theatre, in particular, became a medium for expressing national identity and

societal concerns. Initially post-independence theatre reflected themes of nationalism and pride, reflecting a unified cultural identity. However, in the period after independence, playwrights began to explore a broader spectrum of subjects, which led to the emergence of modern Indian theatre. The establishment of key institutions played a pivotal role in this evolution. The Sangeet Natak Akademi, inaugurated on 28 January 1953 by Dr. Rajendra Prasad, India's first President, was the first instrumental organisation in this regard. The Akademi aimed to preserve and promote India's diverse performing arts. It served as a catalyst for the development of theatre across various regions in the country. Subsequently, in 1959 the National School of Drama (NSD) was established in 1959 under the leadership of Ebrahim Alkazi, who served as its director from 1962 to 1977. The coming of the NSD revolutionized theatre education and production in India. It was during this period of transition, a cohort of playwrights emerged who sought to redefine Indian theatre by integrating modern sensibilities with indigenous narratives. Girish Karnad belonged to a generation of writers who were trying to understand what Indian writing meant and where it stood in the post-independence period. This was a time when Indian drama was evolving with new thoughts and ideas. The 1950s and 60s saw playwrights writing with modern sensibilities and fresh ways of thinking. Karnad was part of the same generation of playwrights as Badal Sircar in Bangla, Mohan Rakesh in Hindi, and Vijay Tendulkar in Marathi. In the 1960s, Karnad began writing in Kannada. This was also the period when regional language theatre was gaining prominence, and the idea of Indian drama as a collective cultural space was beginning to take shape. He was a non-conformist whose writings were bold, unique, and different from the mainstream. He questioned those in power, challenged existing social norms, and refused to follow conventional ideas. As a result, he was often under scrutiny. Like many writers of his time, he wrote in an Indian regional language, yet his plays were powerful enough to be translated and reach a wider audience. He belonged to the first group of modern Indian playwrights who were part of both the economies

of print and performance. Most of his plays drew from myth, history, and oral folklore to recreate the world of the ancient or pre modern past. His mastery lay in his ability to reshape the past in the image of the present.

1.7 Summing Up

Girish Karnad is an important figure in the history of Indian drama and literature. Owing to his prolific contribution, he came to be recognised as a playwright, actor, director, thinker and writer. He belonged to a generation of artists who were navigating the complexities of writing and expression in the post-independence period. This was a time when the Indian cultural and theatrical landscape was undergoing significant change. The theatrical space was shifting and new forms of expression were emerging. Karnad's literary and theatrical work reflects this transition, as he continuously sought new directions in storytelling through drama.

Karnad's writings are marked by a distinct creative approach, where he used myths, folktales, oral narratives and historical episodes not merely to retell them but to reimagine them in a contemporary context. His plays demonstrate how elements from the past can be used to comment upon the present. Rather than treating myths and history as static or fixed narratives, he employed them as creative tools to reflect on contemporary social realities. Through this method, he offered a lens to examine broader issues related to gender, caste, power, morality and identity.

In *Hayavadana*, he explored existential questions and dilemmas surrounding human completeness and identity. In *Tughlaq*, he examined the disillusionment of a visionary political figure, drawing parallels between historical uncertainty and modern political turbulence. In *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan*, he attempted to reconstruct the image of a historical figure who had often been misrepresented, bringing forth a more nuanced portrayal. Similarly, in *Nagamandala*, he presented the inner world and emotional life of a neglected woman, thereby raising questions about agency, desire

and societal expectations. Across these plays, Karnad's themes consistently interrogated the structures of power and the individual's place within society.

His writings are often seen as deeply political, as they engage critically with dominant ideologies and challenge existing social hierarchies. As a result, Karnad was frequently placed under scrutiny, yet he remained committed to addressing difficult questions and expressing dissent through his work. His engagement with women's issues, particularly in *Nagamandala*, is noteworthy, as he brought attention to female desire and voice in a society where such expressions were often silenced.

Although Kannada was not his first language, Karnad chose to write in it, emphasising the importance of regional language literature in shaping modern Indian drama. He initially aspired to become a poet, but his creative journey eventually led him to drama and performance. Despite his success in cinema, where he acted in and directed several acclaimed films including *Samskara*, he often stated that playwriting remained his most fulfilling form of expression. Due to practical considerations, he engaged with cinema and other forms of storytelling, but theatre remained central to his intellectual and artistic identity.

To sum up, Karnad brought new directions to Indian theatre with his creative engagement with myths, history and folklore. He eventually opened up new ways of thinking about contemporary social and political realities. In his later works, Karnad continued to engage deeply with themes of caste, heritage, identity and the politics of representation. He was not only a playwright but also a cultural thinker who used the stage as a space to question, challenge and provoke. His contribution lies in how he reimagined traditional narratives, making them relevant to modern concerns, and how he used literature and performance as tools for social reflection and intellectual discourse

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Unit- 2

Girish Karnad: Dreams of Tipu Sultan

Unit Structure:

- 2.1 Objectives
- 2.2 Introduction
- 2.3 Girish Karnad: The Playwright
- 2.4 Context of the Play
- 2.5 Postcolonial Re-imaginings: Writing Against Imperial History
- 2.6 The Symbolic and Narrative Function of Dreams
- 2.7 Language, Style and Structure of the Play
- 2.8 Reclaiming the Lost Hero: Rethinking Tipu Sultan's Legacy
- 2.9 Summing Up
- 2.10 References and Suggested Readings

2.1 Objective

This unit aims to explore the historical and theatrical significance of *Dreams of Tipu Sultan*, a play by Girish Karnad commissioned by the BBC in 1996 to mark 50 years of Indian independence. The play revisits the figure of Tipu Sultan, offering a counter-narrative to colonial historiography and highlighting Karnad's nuanced portrayal of a visionary ruler.

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

- *understand* the socio-political context in which *Dreams of Tipu Sultan* was written,
- *examine* the historical and theatrical representation of Tipu Sultan,
- *analyze* the politics of history and memory reflected in the play,
- *evaluate* Karnad's contribution to historical drama and postcolonial discourse,

- *reflect* on how the play challenges Eurocentric narratives and explores the politics of representation.

2.2 Introduction

In 1996, the BBC commissioned Girish Karnad to write a play to mark the 50th anniversary of Indian independence. That is how the first idea for *Dreams of Tipu Sultan* was born. The radio play was later broadcast by the BBC on 15th August 1997. Since the plot had to revolve around Indo-British relations, the first thought that came to Karnad's mind was that of Tipu Sultan. He is considered one of the most tragic and unjustly portrayed rulers in history. The figure of Tipu Sultan has long been a subject of both Indian and British imagination, with many viewing his rule as a contentious one. Karnad's play attempts to rescue this distorted portrayal of Tipu from the shackles of history and restore him to the rightful place he deserves in historical memory. The matter of injustice lies in the way history has consistently painted him as a villain. However, in the play written by Karnad, there is a conscious attempt to rescue Tipu from this distorted historical image and present him as a just and visionary ruler. Tipu had the ability to dream and envision a future along the same lines as the British. He understood military strategy, governance, and modernisation. His power lay in his foresight and progressive thinking, which made the British wary of his presence and potential opposition. In an attempt to erase his legacy, they deliberately portrayed him as a religious fanatic, thereby tainting his reputation and attempting to wipe him from the annals of history.

2.3 Girish Karnad: The Playwright

Girish Karnad stands as one of the most formidable and pioneering voices in modern Indian drama. A true polymath, Karnad was not only a playwright but also a theatre director, actor, scholar, screenwriter, and public intellectual. His contribution to Indian theatre in English and Kannada was both foundational and transformative. His writings emerged during a period of intense socio-political flux when India was transitioning into modernity post-

independence. His works reflect the tensions of a nation negotiating tradition and change, identity and autonomy, myth and modernity.

Karnad arrived on the literary scene at a time when Indian drama was grappling with a crisis in terms of form and content. While the country had gained political independence, Indian theatre was still seeking a voice that was rooted in indigenous traditions yet could engage with modern concerns. Karnad's plays bridged this gap by bringing together folklore, history, mythology, and existential dilemmas in a dramaturgically innovative form. His work deals with a wide array of concerns such as political power, moral ambiguity, gender and patriarchy, identity crisis, and the psychological depths of human conflict.

Karnad's major plays include *Yayati* (1961), which reinterprets a myth to expose the generational burden of moral compromise, *Tughlaq* (1964), a play that interrogates idealism, disillusionment, and political failure through the historical figure of Muhammad bin Tughlaq; *Hayavadana* (1971), which blends folk tales and philosophical introspection to explore questions of identity and completeness; *Nagamandala* (1988), a feminist critique of marital norms using oral storytelling traditions; *The Fire and the Rain* (1995), a reworking of the Mahabharata tale that explores human desire, sacrifice, and ego; amongst many others.

Over his lifetime, Karnad was the recipient of several prestigious awards and honors, underscoring his significance in Indian cultural and literary history. He was awarded the Jnanpith Award, India's highest literary honor in 1998. Other accolades include the Padma Shri (1974) and Padma Bhushan (1992), the Sahitya Akademi Award, and numerous national awards for his work in cinema and theatre.

Karnad's dramaturgy is notable for its use of nonlinear narrative techniques, frame structures, chorus-like storytelling, and deep intertextuality. He revitalized the use of traditional Indian theatrical forms such as Yakshagana and folk narrative modes while layering them with modernist dramaturgical experimentation. His dialogues are often philosophical and lyrical, yet grounded in everyday emotion and sociopolitical context.

Among his most significant plays is *Dreams of Tipu Sultan* (1997), which presents a powerful counter-narrative to colonial historiography. Rather than reducing Tipu Sultan to a one-dimensional figure, Karnad presents him as a visionary leader driven by political foresight, technological curiosity, cultural pluralism, and emotional complexity.

2.4 Context of the Play

In the early 1990s, the BBC commissioned Girish Karnad to write a radio play to mark the 50th anniversary of Indian independence. Karnad was interested in exploring Indo-British historical relations and chose to focus on a figure who had fiercely resisted British colonialism. This led him to Tipu Sultan, a ruler often misrepresented in colonial records. The idea was to present a counter-narrative that questioned imperial stereotypes. Thus, *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan* was conceived as a powerful reimagining of history through a postcolonial lens.

The play reframes Tipu not simply as a ruler but as a symbolic site of resistance against imperialist notions. By using Tipu's dreams as a narrative tool, Karnad delves into the spiritual and psychological musings of a historical figure often maligned in dominant colonial narratives by those in power. In this sense, the play also acts as a critique of Eurocentric historical writing and attempts to restore Tipu to his rightful place in history. While talking about the figure of Tipu Sultan, Karnad states, "For me, he is the greatest Kannadiga.... Tipu Sultan has been misrepresented in history books and early works written on him as a fanatic and someone who converted his subjects. But this was largely because what was written was largely influenced by what the British spread and wrote about him as 'they were out to destroy him,'" (The Hindu).

Through his body of work, Girish Karnad not only redefined Indian drama but also created a powerful space where the past converses with the present, offering layered interpretations of power and identity. While discussing Tipu Sultan's grandeur and strategic foresight, Karnad emphasizes that "Sultan was the only one who had perceived a threat to the country from the East India Company... He was a thinker and visionary, who represented the

best of Karnataka. Unfortunately, he has been misunderstood by the people of his own country and a lot of untruths were spread about him” (*The Hindu*).

2.5 Postcolonial Re-Imaginations: Writing Against Imperial History

The play *Dreams of Tipu Sultan* questions the idea of historiography and how history is often seized and written by those in power. It explores the politics of representation and critiques Eurocentric modes of thinking that have shaped the dominant narratives about Tipu Sultan. Through this drama, Karnad attempts to rewrite and reclaim history from a postcolonial perspective. The central aim of postcolonial historical theatre is to revisit, revise, and reinterpret dominant historical narratives in order to construct a rhetoric that speaks to and for the colonized. Such theatre becomes a space for counter-memory, offering alternative frameworks of representation that challenge colonial historiography.

The play opens with two historical figures, Oriental scholar Colonel Colin Mackenzie and Tipu’s court historian Mir Hussain Ali Kirmani in the employment of the British after his death. These characters symbolise the contrasting Eastern and Western traditions of historiography. Colonel Mackenzie urges Kirmani to adopt a tone of objectivity and neutrality while writing his historical narrative. However, Kirmani resists this detached approach. He poignantly remarks, “There’s no healing. True, the blood and tears dried up a long time ago. But the wound remains fresh” (7). He further challenges Mackenzie’s demand, asking, “Dispassionate distance, is that even possible?” Through this exchange, Karnad sets the stage for a larger critique of historical writing, where personal memory, emotion, and cultural perspective inevitably shape the narrative. His dilemma highlights the tension between imposed historical ‘objectivity’ and lived memory.

This colonial imposition of objectivity by Mackenzie reflects the desire of the colonizer to suppress indigenous memory and reshape history through an empirical lens. As Mackenzie favours authenticity as the most essential element for writing history. To him, an accurate historiography must be an

objective one, where facts and figures hold utmost importance. However, for Kirmani, it is his loyalty to a once-glorious past that matters more. He feels that by aligning himself with the British and adopting their point of view, he has severed his ties with the legacy of his former masters. He states, “There’s no healing. True, the blood and tears dried up a long time ago. But the wound remains fresh” (7). His words reflect a deep sense of nostalgia and a lingering attachment to the past, marked by guilt and melancholia. Kirmani himself questions his position, saying, “I spent my life serving him and his father. And now I work for you, his enemies. What does that make me? A traitor? Am I trustworthy anymore? Doesn’t that worry you? It worries me” (8). His inner conflict highlights his moral dilemma.

Mackenzie’s call for neutrality is thus not apolitical; it is an attempt to control and erase emotional and cultural memory from historical records. The records that Kirmani has been entrusted to produce are reflective of his memory of who the figure of Tipu was. Hence, his appeal to Kirmani for an “objective” approach while documenting his version of Tipu is representative of that very colonial impulse to silence memory and impose a sanitized narrative of the past.

The interaction between Kirmani and Colonel Mackenzie becomes a powerful site of reflection on how history is recorded, interpreted, and politicized. Mackenzie urges Kirmani to adopt an objective approach as a historian, to separate personal sentiment from the act of documenting the past. However, Kirmani, burdened by grief, guilt, and a sense of betrayal for being entrusted with Tipu Sultan’s final letter while simultaneously working alongside the British, resists this detachment. He asks, “You have your version of history, all worked out. Why do you want my side? Why do you care?” (8) The question reveals a deeper anxiety, not just about the act of writing, but about who controls history and whose voice is authorized within it. Mackenzie responds with a sense of liberal objectivity “I am interested in the other side. You could say that’s how we Europeans are brought up... to be interested in the other side as well.” (8) However this ‘interest’ is masked by the imperial mechanisms of power and transition from lived history to an official version curated by the colonial state machinery. Ultimately, Kirmani

lets out his anguish stating "...all my recorded facts became memory" (17) exposing the fragile boundaries between memory, loss, and historiography. Karnad uses this tension to critique the imperial framework of historical and knowledge production. His suggestion here is that memory, however fragmented or emotional, may carry truths that official history cannot contain.

As Sarah Abdullah argues, *Tipu Sultan: The dreams of the Sultan* functions as a postcolonial text that "opens up a new form of presenting history in a fragmentary, self-disruptive, non-factual polyphonic narrative, invested with an alternative ending that showcases a possibilistic inversion of events as they happened in the past, all made possible through a syncretic form which draws on narrative, dialogic exchange, performance and representation to at once present and undermine its historical narrative." (127)

In Karnad's play, the figure of Tipu Sultan is no longer just a monarch resisting British expansion. He is depicted as a multifaceted human being, a just ruler, a father, a son, an emissary, a spiritual and tolerant leader who respected religions beyond his own. The play disrupts the reductive colonial trope of Tipu as a fanatic or despot and repositions him within a more complex, layered, and humane portrayal. Even though the historical Siege of Srirangapatna in 1799 marked the end of Tipu's reign, the legacy of the Southern Sultanate cannot be flattened by the colonial victory alone. The play foregrounds the scientific and technological advancements under Tipu's leadership most notably, the use of Mysorean rockets, a significant innovation in military warfare later adopted by European powers. His military defeat, according to Karnad, was not due to technological insufficiency but largely due to internal political betrayal, including the complicity of the Nizam and Maratha forces who allied with the British, and the treachery of his own courtiers. His dreams of driving the British away and restoring glory to his kingdom came to a standstill after his defeat in the Fourth and final Anglo-Mysore War in 1799.

In order to give legitimacy to their idea of the monarch as a religious tyrant and fanatic, the British records created written accounts about the ruler,

almost all of which mention him as an antagonist who exerted abominable cruelties upon them. Hence, as is evident in most colonized cases, the colonizer feels it is their aim to free the colonized of this abomination. This is the idea of Orientalism which describes the East as a land belonging to the primitive savages. Such prejudiced constructions enabled the Europeans to justify their presence claiming that they were bringing light to the dark areas. They established their legitimacy by showing how these areas needed control and development and their role was integral in this regard. This is the pretext used by the Britishers to state how Tipu, as a ruler, was a misfit and tyrant from whom they freed the state of Mysore. Hence, according to Teltscher, “if the Sultan is tyrannical, the British must be blameless” (Teltscher, 1995, p. 231).

While talking about rewriting history José Medina’s asserts that postcolonial texts must aim to “return to those empty spaces that have been masked by omission or concealed in false and misleading plenitude” (16) Karnad’s dramaturgy becomes an act of reclamation, recovering voices and histories that colonial narratives had erased or distorted. In doing so, the play exemplifies what postcolonial historical theatre strives to achieve: to give voice to the silenced, to dismantle imperial archives, and to imagine counter-histories that center the perspectives of the oppressed and marginalized.

Hence, it is in order to reattempt to retrieve the figure of Tipu from the clutches of misrepresentation that Karnad has undertaken the project of writing this play. It is his attempt to rewrite colonial rule, which, according to Helen Tiffin, is a “Process of artistic and literary decolonization that have involved a radical dis/mantling of European codes and a post-colonial subversion and appropriation of the dominant European discourses. This has frequently been accompanied by the demand for an entirely new or wholly recovered ‘reality’, free of all colonial taint. Given the nature of the relationship between colonizers and colonized, with its pandemic brutalities and its cultural denigration, such a demand is desirable and inevitable.” (p. 95) And this is how Karnad restores Tipu to his rightful place in history.

Check Your Progress:

1. Analyze how memory and representation are used as tools of resistance in the play.
2. What role do secondary characters like Mir Hussain Ali and Kirmani play in shaping the audience's perception of Tipu Sultan?
3. How is the idea of a 'counter-history' developed through the narrative?

2.6 The Symbolic and Narrative Function of Dreams

The narrative of the play is visualised through the dreams recorded in Tipu's private diary, a document that chronicles the dreams he had from April 1786 to January 1799. Tipu Sultan maintained a personal record of his dreams along with his interpretations of them. The book consisting of his dreams, also known as the "Khwab-nama", was looted from Seringapatam along with other books. It was later discovered in the bed chamber of Tipu. After Tipu's defeat at the hands of the British in 1799, his dream manuscript was taken by the British and presented in 1800 to the Court of Directors of the East India Company by Alexander Beatson, on behalf of Governor-General Marquess Wellesley. The book, now preserved in the British Library's Persian Manuscripts Collection, is a volume that contains 37 dreams recorded in Tipu's own handwriting, offering a rare glimpse into the inner world of the Sultan of Mysore.

Tipu's dreams serve as a crucial narrative device. These dreams, which he often interprets as omens of good fortune, ironically foreshadow his eventual downfall. The dreams in this manner function both as a metaphor and a dramatic element. It blurs the lines between reality and prophecy. The dreams represent the inner turmoils of Tipu and provide us an insight into the workings of his unconscious self. These dreams became a reflection of Tipu's inner world and his desire for a self-reliant and prosperous kingdom undefeated from the colonizers grip. Though total number of dreams was 37 the play mentions only four of them most of which are political allegories which lay the foundation for the plot of the play. His dreams reflected his political

foresight, inner anxieties, and aspirations for his kingdom. The dream motif also acts as a counterpoint to colonial “factual history,” by placing subjective memory and cultural imagination at the center of historical understanding.

Tipu’s first dream in the play is the dream 9 of his book in history. Here Tipu dreams of his visits to a dilapidated temple with his finance minister Poornaiya. The idols in the temple come alive and express their longing for salvation. Tipu responds with empathy and commitment, saying, “Come, Poornaiya, Let’s go. We’ll have the temple repaired, the walls rebuilt so that these seekers after God are not disturbed” (19). This moment reveals Tipu’s tolerant nature and commitment to the welfare of his people, beyond religious divisions. This statement not only showcases his concern for the spiritual well-being of his subjects but also reflects his respect for religious diversity. Had Tipu been truly a religious bigot, as is often depicted in colonial records, he would not have envisioned the restoration of a temple in his dreams. This moment in the play is significant as it is an assertion of his religious tolerance and a dismissal of the biased historical representations of his rule.

Tipu Sultan’s dreams often reflected his ambitions and his vision for a powerful, progressive kingdom. So in yet another dream, which was 10th out of his 37 dreams, Tipu imagines receiving a white elephant from the Emperor of China, a gift symbolic of greatness. Tipu sees two old men with long beards, dressed in flowing silk gowns, approaching him. Alongside them are two elephants and several footmen carrying spears and guns. He interprets this dream as a sign of his own greatness and destiny, stating, “My interpretation of the dream is that God Almighty and our Prophet will make me another Alexander” (20). The dream highlights Tipu’s ambition to be remembered as a powerful, legendary ruler, a second Alexander.

In another dream, which was numbered 13 out of his 37 dreams. Tipu Sultan envisions a young man in a turban, resembling a Maratha, entering the scene. He is described as a handsome figure, fair-skinned and light-eyed. Interestingly, this striking image is accompanied by a female voice approaching him. But as the vision unfolds, “Tipu takes off the turban and a cascade of long hair comes tumbling down on the shoulder of the young...” (29) This startling revelation leads him to interpret the dream as a sign of

deceit. He interprets it as a symbolic warning about deceit and exclaims, “May it please God, though these Marathas are dressed in male attire, they will in fact prove to be women.” (31) This dream mirrors the political treachery he would soon encounter.

The fourth dream of Tipu came at a time of deep emotional unrest, right after his two sons were taken hostage by the British. Stricken with guilt and sorrow, he couldn’t bring himself to sleep on his bed and instead chose to lie down on the bare stone floor. In this vulnerable state, he had a haunting dream where he saw his father, Haider Ali, without limbs, appearing before him. In the dream, Tipu pleads for punishment and salvation, overwhelmed by guilt. This dream reflects not just his political anxiety, but also the deep personal burden he carried as a father, son, and ruler. In his dreams his father rebukes him for not being able to attack the British when the time was suitable. Haider Ali confronts him asking “why did you let Cornwallis escape? (No answer.) When he was retreating from Seringapatam in shame and desperation, your Amirs and Khans begged you to attack. You stood on the ramparts and did nothing.” (51) Tipu reveals his helplessness, saying, “I knew several of my officers had already started secret negotiations with him. I even knew who they were. My trusted officers. Yet I couldn’t expose them without bringing the whole edifice down” (51). Much like the ghost of Hamlet’s father, Haider Ali visits Tipu in his dreams, embodying his unresolved turmoil and guilt. This reflects his inner turmoil and the frustration he faced at the betrayal within his ranks. This dream humanizes him beyond the image of a military strategist and ruler, and shows him as a father and son tired of the hardships of the regime.

Questions For Self-Assessment:

1. How does Girish Karnad reimagine the figure of Tipu Sultan in the play?

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2. What aspects of Tipu’s personality does Karnad emphasize?

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3. In what ways does *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan* challenge colonial narratives about Indian history?

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4. What is the significance of Tipu Sultan's dreams in the structure and message of the play?

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2.7 Language, Style and Structure of The Play

The play is written as a single-act drama, with no formal division into scenes. Karnad makes use of the montage technique in *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan*. The scenes flow into each other in quick succession, often shifting between temporal and spatial frames without clear distinct transitions. The play begins in the retrospective mode of storytelling in the year 1803, with two historians, Colonel Colin Mackenzie and Kirmani reflecting upon Tipu Sultan's legacy. From this point, the play moves backward, dramatizing the Sultan's life and political engagements. The narrative then quickly shifts to the events following the final days of the Sultan and nears the end with Tipu's death in 1799 at the Siege of Srirangapatna. The structure, in essence, works like a palimpsest, layering memory over history and challenging colonial historiography. The play makes use of Tipu's dreams, historical commentary, Kirmani's narration, Mackenzie's observations, and political events, side by side to create a composite picture of Tipu, rather than a singular, linear biography. The montage technique helps in disrupting traditional storytelling, making space for multiple truths, and is a powerful tool for counter-historiography. This structure allows Karnad to reclaim Tipu from the reductive binaries of hero/villain dichotomy, and instead situates him within a broader postcolonial imagination. In the play he seamlessly weaves together dreams, historical records, dialogues, and retrospective commentary. The play works through a frame narrative, where Tipu's life and reign are explored through the contrasting perspectives of two historians Kirmani, the court historian, and Colonel Colin Mackenzie, the British officer.

This structure allows the audience to see the play from a retrospective gaze. The play also functions in a choric manner, where Kirmani's voice becomes a mediator between past and present, memory and history. Much like Bill Ashcroft's "The Empire Writes Back," the play becomes a counter-historical text, challenging imperial archives and offering space for alternate interpretations.

2.8 Reclaiming the Lost Hero: Rethinking Tipu Sultan's Legacy

Tipu Sultan is portrayed in the play as a true visionary, who had far-reaching dreams of transforming his kingdom through science and technology. Although he despised the British, he deeply admired their technological advancements and warfare strategies. In one significant scene, he explains the utility of the thermometer: "Thermometer! It is quicksilver in a glass tube. When placed in the hands of a sick man, the quicksilver rises to a certain number of degrees and indicates the height of his disorder. That helps the hakim decide on the treatment." This moment captures his scientific temperament and openness to modern knowledge. His palace, filled with mechanical toys for his children and a life-sized replica of a mechanical tiger, reflects his fascination with mechanical innovations. His interest wasn't limited to weapons alone, he even arranged for the import of silkworms and eggs from the island of Jezeriah Diraz near Muscat, showcasing his progressive ambitions in agriculture and trade as well.

While Tipu wished to use British warfare techniques to defeat them, the British, fearing his modern outlook and growing strength, deliberately portrayed him as a religious fanatic. Karnad's play thus attempts to reclaim Tipu's image from colonial misrepresentation and asserts his identity as a progressive and enlightened ruler. As a historical play, it shares much in common with *Tughlaq* and *Taledanda*, as it uses real historical figures and events to explore deeper political, ideological, and moral questions.

Karnad has two key aims in *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan*. Firstly, the play seeks to restore Tipu to the rightful place he deserves in history, beyond the colonial portrayal of him as a religious fanatic or tyrant. Secondly, Karnad highlights that it was Tipu's visionary ideas, his progressive mindset, and his

embrace of science, technology, and modern warfare techniques that made him a threat to the British. It was precisely this ambition to build an advanced, self-reliant nation by mastering the enemy's tools that led to his demonized and controversial image in colonial historiography.

Karnad's work is a perfect example of Foucault's idea of counter-history, which, as Foucault states, "works against grand historical morality or anti-morality tales by resituating values and the battle over them within a multi-agential force field and a multidimensional history." (108) In *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan*, Karnad offers a compelling counter-historiography by challenging the linear colonial narrative in which Tipu Sultan has long been demonized and reduced to a religious fanatic. Instead of portraying him through a simplistic hero-versus-villain binary, Karnad presents Tipu as a layered figure, a man of political ambition, scientific curiosity, technological grandeur, and spiritual introspection. Such a nuanced framework directly questions the imperial logic of colonial historiography and opens up a space for alternative readings of history, where figures like Tipu are not mere footnotes of resistance but complex agents of their own political and historical imagination.

The play concludes with a postscript which highlights a poignant historical irony. After the independence struggle the families of Indian rajas who had collaborated with the British were rewarded with privy purses and estates. However Tipu Sultan's descendants were left in poverty, residing in the slums of Calcutta. This final note becomes a powerful indictment of both colonial legacy and postcolonial amnesia. In reclaiming Tipu Sultan's narrative, Karnad not only rewrites a forgotten chapter of history but also foregrounds the importance of colonized histories in shaping national consciousness. These counter-histories resist the grand imperial narratives that sought to erase indigenous voices. As Edward Said reminds us, "Every empire, however, tells itself and the world that it is unlike all other empires, that its mission is not to plunder and control" (10). Through Tipu's story, Karnad disrupts that illusion, urging us to recognize the power of memory, cultural resistance, and historical re-imagining in restoring agency to those silenced by empire.

Stop to Consider:

History Vs Memory:

History has often been constructed and narrated by those in positions of power, reflecting the perspectives and interests of ruling authorities. However, personal and collective memories, such as those reflected in Tipu Sultan's dream narrative or Kirmani's accounts of the ruler, offer alternative modes of engaging with the past. Such narratives challenge the dominant historical discourse and provide a more nuanced understanding of historical realities. As Pierre Nora famously notes in *Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire*, "History is perpetually suspicious of memory, and its true mission is to suppress and destroy it. History's goal and ambition is not to exalt but to annihilate what has in reality taken place." (9)

Contemporary historians increasingly recognize the value of such personal testimonies and lived experiences in reconstructing a more inclusive cultural heritage. Patrick Hutton states how "memories are unbound from their fixed places in a grand narrative to become simultaneous reference points for historians reconstructing their cultural heritage" (538). Instead of depending solely on colonial records, historians now incorporate personal memories, local stories, and oral traditions. This shift redefines the way we understand history. As sociologist Maurice Halbwachs theorized, collective memory as the shared memory of a group plays a crucial role in shaping how societies remember and interpret their past, often providing a counter-narrative to official histories. In this process, history becomes an art of locating these memories.

2.9 Summing Up

Dreams of Tipu Sultan by Girish Karnad is a powerful play that offers a postcolonial reinterpretation of the historical figure of Tipu who is often misunderstood and misrepresented in colonial historiography. This unit has explored how Karnad, through this play, challenges the dominant colonial

narratives that reduced Tipu to a religious fanatic and tyrant. Instead, Karnad portrays him as a visionary leader, one who was deeply interested in the political, economic, and technological advancement of Mysore. He aimed to bring advancement to his region by adopting the European model as an ideal and, in turn, using their own methods and strategies against them to resist British imperialism.

The play centers around his dreams, which serve as a unique narrative and symbolic device. These dreams are drawn from historical sources such as the *Khwabnama* or the Sultan's Dream Register. They allow Karnad to humanize Tipu, offering a glimpse into his inner world, his aspirations, anxieties, and farfetched foresight. The dreams blur the lines between history and imagination, presenting an alternative form of historiography that foregrounds indigenous voices and perspectives often erased in colonial accounts. Through the structure of the play, Karnad also raises critical questions about the process of writing history. Characters like the court historian Kirmani and the British officer Colonel Mackenzie act as narrative devices to highlight conflicting representations of Tipu. The use of multiple perspectives in the play both native and colonial exposes the limitations and biases inherent in imperial historiography. Karnad deliberately juxtaposes these perspectives together in the play to interrogate the authority of British historical records and reclaim space for subaltern narratives.

Karnad's distinctive dramaturgical techniques have played a vital role in preserving and sustaining Indian theatrical traditions within his plays. He effectively blends classical Indian storytelling techniques with modern theatrical forms. His use of dreams, historical documents and layered characterization reflects his commitment to a theatre that is both rooted in Indian tradition and responsive to contemporary socio-political realities.

The play also consists of broader themes such as anti-colonial resistance, identity, political sovereignty, and cultural dignity. Tipu Sultan emerges as a symbol of defiance against colonial rule, an Indian ruler who dared to envision a self-reliant, modern Indian state. Karnad's portrayal does not reduce Tipu to a mere heroic figure but emphasizes his contradictions and dilemmas, thereby situating him as a human beyond the tyrannical descriptions of him in history.

In conclusion, *Dreams of Tipu Sultan* is not merely a historical drama but a reinterpretation of the figure of the Sultan through a postcolonialist lens. The play perfectly demonstrates how theatre can function as a critical site for memory, resistance, and representation. Through Tipu's dreams, Karnad presents a counter-history, one that challenges colonial stereotypes, reclaims indigenous agency, and offers a more layered understanding of India's struggle against imperialism. As students of literature and postcolonial studies, engaging with this play encourages us to question the politics of representation and recognize the power of artistic mediums in shaping historical consciousness.

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Unit- 3

Raja Rao and *Kanthapura*: Introduction

Unit Structure:

- 3.1 Objectives
- 3.2 Introduction
- 3.3 Biographical Sketch
- 3.4 The Works of Raja Rao
- 3.5 Placing the Work
- 3.6 Critical Reception
- 3.7 Summing Up
- 3.8 References and Suggested Reading

3.1 Objectives

This unit is an effort to give you an overview of the life and writings of Raja Rao, one of the pioneers of what is better known today as Indian Writing in English. Attempts will be made in this unit to

- *familiarize* you with Raja Rao's literary oeuvre
- *acquaint* you with certain aspects of the writer's life and literary career
- *locate* the prescribed novel *Kanthapura* as a pioneering work within the gamut of Indian writing in English
- *evaluate* some critical responses towards Rao

3.2 Introduction

For students and scholars of Indian Writing in English, Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* is a key text. Many will agree that it heralded the beginning of the 'Indian Novel in English' in so far as its portrayal of experience of an Indian way of life and appropriation of the English language to create a new diction is concerned. Its publication in 1938 is one of the central events that

inspired and generated a spate of 'Indian English Novels' to be followed by his contemporaries as well as writers of the succeeding generations. No doubt, Raja Rao is placed alongside the other two stalwarts of Indian English Novels, namely R.K. Narayan and Mulk Raj Anand.

In this unit attempts have been made to acquaint you with the life of the writer and the works that he has produced. Rao's involvement in the nationalist movement is very well reflected in his first book, *Kanthapura*. It is an account of Gandhi's teachings of non-violent resistance to the British rule in India seen from the perspective of a small village in Mysore in South India and narrated in the style of the Indian vernacular tale and folk-epic. Located in the background of Gandhi's Civil Disobedience Movement, *Kanthapura* is the story of participation of an entire village in the freedom movement. It also demonstrates how the English language can be used to tell a typically Indian story without violating native speech rhythms.

In his writings, Raja Rao has evoked the spiritual depth of Indian culture. He used the medium of fiction to portray his patriotic, philosophical and literary concerns in a masterly way. Most of his literary works are about the common people of Indian society; his novels are the voice of an ancient and rich culture that speaks to a modern world.

3.3 Biographical Sketch

As I have already mentioned, Raja Rao is one of the triumvirate of the pioneering Indian novelists in English. Raja Rao was born on 8 November, 1908 in the state of Mysore in Karnataka (India), into a well-known Brahmin family. His father taught Kannada in Nizam's College. Rao lost his mother at the tender age of four which left a lasting impression on him. One could relate this loss to the recurring images of orphans in his works. Another influence on him at this young age was his grandfather with whom he stayed in Hassan in Harihalli.

Rao was educated at several Muslim schools like the Madrassa-e-Aliya and the Aligarh Muslim University. After matriculation in 1927, Rao studied in Nizam's college for his degree. Having studied English and History as his

major subjects for graduation, Rao won the Asiatic Scholarship of the Government of Hyderabad and went to France to study in the University of Montpellier where he learnt the French language and literature. Thereafter Rao went to Sorbonne in Paris where he researched the Indian influence on Irish literature. During 1931-32 Rao wrote four articles for the journal *Jaya Karnataka*, in Kannada. In 1931, Rao married Camille Mouly, a marriage which lasted for eight years; he later depicted the breakdown of their marriage in his novel *The Serpent and the Rope*. In 1939 Rao returned to India and participated in the Quit India Movement of 1942. Rao was also associated with different Bombay-based cultural organizations for propagation of Indian culture and values like *Chetana* and *Sri Vidya Samiti*. Rao's involvement in the nationalist movement gets reflected in his two early works: *Kanthapura* and *The Cow of the Barricades and Other Stories*. In 1947, Roy Hawkins of Oxford University Press, Bombay, published *The Cow of the Barricades and Other Stories*. Rao's spiritual experiences form the basis of his next two novels, *The Cat and Shakespeare*, published as *The Cat* in the 1959 summer issue of *Chelsea Review* and later in 1965 by Macmillan, and *The Serpent and the Rope*, published in 1960 by John Murray. In the year 1988, Rao published Gandhi's biography *Great Indian Way: A Life of Mahatma Gandhi* and was also awarded the prestigious Neustadt Prize for literature in the same year.

After the War, Rao spent much of his time in France and travelling throughout the world. He visited America in 1950 and later spent some more time living in an ashram. Rao settled in the United States and taught Indian philosophy in the University of Texas from 1966 to 1983. In 1969 Rao was awarded the Padma Bhushan, the third highest Civilian Awards in India. He died of a cardiac attack on July 8, 2006 at Austin, Texas at the age of ninety seven.

Stop to Consider:

Raja Rao significantly contributed to the University of Texas while serving as a faculty, and in retirement, by his continued involvement in the intellectual life of the community. The University, in recognition of

his invaluable contribution, honoured Raja Rao at a one-day symposium, “Word as Mantra: The Art of Raja Rao”, on 24th March, 1997. The symposium was organized by the Centre for Asian Studies in cooperation with the Harry H. Ransom Humanities Research Centre to honour Raja Rao as author, philosopher, teacher and mentor.

The symposium, “Word as Mantra”, honouring Raja Rao, also provided the Sahitya Akademi an opportunity to present Rao with its Fellowship (the highest honour conferred by the Akademi on any Indian writer and reserved for those who have achieved the greatest distinction in the world of letters). The then president of the Akademi, U. R. Anantha Murthy in his speech said that Rao’s concern “is with the human condition rather than with a particular nation or people. Writing, to him is sadhana, a form of spiritual growth. That is why he would go on writing even if he were alone in the world.”

Raja Rao is perhaps the first Indian who brings into the business of novel-writing (as seen in his novels like *Kanthapura*, *The Serpent and the Rope*, *Comrade Kirilov*, etc.) a wide intellectual culture—Vedas, Upanishads, Buddha, Sankara, the Holy Grail, Dante, Rilke, Paul Valery, Marx, Gide and so on. R. Parthasarathy in the essay “The Example of Raja Rao” (included in *Word as Mantra*) urges that Rao is “one of the most innovative novelists. . . . He has put the novel to uses to which it had not perhaps been put before by exploring the metaphysical basis of writing itself: of, in fact, the word”. Moving away from the European lineage of the ‘novel’, Rao has indigenized the genre by assimilating materials from the Indian literary tradition.

SAQ:

Would you consider Rao’s experience in the European countries as being relevant to his ‘Indian Writing’? What would be the nature of such ‘relevance’? (80+60 words)

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3.4 The Works of Raja Rao

While *Kanthapura* is undoubtedly his most widely acclaimed work, Raja Rao has a number of literary works to his credit. Besides *Kanthapura*, he has written a number of novels and short stories. His works blend philosophical and spiritual insights into the fabric of everyday life. Rao was awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1964 for his novel *The Serpent and the Rope*. He was also awarded the Neustadt International Prize for Literature in the year 1988. In the present section we shall have a look into some of his works apart from *Kanthapura* (which shall be discussed in greater detail in Unit 2 and 3 of this Block):

The Cow of the Barricades, and Other Stories (1947):

The Cow of the Barricades and other Stories is a collection of stories which comprises some of the earliest works of Rao. Most of the stories that this collection includes were written in the 30s of the preceding century: “The Cow of the Barricades” appeared in 1938, “Javni” in 1933, “In Khandesh” in 1934 and “The True Story of Kanakapala, Protector of Gold” in 1935, “Narsinga” and “Companions” in the early forties. Stories like “Akkayya”, “A Client”, and “The Little Gram Shop” which were published in 1947 have earlier French versions. In terms of theme and treatment, most of the stories of this collection are related to his novels. For Shyamala A. Narayan, these stories depict “the wide range of Raja Rao’s writing in three decades, ranging from the purely social to the metaphysical”.

In most of the stories Rao has portrayed unforgettable women characters. Two such characters are Javni and Akkayya. In the later works of Rao such as *The Serpent and the Rope* and *The Cat and Shakespeare* women are not presented with such vividness and in such realistic terms. In his later works, the metaphysical concern predominates and women are important insofar as they are associated with the development of the hero’s character. However, in *Kanthapura* he depicts the rural womenfolk as taking an active and leading part in India’s freedom movement. The fate of the Indian women in *The Cow of the Barricade and Other Stories* is one of passive suffering regardless of their social status.

Many of the stories in this collection deal with widows and orphans. “Javni” is a widow while the narrator in “The Little Gram Shop” and the women in the same story – ‘Beti’ and ‘Rati’ are orphans. Narsiga in the story “Narsiga” is also an orphan but he is looked after by the ‘Master’. As in the novel *Kanthapura*, in some of the stories in this collection also, we see the influence of Gandhi on the people. The Master in “Narsiga” and the “Cow of the Barricades” are symbolic figures of Mahatma Gandhi. Here also Raja Rao shows how Gandhi appeals to the deep religious feeling in Indians. In these stories, it is Rao’s use of social realism which is highly successful. Different aspects of Indian life are presented in these stories. India’s struggle for freedom is found in stories like “The Cow of the Barricades” and “Narsiga”. A typical Indian folk tale, with a village grandmother as the narrator (a device also used in *Kanthapura*) is found in “The True Story of Kanakapala, Protector of Gold”. Problems of the lower caste women (Javni), problems of wife-beating (Rati) and problems of the Brahmin widow (Akkaya) are very vividly depicted. The metaphysical dimension of India is presented in such stories as “Nimka”, and “India: A Fable”. Taking into account the variety of life that each story presents, C. D. Narasimhaiah says that even if Rao had not written any novels, “his short-stories by themselves would have assured him a permanent place in Indian-English fiction”.

***The Serpent and the Rope* (1960):**

Published more than two decades after *Kanthapura*, *The Serpent and the Rope* is Rao’s second epoch-making novel. In *The Serpent and the Rope* is a semi-autobiographical story of Raja Rao (the ‘Serpent’ in the title refers to ‘illusion’ and the ‘Rope’ to the ‘reality’). The work dramatizes the relationship between Indian and Western culture. The Hindu concept of ‘Karma’, second birth, and eternity are brought within the fold of the tale. *The Serpent and the Rope* has layers of meanings in it; it is less about a story or plot and more about the search for meaning and wisdom. The spiritual quest is presented by two viewpoints—a Brahminical one and a Western one.

The Serpent and the Rope gave a new direction to the Indian Novel in English by philosophizing it. Since the rise of the novel in the eighteenth century, its philosophical bias has been toward the individual in an objective world. An entirely opposite view is expressed in *The Serpent and the Rope*: “India is perhaps the only nation that throughout history has questioned the existence of the world—of the object” (R. Parthasarathy in “The Example of Raja Rao”). Philosophical debates are a part of both the Upanishads and Puranas and *The Serpent and the Rope* resembles both. Furthermore, going by the bulk of critical studies this novel has attracted, it could be well said that it is one of the influential novels written in Indian English literature.

Stop to Consider:

One of the early texts of Indian writing in English can be seen through Sake Dean Mahomet’s *Travels of Dean Mahomet*. This travel narrative of Mahomet was published in 1793 in England. In its early stages, it was influenced by the Western form of the novel. Early Indian writers used English unadulterated by Indian words. Another writer of historical importance is Bankim Chandra whose *Rajmohan’s Wife*, published in 1864 is often considered to be the first full-fledged novel in English. Next to it, *One Thousand and One Nights* by S.K. Ghosh and *Indian Detective Stories* by S.B. Bannerjee are other works of prose-fiction in English from Indian hands. Mention may be made of Toru Dutt’s novel called *Binaca or The Young Spanish Maiden* which was published after her death by her father in the columns of the ‘Bengal Magazine’. Ramesh Chandra Dutt wrote many novels in Bengali and two of them were translated into English by the novelist himself. These are: *The Slave Girl of Agra* and *The Lake of Palms*.

***The Cat and Shakespeare: A Tale of Modern India* (1965):**

An answer to the Hindu concept of Karma, Raja Rao’s *The Cat and Shakespeare* deals with metaphysical issues where there is a blending of Indian philosophy with western thoughts. The ‘Cat’ in the title is

representative of the Hindu concept of 'Karma'. The emphasis on Indian specificity is enhanced by the subtitle of the book '*A Tale of Modern India*'. This novel is an answer to the philosophical questions raised in the earlier novels. Rao here explores the Vedantic idea of the world being a play ('lila') of the Absolute, and the product is an invigorating comedy in which neither Shakespeare nor his language is spared. In this novel one does not find the communicative strategies of the earlier novels. Rao's intent here is to express traditional lore. Both the languages, English and Sanskrit, are skillfully intertwined in the novel whilst making the Sanskrit rhythm mix with the sophistication of English. Rao's craftsmanship in this novel shows the texture of Indian life through this plain spoken and humorous tale. The novel basically centers around two friends. Govindan Nair is a sharp, down-to-earth philosopher and clerk, who deals with the difficulties and problems of day-to-day life with a remarkable sense of humour and zest. His unorthodox and unconventional ways of dealing with things is a constant cause of panic for his friend Ramakrishna Pai who is also the narrator in the novel.

The Cat and Shakespeare embodies complex metaphysical speculations on time, death and eternity and the text defies analysis and cogent elucidation. One of the most significant themes of the novel is 'Time' and its relation to 'Death'. Time is conceived of in the novel at several different levels and with several different degrees of complexity. Everything about the novel is a baffling challenge to the reader, who at the end of reading the novel finds himself provoked, dazed and bewildered at its elusive metaphysical meanings. The yoking of cat and Shakespeare remains a riddle. The narrative is complex and the story seems to move in uneasy jerks unfolding some strange experiences hidden in the obscurity of theme, plot and meaning.

***Comrade Kirilov*(1976):**

Though originally written in English, it came to be first published in French in a translated version in *La Chatte et Shakespeare* Colman Levy, Paris, 1965. Comrade Kirilov is a sketchy tale by Raja Rao, depicting the life and ideology of the protagonist Padmanava Iyer. The attention of the novelist is more directed towards the evolution of the mind of the protagonist. Depiction

of his mental states and opinion is what occupies a more dominant position than action, which is rather slow.

In Comrade Kirilov's journey from India to California and then to London and further to Moscow and Peking one could notice a questing soul who sets himself in search of reality across the world. This journey of Kirilov, is a journey of illumination as (in the course of his journey to various places) the reader finds discussions on various issues like Communism, History, Theosophy, sex, Gandhism, education in India, dialectics, democracy etc. which not only reveal but also form the texture of the novel.

Another important aspect in the novel that forms a kind of parallel plot is "Irene's Diary". This diary serves two very important purposes: one, it reveals the character of Comrade Kirilov from the perspective of Irene; and second, it takes the reader into a journey to Irene's mind vis-a vis her husband.

Like *The Serpent and the Rope*, *Comrade Kirilov* is a spiritual autobiography. So instead of a chronological narration of events, the narrator takes us through introspection and enters the inmost thoughts and feelings and analyses human and social relations. Sometimes the continual philosophic digressions and discussions are lengthy and rambling, but what makes the book distinctive is still its philosophizing, its quotations from Sanskrit and its references to the myths and traditions of India. The comparisons and contrasts between different faiths and beliefs serve to emphasize that India is not only a country in the sense that England or Russia is but it is an experience, a metaphysic.

***The Chessmaster and His Moves*(1988):**

This book won Rao The Neustadt Prize for Literature. It is the first volume of a trilogy in which Rao tried to explain the game of chess with life. *The Chessmaster and his Moves* comprises three books spread over seven hundred pages. The characters in *The Chessmaster and his Moves* are drawn from various cultures seeking their identities; its large cast of characters: Indian, European, African and Jewish, is remarkable. The story moves from France to London and on to the Himalayas and Bengal. In this novel, Rao

uses the metaphor of the chess game to animate philosophical and psychological ideas. Sivaram Sastri, one of the characters in the novel is an Indian mathematician in France who meets Proust and recounts his love affairs and relationships. It is the story of an impossible love between Sivaram Sastri and a married woman. The story is full of uncertainties and the characters turn inward to seek meanings and answers to their questions, transforming the book into a metaphysical exploration. Sastri's love for the French actress Suzanne, or her beguiling, effervescent friend Mireille, for instance, serves to underline the differences between the East and the West; while the latter seeks happiness in the world, the former is looking for freedom from the world itself.

Apart from novels and short-stories, Raja Rao has a number of non-fictional works in his oeuvre. *Changing India: An Anthology* (1939), *Wither India* (1948), *The Meaning of India* (1996), *The Great Indian Way: A Life of Mahatma Gandhi* (1998) are some of his prose works. Written in English, Rao's works give us an opportunity to look back not only at the times and situations in India during which the author lived, but also to acquaint ourselves with the ancient Indian traditions. R. Parthasarathy in the essay "The Example of Raja Rao" (included in *Word as Mantra*) urges that Rao is "one of the most innovative novelists...Moving away from the European lineage of the 'novel', Rao has indigenized the genre by assimilating materials from the Indian literary tradition. He has put the novel to uses to which it had not perhaps been put before by exploring the metaphysical basis of writing itself; of in fact, the word".

3.5 Placing the Work

Raja Rao's first novel *Kanthapura* is a trend-setter; it demonstrates (we shall see how, in Unit 3 of this Block) the appropriation of the English language to tell a typically Indian story. *Kanthapura* presents the crucial political and historical events of the nineteen-thirties in India and the effects of these happenings in a village community. The novel focuses on the villagers of Kanthapura who participate in India's struggle for independence inspired by Gandhian principles. The immediate context in the novel is the Civil

Disobedience Movement inspired by Gandhi and the participation of the entire village in the Movement. *Kanthapura*, was for the most part, written in a thirteenth- century French castle in the Alps, and published in London in 1938 by Allen and Unwin.

Rao's passion for rustic Indian life, his concern for the freedom movement in India and his endeavor to adapt the English language to tell a tale in the Indian mode and form of style—all go into the making of his first novel *Kanthapura*. His choice of a remote and interior village as the backdrop for action in the novel is also very significant. One might wonder why Raja Rao did not select an urban town for his purpose, as the urban areas directly felt the consequences of British decisions. There could be several reasons for it.

SAQ:

If we agree that *Kanthapura* set a trend in Indian Literature in English,
How would we describe this trend? (80 words)

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For a reader interested in the way of life in the Indian villages, Rao's *Kanthapura* could furnish her/him with interesting insights. Villages had always formed India; long before the British came to India, the village had been the only existing form of a community. The villagers were integrated into several economic and social functions and due to division of labour, the different members of a particular village were required to perform a particular type of work. But, it also depended on the affiliation of the caste, which work the villagers had to do. Whereas members of the upper caste like the Hindus were in sophisticated positions like teachers or priests, other persons, who belonged to a lower caste, earned money, for instance, by weaving. In the rural area, workers had a particular working-place which separated members of different castes. Stratification into castes determined the

members' social position. Raja Rao's Kanthapura in *Kanthapura* is therefore divided into five districts, namely in a "Brahmin quarter", a "Pariah quarter", a "Potter's quarter", a "Weaver's quarter", as well as a "Sudra quarter". From this point of view, it results that every caste group has a particular social environment and an area in the caste-ridden traditional, rural society where its members live and work.

In the years after the beginning of British Imperialism, the rural community provided orientation and steadiness in times of rapid changes and disorder. The British, however, regarded India as "underdeveloped", precisely because India was mainly rural. Furthermore, being considered to be the opposite of the city, the village took on an increasingly important role. In contrast to the city—associated with immorality and perfidy—the village, however, featured authenticity and naturalness, because the members of the society, their traditions and 'Indian' values remained just as they had existed before the enforced influence resulting from the British rule. Another reason for Rao's choice of the village setting is in consonance with his Gandhian loyalties. Gandhi locates his politics in the villages of India where the majority of Indian population resides. Rao treats the history of the freedom movement at the level of hostility between the village folk and the British colonial authority at a time when colonialism had become intensely heavy-handed in its response to the Civil Disobedience Movement. *Kanthapura* is a tale of how the independence movement becomes a tragic reality in a tiny and secluded village in South India.

So far as the style and form of the novel is concerned Rao makes a deliberate attempt to follow the traditional Indian narrative technique and it is an Indian sensibility that informs the telling of the tale. The novel has the flavor of an epic as it delightfully emerges through the eyes of an old woman who comments with wisdom and humor. In fact both the spirit and the narrative technique of *Kanthapura* are primarily those of the Indian Puranas, which may be described as a popular encyclopedia of ancient and medieval Hinduism, religious, philosophical, historical and social. Rao, at the outset, describes his novel as a "Sthala-Purana"—the legend of a place. The Puranas are a blend of narration, description, philosophical reflection, and religious teaching and the style is usually simple, flowing, and digressive.

Rao makes a highly innovative use of the English language to make it conform to the Kannada rhythm. In keeping with his theme in *Kanthapura* he experiments with language following the oral rhythms and narrative techniques of traditional model of writing.

Stop to Consider:

The Narrator in *Kanthapura*

Consider the narrator in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and the narrator in Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*. In the former, Marlow's consciousness has been developed by the novelist and he is an integral part of the narrative and its narration. Compared to Marlow, Achakka barely has a consciousness and we do not know much about her except that she is an old woman from Veda Sastri's family. In this case, the narrator or the story teller could have been any one, if not Achakka. Another feature in this kind of narration is that the actual incidents (for instance wiping out of the village) acquires newer and different nuances and dimensions as it is told and retold. Moreover, in *Heart of Darkness* the audience, which constitutes a specific group, is also elaborately introduced. Whereas in *Kanthapura* the audience is implied until towards the end when the new-comer is mentioned.

The emotional upheaval that shook *Kanthapura* is expressed by breaking the formal English syntax to suit the sudden changes of mood and sharp contrasts in tone. While the intuitive borrowing from language takes place at one level in the novel, at another interconnected level, the "real" India is constructed by enshrining the novel in Gandhian ideology. It is a highly original style. The author's "Foreword" to the novel also spells out the postcolonial cultural agenda: "The telling has not been easy. One has to convey in a language that is not one's own the spirit that is one's own... yet English is not really an alien language to us. It is the language of our intellectual make-up-like Sanskrit or Persian was before—but not of our emotional make-up. We are all instinctively bilingual, many of us writing in our own language

and in English. We cannot write like the English. We should not. We cannot write only as Indians.”

Rao’s novel is significant as a cultural tract which rewrites true history against the “inauthentic” historical accounts compiled by Europeans, and because it effects a cultural revival through the use of indigenous themes and motifs. Rao is also alive to the fact that religion has the potential to move people beyond dormancy—to display active political energy to the extent of sacrificing their lives. *Kanthapura* evokes a sense of community and freedom, construed as a spiritual quality which overcomes all bounds and crosses all barriers.

In order to allow an easy interchange between the world of men and the world of gods, between contemporaneity and antiquity, Rao equips his story with a protagonist whose role it is to enthuse the villagers into joining the political cause of India’s struggle for freedom without reservation. The tension between these two often contradictory levels of writing—the mythic/poetic and the political/prosaic—is the defining characteristic of the novel. As will be seen, this tension is both strength and weakness to the narrative; on the one hand enhancing its sheer readability as a story, and on the other hand blurring readers’ understanding of the realities of the Indian Independence struggle.

Kanthapura was highly praised by the English writer E. M. Forster whose masterwork *A Passage to India* (1924) criticized British imperialism. However, Rao’s India is not a certain geographical or historical entity, but more of a philosophical concept and a symbol of spiritual calling.

3.6 Critical Reception

Ever since its publication, *Kanthapura* has generated a spate of critical writings around it. This shows the richness and depth of the text that could arouse such variegated responses from different quarters. For instance, talking about Raja Rao’s influence in the gamut of Indian English writing, Braj B. Kachru says, “...Rao’s *Kanthapura* provided a liberating mantra in the formative writings of India Writing in English”. Regarding the influence of Rao’s work in the minds of the Indian reader, C.D. Narasimhaiah says,

“*Kanthapura* had built a strong base amongst undergraduates, most of who hailed from villages and towns. And they responded spontaneously to the Foreword which spoke of every village having a sthalapurana, the legend of the place, of a god or godlike hero and heroine. It touched a chord in their hearts as Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* did not.”

On the other hand, talking of the social reality depicted in the novel, William Walsh is of the opinion that, “*Kanthapura* unlike *Coolie* focuses on the intensity of Indian life, its physical immediacy, its traditional swaddling and its religious murmurings. The action is located in a single village and told in the traditional way by a grandmother. . . the novel is dense with actualities of village existence and brilliant with an impassioned light of spirituality”. In his essay titled “The Village that was Wiped out of Man and Mosquito”, M.K.Naik makes a full length study of *Kanthapura* and looks upon the text as “a daring and highly meaningful experiment in style”; “a memorable work”; “a finished product”; “a minor classic”. In the same essay Naik makes a comparison between Rao’s *Kanthapura* and Ignazio Silone’s *Fontamara* and discusses the affinities between the two. Not only is its sensibility truly of the soil but also its form and narrative technique can be traced back to the Indian Purana. V.Y. Katak is also of the view that it is Raja Rao’s evocation of native life as well as its speech rhythms that account for the power of the narrative.

Drawing upon the significance of the mythic aspect of the novel, H.M. Williams says that the idea in the style of writing this novel is that the epic tradition can be absorbed into depicting ‘Satyagraha’; “The novel is based on the tradition of the Indian epic, the Ramayana. India is Sita in the toils of the British (Ravana, the many headed Rakshasha). To rescue her, the Gods send an avatara, another Rama in the shape of Mahatma Gandhi, to lead the people of India against the British”. Another critic T.D. Brunton is however, severely critical of Raja Rao’s style and the narrative technique followed throughout the novel, “...his old woman narrator is a clumsy expedient, compelling him to write for pages at a time in a rigid syntactic pattern of short, hurried clauses...the author surrenders to the unfocussed flux of reminiscences (it cannot be called consciousness) of his narrator”.

The critical responses surrounding *Kanthapura* as you can understand from the above discussion are numerous and varied. For reasons of space, it is difficult to make elaborate discussion of these and other (some of which have not been covered here) responses. However, it is expected that this section will inspire you look into other responses related to Raja Rao's works.

SAQ:

1. Identify the recurrent concerns in Raja Rao's works. What are the themes and motifs that occur repeatedly? (80 words)

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2. Do you think Rao's inclination towards Indian philosophy overcasts other themes in his creative works?

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3. Comment on the East-West encounters that Rao portrays in his novels.

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3.7 Summing Up

The preceding sections give you a fair idea about Raja Rao, the novelist; his literary oeuvre and his pioneering efforts in initiating what constitutes now a substantial part in Indian English Writing. It is expected that this section will inspire you to further delve into the works of Rao and see for yourself what informs his writings. In the next section I shall discuss Rao's *Kanthapura* in brief; give an account of the vast array of characters and acquaint you with some of the critical responses that this masterpiece has evoked in the literary scenario.

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Unit- 4

Reading the Novel

Unit Structure:

- 4.1 Objectives
- 4.2 The Story in Brief
- 4.3 The Characters
- 4.4 Summing Up
- 4.5 References and Suggested Reading

4.1 Objectives

In this unit, I have attempted to introduce to you *Kanthapura*, the novel under discussion. From the previous unit, you must have formed some idea of the concerns in the novel. This unit will help you to—

- *gain* an overview of the story in brief
- *identify* the roles of the different characters and understand what they are meant to signify in the novel
- *appreciate* the novel in its totality of events

4.2 The Story in Brief

Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* is a story told in retrospect by one of its former inhabitants, Achakka, an aging grandmother. Achakka's narration starts with an elaborate description of the location of the village by the same name. As the narrative starts, the story is immediately imparted with an Indian speech style as in the manner of story-telling.

Kanthapura, as we get to know, is a small village in the district of Kara in Mysore, South India. It is situated on the slopes of the Western Ghats which form a wall along the Malabar Coast, facing the Arabian Sea. Cardamom, rice and coffee are the chief crops of the region, and there are

forests of *teak and jack* of *sandal* and *sal*. Kanthapura has about a hundred houses divided into a number of quarters: the Brahmin quarter, the Potters quarter, the Weavers quarter and a Sudra quarter. The reader is also given a detailed list of the inhabitants of the village with their professions and idiosyncrasies attached to their names. Such names as Postmaster Suryanarayana, Patwari Nanjundia, Waterfall Venkamma, Corner-House Moorthy, Kannaya House people, Temple House People, Fig tree House people, Coffee planter Ramayya, pock-marked Siddha, one-eyed Linga and so on, testify to this feature.

Like other villages in India, Kanthapura too has its own myths, deities and its own superstitions. The Goddess Kenchamma, residing on Kenchamma Hill, is the presiding deity of the village. The legend associated with the goddess is that long ago Kenchamma had slain a demon that created havoc in the countryside; that being the reason why a part of the hill was still red. It is believed that she protects the villagers from famine and diseases like small-pox and cholera. At this point in the novel one gets a fine instance of Raja Rao's use of irony: "...then there was cholera. We gave a sari and a gold trinket to the goddess, and the goddess never touched those that are to live—as for the old ones, they would have died one way or the other anyway... Ramappa and Subanna, you see, got it in town and our goddess could do nothing. She is the Goddess of Kanthapura, not of Talasanna. They ought to have stayed in Talassanna and gone to Goddess Talassanamma to offer their prayers".

The village also has the newly constructed Kanthapurishwari temple on the main street promontory. This soon becomes the centre of the village life, as well as the cause of all the trouble that form the substance of the novel.

The story starts with Moorthy finding out a half-sunk Shiva linga, and the resultant construction of the temple and the festivities surrounding the occasion of Sanker Jayanthi and Harikatha. Jayaramachar, the *Harikatha* man tells strange Harikathas, for along with the gods and goddesses, he would bring in Gandhi, the Swaraj and the Red-men thereby mingling politics and religion. The *Harikathas* provide the finest example of Raja Rao's use of the mythical technique. Gandhi is thus glorified and raised to the level of

Rama and Krishna who fought the demons as Gandhi was fighting the Red-men. But the political propaganda carried out in the guise of Harikatha soon reaches the government and Jayaramachar is immediately arrested.

A few days after this, the policeman Bade Khan, comes to Kanthapura and is received with spite by the people of the village, which makes him go to the Skeffington Estate for lodging. The government agent that he is, Bade Khan keeps prowling about the village and later forms an alliance with Bhatta, a corrupted and greedy Brahmin of Kanthapura who agrees to work against Moorthy and the other Gandhi men of the village. Together they engage in every possible task that could curb the dissemination of the nationalistic spirit among the villagers. Thus the tension and conflicts in the novel result from the clash of these two opposing forces—the Gandhi movement for freedom (represented by Moorthy and his friends) and government repression (Bhatta and Bade Khan).

SAQ:

An author often gives indirect suggestions of hidden features. Identify such strategies in the depiction of Bade Khan. (70 words)

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While the Congress activities gain full force in the village with Moorthy convincing the villagers about the necessity of spinning and weaving, Bhatta, in order to disrupt such awakening, starts dishonouring Moorthy for his involvement in the pariah business. He threatens Narsamma, Moorthy's mother that her son would be excommunicated by the Swami if he does not stop mingling with the pariahs. Bhatta's threats, Moorthy's refusal to yield and the shock of having a son excommunicated proves fatal to Narsamma and one morning she is found dead in the fields.

Even after the death of his mother, Moorthy continues in his mission with undaunted zeal and spirit. He also starts teaching the pariahs and decides to extend his programme to the coolies of the Skeffington Coffee Estate. These labourers in the Coffee plantation are recruited from different parts of the plains below the Ghats and are made to undergo a miserable life of torture, suffering and back-breaking labour. When Moorthy comes to the Coffee Estate, he is confronted with the policeman Bade Khan at the gates. After a series of verbal abuses and curses, a fight ensues where Bade Khan and his foreman would have been torn to pieces by the women, had not Moorthy intervened.

The following morning, Rachanna and his family are thrown out of the plantation and are given shelter in Kanthapura. Soon after this incident, Moorthy starts his 'Don't touch the Government Campaign' and goes from door to door convincing people to join the Congress and start spinning their own khadi clothes. He gets an overwhelming response from the different quarters of the village; Patel Range Gowda, Ramayya, Elder Siddayya, and even the Pariah's like Rachanna, Lingayya and Madanna agree to form a Congress Committee of Kanthapura with Moorthy as the elected president. Range Gowda is elected as the Protector along with twenty one others who are also to be the members of the Congress Committee. They vow to spin everyday, practice ahimsa and to seek truth. The membership fee at the rate of four annas each is collected and sent to the Provincial Congress Committee.

A few months after this, Moorthy is arrested by the police and taken to Karwar on false charges of arranging the attack of the Pariahs on the police. In spite of the efforts of Advocate Sankar and the prayers of the Kanthapurians, the Redmen's court declares Moorthy guilty and he is sentenced to three months of rigorous imprisonment. Meanwhile Range Gowda is also dismissed from his position by the government and Bhatta leaves for Kashi for good.

In the absence of Moorthy, it is Rangamma who takes up leadership of the people and also discusses the Vedic texts with the villagers on account of the death of their teacher Rama Krishnayya. It is also under her inspiration

that a Women's Volunteers Corps or *Sevika Sangha*, as they call it, is formed. Rangamma inspires the members to become Sevikas by telling them the stories of Rani Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi who fought the British heroically, of the Rajput ladies who burnt themselves on the pyre rather than surrendering to the enemy, of Annie Beasant, Sarojini Naidu and Kamala Devi. These *sevikas* take regular training in Rangamma's courtyard and are also given yoga lessons; she teaches them not to neglect their household duties and to remain absolutely non-violent if ever the police were to beat them.

On Moorthy's return from the prison, he starts his "Don't touch the government Campaign" in full swing and gets wholehearted support from his followers. The reader is also informed of another action taking place in the background, that is, the historic Dandi March and the breaking of the Salt Law. In accordance with the instructions from the Provincial Congress, the people of Kanthapura also refuse to pay taxes and elect a new government with Range Gowda as the Patel. This is followed by picketing and 'Satyagraha' at Boranna's Toddy Grove with a detailed and graphic account of the dramatic incident by the novelist. The people, who are arrested during the Satyagraha, later relate harrowing tales of the beatings and tortures which they were subjected to in the prison. Seetharamu, for instance, gives an account of how he was yoked like a bull and made to plough the field even though he was running high temperature.

Stop to Consider:

Amitav Ghosh is also another chronicler of the past; although he is not directly involved with politics. His concern with Indian politics (of the times which he talks about in his novels like *The Shadow Lines*) is to show how it affects the emotional and psychological sphere of the individual. *The Shadow Lines* is about a journey abroad that is needed to uncover some obscure events related to the protagonist's family past. However, the personal experiences of the characters invariably link up to the moment that caused the traumatic evolution of the Indian state: the partition and the resultant massacre of innocent lives.

In *The Shadow Lines* too we find a mingling of past and present as the narrator's memory crosses the frontiers and borders from Dhaka to Calcutta and London in which the death of the narrator's cousin in the 1964 Dhaka riot constitutes the central event. However, the technique used in mingling past and present in Ghosh's novel is different from Raja Rao's mythic technique in *Kanthapura* which sees the past as a continuation of the present.

Not only are the freedom fighters tortured in jails, but government repression also gets intensified on the people of Kanthapura. A new Patel is appointed and the people are ordered to pay revenue to him. One morning, the people of Kanthapura wake up to find that all the roads and lanes leading to Kanthapura have been barricaded and a new beadle announces that if taxes are not paid according to the laws, the government will take punitive measures against the rebels. During the night, Moorthy and Rangamma run from door to door to inform the people to ring the temple bell for help if they are troubled by the policemen.

The next morning, the villagers see a long procession with an armed soldier at both ends of the line. In the middle, with one policeman to every two men, were the coolies who had left the Skeffington Coffee Estate to live in Kanthapura. They were being marched back to the Estate because the Sahib wanted them. They also find that while they were sleeping, the police had come and taken Moorthy and Rangamma away. The whole village is now full of policemen who start beating and abusing the women and burning down some of the houses and the rice granary. Terrified, the women take shelter in the temple and shut the temple doors so that the policemen cannot open them. They wait in vain hoping for people to come to their aid, but all they hear is the sound of soldiers' boots, keeping watch outside the door. They light the sacred fire and recite bhajans so that people get to know that there are prisoners inside the temple. To while away the time, Ratna starts telling them stories of the women of Bombay and of other big cities, and how bravely they were fighting the Red men, shoulder to shoulder with their men folk. The next morning, Rachanna's wife Rachi comes to their aid and

opens the door. Thus released, they hurry back to their homes to discover that some of their menfolk have been away while some others have managed to hide themselves in the dense jungle bushes on the outskirts of the village.

Three days after this incident, some Europeans and city-coolies arrive at Kanthapura to auction the lands of the villagers. The women decide to bring out a procession on the eve of Satyanarayana Puja and under the cover of this procession, they plan to go out of Kanthapura. When the preparations are over, Ratna blows the conch and the women light camphor and break coconuts and the procession starts with the women singing songs and clapping hands. The policemen, on the other hand, are ready to attack them but seeing that it is a religious procession, they stop. At one point the inspector stops Ratna and asks, “Where are you going?” “Where the gods will” she replies. As the procession marches forward, cries of *Vande Mataram* rises from their throats which is greeted, from the dense jungles by their men, with *Mahatma Gandhi ki jai*. In a fury, the police shower lathi blows on the men and the others like the city boys, the volunteers, Mohammedans and the peasants who had come to their help. In the ensuing confusion, the coolies rush out from the Skeffington Estate and a bloody battle continues in the fields. But Rachi, Rachanna’s wife could bear it no longer; she and some pariah women take off their saris, make a bonfire and start lighting one thatch after the other. In the midst of gunshots and human slaughter, some thirty Kanthapurians manage to reach the banks of the Cauvery River and soon cross over to the state of Mysore on the other side. They reach the village of Kashipur where they are given a hero’s welcome by the people and decide to settle there.

Kanthapura is not brought into the scenario again although towards the end of the novel (after one year and two months), the characters talk about it wistfully and longingly. The reader gets to know that these thirty refugees are comfortably settled in their new homes in Kashipur. In the afternoon, they all gather in the veranda and religious books are read and discussed, just as in Kanthapura.

On the other hand, as a result of the pact with the Viceroy, Moorthy is released from jail. Ratna receives a letter from Moorthy in which he tells

her about Jawaharlal Nehru and how he is held in high esteem by the youth all over the country. In this way, the novelist has given us an idea of how Nehru was rising on the political scene and already attracting the masses. As Achakka puts it, “he was like Bharata to the Mahatma”. Ratna leaves for Bombay and they get to hear that the Mahatma is about to go to the Red man’s country to bring Swaraj for them. It is only Patel Range Gowda, who towards the end of the novel visits Kanthapura on his release from the jail. He goes to the village to dig out the jewels which he had buried underground on the night of government action. On his return to Kashipur, he informs the others of the sea change that Kanthapura has undergone over the time.

Check Your Progress:

1. Comment on the plot structure of *Kanthapura*? Compare with the plot structure of any other Indian English novel that you have read. Does it stand as justification of what Raja Rao writes in the Foreword?
2. Do you think the mode of story-telling serves as an effective narrative technique in the novel? How well does it voice the sense of community?
3. How does ‘memory’ work as a tool in the telling of the tale in *Kanthapura*? Is it different from the way in which ‘memory’ functions in *The Shadow Lines*?

4.3 The Characters

Moorthy, the Village Gandhi:

Moorthy is one of the central figures in the novel. It is he who organizes Congress work in the village; he is one among the thousands of young Indian men who left their studies and risked the wrath of the British government for the sake of their motherland. That Moorthy is liked by the village folk is evident from the affectionate manner in which he is referred to

by the people of Kanthapura. He is called 'Corner-house Moorthy'; 'our Moorthy who has gone through life like a noble cow, quiet, generous, deferent, Brahminic a very prince'. He is considered to be honest like an elephant and is spoken of as 'our Gandhi', 'the saint of our village'. He is the 'small mountain' while Gandhi is the 'big mountain'. The influence of Gandhi transforms him from a common village lad to a man capable of leadership and self-sacrifice. Moorthy is said to have had not an actual meeting with Gandhi, but a vision of Gandhi addressing a public meeting and he himself making his way through the crowd and receiving inspiration from a touch with Gandhi's hands.

Moorthy goes from door to door in his village carrying the message of the Mahatma and explaining the importance of *khadi* and *charkha* to the villagers. It is he who forms the Congress Committee in the village and is unanimously elected as the President. Even Range Gowda, the 'Tiger' of the village is deferential to him and calls him 'Learned Master'.

However, Moorthy's character is never over-idealised, which makes Raja Rao's characterization realistic and credible. One of the important aspects of the Gandhian movement is the eradication of untouchability. It is in this connection that Moorthy is shown to be an ordinary human being troubled with the common anxieties and concerns of his times. Being a Brahmin he is reluctant to enter Pariah Rachana's house (whom he calls 'Brother Rachana'), stands on the gutter slab (as demanded by custom) and wants to talk from outside; but Rachanna's wife calls him in. It is a very trying moment for Moorthy and his experience is very realistically depicted: "...and with one foot to the back and one foot to the fore, he stands trembling and undecided, and then suddenly hurries up the steps and crosses the threshold and squats on the earthen floor...and he looks this side and that and thinks: surely there is a carcass in the backyard and surely it is being skinned, and he smells the stench of hide and the stench of pickled pigs, and the roof seems to shake, and all the gods and all the manes of heaven seem to cry out against him, and his hands steal mechanically to the holy thread, and holding it he feels like saying, 'Hari-Om, Hari-Om'..."

Raja Rao has depicted Moorthy as a creature of flesh and blood with the fears, anxieties and failings of an average man of the times. He is not a superhuman; but an average young man who like many others of the days were inspired by the nationalistic spirit to come out of their shells and fight for the cause of their country.

Ratna, the Progressive Widow:

Ratna is a young widow; she is attractive and charming as is clear from the attention which Moorthy pays to her. There is a very subtle hint of chances of an amorous relationship between the two, but this aspect is never fully developed in the novel. Ratna is a young educated woman of progressive views. Though she is a widow, she does not live in the conventional manner in which a widow is expected to live. She wears bangles, coloured sarees (not the white dhoti of a widow), uses the kumkum mark on her forehead, and parts her hair like a concubine, as Venkamma puts it. She is bold and witty in conversation. Although much criticized for her unconventional ways, she chooses her own path and sticks to it with firmness and determination.

Ratna takes interest in the Gandhian movement and is a source of inspiration and help to Moorthy. When Jayaramachar, the Harikatha man, is arrested, she conducts the Harikathas. After Rangamma's death, it is Ratna who reads out the newspapers and other publicity materials of the Congress to keep the villagers updated about the happenings in the country. On the eve of Moorthy's arrest, Ratna along with Rangamma carries on the work of the Congress in the village. She exhibits immense courage and resourcefulness in the face of government suppression and police action. Consequently, she is dishonored, beaten up and sent to jail. As the narrator tells us, she comes out of the jail as a changed person, more humble and courteous, but more matured and determined. She is the epitome of those Indian women who were enthused with Gandhi's ideals and emerged from their homes to fight against British rule along with their menfolk.

Patel Range Gowda, the Tiger of the Village:

Range Gowda is a man of commanding and forceful personality and determination. He wields considerable power and authority in the village because of which he is known as the 'Tiger' of the village. Nobody dares to oppose or disobey his orders. As the narrator puts it, "he was a fat, sturdy fellow, a veritable tiger amongst us, and what with his tongue and his hand and his brain, he had amassed solid gold in his coffers and sold bangles on his arms. His daughters, all three of them, lived with him and his sons in law worked with him like slaves, though they owned as much land as he did. But then, you know, the Tiger, his words were law in our village". This powerful man is all ready to further the cause of the Congress. While he realizes the worth and integrity of the young Moorthy and is deferential to his ideals, the Patel is utterly disrespectful of Bade Khan when the latter comes to him searching a place for rent.

He explains to the people the significance of spinning and weaving, non-violence, and of the value and meaning of independence. During Moorthy's imprisonment, he boosts the morale of the people, guides and encourages them and sees to it that their spirits do not wane away.

Bhatta, the First Brahmin:

In the novel, Bhatta is Moorthy's foil. He is an agent of the British government and in league with the Swami in the city to frustrate and disrupt the freedom movement in Kanthapura. According to C.D. Narasimhaiah, "he is one of the most interesting men in Kanthapura, and the novelist has given us a detailed account of the past, of his crooked nature, and the way in which he sets about doing the work of the red man and opposing the Gandhi movement".

As the narrator tells us, Bhatta begins his life with a loin cloth at his waist, and a copper pot in his hand, goes on adding several acres of the peasants land to his own domain. With increasing prosperity, Bhatta loses his interest in priesthood. The Brahmin who starts with ascetic ways (which he keeps up for show), later on labours for wealth and position and luxury and lives on the exploitation of his neighbours.

Bhatta is very much crafted; and is always the first to reach the venue of any ceremonial occasion. The novelist gives a graphic account of one such occasion: "...then the real obsequial dinner begins, with fresh honey and solid curds, and Bhatta's beloved Bengal-gram kheer: "Take it Bhattare, only one cup more, just one? Let us not dissatisfy our manes". The children are playing in the shadow, by the byre and the elderly people are all in the side room, waiting for the holy Brahmins to finish their meal. But Bhatta goes on munching and belching, drinking water and then munching again".

Bhatta is an unworthy husband too. He has little affection for his wife. In the days he dines out, the poor woman has to do with dal-soup and rice. His wife dies and soon this middle-aged man marries a girl of twelve years: "What could he do? Offers of marriage came from here and there. There is dowry too. A thousand rupees cash and five acres of wet land. And a real seven days' marriage".

Bhatta's other social considerations hardly go any further. Bhatta is one of those who has nothing to do with the Gandhi bhajans. It is he who keeps the Swami informed about the happenings in the village. Moreover he is also the government's election agent and therefore discourages the nationalist sentiments to surge in Kanthapura. He also sides with Bade Khan and sets afloat the rumours regarding Moorthy's excommunication. Ironically, in the later part of the novel, he goes to Kashi to wash off his sins. Through Bhatta, the novelist presents the corruption among the high-caste Brahmins who wielded much influence in the society of the times. He is the symbol of greed and narrow orthodoxy.

Bade Khan, the Policeman:

Bade Khan, the policeman represents the rule of the Empire in Kanthapura. He is one of those Indians who made it possible for the British to rule in India for a long time. It is his duty to maintain law and order in Kanthapura and suppress the Gandhian movement. On arriving at Kanthapura, the first difficulty he has to face is that of accommodation.

Being a Muslim, he finds it difficult to find a house in the village. He can stay neither in the Potter's Street, nor in the Sudra Street, and of course the Brahmin quarter is out of bounds for him. Patwari Nanjundia is unable to help him. Then he approaches Patel Range Gowda, who receives him dryly, insults him, and bluntly tells him that his business is to collect revenue, and not to go about hunting for houses. Later, he is allotted a hut in the Skeffington Estate where he settles down with one of the pariah women.

Bade Khan moves about the village secretly watching the people, collecting information and passing it on to the city authorities. Very soon he forms a league with Bhatta and the other anti-Gandhi men of the village. When Moorthy goes to meet the workers at the coffee estate, it is Bade Khan who keeps watch and showers on him and his supporters the lathi-blows.

The White Owner of Skeffington Coffee Estate:

The Skeffington Coffee Estate, which is situated close to Kanthapura, is owned by a white man, who is popularly regarded as the 'Hunter Sahib'. The 'Hunter Sahib' always carries a whip or 'hunter' in his hand and wields it freely on any worker who has the audacity to neglect his/her duties in the estate.

A large number of workers are needed on the estate and they are recruited by his *maistri* or steward with false promises. The workers are brought to the estate from distant parts of Mysore with false promises of attractive wages with visions of a happy and comfortable life with no hard labour. Apart from this, they are also sexually exploited by the Sahib. If the Sahib takes a fancy to any of the women, she has to be sent to his house at night, or he would torture the other members of the family either by cutting off wages or lashing them with his whip.

The Swami:

The Swami lives in the city and like Gandhi, never appears on the scene. However, he influences the course of action and does much harm to the

‘Pariah’ cause. He is an orthodox Brahmin, narrow and conservative in his views. Moreover he is a traitor to the country. He receives twelve hundred acres of wet land from the government. So, he is a willing stooge of the Britishers. In alliance with Bhatta, he does his best to defeat the freedom struggle in Kanthapura. It is he who excommunicates Moorthy for the ‘pariah business’, and is thus indirectly responsible for his mother’s death.

Advocate Sankar:

Like Moorthy, Advocate Sankar is a staunch follower of Gandhi. He is a true patriot and does his best for the cause of freedom. He wears Khadi, and does not go to functions where people come wearing dresses made of foreign material. When Gandhi is sent to prison, Sankar keeps fast, for he believes that fasting is a means of self-purification. He is very different from his professional counterparts. He withdraws himself as soon as he discovers that the case of his client Rama Chetty is false. Bold and fearless, he takes up the defense of Moorthy when the latter is arrested and sent to the city courts. As a husband, Advocate Sankar is to be contrasted with Bhatta. Unlike Bhatta, he does not marry for the second time when his wife dies.

Waterfall Venkamma:

Like a ‘waterfall’, this character in the novel is always found to be shedding tears and roaring and railing against almost everybody in the novel. Waterfall Venkamma symbolizes all the pettiness, jealousy, triviality and orthodoxy of Indian village life. She cannot bear to see others happy or successful; prosperity of other villagers arouses her wrath and spite. She is jealous of Rangamma because the latter has a much larger house and constantly rails against her: “Why should a widow, and a childless widow too, have a big house like that? And it is not her father who built it...its my husband’s ancestors who built it. I’ve two sons and five daughters and the shaven widow hadn’t even the luck of having a bandicoot to call her own.”

She is also against Moorthy, because he refused to marry her second daughter. She nurses this grudge against him, and does her best to have her

revenge upon him. Orthodox and conservative, she has no sympathy with the Gandhian movement and therefore take sides with Bhatta and the Swami. It is she who spreads the idea that Moorthy is to be excommunicated. In this way, she also causes the death of Moorthy's mother. She also hates Ratna for her progressive views and constantly hurls abuses against her.

Narsamma:

Narsamma is the old widowed mother of Moorthy. She is tall and thin and "her big, broad ash marks gave her such an air of ascetic holiness". She has a great love for her son and high hopes of a brilliant career for him. But her hopes and dreams are shattered when he joins the freedom movement. She gave birth to eleven children, five of whom died, and of the remaining six Moorthy was the only son. Being the youngest of all, Moorthy is deeply loved by her and therefore the news of Moorthy's excommunication proves fatal to her. Excommunication is regarded by her as nothing less than a sin: "Oh! to have gone to Benaras and Rameshwaram and to Gaya, and to have a son excommunicated. I wish I had closed my eyes with your father instead of living to see you polluted. Go away, you pariah".

Narsamma is the most pathetic character in the novel. She is not wicked or crooked like Waterfall Venkamma, but is blinded by traditional customs and orthodoxies. She is therefore unable to understand the implications of the Gandhian movement and the noble work that her son is engaged in and hence has the sympathy of the reader.

SAQ:

Can we apply standards of 'psychological realism' to the characters in *Kanthapura*? Do they appear to be individualized? (80 + 70 words)

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Rangamma:

She is one of the few educated women of the village. She is a lady with enlightened and progressive views and helps Moorthy in organizing the Congress work in the village. She reads the newspapers herself and keeps herself and the others acquainted with the day-to-day happenings elsewhere; the narrator tells us that she knows many things of general interest: "...of the plants that weep, of the monkeys that were the men we have become, of the worms thin as dust, worms that get into your blood and give you dysentery and cholera..." Waterfall Venkamma is jealous of her, and roars and rails against her day and night. It is from such railings that we learn much about Rangamma. We get to know that she is a childless widow, but has a very big home, bigger than that of Venkamma's. Her relatives stay in the city and visit her frequently.

Check Your Progress:

1. Analyse in detail the narrative strategies by which Raja Rao depicts the characters in the novel.
2. The independence Movement as depicted in *Kanthapura* is not merely a political struggle for freedom but an all pervasive emotional experience. Comment on this statement. (60 words)
3. Comment on Moorthy's role as agent of Gandhism in Kanthapura.

4.4 Summing Up

In this unit, I have tried to provide you with a brief overview of the story line of the novel and discussed the role of some of the characters that are integral to the development of the plot. But a reading of this unit will be more fruitful if you have already read the novel on your own. It is expected that this unit will assist you to look at the nuances of the narrative and broaden the scope of your reading.

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Unit- 5

Themes and Techniques

Unit Structure:

- 5.1 Objectives
- 5.2 Introduction
- 5.3 The Title
- 5.4 Major Themes
 - 5.4.1 The Question of Language
 - 5.4.2 Village and Community Life
 - 5.4.3 Colonial Exploitation
 - 5.4.4 Story-telling
 - 5.4.5 Sthalapurana and the Culture of Mythology
 - 5.4.6 Social Divisions and National Unity
 - 5.4.7 Nationalism and the Question of a New Society
- 5.5 Narrative Technique
- 5.6 Images and Myths
- 5.7 Summing Up
- 5.8 References and Suggested Readings

5.1 Objectives

This is the final unit of Block 2. The objective of this unit is to enable you to

- *analyze* the novel in terms of its themes;
- *identify* the narrative technique employed by Raja Rao in the novel;
- *assess* how these themes and techniques contribute to the overall effect of the novel.

5.2 Introduction

The novel is a western art form; but Raja Rao has used it to express an essentially Indian sensibility. *Kanthapura* is Indian both in theme and treatment; it is an 'Indian' novel in English and attempts to express the Indian sensibility.

After going through the previous unit you must have formed a fair idea of the story line. Now, it is important for us to look at the themes and techniques that appear in this masterpiece which impart an Indian flavour to it. For a novel like *Kanthapura*, it is very necessary to understand the narrative technique employed. It is very different from the traditional third-person omniscient narrative or the stream-of-consciousness technique. The entire narration is in the form of story-telling by a garrulous Indian grandmother. In the following sections I have discussed in detail some of the important themes and the techniques that the writer makes use of in his novel.

5.3 The Title

The title 'Kanthapura' at once tells us what the novel is about. 'Kanthapura' is apt and suggestive as a title for the novel is about a South Indian village by that very name, about its people, their way of life and the metamorphosis that comes about in this village under the sweep of the freedom movement. The significance of the title also lies in the way in which it evokes an Indian sensibility. Unlike the British and other European novelists before him (like Defoe, Richardson, Fielding and so on), whose choice of titles (*Robinson Crusoe*, *Tom Jones*, *Pamela*, etc.), are all named after their respective protagonists), are suggestive of the prime importance of the 'individual' in the world, Rao's title shows the importance of 'community life' in India. If there is any protagonist in the novel, it is the community, the people of *Kanthapura*.

Kanthapura is not a novel dealing with the life and doings of any particular protagonist. It is certainly not the story of Moorthy, but of the village-folk, of their suffering, their exile, their momentary defeat—a defeat which has in it the seeds of ultimate victory. Hence one cannot talk about a single

protagonist in this novel; it is Kanthapura itself and its people. Even the figure of Gandhi is very skillfully presented so that Gandhi does not become an overbearing presence among the common villagers. Gandhi never makes a physical appearance in the novel although the impact of his ideals is very strongly felt. This suggests the importance that community life of Kanthapura has in the novel and also serves to justify the author's choice of the title.

SAQ:

There are also many English novels with descriptive names—*Hard Times* for instance. Kanthapura is suggestive of an integrated community. Do you think it also suggests a land mark event in mass movement? Give your opinions. (70 words)

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3.4 Major Themes

In this section I shall acquaint you with some of the important themes that inform Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*, an understanding of which is essential to appreciate the text in its totality:

5.4.1 The Question of Language

In the 'Foreword' to the text, there is reference to 'English' as a vehicle or medium of message in the Indian context. This medium, as Rao says, however, is "not one's own"; but the spirit that the medium conveys "is one's own". The text of *Kanthapura* complements the 'Foreword' as Rao takes up his own challenge to demonstrate that the "thought-movement" is not "maltreated in an alien language". In his use of English, he makes a distinction between two linguistic functions—'intellectual' and 'emotional':

"[English] is the language of our intellectual make-up—like Sanskrit or Persian was before—but not of our emotional make-up. We are all instinctively bilingual, many of us writing in our own language and in English. We cannot

write like the English. We should not....Our method of expression has to be a dialect which will someday prove to be as distinctive and colourful as the Irish or the American.”

Stop to Consider:

In 1982, Salman Rushdie said, “we can’t simply use the language [English] in the way the British did: it needs remaking for our own purposes”. This shows that Rao’s succeeding generation has taken up his credo.

The works that followed *Kanthapura* are essentially Indian in their contextualization, their linguistic and cultural hybridity. Parthasarathy explains such experiments as “ritually de-Anglicized English”:

In *Kanthapura* English is thick with the agglutinants of Kannada; in *The Serpent and the Rope* the Indo-European kinship between English and Sanskrit is creatively exploited; and in *The Cat and Shakespeare*, English is made to approximate the rhythm of Sanskrit chants. At the apex of this linguistic pyramid is... *The Chessmaster and his Moves*, wherein Rao has perfected his experiments with the English language spanning more than fifty years. (Parthasarathy in *Word as Mantra: The Art of Raja Rao*)

English is a part of India’s multilingual linguistic repertoire and his stylistic experiment appropriates the English language in Indian terms. As a result the Indian reality that emerges from his style of writing is authentic. Foremost among the problems that the Indian writer has to wrestle with are, firstly, the expression of modes of thinking specific to his culture and secondly, terminology. Rao overcomes the first problem by invariably drawing upon the speech flavours of Kannada and Sanskrit, idiomatic and syntactic equivalences, and the imitation of native-style repertoires. He overcomes the second problem of finding words for culturally bound objects by contextualizing them so that their meanings are self-evident. It is within the frame of Kannada that the tale is told. Rao’s use of English suggests the

appropriation of the structural characteristics of Kannada as the following example will show:

“High on the Ghats is it, high up the steep mountains that face the cool Arabian seas; up the Malabar Coast is it, up Mangalore and Puttur and many a centre of cardamom and coffee, rice and sugarcane.”

The literal translation of Kannada phrase and idiom into English is another factor which imparts an Indian flavor to the style. Certain names like “Waterfall Venkamma” and “Nose-scratching Nanjamma” are literal translations from an Indian speech style. Phrases and idioms like “You are a traitor to your salt-givers”, “As you like says the lick of your feet”; “The Don’t touch the Government Campaign”; “Nobody... will believe in such a crow-and-sparrow story”; “Your voice is not a sparrow voice in your village”; “You cannot put wooden tongues to men”; “Why? Go and ask the squirrel on the fence!”, “The leaf is laid”; “To the mire with you”; “The sinner may go to the ocean but the water will only touch his knees”; “A tiger-jawed person, she could speak like a man” and so on, show the incorporation of the essence of an Indian speech rhythm in English. As Parthasarathy says, “the English language does not have sufficiently deep roots in South Asia.” It is therefore important for the writer to find his individual style through which to express his worldview.

SAQ:

Does the adoption of local idiom strengthen the ‘Indian’ flavour? Or does it lead to distortions which estrange the Indian scene? (70 + 70 words)

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With Rao, a new paradigm for the use of the colonial language started unfolding itself where the earlier conceptual frameworks were being substituted with fresh initiatives. The credo of 1938 became the cornerstone

for what followed in the years to come. In different ways and with different emphases, one hears voices from different parts of the world regarding the use of English within a particular context such as Amos Tutuola (in *The Palmwine Drinkard*), Chinua Achebe (in *Things Fall Apart*) and Raja Rao's own contemporaries and successors in the Indian subcontinent such as Upamanyu Chatterjee, Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth and so on.

5.4.2 Village and Community Life

Kanthapura is a typical Indian village; its different aspects have been minutely described which imparts a realistic element to it. We are told of its location, of its crops, grinding poverty afflicting the masses, illiteracy and superstition. The setting of *Kanthapura* is a village in Karnataka on the Western Ghats of India, in an area rich in grains like rice, spices like cardamom, and other cash crops like coffee, sandalwood, sugarcane, and teak. The village has separate quarters for Brahmins, pariahs, potters, weavers and sudras. It is a well-populated village and like all traditional Indian societies religious sentiments predominate here. It has a temple devoted to the village deity Kenchamma, on the hill, and a temple devoted to goddess Kanthapurishwari on the main street promontory. In an Indian village like Kanthapura, relationships are interpersonal and social stratification is along caste and occupation lines. The coming of Gandhian ideology enables the novelist to penetrate into the rivalries and jealousies and rigidities of the caste system that are very religiously followed in such villages.

The villagers are represented in realistic colour. Their names are made descriptive in a typically rural way. There is Post Master Surya Narayana with his two-storied house; Patwari Nanjundiah who had even put glass panes to the windows; the thotti house of the pock-marked Siddha which has a big veranda, large roof and a granary; Waterfall Venkamma, who roared day and night; Zamindar Bhatta who has gone on adding peasants' land to his own domain; the young, idealistic, corner house Moorthy (who in due course of time shakes the village out of its complacency); and the nine-beamed house of Patel Range Gowda, the vigorous peasant chief of the village wedded to the soil from immemorial generations, a 'Tiger' to the authorities.

Although superstitious and ignorant, these people are deeply religious as seen in their faith in goddess Kenchamma, the village deity. There is a folk song which evokes in us images and attitudes to what Kenchamma means to the people of Kanthapura:

Kenchamma, Kenchamma

Goddess benign and bounteous

Mother of earth, blood of life

Harvest queen, rain crowned

Kenchamma, Kenchamma

Goddess benign and bounteous

Kenchamma forms the centre of their lives and makes their lives meaningful.

Marriage, birth, sickness, death, funeral—all are watched over by Kenchamma. For these poor villagers, the hills, rivers, fields and animals have a distinct presence, as evident in the following:

“Suddenly a shooting star sweeping across the sky between the house-roof and the byre-roof, and Ramakrishna says, ‘Some good soul has left the earth’”.

Here, a distinctive Indian sensibility, a peasant sensibility, to be precise, has been expressed in the English language.

5.4.3 Colonial Exploitation

A considerable part of the book is taken up with life on the coffee estate, the crudities and vulgarities of the Red-man; the humiliations of the poor and helpless natives and the violation of their women’s honour—all have been portrayed to the last detail of credibility.

The Skeffington Estate is described vividly and elaborately in the novel. No one knows when the estate was founded although many people of Kanthapura still remember its first owner who was called ‘Hunter-Sahib’, from the manner of wielding his whip on the labourers. The coolies who worked on the estate were recruited from the plains below the Western Ghats and a Foreman or ‘Maistri’ was appointed for the purpose. This

person would be sent from time to time to recruit coolies and would entice the latter to leave their hearth and home in lieu of reaping richer rewards from the work in the Coffee Estate. Once the simple and poverty-stricken people were brought to the plantation; all promises are forgotten and no wages would be given. The march of the coolies to the Coffee Estate is very graphically described which is evocative of their wretched condition: "...half-naked, starving, spitting, weeping, vomiting, coughing, shivering, squeaking, shouting, moaning, coolies with children clung to their mothers' breasts, the old men to their sons' arms, and bundles hung over shoulder and arm...winding through the twists of the Estate path". And their joy and excitement on finding employment is equally evocative, "a four-anna bit for a man hand and a two-anna bit for a woman hand—and on finding rice and water they cringed before the Sahib and fell on his feet in gratitude and that night they slept the sleep of princes".

The work on the estate is not just picking coffee-berries as promised. The labourers also need to dig pits and hew wood, and the women had to pluck weeds and to kill vermin. Working with the axe or spade would become increasingly tiresome under the scorching sun. He who rested for a moment would be severely whipped by the Maistri who would be forever watching them. The workers would also be sexually exploited; the Sahib would have any woman who tickled his fancy. If a woman refused, the husband or the father's wage would be cut or he would be given a whipping.

The arrival of Bade Khan, the policeman, further strengthened and encouraged the Sahib, because an officer of law was with him now. The majority of the coolies were Pariahs. But there were also a few Brahmins who could be suppressed so easily. Among them were two young Brahmin clerks, Gangadhar and Vasudev, with progressive and enlightened views. They took the Pariahs to Kanthapura to take part in the Gandhi-bhajan and invited Moorthy to come to the Estate to teach the ignorant coolies.

It is however to be observed that the villagers do not feel the pressure of any direct oppression or exploitation from the Government; it requires quite an effort on the part of Moorthy to convince them that spinning is the need of the hour. They need to be sensitized about the politics operating at the

larger arena. A striking contrast is therefore posited in the depiction of the Sceffington Coffee estate where the workers are oppressed as well as exploited in more ways than one.

SAQ:

How much prominence is given to colonial exploitation in the novel?
(80 words)

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5.4.4 Story-Telling

The mode of story-telling used in the novel also imparts an Indian flavour to the mode of narration. Every Indian perhaps has the experience of listening to stories told by grandparents as children. “Indians have been great story-tellers since times immemorial. Indian grandmothers and grandfathers, sitting cozily by the fire on long winter evenings, have narrated interminable tales to their grandchildren. . . with the passing of time, outlines lose their sharpness and get blurred, and so fact and fancy, memory and imagination, jostle each other in wild profusion”.(Srinivas Iyengar) *Kanthapura* is just such a tale.

The narrator of the story of *Kanthapura* is an old woman from “Veda Sastri’s family”, a widow with neither a daughter nor a granddaughter. She is a familiar grandmotherly figure, with no formal education, but well-versed in the myths, legends, the social and ritualistic practices of her community, also possessing a flair for story-telling. She recreates the events and the speech of the characters involved in them with aptness in her story telling. Achakka, as she is called in the novel, tells the story of *Kanthapura* for the benefit of a new comer, years after the events narrated in the novel had taken place. From her home in some distant village in Mysore, she remembers wistfully the events of those stirring days, and as the story proceeds, much that is purely fictional and imaginary mingles with the factual.

Memories grow dim with the passing of time, much is forgotten, and much else is unconsciously modified and glorified. The petty and the trivial acquire new dimensions and viewed in retrospect, events acquire a significance which they did not possess at the time. This is what actually happens as the grandmother Achakka proceeds with her narration.

5.4.5 Sthalapurana and The Culture of Mythology

In his structural design of the text, Rao looks back to the tradition of 'Sthalapurana'. Braj B. Kachru in his essay "Raja Rao: Madhyama and Mantra" says, "Rao however recognizes that it is India's Puranas and epics that provide structural frameworks to him: the conventions of *Kadambari* (7th century CE) by Bana and *Uttararamacharita* (7th century CE) by Bhavabhuti". In the 'foreword', Raja Rao tells us: "There is no village in India that has not a rich sthala-purana, or legendary history, of its own. . . .one such story from the contemporary annals of my village I have tried to tell"

In *Kanthapura*, Rao has not only given us a legendary history of the place, he has also tried to create a *Sthalapurana* for the region. This has been done by mythicising the heroism of the local hearts and heads in the cause of their motherhood. As Northrop Frye points out, "in a myth some of the chief characters are gods, other beings larger in power than humanity," so also is the case with the novel. Moorthy is presented as a figure much above the common run of men. A dedicated, selfless soul, he is idealized to the extent of being regarded as a local Mahatma. And, of course, there is the real Mahatma also, always in the background though nowhere physically present. The village women think of him as the Sahyadri Mountain big and blue, and Moorthy as the small mountain. Range Gowda, the village headman, describes Moorthy thus:

"He is our Gandhi. The state of Mysore has a Maharaja but that Maharaja has another Maharaja who is in London, and that one has another one in heaven, and so everybody has his own Mahatma, and this Moorthy who has been caught in our knees playing as a child is now grown up and great, and he has wisdom in him and he will be our Mahatma".

Just as there is the local goddess Kenchamma who protects the village Kanthapura and a greater god who protects all, Moorthy is the local *avatar* while Gandhi is the greater deity. The Harikatha man raises Gandhi to the level of a god by identifying his activities with one particular feat of Krishna, though it does not always mean fidelity to facts:

“You remember how Krishna when he was a babe of four had begun to fight against the demons and had killed the serpent Kali. So too our Mohandas began to fight against the enemies of the country...Men followed him, as they did Krishna, the flute player; and so he goes from village to village, to slay the serpent of the foreign rule”

Whereas ‘Kaliya-daman’ here offers a parallel to the destruction of foreign rule, later on the battle between Rama and Ravana offers a similar mythical analogy. Although none of these analogies can be followed to find an exact point of correspondence between the past and the present, they do illuminate to some extent, the historical situation of the thirties. For the grandmother in Kanthapura, ‘Swaraj’ is Sita, ‘Mahatma’ is Rama, and ‘Jawaharlal’ is brother Bharata:

“He will bring us Swaraj, the Mahatma. And we shall be all happy. And Rama will come back from exile and Sita will be with him, for Ravana will be slain and Sita freed...and brother Bharata will go to meet them with the worshipped sandal of the master on his head. And as they enter Ayodhya, there will be a rain of flowers”.

Stop to Consider:

There is also an account of a number of local rituals. “There is the ritual of yoking the bulls to the plough under the Rohini Star or of the traditional belief that at the beginning of Kartik, gods can be seen passing by, “blue gods and quiet gods and bright-eyed gods” or to the different modes of appeasing the goddess Kenchamma. All these make up the fabric of living of which the narrator is a part. Thus the reference to the rituals of ploughing, of worship and sacrifice, becomes a means of establishing the atmosphere in which the villagers live, as well as a

device for concretizing the point of view, i.e., delineation of the character of the sophisticated narrator who can assimilate all facts into a mythical structure, for whom no fact become really significant unless it can be identified as a part of myth”.

SAQ:

1. What role do the women characters play in Kanthapura? Discuss their significance in the context of the prevailing political scenario. (40+60 words)

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2. Which Indian myth is the most appealing for the villagers in Kanthapura? (50 words)

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5.4.6 Social Divisions and National Unity

Caste hierarchy and the rigidities associated with it is a distinctive feature in the social life of *Kanthapura*. The village is divided into different sections on the basis of caste and members of the lower strata are prohibited from any kind of interaction with the members of the superior caste. However, the influence of Gandhian ideology brings about significant changes as well as discord in the village.

Stop to Consider:

“Gandhi endeavoured to find a solution to the caste system by interpreting the traditional distinction of castes in a less restricted manner that allowed him to be free of addressing it in terms of ritual purity and pollution. His understanding of the *shastras* or the scriptures had made him realize that no one varna or caste was superior to another in terms

of birth. In terms of office, however, a brahmin would be superior to others if he was true to his dharma of protecting the weak against the strong, but not if he were to prey upon the other castes. Gandhi's reasoning did not insist upon the coexistence of castes in terms of common celebrations or communal eating that Rao, in his enthusiasm, permits in his vision of a united India" (Rumina Sethi, *Myths of the Nation*, p 85).

The Gandhian ideals of equality encounter tremendous resistance owing to the caste differentiations and the routine system within which the different castes of the village operate. Moorthy's initiation of Gandhi's programme of spinning yarn creates disorder and disturbance in a traditional society of Brahmins. One of them called Nanjamma vehemently protests against this, for it is demeaning for a Brahmin to indulge in such manual labour especially when there are enough weavers in the village. As for the pariahs, the feeling of being upwardly mobile through close contact with a Brahmin, as well as the promise of economic self-sufficiency they have always been denied owing to their status, are clearly motivating opportunities.

Bhatta is disgusted with this 'Gandhi vagabondage' and the intermingling of Brahmins and pariahs for which he holds Gandhi responsible: 'he is a Vaishya and he may do what he likes. That does not pollute me. But, Rama-Rama, really if we have to hang the sacred thread over the shoulders of every pariah...it's impossible, impossible...you should speak to your people and organize a brahmin party. Otherwise Brahminism is as good as kitchen ashes...' (*Kanthapura* 44).

Even Moorthy has a genuine dread of mixing with the pariahs in the village, in spite of being the first Gandhian there. He cannot do away with the fears, beliefs and superstitions related with his superior caste. Therefore we find him trembling and indecisive when Lingamma, a pariah invites him to her hut. In this climactic moment we are presented with Moorthy's dilemma as he is unable to choose between his loyalties: the message of Gandhi which made him pledge for a national cause, or, the brahminical purity, the corruption of which can pollute his progeny generation. Both Moorthy and

Rangamma, Gandhian activists of the village, cannot really come to terms with such ethics of social reform. Moorthy is hesitant to enter Rangamma's house after the visit at the pariah quarters and Rangamma too is reluctant to allow him enter his hut.

5.4.7 Nationalism and The Question of A New Society

Most of the creative writings which depict India's freedom movement have taken into account the ideals and achievements of Gandhi, who dominated the Indian political scene from 1916 till his death in 1948. For thousands of illiterate peasants, Gandhi came to stand for a religious avatar or incarnation of a god and even many of the city-dwellers looked upon him as a prophet as well as a saviour.

In *Kanthapura*, we have more than a glimpse of the Freedom Movement in India under the leadership of Gandhi. We see how the name of Gandhi acts like a charm in every nook and corner of the country and how the people in remote and far-away places like Kanthapura observe a fast in order to show their solidarity with Mahatma Gandhi as he sets out on his historic Dandi March. Moorthy is a typical example of the thousands of young men who were fired with patriotic zeal by Gandhi's inspiration and who, under his programme, left schools, colleges and universities or resigned from their jobs. Rangamma and Ratna depict how the spirit of nationalism fired the consciousness of the women of the country. Their participation in the movement shows how women took an active interest in politics at the time. Rachanna and Range Gowda show how the people of the lower castes picked up courage, and accepted the voluntary restraint of non-violence. Peasants refused to pay revenue and other taxes to the Government, with the result that many were evicted from their lands and lost all means of earning a livelihood. When Moorthy is arrested his place is taken by Ratna, and so the struggle continues. There were 'dharnas', 'picketings' and 'Satyagrahas'; people, including children and women were beaten up but their spirit could not be crushed. Shouts of *Gandhiji ki jai* and *Inquilab Zindabad* resounded in the air and fostered a spirit of patriotic and nationalistic zeal among the people.

Gandhi does not make a physical appearance in the novel, but he is constantly present in the background and at every juncture, there are references to important events of the day such as the historic ‘Dandi March’ and the breaking of the ‘Salt Law’. Hence, for a proper understanding of the novel, it is essential to form a clear idea of the important political and social events connected with the Indian freedom struggle. There were several strands in the Gandhian Movement—the political, the religious, and the social (including the economic)—and the three have been inextricably woven into the story of regeneration of Kanthapura as a result of the freedom struggle. It is not merely a novel that talks about the political condition of its times, but a novel concerned as much with the social, religious and economic transformation of the people. The Gandhian movement was based on ‘Satyagraha’, firmness in truth. Gandhi added an ethical dimension to what was basically a social and political movement. Gandhi believed that the strength of his *Satyagraha* alone would result in freeing India and establish a system of pre-capitalist, agrarian village community. The Gandhian influence is obvious: moral revolution takes precedence over social and political revolutions. It is significant that Moorthy enters the untouchable’s house in his own village first before his imprisonment as a revolutionary.

Stop to Consider:

Rumina Sethi in her book *Myths of the Nation* draws attention to the actual visits of Gandhi to Karnataka and the effects of his appeals:

“Gandhi first visited Karnataka in 1921 with a view to motivating people into joining the non-cooperation movement. His appeal to boycott schools, colleges and government offices was taken up enthusiastically. So was the adoption of khadi(home spun), the abolition of untouchability, and the prohibition of liquor. During another visit in 1927, he said: ‘more is expected of those who give much. I have found so much good in this State that I almost fancy that if you and the Maharaja together will it, you can make the state *Ramrajya*’.

It is conceivable that Gandhi’s presence in Karnataka motivated the youth of its cities and villages alike, and, therefore, Moorthy’s encounter with the Mahatma, though imaginary, has a context”.

For the villagers, the politics of the country is inseparable from Gandhi, and Gandhi inseparable from divinity: ‘Rama, Krishna, Sankara and the Mahatma’ are always mentioned in the same refrain. This speaks of Gandhi’s birth as a divine visitation on earth to destroy sin and sinners alike in order to re-establish the hold of religion. The political struggle is, thereby, largely ritualized, and nationalism filters down into the village through religion.

Check Your Progress:

1. Comment on the use of mythology to reinforce Indianness in the novel. Does Raja Rao also ‘mythologise’ Gandhism? If so what is the view of Gandhism that prevails?
2. Comment on the effectiveness of Raja Rao’s linguistic strategy. Does it help to loosen the novelistic structure?
3. Do you think *Kanthapura* is a novel of India’s political and social awakening? Discuss.

5.5 Narrative Technique

The narrative technique in *Kanthapura* is typically Indian. The Indian grandmother is the most ancient and most typical of story-tellers, and the narrator in the novel, Achakka, is one such grandmother, narrating the story for the benefit of a new-comer, years later: “Achakka is more articulate than her predecessors, indeed, her garrulity is ear-splitting, if taken in large doses; her narrative style is the novel’s crowning charm and also the greatest threat to its success. Those familiar with the vernacular and the circumlocution of Indian speech habits will be delighted with Achakka’s narrative style and its gossipy digressions”. The substance in the novel is made up of the stream of her memory, in which many events and characters have been blurred by the passage of time, and many others have been heightened by her imagination. Her personality colours the whole Non- Cooperation Movement, the brave resistance of the people, and their consequent suffering. Rao tells us in the classic ‘Preface’ to the novel that “the telling has not been easy”. This is because one has to capture the tempo of Indian life in a

foreign language. As the novelist says, “We, in India, think quickly, we talk quickly and when we move we move quickly...and our paths are interminable. The *Mahabharata* has 214,778 verses and the *Ramayana* 48,000. Puranas there are endless and innumerable. We have neither punctuation nor the treacherous ‘ats’ and ‘ons’ to bother us—we tell one interminable tale. Episode follows episode, and when our thoughts stop our breath stops, and we move on to another thought. This was and still is the ordinary style of our story-telling” (Preface). It is this swiftness of movement which an Indian novelist must capture, he must tell a tale in which episode follows episode in an endless succession. Seen from this perspective, Achakka’s inordinately long, meandering sentences, use of blanks, digressions and expressions like ‘this and that’, ‘here and there’, are very significant and complement Rao’s credo. In the very opening sentences, as Mulk Raj Anand points out, “the reader can almost hear grandma talking. Episode follows episode, and each one is integral to the story. The detailed accounts of Sankar, Rangamma and Bhatta are revealing, essential for the narrative. It is a long interminable tale, and its essentially *Indianness* is seen in its long interminable sentences, long paragraphs, and the absence of division into chapters”.

The choice of such a narrator serves several purposes; it enables Raja Rao to mingle fact and myth in an effective manner. For the old woman, ‘Jawaharlal’ is Bharata to the Mahatma who, she believes will slay ‘Ravana’ (the British) so that ‘Sita’ (India) might be freed. For her Gandhi has attained the status of God, and Moorthy is regarded as his avatar in Kanthapura. Achakka’s imagination pictures the Mahatma as large as blue like the Sahyadri mountains, while Moorthy is seen as the small mountain. To her the Satyagraha becomes a religious ceremony to which she devotes her sacred ardour.

Another advantage derived by the choice of this narrator is that the language used by her is of an elemental quality. Her reaction to things is vivid and direct, not literary and second-hand. She talks of the “pumpkin moon”; “the stream of milk splashed on a moonlit night”; “young boys bright as banana trunks”; all are images taken from day to day phenomena which

would come naturally to a village woman. The narrator also enables Raja Rao to achieve his professed aim of reproducing the rhythm of Indian speech in English, as well as of coming closest to the oral tradition of story telling.

Stop to Consider:

Not only does Achakka narrate, she also comments and her comments are balanced and shrewd. Here are a few instances of her racy comments:

1. “To tell you the truth, Bhatta began all this after his last visit to the city.”
2. “Rangamma did not understand all this, neither, to tell you the truth, did any of us.”
3. “Bhatta left us after harvest on a pilgrimage to Kashi. I tell you, he was not a bad man, was Bhatta”

Achakka’s manner of telling the tale is, according to Srinivas Iyengar, “characteristically Indian, feminine with a spontaneity that is coupled with swiftness, raciness suffused with native vigour, and exciting with a rich sense of drama shot through and through with humour and lyricism, . . . the telling of the story gives the whole affair with an *ithihastic*— at least a *puranic*-dignity. The narrative is hardly very straightforward: there are involutions and digressions, there are meaningful backward glances, there are rhythmic chains of proper names (Rachanna and Chandranna and Madanna; Satamma and Rangamma and Puttamma and Seethamma), there are hypnotic repetitions and refrains, and there are also sheer poetic iridescences. A village, a picturesque region, an epoch of social and political change, a whole complex of character and motive, reason and superstition, idealism and cold calculation, all spring up before our eyes demanding recognition and acceptance; it is almost a *tour de force*. Although Raja Rao has put the story into the mouth of a grandmother— although the feminine touches and mannerisms, the seemingly effortless rotation of the tongue, the meandering sentences and massive paragraphs are characteristic of the narrator—there

is nevertheless consummate art in all this riot of artlessness, there is careful selection behind the apparent abundant detail”.

5.6 Images and Myths

Raja Rao’s use of imagery is functional and creative. His use of images is functional and not merely decorative. His similes and metaphors are drawn from the common, everyday objects and phenomena, hence they serve to clarify and elucidate. Meenakshi Mukherjee opines that, “Images and metaphors are his natural mode of expression, and very little influence of English language is discernible. His earlier work was full of fresh perception and a first hand response to life. His language in the first two books is so richly strewn with similes that any passage quoted at random will serve to illustrate this element of his style”. Consider, for example, the following from *Kanthapura*:

- 1) “...and when Moorthappa comes lets the rice be fine as filigree and the mangoes yellow as gold, and we shall go out, horn and trumpet gong before us and break coconuts at his feet”. The imagery here touches upon objects and experience (‘rice be fine as filigree’; ‘mangoes yellow as gold’ and breaking of ‘coconuts’ at someone’s feet) that are distinctively Indian and faithfully conveys an Indian sensibility.
- 2) Postman Subbayya, who had no fire in his stomach, and was red with red and blue with blue.
- 3) You are a Bhatta, and your voice is not a sparrow voice in your village and you should speak to your people and organize a Brahmin party. Otherwise Brahminism is as good as kitchen ashes...
- 4) ...and mother and wife and widow godmother went up to their lighted lizard-clucking homes.

These expressions convey vivid images of a typically Indian context than could have been possible with English expressions. In the fourth instance, the words “lighted lizard-clucking homes” convey an image of security

associated with the interior of a house after lighting time which is essential to these women (mother and wife and widow godmother), who have spent a long and uncertain day of struggle, picketing toddy-booths.

Another important aspect of Raja Rao's art in *Kanthapura* is his use of myths. Because of the fact that even the most illiterate Indian is acquainted with mythological stories, myths play a significant part in Indian life. It is common for Indian preachers to give a mythological or spiritual significance to physical phenomena. Indians at every level are also extremely well-acquainted with the stories in *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharatha*. It is quite usual to compare two loving brothers, or friends, to Rama and Lakshmana, and the narrator does that in the case of her Seenu and Moorthy. In the myth that Jayaramachar invents about the divine birth of Gandhiji, he is held to be an incarnation of Siva, but Achakka compares him with Rama, and India with Sita. Gandhi's going to England to participate in the Round Table Conference is compared to Rama's exile, and the Indians who participate in the process of Government are compared to Bharata who worshipped Rama's sandals in his absence. The foreign rulers are compared to Ravana, and Gandhi is to kill this demon, and bring back enslaved Sita, i.e. India who is under the domination of foreign rulers, back with him after liberating her. His return is expected to be like the triumphant return of Rama to Ayodhya when there was a shower of flowers from the sky. The followers of Gandhi are like Hanuman, and they are equally ready to carry out his instructions at any time. Similarly, the Satyagrahi in prison is the divine Krishna himself in Kansa's prison.

5.7 Summing Up

The purpose of this unit was to discuss those aspects which are crucial to have a critical approach towards the different nuances of the narrative. By now, you should have formed some idea of the themes and techniques that have gone into the making of this novel. It is expected that the discussions contained in this unit will further motivate you delve into the novel and formulate your own ideas on the text.

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Unit- 6

Gita Hariharan: An Introduction

Unit Structure:

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6.1 Objectives

In this unit, you will be introduced to the distinguished Indian writer, editor, and public intellectual Gita Hariharan (b. 1954). Here you will get an overview of Hariharan's life, her major literary contributions, and the socio-political concerns that shape her writing.

After completing this unit, learners will be able to:

- *understand* the literary significance of Gita Hariharan in contemporary Indian English writing.
- *trace* her life, career, and the socio-political influences shaping her work.
- *analyze* the major themes in her novels and essays, including feminism, power, memory, and identity.
- *recognize* Hariharan's contribution to postcolonial discourse and cultural criticism in India.
- *engage* critically with selected writings by Hariharan using literary and socio-political frameworks.

6.2 Introduction

Gita Hariharan is a celebrated figure in Indian English literature, known for her rich and thought-provoking fiction as well as her politically engaged essays. A writer, editor, and activist, Hariharan has consistently explored the intersections of gender, power, memory, and cultural identity in her work. Her writing transcends the personal and the political, weaving narrative with critique, myth with modernity, and the ordinary with the subversive.

Born in Coimbatore in 1954 and raised in Bombay and Manila, Hariharan's cultural and intellectual formation took place amidst a range of global and local influences. After completing her education in English literature, she began her career in publishing and editing before transitioning to full-time writing. Her debut novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1992) won the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Best First Book (Eurasia), marking the arrival of a bold new voice in Indian English fiction. Since then, she has published several novels, short story collections, and essays, each of which is deeply engaged with contemporary issues—from the constraints of tradition to the operations of state power and cultural nationalism.

In this unit, we will explore Gita Hariharan's life and work in three main sections. The first will provide an overview of her biographical and professional background. The second will examine her major literary works, focusing on recurring themes and narrative techniques. The third section will discuss her engagement with political issues, especially her contributions as a public intellectual and cultural critic.

6.3 Life, Career, and Literary Beginnings

6.3.1 Early Life and Education

Gita Hariharan was born in 1954 in Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, into a middle-class Tamil Brahmin family. She spent her formative years in two very different urban landscapes—Bombay (now Mumbai) and Manila in the Philippines—experiences that exposed her to multiple cultures, languages, and literary traditions. This cosmopolitan upbringing helped her cultivate an early appreciation for diversity and storytelling in its many forms. From a

young age, she encountered not just Indian epics and folktales, but also Western classics and popular fiction. These wide-ranging cultural inputs would later shape the narrative texture of her literary works.

Hariharan pursued her undergraduate degree in English Literature at the University of Bombay, where she was introduced to both British literary canons and postcolonial critiques. She then travelled to the United States to earn her Master's degree in Communications from Fairfield University, Connecticut. This academic training, especially in literature and media, laid the foundation for her later preoccupations with form, voice, and power in storytelling. It also helped her bridge the realms of creative writing, media criticism, and cultural theory.

6.3.2 Editorial Work and First Forays into Fiction

Before becoming a full-time writer, Hariharan worked extensively in the fields of editing and broadcasting. She served as an editor with Orient Longman (now Orient BlackSwan), one of India's major academic publishers, and later worked with All India Radio. Her engagement with publishing not only sharpened her editorial sensibility but also deepened her understanding of how narratives—whether academic or creative—are constructed, framed, and disseminated. In many interviews, Hariharan has spoken about how these roles helped her understand the politics of knowledge production and the hierarchies embedded in literary and cultural institutions.

Her literary debut came in 1992 with *The Thousand Faces of Night*, a novel that interweaves classical Indian myths with the everyday experiences of modern Indian women. The book won the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Best First Book (Eurasia), and was widely celebrated for its lyrical style, feminist themes, and mythopoetic structure. With this novel, Hariharan established herself as a major voice in Indian English fiction—one that could blend the mythical and the contemporary, the personal and the political.

Hariharan has often emphasized the importance of oral traditions, family stories, and the act of listening as central to her growth as a writer. Her

literary influences include authors as diverse as Ismat Chughtai, Virginia Woolf, Mahasweta Devi, and Toni Morrison. She is particularly drawn to writers who explore the lives of women, the weight of memory, and the limits of justice. However, she has always insisted that her fiction is not merely an artistic exercise but a form of political engagement—an attempt to ask difficult questions and resist ready-made answers.

6.4 Major Literary Works and Thematic Concerns

6.4.1 *The Thousand Faces of Night* and Feminist Retellings

Gita Hariharan's debut novel, *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1992), marks a significant intervention in Indian English literature, particularly in the domain of feminist writing. The novel is not only a literary narrative but also a subtle critique of the patriarchal structures deeply rooted in Indian society. It blends classical mythology with contemporary experience, drawing upon oral traditions, folktales, and epics to expose the complex realities of women's lives across generations. This interweaving of myth and memory forms a distinctive narrative method that allows Hariharan to question dominant cultural narratives and provide space for alternative perspectives—particularly those of women.

Set in contemporary South India, the novel follows the lives of three women—Devi, her mother Sita, and the family servant Mayamma—each representing a different dimension of womanhood and resistance. The central protagonist, Devi, returns from the United States after completing her studies and finds herself disoriented in the traditional, rigidly patriarchal domestic world she is expected to re-enter. Through Devi's journey of introspection and rebellion, the novel interrogates the tension between Western education and traditional Indian expectations for women, exposing the oppressive expectations surrounding marriage, motherhood, and familial duty.

A distinctive feature of the novel is its use of mythology as a feminist tool. Devi is raised on stories told by her grandmother—stories from the *Mahabharata* and other ancient sources—which are traditionally meant to inculcate obedience and virtue in women. However, Hariharan reclaims

and reinterprets these tales, highlighting the latent violence and sacrifice embedded within them. The stories of women like Gandhari, Amba, and Ganga are not just literary ornaments but serve as critical counterpoints to the lived experiences of the characters in the novel. For instance, Gandhari's blindfold becomes a symbol not of devotion but of self-effacement. Amba's rebirth as Shikhandi—seeking revenge on Bhishma—becomes a metaphor for suppressed anger and agency reclaimed. In this way, myth is not rejected but re-visioned; it is used to frame women's suffering, resistance, and desire for transformation.

The protagonist Devi is caught between the mythical ideals of womanhood and the reality of gendered oppression. Her failed marriage to Mahesh—a man who sees her only as a wife, not as a person—forces her to question the scripts handed down to her by society. Her mother, Sita, is a widow who has internalised the ideals of silence and sacrifice. She embodies the model of traditional womanhood who finds meaning in duty and repression. In contrast, Mayamma, the servant, represents the lower-caste woman who endures both gender and class-based violence. Her life, filled with physical abuse and social invisibility, is narrated with empathy and nuance. Through these three characters, Hariharan presents a spectrum of women's experiences and suggests that while suffering may be common, responses to it—submission, endurance, or rebellion—vary.

The novel also critiques the institution of marriage and the roles assigned to women within it. Devi's marriage is not abusive, but emotionally barren—a form of passive erasure. Sita's widowhood is marked by discipline and denial, and Mayamma's marriage is a brutal saga of poverty and violence. These depictions dismantle the romanticised notion of the Indian home as a safe, nurturing space for women. Instead, the home becomes a site of silence, subjugation, and generational trauma.

In terms of narrative style, *The Thousand Faces of Night* is notable for its lyrical prose, nonlinear structure, and dream-like quality. Hariharan avoids conventional plot development, choosing instead to focus on moments, memories, and fragments that reveal the psychological and emotional states of her characters. The interspersing of myths and dreams within the narrative

not only enriches the text but also reflects the blurring of past and present, real and imagined, personal and collective. This style mirrors the fragmented lives of the women in the novel, whose stories are often interrupted, unfinished, or unheard.

Moreover, Hariharan's novel challenges the idea of a single, unified female identity. Her characters are not heroic in the traditional sense, nor are they victims without agency. They are complex individuals negotiating their own paths within oppressive systems. The novel resists closure and definitive resolution—Devi leaves her husband, but her future remains uncertain. This open ending reinforces the novel's commitment to portraying life as it is, not as it ought to be.

In conclusion, *The Thousand Faces of Night* is a powerful example of feminist revisionism in Indian literature. By reclaiming myth, centring women's voices, and exposing the contradictions of tradition, Hariharan creates a work that is both literary and political. The novel invites readers to question cultural narratives and to imagine new forms of identity, agency, and resistance for women in a rapidly changing society.

6.4.2 *The Ghosts of Vasu Master, When Dreams Travel, and In Times of Siege*

a) *The Ghosts of Vasu Master*

Published in 1994, *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* is Gita Hariharan's second novel and marks a departure from the myth-infused narrative of her debut. Set in a fictional South Indian town, the novel follows the retired schoolteacher Vasu Master as he attempts to teach a silent boy named Mani. The story unfolds not through dramatic events, but through the meditative reflections and evolving inner life of the protagonist. Hariharan uses Vasu Master's attempts at reaching Mani to explore deeper philosophical questions about learning, language, silence, healing, and the human need for connection.

The novel resists conventional linear plot development and instead employs a fragmentary, introspective structure. Vasu Master narrates his thoughts in

a series of journal-like entries, interwoven with anecdotes, folk tales, philosophical musings, and references to classical literature. Through these entries, Hariharan constructs a layered character study that also functions as a reflection on pedagogy and ethical responsibility. Teaching becomes a metaphor not only for knowledge transmission but for mutual transformation. In attempting to “teach” Mani, Vasu Master confronts the ghosts of his own past—his former failures as a teacher, a husband, and a father—and is ultimately compelled to rethink what it means to understand another person.

The novel questions the traditional teacher-student hierarchy by placing the teacher in a position of vulnerability and unknowing. Vasu Master’s journey is not toward mastery, but toward humility and ethical attentiveness. The text subtly critiques institutional forms of education that rely on discipline, rigidity, and control, proposing instead a more humane, patient, and open-ended engagement with the learner. Hariharan also uses silence—both literal and symbolic—as a powerful thematic device. Mani’s muteness is not simply a problem to be solved but a presence that demands listening, interpretation, and care.

Stylistically, *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* is rich in metaphor and intertextuality. Hariharan incorporates traditional Indian storytelling techniques, including parables and animal fables, to break up the narrative and offer philosophical insight. These interruptions echo the oral tradition and challenge Western linear forms of narrative coherence. The narrative becomes a mosaic of voices, all converging on the central concern: how to heal, how to teach, and how to live ethically in a world shaped by loss and misunderstanding.

The novel presents teaching and storytelling as acts of imagination and ethical engagement. Through the gentle and introspective figure of Vasu Master, Hariharan articulates a vision of education not as the transfer of fixed knowledge, but as a collaborative, exploratory, and redemptive process. *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* thus stands out not just as a literary text, but as a philosophical inquiry into the ethics of listening, the complexity of communication, and the redemptive power of shared stories.

b) *When Dreams Travel*

Gita Hariharan's *When Dreams Travel* (1999) is a bold and imaginative retelling of the *Arabian Nights*, particularly the frame story of Shahrazad. Through this novel, Hariharan engages in a feminist rewriting of the well-known tales, bringing to light the gendered politics of storytelling, power, and desire. The narrative interrogates not just the original *Arabian Nights*, but also the ways in which women's voices have historically been controlled, silenced, or appropriated. This novel marks Hariharan's entry into postmodern territory, blending fantasy, metafiction, myth, and realism in a richly layered narrative.

The story is framed around Shahrazad and her sister Dunyazad, now reimagined as "Shahrzad" and "Dunyazad." Hariharan imagines what might have happened after the 1001 nights end. What becomes of the women once the storytelling is done? In Hariharan's version, Dunyazad emerges as the central narrator who refuses to fade into obscurity. In fact, the novel begins with her death—and yet, through her voice, memory, and imagination, she returns to tell her version of the tale. This narrative strategy allows Hariharan to blur the boundaries between life and death, truth and fiction, voice and silence.

One of the key innovations of *When Dreams Travel* lies in its self-conscious structure. The novel shifts between multiple timelines and narrative voices, with the boundaries between past and present, reality and imagination, constantly dissolving. Shahrzad is not merely a historical figure but a symbol—of the female storyteller, the strategist, the survivor. The novel becomes a meditation on the act of storytelling itself: who gets to tell stories, and what power does storytelling hold in patriarchal structures?

Hariharan also subverts the image of the Sultan, the tyrannical listener in the original tales. In her version, the male characters are no longer in control of the narrative. Instead, the focus shifts to women's interior lives, their friendships, their dreams, and their traumas. Dunyazad's journey from silence to speech becomes symbolic of women reclaiming narrative agency. She not only remembers and revisits the tales of her sister but also adds her own voice—altering, interrupting, and reimagining them. This act of retelling is inherently political.

The novel further explores the themes of memory, exile, and the female body. There are dream sequences, imagined cities, alternate realities—all of which serve to disorient the reader and challenge linear modes of storytelling. The structure mimics the fragmented, layered nature of memory itself. By using the fantastical and the surreal, Hariharan exposes the violence hidden beneath seemingly magical tales, and how such violence—especially against women—is normalized or romanticized in traditional narratives.

Stylistically, *When Dreams Travel* is lush and poetic, with Hariharan's prose marked by sensual imagery, sharp irony, and philosophical undertones. The novel resists easy classification—it is part fable, part feminist manifesto, part political allegory. Yet, at its core, it remains committed to the emancipatory potential of stories.

In reimagining *Arabian Nights* from the margins, Hariharan critiques both historical and contemporary forms of patriarchy. *When Dreams Travel* stands as a powerful statement on the necessity of reclaiming narrative spaces for women, and on the enduring power of dreams, memory, and dissent in crafting more just and imaginative worlds.

c) *In Times of Siege*

Published in 2003, *In Times of Siege* is one of Gita Hariharan's most politically charged novels. Departing from her earlier focus on myth and narrative form, this novel addresses contemporary Indian politics directly, particularly the rise of right-wing Hindu nationalism, communal violence, and the state's encroachment on academic and intellectual freedoms. The novel is deeply rooted in the socio-political context of post-Gujarat 2002, a period marked by state-sponsored communal riots and a climate of fear and ideological policing. Through this work, Hariharan aligns fiction with resistance, portraying literature as a space of ethical and political engagement.

The protagonist, Shiv Murthy, is a mild-mannered, middle-aged history professor at an open university in Delhi. His life is unremarkable—routine, solitary, and apolitical—until he assigns a reading on a 12th-century Bhakti saint, Basava, that highlights the poet-saint's rejection of caste, orthodoxy, and religious fundamentalism. This academic decision unexpectedly draws

the ire of a radical Hindu nationalist group, the “National Organisation,” which accuses Murthy of offending religious sentiments and distorting national history. What follows is a quiet but tense narrative of how an ordinary individual is drawn into a battle over truth, power, and memory.

The novel is not only about the persecution of an academic but also about the transformation of a passive citizen into someone politically awakened. Initially hesitant and fearful, Shiv gradually begins to understand the implications of silence and complicity. Through the support of his student Meena, a younger and more politically conscious character, he is pushed to re-evaluate his responsibilities as an intellectual and as a citizen in a democracy under siege. The novel thus becomes a bildungsroman of political awakening, where the classroom becomes a battleground and the act of teaching a form of resistance.

Hariharan’s choice of Basava as a historical figure is significant. A 12th-century reformer-poet from Karnataka, Basava challenged Brahmanical orthodoxy and promoted a radical vision of equality and justice. His poetry, with its anti-caste and anti-ritualistic ethos, serves as a counterpoint to the communal narratives being imposed in contemporary India. By juxtaposing Basava’s medieval radicalism with the present-day political crisis, Hariharan highlights the continuity of resistance in Indian intellectual traditions.

In Times of Siege critiques not only the external threats to freedom—censorship, surveillance, intimidation—but also the internalised forms of fear and compliance that prevent individuals from speaking out. Hariharan exposes the institutional complicity of universities and the bureaucracy, the silencing of dissent, and the manipulation of history for ideological ends. The novel calls for a reclaiming of public discourse and for courage in defending democratic values, especially by those in positions of knowledge production.

Stylistically, the novel is more restrained than Hariharan’s earlier works, marked by clear, deliberate prose that mirrors the protagonist’s inner conflict. The narrative unfolds over a compressed timeline, heightening the sense of urgency and tension. Unlike her mythic reimaginings, here Hariharan chooses realism and restraint to reflect the gravity of the times.

In Times of Siege is both a literary and political statement. It underscores the dangers of historical revisionism, the erosion of secular values, and the responsibilities of intellectuals in authoritarian times. Through Shiv Murthy's hesitant but significant moral journey, Hariharan urges readers to recognize that neutrality is not an option in the face of injustice—and that even the most unassuming individuals can become agents of resistance when conscience calls.

6.5 Gita Hariharan as Public Intellectual and Cultural Critic

Gita Hariharan is not only a celebrated novelist and storyteller but also one of India's most influential public intellectuals and cultural critics. Over the last three decades, her work has moved beyond the boundaries of fiction into the wider arenas of civil rights, secularism, democracy, gender justice, and freedom of expression. Her role as a public thinker is defined not simply by her writings, but by her activism, editorial work, legal advocacy, and sustained interventions in public discourse. In this section, we explore Hariharan's contributions as a writer deeply engaged with the moral and political questions of our times.

Hariharan's transformation into a public intellectual began in earnest with her legal battle in the mid-1990s, when she challenged India's guardianship laws in court. Under the Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act of 1956, the natural guardian of a child was designated as the father, with the mother's rights considered secondary. When Hariharan was denied the right to be named guardian of her son for official purposes, she filed a case in the Supreme Court of India. In 1999, the court ruled in her favour, declaring that either parent could be a natural guardian. This landmark case was not just a personal victory but a significant moment in the legal recognition of gender equality in India. It marked the beginning of Hariharan's deeper engagement with questions of rights, justice, and constitutional secularism.

As a public intellectual, Hariharan has persistently spoken out against the growing authoritarianism, communalism, and cultural intolerance in Indian society. She has contributed essays to leading national and international publications, including *The Hindu*, *Outlook*, *The Wire*, *Frontline*, and *The*

New York Times, where she analyzes the erosion of democratic values, the rise of majoritarianism, and the suppression of dissent. Her tone is usually reflective yet firm, and her arguments are always grounded in constitutional values and the idea of India as a pluralistic, secular democracy.

One of the core themes in her public writing is the defense of secularism—not as a rhetorical device, but as a lived, constitutional principle. In numerous essays, she has drawn attention to the dangers posed by Hindutva politics, the rewriting of history textbooks, and the stifling of cultural institutions under authoritarian regimes. She argues that when history is appropriated for political ends, it ceases to be a space of critical engagement and becomes a tool of indoctrination. Her fiction—particularly *In Times of Siege*—echoes this concern, but her essays are more direct in confronting the political actors and institutions responsible.

Hariharan's commitment to free expression is another defining aspect of her intellectual persona. As a founding member of the Indian Writers' Forum and a vocal participant in the Indian Writers Protest movement, she has stood alongside fellow authors in defending the freedom to speak, write, and dissent. She was among the first writers to return her Sahitya Akademi award in 2015 following the government's silence on the murders of rationalist thinkers and writers like M.M. Kalburgi. In her public statements, she argued that literature cannot thrive in an atmosphere of fear and censorship and that writers must speak up when democratic institutions are under threat.

Hariharan's role as editor and anthologist is also central to her work as a cultural critic. She has edited several influential collections such as *A Southern Harvest: Stories from the Indian South* and *From India to Palestine: Essays in Solidarity*. The former brings regional literatures into dialogue with mainstream Indian English writing, while the latter extends her solidarity beyond India's borders, showcasing her internationalist outlook. Her editorial projects reflect her belief in the diversity of voices and her desire to create platforms for marginalised narratives.

Her 2014 non-fiction work *Almost Home: Cities and Other Places* demonstrates her ability to blend personal narrative with political observation. In this collection of essays, Hariharan explores various cities—

from Delhi to New York, Baghdad to Colombo—through a lens that is both literary and critical. These pieces are not traditional travel writing but meditations on memory, displacement, violence, and belonging. In writing about Baghdad, for instance, she connects the war-torn city's devastation with the larger imperialist project and the human cost of global geopolitics. Similarly, in her writings on Delhi, she confronts the city's transformation through neoliberal development and the invisibilisation of the urban poor. Here, we see her capacity to move between the personal and the political, the local and the global.

Moreover, Hariharan's idea of resistance is not limited to protest but extends to the imaginative space of literature and storytelling. She often speaks of fiction as a place where alternative realities can be imagined, where voices silenced by history and politics can be heard. In her lectures and writings, she emphasizes the ethical responsibility of writers to respond to injustice not necessarily with polemic, but with empathy, imagination, and narrative complexity. For Hariharan, storytelling is not escapist; it is a form of truth-telling that allows readers to inhabit other lives and reconsider their certainties.

Her public engagements are marked by a consistent concern for marginalised communities—Dalits, minorities, women, and the working class. She believes in building alliances across struggles and identities, often invoking the language of solidarity and constitutional morality. Her worldview is shaped by left-progressive politics but remains deeply humane and open-ended. She does not offer dogmatic answers but insists on the importance of raising difficult questions.

Gita Hariharan exemplifies the figure of the writer as a public thinker. Her work—both creative and critical—demonstrates a profound commitment to the principles of justice, equality, and freedom. In an era where writers and intellectuals are often pushed to the margins, Hariharan's voice remains clear, courageous, and uncompromising. Through her fiction, legal activism, public essays, and editorial interventions, she has reshaped the contours of what it means to be a writer in contemporary India: not just a teller of tales, but a witness, a citizen, and a conscience.

6.6 Key Themes in Githa Hariharan's Works

Githa Hariharan's literary and critical corpus reflects her persistent engagement with questions of identity, power, justice, memory, and the transformative potential of storytelling. As a novelist, essayist, editor, and public intellectual, Hariharan challenges established norms and offers nuanced alternatives to dominant political and cultural narratives. Her fiction, deeply rooted in feminist and postcolonial sensibilities, is marked by a commitment to social justice, gender equality, and democratic ethics. Whether she is reworking myths, interrogating historical memory, or critiquing authoritarianism, Hariharan consistently foregrounds the ethical responsibilities of the writer and the intellectual.

1. Feminist Reimaginings and the Reclamation of Voice

One of the most prominent and consistent themes in Hariharan's work is the feminist reimagining of traditional narratives. Her debut novel, *The Thousand Faces of Night*, exemplifies this approach, offering a complex and intimate exploration of women's lives in patriarchal Indian society. The novel weaves together the personal stories of three women across generations and juxtaposes them with retellings of classical myths and legends from the Mahabharata and Puranas. In doing so, Hariharan not only critiques the patriarchal assumptions embedded in traditional literature but also highlights the resilience and agency of women who are often silenced in both myth and modern life.

In *When Dreams Travel*, this feminist project is extended to a global context. By rewriting the frame tale of *The Arabian Nights*, Hariharan gives voice to Shahrazad's sister, Dunyazad, who emerges as the primary narrator and reclaims the act of storytelling from male control. Through Dunyazad's voice, the novel interrogates the limits of patriarchal authority and celebrates the power of female creativity, resistance, and memory. Hariharan challenges the invisibility of women in canonical texts, replacing them with protagonists who speak back, disrupt, and reframe the narratives that sought to define them.

2. Storytelling as a Political and Ethical Practice

In Hariharan's fiction, storytelling is not a passive or ornamental act. It is a deeply political and ethical engagement with the world. Her novels consistently portray storytelling as a mode of survival, resistance, and solidarity. In *The Ghosts of Vasu Master*, the protagonist—a retired schoolteacher—attempts to communicate with a traumatised boy through the act of telling stories. These stories serve not only to bridge the distance between individuals but also to expose the wounds of the past and the ongoing violence of everyday life.

Hariharan uses storytelling to challenge authoritarian structures—whether religious, cultural, or political. Her stories are layered, nonlinear, and dialogic, inviting readers to engage critically with both form and content. She resists closure, allowing multiple voices, interpretations, and contradictions to coexist. In this way, Hariharan positions literature as a space of ethical ambiguity and political contestation—one that mirrors the complexity of lived realities.

3. History, Memory, and the Struggle over the Past

A recurring concern in Hariharan's work is the contestation of historical memory. She is acutely aware of how history can be manipulated to serve ideological purposes, particularly in times of political crisis. *In Times of Siege*, published in the wake of the 2002 Gujarat riots, exemplifies her concern with the distortion of history under right-wing regimes. The novel explores the harassment of a mild-mannered history professor who assigns material on the 12th-century reformer Basava. His academic freedom is curtailed by a nationalist group, and his personal life is thrown into disarray.

Through this narrative, Hariharan demonstrates how the past is not a neutral space but a battleground where competing ideologies fight for dominance. She warns against the use of history as a tool of communal propaganda and emphasizes the importance of recovering pluralist and subaltern traditions that are often erased from dominant narratives. Figures like Basava and Shahrazad are not mere historical characters in her fiction—they are sites of resistance, representing alternative visions of justice, equality, and human dignity.

4. The Intellectual's Responsibility in Crisis

Hariharan's later works increasingly focus on the role of the writer and intellectual in a society under siege. This theme is explored most directly in *In Times of Siege*, where the protagonist Shiv Murthy undergoes a reluctant transformation from apolitical academic to socially responsible citizen. The novel raises crucial questions: Can neutrality be a form of complicity? What are the ethical obligations of those who produce and disseminate knowledge in an atmosphere of censorship and fear?

These questions are not confined to her fiction. In her public essays and statements, Hariharan repeatedly insists that writers and thinkers must speak truth to power, particularly when democratic values are under threat. She herself has acted on these convictions, returning her Sahitya Akademi award in protest against communal violence and censorship, and writing forcefully in support of freedom of expression, secularism, and human rights. For Hariharan, the role of the public intellectual is not to remain aloof or neutral, but to engage critically and courageously with the injustices of the time.

5. Justice, Rights, and Secular Democratic Ethics

Underlying Hariharan's literary and public work is a deep commitment to justice in its broadest sense. Her fiction interrogates systemic inequalities—gender-based, caste-based, and class-based—and her non-fiction extends these concerns into the domains of law, policy, and public discourse. Her legal battle for gender equality in guardianship rights set a powerful precedent and exemplified her belief in the possibility of progressive legal reform.

Hariharan views secularism not just as a legal principle but as a cultural ethic. She has consistently warned against the dangers of majoritarianism, the politicization of religion, and the normalization of hate speech. In her view, literature and culture must foster critical thinking, empathy, and dissent, all of which are essential to the survival of a vibrant, pluralist democracy. Her essays on communalism, censorship, and the politics of memory urge readers to consider how institutions and ideologies shape public life—and how citizens can resist these forces through collective action and solidarity.

6. Global Solidarities and Transnational Perspectives

Though deeply rooted in the Indian context, Hariharan's concerns are global in scope. Her essays in *Almost Home: Cities and Other Places* move across geographies—Baghdad, New York, Delhi, Colombo—linking issues of war, displacement, gentrification, and memory. She advocates for forms of internationalism rooted in anti-imperialism, anti-racism, and human rights. In editing *From India to Palestine: Essays in Solidarity*, she brings together diverse voices committed to justice across borders. This transnational perspective enriches her understanding of power and resistance, reminding us that the struggles for justice are interconnected across time and space.

6.7 Githa Hariharan in Indian English Literature

Githa Hariharan occupies a vital space in the landscape of Indian English literature. As a novelist, editor, essayist, and cultural critic, her contribution extends beyond creative writing into the realms of feminist thought, political resistance, and democratic cultural engagement. What makes her presence especially significant is the way she brings together literary innovation and socio-political commitment. Her work, both in fiction and non-fiction, is marked by a deep sense of moral inquiry, a critique of entrenched power structures, and a persistent search for new narrative forms capable of articulating subaltern and marginal voices.

Since the publication of her first novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* in 1992—which won the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Best First Book in the Eurasia region—Hariharan has been recognised as a major voice in post-independence Indian English writing. Her debut stood out not only for its lyrical prose and complex female characters but also for its bold interweaving of myth, memory, and lived experience. At a time when Indian English fiction was still negotiating its place in the global literary marketplace, Hariharan brought attention to the inner lives of Indian women in both contemporary and mythical settings. In doing so, she helped foreground gender as a central category in literary representation.

While early Indian English novels often explored themes of nationalism, modernity, and diaspora, Hariharan's work added a new dimension by returning to the local, the familial, and the intimate—but never in isolation from broader social questions. Her fiction has consistently bridged the private and public spheres. In *The Ghosts of Vasu Master*, for example, she uses the meditative reflections of a retired schoolteacher to explore pedagogical authority, memory, and the politics of language. In *When Dreams Travel*, her feminist rewriting of the *Arabian Nights*, she positions storytelling as a powerful mode of resistance and survival. These thematic concerns mark her as a writer deeply invested in both literary form and social critique.

One of the most distinctive features of Hariharan's literary work is her persistent experimentation with narrative structure. Rather than adopting linear, realist modes typical of much postcolonial fiction, she often turns to non-linear, fragmentary, and metafictional forms. This is evident in her use of multiple narrators, nested narratives, and re-appropriated myths. Such formal choices are not merely aesthetic but ideological—they challenge hegemonic notions of authorship, authority, and historical truth. In this sense, her work aligns with the broader modernist and postmodernist impulses within Indian English writing while remaining anchored in indigenous traditions of oral storytelling and mythic memory.

Her intervention in Indian English literature is also significant because of her insistence on the political responsibility of the writer. This is perhaps best exemplified by her novel *In Times of Siege* (2003), which is set in the charged political climate of post-Gujarat riots India. The novel critiques the growing threats to academic freedom, religious pluralism, and historical objectivity. Unlike many of her contemporaries who often maintain a safe distance from overt political issues, Hariharan enters the arena of cultural politics directly and unflinchingly. She challenges the reader to confront questions of complicity, resistance, and ethical responsibility.

Moreover, Hariharan's contribution to Indian English literature extends beyond her own novels. She has served as a key editor and anthologist, curating and publishing voices from various regions, languages, and communities. Her editorial projects, such as *A Southern Harvest* and *From*

India to Palestine: Essays in Solidarity, demonstrate her commitment to inclusivity, translation, and cross-border dialogue. In an Indian literary scene often dominated by metropolitan voices and upper-caste narratives, Hariharan has helped foreground subaltern and regional perspectives.

Hariharan's role in shaping Indian English literature is not only due to the subjects she chooses but also the sensibilities she brings to them. She is a part of that generation of writers—alongside Amitav Ghosh, Shashi Deshpande, and Mahasweta Devi in translation—who refuse to see literature as separate from life. Her work blurs the boundaries between art and activism, between fiction and intervention. This makes her especially relevant in the current context, where literature is increasingly being called upon to respond to authoritarianism, environmental crisis, and socio-economic inequality.

Her language, too, reflects a careful balancing act. It is lyrical without being ornate, politically charged without being didactic. She often draws from classical sources—Indian mythology, Sufi lore, Bhakti poetry—but uses them in contemporary, often subversive ways. This allows her to challenge the rigidity of tradition while also rescuing its radical and pluralistic elements. By doing so, Hariharan opens up a space within Indian English literature where past and present, myth and realism, individual and collective, can coexist in productive tension.

Importantly, her work is also marked by an internationalism that is neither derivative nor escapist. Unlike some Indian English writers who write primarily for a global Western audience, Hariharan remains rooted in Indian socio-political realities while building solidarities with global movements. Her essays and speeches on Palestine, global capitalism, and minority rights reflect a deep understanding of interconnected struggles. This global-local dialectic gives her work a distinctive relevance and makes her an important figure not only in Indian English literature but also in the broader postcolonial literary world.

In summary, Githa Hariharan's place in Indian English literature is defined by her literary experimentation, feminist consciousness, political engagement, and commitment to democratic values. She has expanded the possibilities

of narrative form, redefined the role of myth and memory, and deepened the social conscience of Indian English writing. As a writer, editor, and public thinker, she continues to inspire a generation of readers and writers to see literature not just as a mirror of society, but as a tool for transformation.

6.8 Summing Up

In this unit, we have explored the life, works, and literary contributions of Githa Hariharan, a significant figure in contemporary Indian English literature. Beginning with a discussion of her early life, professional background, and formative influences, we examined how her exposure to diverse cultures, languages, and socio-political contexts shaped her literary and ideological commitments. Her work as an editor and cultural commentator further enriched her sensitivity to issues of representation, marginality, and voice.

Hariharan's fiction is marked by a powerful combination of literary innovation and social critique. Her debut novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* established her as a bold feminist voice, reinterpreting classical Indian myths to foreground women's agency and struggle. Her subsequent works—*The Ghosts of Vasu Master*, *When Dreams Travel*, and *In Times of Siege*—continued this trajectory, using experimental narrative forms and rich intertextuality to interrogate themes such as memory, storytelling, censorship, and historical distortion. Each of these novels brings to the fore characters who resist normative identities and question inherited narratives, thereby challenging both literary and political conventions.

The unit also examined the major themes in her work, including feminist reimaginings, the political role of storytelling, the contestation of history, the responsibilities of the public intellectual, and her sustained critique of authoritarianism and injustice. Whether revisiting ancient tales or engaging with contemporary crises, Hariharan consistently shows how literature can become a site of resistance and renewal. Her fiction encourages readers to question what is taken for granted, to listen to silenced voices, and to imagine more just futures.

Furthermore, we located Hariharan's significance within the broader landscape of Indian English literature. Unlike writers who tend to isolate aesthetic concerns from political realities, Hariharan maintains that literature must remain in dialogue with the world. Her work enriches Indian English fiction by challenging dominant forms and ideas and by inserting feminist, secular, and democratic ethics into literary discourse. Her contributions also go beyond the domain of fiction through her editorial and activist work, which builds solidarities across regions, languages, and movements.

In conclusion, Githa Hariharan is not only a creative writer of distinction but also a deeply engaged intellectual whose work continues to inspire critical thought and ethical reflection. Through her novels, essays, and public interventions, she affirms the power of storytelling as an act of cultural dissent and social transformation.

6.9 References, Suggested Readings and Recourses

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Online Resources

- Indian Writers’ Forum: www.indianwriters.org
- University of Mumbai Study Material: mu.ac.in
- Studocu: Notes on “The Remains of the Feast” by Githa Hariharan. www.studocu.com

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