

Indian Writings In Literature

DENG503

Edited by:
Dr. Digvijay Pandya



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INDIAN WRITINGS IN LITERATURE

Edited By
Dr. Digvijay Pandya

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SYLLABUS

Indian Writings in Literature

Objectives:

- To enhance analytical skills of students
- To improve understanding of literature among students
- To develop interest among students about Indian writing in English

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1	Amitav Ghosh- The Shadow Lines-Introduction, Detailed study of Part I, II & III
2	Amitav Ghosh- The Shadow Lines-Theme of Nationality, Character of Tridib and grandmother, Narrative techniques
3	Rupa Bajwa- The Sari Shop- Introduction to text, Detailed study of text
4	Rupa Bajwa- The Sari Shop-Concept of feminism, Psychological study
5	Rupa Bajwa- The Sari Shop-Theme, Character and Plot construction
6	Arvind Adiga- The White Tiger- Introduction, Plot-Detailed study
7	ArvindAdiga-TheWhiteTiger-Theme,Characterisation,CriticalAppreciation
8	Prem Chand-Godan- Introduction, Detailed study, Plot construction
9	GirishKarnad-Nagamandala-Introduction,Detailedstudy,Plotconstruction,Theme
10	Mahesh Dattani- Final Solutions- Introduction, Detailed Study, Plot and character, Theme

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Unit 1: Amitav Ghosh; Shadow Lines: Introduction to the Text

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Introduction

1.1 The Shadow Line – An Introduction

1.2 Characters

1.3 Amitav Ghosh's Works: A Critical Sketch

1.4 Critical Appreciation of the Novel

1.5 Important Aspects of the Novel

1.6 Summary

1.7 Key-Words

1.8 Review Questions

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Objectives

After reading this Unit students will be able to:

- Know about an Indian Bengali writer Amitav Ghosh.
- Discuss the Plot Summary.

Introduction

The Shadow Lines (1988) is a Sahitya Akademi Award-winning novel by Indian-Bengali writer Amitav Ghosh. It is a book that captures perspective of time and events, of lines that bring people together and hold them apart, lines that are clearly visible from one perspective and nonexistent from another. Lines that exist in the memory of one, and therefore in another's imagination. A narrative built out of an intricate, constantly crisscrossing web of memories of many people, it never pretends to tell a story. Rather it invites the reader to invent one, out of the memories of those involved, memories that hold mirrors of differing shades to the same experience. The novel is set against the backdrop of historical events like Swadeshi movement, Second World War, Partition of India and Communal riots of 1963-64 in Dhaka and Calcutta. The novel brought its author the 1989 Sahitya Akademi Award for English, by the Sahitya Akademi, India's National Academy of Letters.

1.1 The Shadow Line – An Introduction

A young, inexperienced, but competent seaman suddenly gives up his successful position as mate on a steamship. Whilst he is on shore in Singapore an older and experienced sea captain recommends him to the harbour master, as a result of which he is given command of a sailing ship whose captain has died at sea. He travels to Bangkok to take charge of the ship and feels that he is joining an illustrious brotherhood of distinguished former commanders. However, he learns from the chief mate that the previous captain was dissolute and neglected his duties, The chief mate was forced to take charge of the ship, and the captain cursed the ship and all its crew before dying.

The new young captain is delayed in Bangkok by a combination of official procedures and the chief mate's illness. He seeks medical advice, but impatient to be underway with his new

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commission, he disregards the warnings and sets sail in unfavourable conditions. The journey progresses very slowly because of a lack of wind, and the ship becomes becalmed in the Gulf of Siam. Meanwhile all the crew are infected with malaria, and the chief mate appears to be dying. The mate believes that an evil influence from the previous captain is casting a jinx on the ship.

The young captain then suddenly discovers that the supplies of quinine he has been using to treat his crew have been stolen and sold by the previous captain, who has re-filled the bottles with useless stuff. The captain is supported in all his attempts to keep going by the ship's cook, who has a bad heart. The chief mate recovers slightly, but the ship makes no progress. The captain in despair decides to abandon the voyage and return to Singapore. En route the ship encounters a tropical thunderstorm, and the captain has to maintain the safety of the ship with the help of only two or three sick crew members. The chief mate goes through a phase of near madness in which he believes that they are battling against evil forces of the former captain, who he personally buried at sea in the same part of the Gulf. Finally, the ship reaches Singapore, the crew are taken off to hospital, and the cook requests to be discharged from his duties. The captain recruits a replacement crew and is planning to resume his voyage the very next day, feeling older and wiser.

1.2 Characters

- Narrator - The protagonist is a middle class boy who grows up in a middle-class family.
- Tridib - He was the son of Mayadebi, and so by relation he was the second uncle of Narrator.
- Grandmother of Narrator (Tha'mma) - She is the headmistress of girls school in Calcutta. She is very strict, disciplined, hardworking, mentally strong and patient lady.
- Ila - She is the cousin of narrator. She lives in Stockwell, London. She is very good looking.
- May - She is the daughter of Prices family.
- Nick - He is a good looking blonde having long hair and wants to become a Chartered Accountant. In the course of the novel he marries Ila.

1.3 Amitav Ghosh's Works: A Critical Sketch

Amitav Ghosh is one of the better-known Indian Writers writing in English today. Born in 1956 in Calcutta, he had his school education at the famous residential Doon School in Dehradun. Though he belonged to a middle class Bengali family, his childhood had varied influences that set him apart from the typical *Bhadralok* (middle class) value system. While growing up in his grandfather's Kolkata home where the sitting room was lined with bookshelves, (he talks about it in the award winning essay "The Testimony of my Grandfather's Bookcase") Ghosh became a voracious reader. By the age of 12, he had devoured Mikhail Sholokhov's *And Quiet Flows the Don*, a gift from an uncle. He admits in an interview that in the Bengali culture writing is greatly valued and that was his inspiration. His father, Lt Col. Shailendra Chandra Ghosh served the British army in Myanmar and was an avid storyteller. These stories about the exotic lands told to him as a young boy were to greatly affect the canvas of his imagination. He also admits as to how these early family experiences were to have a far reaching influence on his literary creations. He quotes the example of *The Glass Palace* (2000) that grew out of his uncle Jagat Chandra Dutta's experiences as a timber merchant in Myanmar. The fact that the family was constantly on the move, owing to his father's official assignments, also had its effect on young Amitav. Even though he was in a boarding school he got to visit and live in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. "Because of that I could understand what it is like to be a Sri Lankan and a Bangladeshi in relationship with 'India,'" he says. This sensibility pervades many of his works and one sees that the Indian Subcontinent is frequently decentered from Delhi to other capitals like Dhaka and Mandalay.

He graduated from Delhi University and with an Inlaks scholarship went to Oxford for his DPhil in Social Anthropology and Philosophy. During his research he came across the papers of a 12th century Tunisian Jew, Abraham Ben Yiju, in a Cairo synagogue. He learnt from the papers that he had come to Mangalore via Egypt and lived there for 17 years. This formed the seminal idea of

what would be Ghosh's third book, *In An Antique Land* (1992). Ghosh returned to India in 1982, and worked in the Centre For Developmental Studies in Thiruvananthapuram (Kerela) for a year. He describes the period as the most peaceful in his life. He started work on his first book *The Circle of Reason* (1986) while still in Kerela and completed it in Delhi. He talks of his days in Delhi and his struggle as a fledgling writer. He says in an interview "I was living in the servant's quarters on top of someone's house. With the Delhi sun beating down at the height of the summer, I would sit in a *lungi* and furiously punch away at my typewriter." His writing career began at the Indian Express newspaper in New Delhi and in 1986 his first novel, *The Circle Of Reason*, went on to win one of France's top literary awards, the Prix Medici Etrangere. His writing career had taken off well from here on and subsequent years saw him becoming a recipient of many coveted awards, including the 1999 Pushcart Prize and the Arthur C. Clarke Award for his highbrow thriller, *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1996) Witnessing the 1984 Anti-Sikh riots in Delhi in the wake of Indira Gandhi's assassination had a profound effect on him. "I think it was essentially after the 1984 riots that people recognised the dimension of the communal problem in India." He wrote about it in *The New Yorker* and it became a point of departure for his novel *The Shadow Lines* (1988). Though the book does not deal with the '84 riots per se, it has dealt with the pathology of riots and civil strife in a more encompassing manner.

In the year 2001 he was in news for having withdrawn his book *The Glass Palace* from the shortlist of Commonwealth Writer's Award because he felt that such awards continue to abet the very institutions (the British Empire) that he tries to fight through his writings. In a letter written to the Prize Manager of the foundation he contests the very idea behind Commonwealth as a category... 'As a literary or cultural grouping ... it seems to me that "the Commonwealth" can only be a misnomer so long as it excludes the many languages that sustain the cultural and literary lives of these countries. ...the ways in which we remember the past are not determined solely by the brute facts of time: they are also open to choice, reflection and judgment. The issue of how the past is to be remembered lies at the heart of *The Glass Palace* and I feel that I would be betraying the spirit of my book if I were to allow it to be incorporated within that particular memorialization of Empire that passes under the rubric of "the Commonwealth".' The literary community hailed this withdrawal as being exemplary and worthy of emulation. On the subject of recreating historical events through his novels, he draws up the distinction between 'state history' and 'human history.' He says in an interview that the difference between the history historians writes and the history fiction writers write is that the latter write about 'human history'... 'it is about finding out the human predicament. It is about finding out what happens to human individuals, characters...on the other hand is the kind of history exploring causes...Causality is of no interest to me.' In these times driven by media, Ghosh has consciously cultivated a low profile. He believes that the excessive pressures created by the *media circus* (as he calls it) on young writers cripple their creativity and take attention off the most important task: that of writing. Ghosh is presently based in America, where he first met his wife, Deborah Baker, who is a senior editor with the publishers Little, Brown and Company. After teaching anthropology and comparative literature in various universities in America, Ghosh is now distinguished professor of Comparative Literature at Queens College, City University of New York. He lives in New York with his wife and children, Leela and Nayan.

1.4 Critical Appreciation of the Novel

The Shadow Lines (1988) can be viewed at one level as a story of a Bengali family through which the author presents, analyses and problematises many issues that are being debated in contemporary India. The story cleverly engages in its main body characters spanning three generations of this family. The story of these characters is not told in a contextual vacuum, it instead corresponds to the growth of Calcutta as a city and India as a nation over a period of three decades or more. Significantly, private events in the author's life and other important characters take place in the shadow of events of immense political significance. The family too is not there typically as a spectacle but as a means to 'discuss' these issues that are at the heart of this work. So there is Thamma, the grandmother of the unnamed narrator through whom the issue of the Bengal Partition

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and the whole idea of **Nation**, Nationalism and Nationhood gets discussed. There is Tridib, the eccentric Historian cousin through whom the idea of **history** being problematic gets highlighted. Then there is the third generation Ila, the narrator's second cousin through whom the author brings to fore the issues of **diaspora** and **racism**. The role of the narrator is also central to the extent that it is he who articulates the ideas held by these characters and also integrates these subjective viewpoints and experiences to highlight that both public discourses like history and personal discourse like anecdotes are incomplete till they are integrated. The role of the narrator is also crucial to the structure of the novel, which is one of story within story told in a non-linear way. The novel has also been analysed by the critic Suvir Kaul in the essay "Separation Anxiety: Growing Up Inter/National in *The Shadow Lines*" as embodying elements from the *bildungsroman* (coming of age) tradition of the novel. M.H.Abrams describes the term *bildungsroman* as a 'novel of formation' ... 'the subject of these novels is the development of the protagonist's mind and character, as he passes from childhood through varied experiences -and usually through a spiritual crisis - into maturity and recognition of his identity and role in the world.'



Did u know? The Shadow Lines witnesses the growth of the narrator from an impressionable 8 year old in the Gole Park flat in Calcutta to an assured adult through the book.

However, the growth of the narrator is not physical alone but seen in relation with the growth of ideas on '... nationalism, nation states and international relations...the narrator's itinerary into adulthood ...is necessarily framed by these larger public questions...it becomes not merely a male *bildungsroman*, an authorized autobiography, with its obvious agendas and priorities, but also a dialogic, more open-ended telling of the difficult interdependencies and inequalities that compose any biography of a nation.' The novel begins with the eight-year-old narrator talking of his experiences as a schoolboy living in the Gole-Park neighbourhood in Calcutta. He introduces the reader to the two branches of his family tree- the families of his Grandmother Tha'mma and that of the Grandmother's sister, Mayadebi. According to the acclaimed critic Meenakshi Mukherjee this rendition in the novel amongst other details helps the reader feel the 'concreteness of the existential and emotional milieu...the precise class location of his family, Bengali *bhadralok*, starting at the lower edge of the spectrum and ascending to its higher reaches in one generation, with family connections above and below its own station...' The grandmother is a schoolteacher and the father is a middle rung manager in a tyre company. The family of Mayadebi is more affluent, her husband being a high-ranking official in the foreign services, with one son, Jatin being an economist with the UN and the younger one Robi being a Civil Servant. Only Tridib of her sons is not successful in the material sense, however of his ability the reader is left in no doubt as even though eccentric, he is the one who is the repository of all the esoteric knowledge. He can talk on length about issues as diverse as the sloping roofs of Columbian houses and the culture of the Incas with equal ease. He is also the one who transfers to the young narrator a profound love for knowledge. The sisters Tha'mma and Mayadebi are thick with each other, however the former is perennially on her guard on the issue of accepting help from the latter. In this regard it is important to talk about her past experiences. As a young woman living in Dhaka (prior to Bengal Partition) she is married off to an Engineer posted in Burma. However she loses her husband very early and is left with the prospect of raising her only son single handedly. What follows is her struggle to make ends meet and her subsequent career as a schoolteacher in Bengal. She raises her only child independently and lives a spartan life where *wasted time stinks*. Her self worth goads her to abstain from becoming dependent on her affluent relations. In the midst of the narrative she retires from school and her life really comes a full circle. One of the important facets of Tha'mma's worldview that we have to consider is her perception of historical events and her notions of Nationhood and Nationalism. As a young woman she finds herself in the greatly charged milieu of 19th century Bengal when the Extremist strand of Nationalism was in its full glory. As a college going young woman she upholds these young extremists as her true heroes and secretly desires to be a part of such extremist organizations as *Anushilan* and *Jugantar*. She idealises these young men who indulge

in clandestine extremism with the larger goal of Independence in mind. At the same time as a product of Western Education, her idea of Nation as an entity is borrowed in its entirety from England. She tends to associate gory wars passion, sacrifice and blood baths with the creation and grandeur of nations. 'War is their (the English) religion. That's what it takes to make a country. Once that happens people forget they were born this or that...that's what you have to achieve for India.' She particularly likes her nephew Robi who, according to her, has besides, a fine education a fine body that is essential for the enterprise of nation building. To the fact that she is a dislocated Bengali (from the Eastern side) she does not pay much attention and like a typical middle class character is too involved in matters of livelihood to bother about these issues. Life is simple for her- she believes in the values of honesty and hard work and has been a tremendously scrupulous teacher and mother. She believes so completely in the ideal of hard work that when she meets her poor migrant relatives she can think of no other reason but lack of hard work as the reason for their penury. She gives no thought to the event of Partition that is partly responsible for the dislocation and destitution of the family. It is only when she plans to visit her sister in Dhaka and when she has to undergo the usual procedure of compiling her immigration papers that she is jolted into recognizing the reality of the Partition of her state. The author here delves into the whole idea behind physical and psychological spaces. Here the author talks of *Phantom distances* through the *shadow lines* that the state machinery creates in order to reinforce the idea of nation. Whereas in a large country like India where diversity abounds in every aspect of cultural, economic, social and linguistic existence nationhood is imposed over these *imagined communities* and ironically where communities exist naturally (like in the pre-partitioned Bengal) they are thrown apart with barbed wire fencing, passports and papers reinforcing a much greater psychological distance between the two. Her visit to her erstwhile home in Dhaka also turns out to be poignant in ways more than one. Her uncle (father's brother) is the only one languishing in that house because he is completely out of touch with reality and refuses to believe the fact that the country has split. Here the author echoes the idea of collective madness and normalcy. Whereas the uncle who refuses to believe in the Partition of the country is labelled mad by the so called normal people, it is in a way a collective madness that has endorsed the highly abnormal act of Partition and then driven the non conformists to the edge of madness. This old man also portrays the **violence** that **history** perpetrates. Whereas this violence is a part of the life of all the people who underwent the distresses of dislocation during Partition, it can only find an expression through the grotesque means of madness. And there is escape from it also through madness. The character of Tha'mma is crucial to the narrative in the manner in which it brings out some of these concepts and also provides a rallying point around which other ways of looking at these are built. Tha'mma embodies a conventional even though interesting belief system, which is challenged by the other characters as well as the novelist himself. For most part of the book she comes across as a frugal, no-nonsense woman for whom any wastage of time or money is abhorrence. She is a principled old woman whose views on nation and nation building are remarkably simplistic. She doesn't consider herself as a migrant belonging to the other side of the border; she has no sympathy for her refugee relatives living in a state of utter penury. Her notions of nation, nation building are straight from history books. She considers healthy young people like Robi as ideal nation builders. She is remarkably free from all traces of cynicism so evocative of victims of partition.

She does not consciously criticize the phenomenon of Partition even once, there are no lengthy harangues: her critique of the Partition, nation and nationalism lies in her anecdotes. Often it is the anecdotes and the personal experiences that make her acknowledge the cracks and contradictions in her beliefs. Tha'mma as a child in Dhaka house makes stories about the disputed upside down house (the other half of the house occupied by the uncle's family) The artificial constructedness of the '**otherness**' of the house is very evident and many critics have seen it as a foretaste of a similar exercise that the state indulges in when the Partition of a nation has to be justified and difference has to be created if it does not exist. The two nations just like the two parts of a household were united at one time but the course of history (or failure of vision) divides them and for sustaining their separation the difference has to be created. The case of the Partition of the Indian subcontinent has been very different because the state has been forced to create a difference where none existed and show the two nations as inherently opposed.

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It is the fear that comes of the knowledge that normalcy is utterly contingent, that the spaces that surround one, the streets that one inhabits, can suddenly and without warning become as hostile as a desert in a flash flood. It is this that sets apart the thousand million people who inhabit the subcontinent from the rest of the world-not language, not food, not music-it is the special quality of loneliness that grows out of the fear of the war between oneself and one's image in the mirror. The house trope used in the novel is for obvious reasons of making the reader see through such an act when it comes to the country : what is ironic is that Tha'mma who should have *seen through* it is blissfully oblivious of the strategy.

Perhaps this oblivion is tantamount to a deliberate non-admission of facts that are deeply disturbing to her. Here the two reactions of madness that we examined earlier can be compared to the non admission of events, a denial that the individual resorts to in order to avoid the madness that is bound to follow later. The oblivion of Tha'mma therefore becomes her survival strategy. However an indicator of this deep complex does surface later. Her decision to go to Dhaka in order to bring back her old sick uncle is a very upsetting time for her. Routine activity of furnishing her personal details while finishing the documentation for her visa forms raise fundamental doubts within her about her identity. The sane formulations of her life are threatened by some dull looking External Affairs Ministry forms. For the first time the sure shot, unruffled Tha'mma goes through pangs of some fundamentally disturbing introspection. She wonders as to how the 'place of her birth had come to be messily at odds with her nationality'. She cannot resolve the chaos that surfaces in the patterns that are so essential to her identity. The narrator at this point cleverly talks of certain language constructions in the Bengali language: You see, in our family we don't know whether we are coming or going- It's all my grandmother's fault... But of course the fault wasn't hers at all: it lay in the language. Every language assumes a centrality fixed and settled point to go away and come back to, and what my grandmother was looking for was a word for a journey which was not coming or going at all : a journey that was a search for precisely that fixed point which permits the proper use of verbs of movement. According to Nivedita Bagchi there is ' a peculiar construction in the Bengali language which allows the speaker to say "aaschi" (coming) instead of "jachchhi" (going) ...which is 'especially used as an equivalent to "good-bye"'.

Thus a Bengali speaker while leaving a place is apt to say, "I am coming (back) instead of "I am going."" The grandmother's Bengali verbs that confuse the simple acts of coming and going become a part of the family's lore. Young people in the family joke about this language feature that confuses movement of two opposite kinds. But interestingly, within this feature of the Bengali language lies a critique of the migration of populations during the Partition of 1947. If, therefore Tha'mma says "aaschi" (I am coming) before leaving for Dhaka, it is to be read as an announcement of her arrival to her erstwhile home rather than a *faux pas* that confuses coming and going. All going away therefore culminates only in a coming of a very different kind. The fault therefore obliquely points at the chaos of coming and going that there is in Tha'mma's world rather than in her language. This claim is further confirmed by the fact that the book has two sub-sections: *Going Away and Coming home*. Both phrases indicate the queer sense of home and homelessness that the Partition victims have experienced that allows them to dispense with a fixed point that signifies a point of departure. It is also interesting to note why a common language feature should invite ridicule from the speakers themselves. It is foregrounded to draw the reader's attention towards the *fault* of Partition, neither that of the language nor that of Tha'mma. Specific addresses are remarkably highlighted in *The Shadow Lines*, the house at Raibajar, the narrator's house in Gole Park, Lymington Road, the Price household, the Shodor bazaar in Dhaka and the feud-ridden Dhaka house. All these are real enough to be plotted on a street atlas. These intricate addresses have a strong power of evocation and add to the verisimilitude of the narrative. Infact these specific addresses have a power that emanates from their permanence. These addresses are more than a mere assistance in discovering location, they are the units that survive civil political and private strife and yet remain unchanged. In this way if compared to nations as entities, specific locations outdo them in endurance. Nations are born, nations die, the cartographers and politicians rearrange political spaces but these locations are remarkably immune to these designs. They thus become the fixities and entities with 'semiotic signification' that provide meaning to several characters, their concerns and their identities. This further becomes an instance of a personal space

(and if these addresses can be seen as personal narratives) outdoing a public one. Specific addresses in the novel subvert the idea of the nation in the novel.

The narrator's eccentric cousin Tridib is an unconventional character who does not fit into the genteel society of his family. He is conducting research into the ancient Sena dynasty of Bengal and is repeatedly shown engrossed in his study. Tridib does not merely happen to be a scholar of Ancient history writing a thesis on the lost Sena Empire, his is indeed a voice that bears the burden of a historical vision. Right from the beginning of the novel there is in him a deep consciousness about the enterprise of knowledge. He not only collects esoteric bits of knowledge, the range of which stretches from East European Jazz to the intricate sociological patterning of the Incas religiously but also shapes his own and the narrator's orientation towards it. Tridib is a stock character Bengali literature and folklore is replete with. Images of such figures abound, so whether it is the distant uncle in Satyajit Ray's film *Agantuk* or as Meenakshi Mukherjee in the essay 'Maps and Mirrors: Coordinates of Meaning in *The Shadow Lines*' points out the 'traveller/imaginer reminding the Bengali reader occasionally of the *Ghana -da* stories by Premananda Mitra and ...*Pheluda* stories by Satyajit Ray in both of which a boy is held spell bound by a somewhat older person's encyclopedic knowledge of other lands and civilizations.'

The narrator gets his first lessons on the business of scholarship from Tridib-he is presented with a Bartholomew's Atlas as a childhood gift which remains a symbol of this transference and which resurfaces years later in the author's hostel room in Delhi-thus signifying a lasting influence that Tridib has on the narrator and the uncle's symbolic gift of *the worlds to travel in and the eyes to see them with*. That he receives Tridib's gift of this knowledge thereafter becomes a kind of *etanarrative* that the author will subsequently want to break out of and interrogate. However there is another aspect of Tridib that the author shows- that of a glib talker. Tridib, the eccentric uncle of the narrator has an audience in the people of the *addas* in the Calcutta neighbourhood of Gole Park. Nivedita Bagchi in the essay 'The Process of Validation In Relation To Materiality and Historical Reconstruction in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*' defines the Bengali word *adda* which is seen as the place of dissemination of the historian's (Tridib's) discourse. According to Bagchi the Bengali word describes 'long, leisurely conversations within a group of people which characterises a Bengali day.' She further states that the acknowledgement of the Bengali community within the narrative is a feature of the oral narrative where the narrative is the secret of the community which further links to the idea that narratives are connected to an identifiable group. He takes on the center stage in these public street corners where people pour over *chai* and talk quotidian concerns. He is more of a performer than historian in these spaces. The Tridib of the *addas* exaggerates and manipulates information for an audience that listens to him in rapt attention with their mouths gaped in awe of his knowledge. There is another space that Tridib occupies, that of his book lined quiet room in his family house in Calcutta. The narrator confesses 'it was that Tridib that I liked the best: I was a bit unsure of the Tridib of the street corners.' *Tha'mma*, too thinks this behaviour at the *addas* as totally abominable and a way of making his *time stink*. What is it about Tridib of the *addas* that is distrustful? The book in describing Tridib of the *addas* and his behavioural pattern there and by ascribing to him certain statements (he lies to the audience about his just concluded trip to London) only highlights a very important issue that the book deals with: that of the **seat of the Historian** and how he occupies it in **disseminating knowledge**. It is also significant to note that here we come into contact with two facets of a historian: the diligent, quiet fact-finder and the powerful, loud mouthed one in public sphere and through the latter the book goes on to throw some questions about the political role of history.

The narrator gets a lesson in combining precision and **imagination** as a strategy of gaining knowledge from Tridib. The employment of imagination being necessary because a historian does not and cannot possibly have an access to all the relevant sites of the event all the time. The time and space of a historically important event may be removed many throws from the historian in which case the quality of his mastery on the event becomes dependent on his own imagination or either the imagination of historians before him. The compound word *precise-imagination* also becomes a paradox in bringing the limiting, exacting precision to bear upon the soaring, sky kissing imagination. The perspicuity of vision that the narrator cultivates thereafter by this lesson is

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evident in his extraordinary reactions to the space of London during his visit. He not only recognizes old buildings that Tridib had merely mentioned to him as a child, but with the same eloquence questions missing ones, the ones bombed out in action and the like. The old club building that Tridib had fondly talked about to the narrator years ago is intact in his imagination decades later while on a visit to London. His suggestions of its existence are brushed aside by his cousin Ila whose opinion is supported by the club's absence, however the external evidence fails to satisfy him and after much effort they find out from an old timer that the club had indeed existed at the exact spot that he had pointed out and that it had been targetted during a war and reduced to rubble. The author's theoretical knowledge, therefore, of the existence of the building beats the Ila's very real but thoughtless existence. Tridib's vision works, at the same time he has the historian's itch to classify and know events *completely* rather than experience them spontaneously as Ila does. Tridib as a young man falls in love with May who is the daughter of the Price family of England. The friendship of the Datta- Chaudhary family and the Prices goes back to the Colonial times when their English grandfather, Tresawsen had come to Calcutta as an agent of a steel-manufacturing company and had later become a factory owner. The relationship between Tridib and May starts from exchange of friendly letters till the one that Tridib writes. In his letter he proposes to her by elaborately describing an intimate lovemaking episode between two people in a war ravaged theatre house in London. He proposes to meet her 'as a stranger in a ruin.... as completest of strangers, strangers-across seas' without context or history. May is initially perplexed but cannot resist his 'invitation' and finally reaches India to see him. However soon the romance in the relationship is replaced by discord. They assign meanings to happenings and things around them differently. While driving along with the child narrator towards Diamond Harbour they come across an injured, profusely bleeding and badly mauled dog. While the narrator shuts his eyes to escape the *ugly* sight, Tridib drives on with a nonchalance that shocks May completely. She asks him to drive back to the mangled animal after which follows her extraordinary show of endurance and fortitude with which she relieves the animal of its pain by assisting it to a peaceful death. Exasperated by the whole experience she tells Tridib in a huff that *he is worth words alone*. The quality of activism that we see in May resurfaces in London years later when she collects donations for destitute children. This is in sharp contrast to Tridib who is an armchair historian and lives and feeds on ideas alone. A similar situation arises in Dhaka while they along with Tha'mma, Mayadebi and child Robi are trapped in the communal frenzy that takes place while they are bringing back the old uncle left behind in Dhaka since Independence. While they meander through the riot ravaged streets of the city in their chauffeur driven car, the old uncle is following them in a rickshaw steered by the Muslim who looks after him. May observes how the mob which first turned to them, on being repulsed, attacked the old man on the rickshaw and instead of saving him, Tha'mma displays the same non-chalance that Tridib had earlier shown towards the dog and asks the driver to drive on without looking back. May is struck with the old impulse and getting out of the car, she heads towards the mob to save the old man. Tridib cannot allow her to embrace death and therefore follows her. In the melee, the mob attacks Tridib and he is killed. The incident powerfully evokes the earlier dog episode and the promise that Tridib gets from May at that time, about giving him too the peaceful death like the dog if a situation ever arose, uncannily turns true. Of this incident the narrator gets to know only in the end when dissatisfied with other people's versions, he asks May to recount to him the cause of Tridib's death. The incident as recounted by May becomes like that missing part of the jigsaw puzzle of Tridib's death that the author is trying to look for. Ila, the narrator's cousin is another important influence on the young, impressionable narrator. She, owing to her father's job is a globetrotter and comes to settle in London. Her experience of places as diverse as Colombo and Cairo and her school years at all these exotic places woven into delightful anecdotes for the child narrator initiate for the latter his first ever flights of imagination. Along with Tridib's encyclopedic knowledge, it is cousin Ila's descriptions of her vibrant life abroad that give the narrator a flight outside the confines of his drab Gole Park flat. The cousin's colourful Annual Schoolbooks become his initiators into an unseen but alluring world outside. For Ila the immediacy of experience –personal/political is so overwhelmingly important that its context and historicity remains suspended in the background. Earlier the mere description of the city of Cairo brings to the mind of the atlas educated, historically

aware narrator, the first pointed arch in the history of mankind whereas for Ila 'Cairo is merely a place to piss in.' She flits from experience to experience with a heightened sensual gusto but failing to 'arrive' at any stage in the novel to a state of greater knowledge, insight or evolution. Tridib often said of her that 'the inventions she lived in moved with her, so that although she had lived in many places she had not travelled at all.' 'For Ila the current was the real: it was as though she lived in a present which was like an airlock in a canal, shut away from the tidewaters of past and future by steel flood gates.' However this uninhibited flow of experience in her throws up certain questions that the other narratives have either suppressed, not acknowledged or either failed to account for. This realm does not have history's linear progression of and no casts to mould and reshape experience.

Her experience as an Indian in London becomes another model of citizenship that the book explores along with Partition Diaspora and the modern Calcutta Middle class. However her personal experience first as a student in London and later that of marrying a white man throws up an entire polemic about the diasporic communities. When she narrates the story about the fantasy child Magda to the narrator, it is quite evident that the child is a consequence of her mixed marriage (owing to the child's blue eyes and fair complexion). The absolute dread that she associates with the imagined classroom of the child betrays her own sense of complexity as a woman faced with questions about race in a mixed marriage. In this regard it is important that Ila in this conversation displays a hyper emotionality, enough indication of some deep complex of feelings within her about race. Finally when Nick betrays her, her insecurity as a woman and especially as a one disadvantaged due to her race comes out in the open. Her life comes full circle from that anxious schoolgirl boasting about nonexistent boyfriends to the distraught adult finding it difficult to come to terms with an unfaithful husband. 'You see you've never understood; you've always been taken in by the way I used to talk in college. I only talked like that to shock you and because you seemed to expect it of me somehow. I never did any of those things: I'm about as chaste ... as any woman you'll ever meet.' The narrator is introduced as an eight-year-old child who is ensconced in a genteel middle-class existence where young children are concerned only with doing well in studies. However the narrator finds means to escape it through his uncle Tridib who sensitizes him to the exciting enterprise of acquiring knowledge. The narrator is gifted an Atlas as a birthday gift and that becomes a symbol of sorts for the 'transference of knowledge' that takes place between the two. What the narrator acquires from Tridib is an extraordinary sensitivity towards knowledge, which later becomes crucial to the role of narration that he undertakes. The narrator is not only a storyteller but also the strand that brings together other available versions in order to make a complete picture. It is significant that the author himself comes across as more of a storyteller than a historian or an anecdote teller. Stories in this book are in circuitry, without definite beginnings and endings, they are indiscrete and seem to belong to no one. Here it is pertinent to point out that the author, in spite of his omniscience, is unnamed and his stories are mostly in the form of renderings of the other characters. These stories become more intelligible when the narrator joins them into meaningful wholes after collecting all the possible versions of the incident described from various sources. A case in point is the truth behind Tridib's death in Dhaka. Tha'mma, Mayadebi, Tridib's girlfriend May and Robi are the eyewitnesses to the lynching of Tridib during the Dhaka riots. His death, its cause and manner is however not made known to the narrator in its entirety: the parents are reluctant to reveal anything just like middle class people are used to avoiding all the talk of death in front of young children. The child Robi talks of the experience with a hyper emotionality characteristic of a traumatic childhood experience that he hasn't let go off even as an adult. At a later time Robi as an adult recounts all that happens while on an evening out with the narrator and Ila. His account is complete to the extent that he as a child can only observe partially. His partial perception is not only a result of his intellectual inadequacy but also due to the fact that he is physically limited- 'an effect of that difference in perspective which causes all objects recalled from childhood to undergo an illusory enlargement of scale'- this makes him incapable of even observing the incident objectively. His account of the incident is therefore more of a cathartic outburst because it has been long repressed than an informative or insightful reconstruction of the past. The last strand in the experience is May to whom the narrator then turns for an adequate explanation. It is in London that the narrator gets to know the truth behind the death.

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Another aspect of modern India that the narrator brings out through the novel is the typical 20th Century phenomenon of **Civil strife** and rioting especially the one that results from communal discord. It is important to mention here that *The Shadow Lines* written in 1988 was the author's response to another unprecedented event in Post-Colonial Indian scene: the 1984 Anti-Sikh riots that swept the nation after the then Prime minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi was assassinated by her Sikh bodyguards. To begin with allegedly State sponsored these riots in their magnitude were comparable to the earlier communal frenzy of 1947 partition. The novel situates the 1964 communal riots in Calcutta experienced by the narrator as a young school going boy centrally in the boy's psyche as well as in his analysis of the difference of perception that pervades the recording of such incidents. In the book these riots and the riots at Dhaka become the occasion for the acid test of our recording systems whether of our history or of our newspapers. The author does a brilliant job by the use of excessive and mundane journalese that drowns the powerful dominance that it exerts in the author's consciousness. The author finds an inadequate portrayal of such historical events in these sources and then goes on to analyze the reasons behind such silences:

By the end of January 1964 the riots had faded away from the pages of the newspapers, disappeared from the collective imagination of 'responsible opinion', vanished without leaving a trace in the histories and bookshelves. They had dropped out of memory into the crater of a volcano of silence. The theatre of war where the Generals meet is the stage on which the states disport themselves: they have no use for the memory of riots. Through an extensive description of a day during the 1964 Calcutta riots, the narrator tells us of his experiences of the day as a school student. Through the day he along with the other children are caught in a fear psychosis while going to school. He describes the empty bus ride home where the driver falters, drives into wrong lanes and makes all the unexpected detours into unknown, deserted lanes of Calcutta to escape the mad mob. Years later while talking of the incident to his College friends in Delhi he is surprised to find that none of them seem to remember the fateful day.

Eager to prove his memory right he leads some of them to the archives where he digs out old papers to support his memory. To his dismay, the newspapers paint the incident in regular *journalese*. While reading retrospectively about his own experience of communal riots in Calcutta as a child, he stumbles upon other events of the fateful day, one of which is a description of a similar riot in Dhaka. It is at this time that he is able to link up the two seemingly unrelated events and the fact strikes him that it was indeed the same riot in Dhaka that had claimed its victim in Tridib. What the others in his college cannot even seem to remember owing to their location in places that are far from Calcutta, is ironically a mirror experience of people in another country (Khulna, Bangladesh, then in Pakistan), 'the two cities face each other at a watchful equidistance across the border.' What follows is the author's meditation on the idea of distance as a physical reality and as a political and psychological construct. The insignificant physical distance between the two cities (earlier one community) is stretched to an unfathomable, unconquerable political and psychological distance, often making them as different as two civilisations. Returning to civil strife and its portrayal, why are there these silences in History? Probably because, the author says, these do not cohere well with constructs like a nation that the state has so painfully nurtured earlier: 'the madness of a riot is a pathological inversion, but also therefore, a reminder of that indivisible sanity that binds people independently of their governments. And that prior, independent relationship is the natural enemy of the government, for it is the logic of states that to exist at all they must claim the monopoly of all relation between people...' Is history, then an objective telling of the past events or choosing what to write in order that the underlying form is not distorted? It chooses to write about that which serves it while the rest is irretrievably silenced. The author points out that the silence he sees in history results when happenings cannot be accounted for in a given manner 'the kind of natural silence that descends when nearness / distance, friend / enemy become terms that are impossible to define.

However, these definitions in the first place become difficult because artificial differences are imposed by the state. Riots and their memory become a case in point because as Ghosh puts it they are an instance of 'pathological inversion' -i.e. violence of a state turning inwards unlike in other conflicts like war where it turns outwards. The clear definition of enemy/friend, ingroup/outgroup,

I/other becomes difficult. Who is to be described as a perpetrator and who the victim becomes problematic for the state and also the reasons, if documented, subvert the idea of the idea of the nation, therefore having no value for the governments as historical object. It is because of this choice based reportage that history is said to have an underlying literary structure. In the event of wars, on the other hand there is a well-defined enemy, a self-righteous *we group* and a legitimate action that reaffirms our notions of nationhood and our projected ideology. So there is a glory to wars, which is also violence, but one that makes sense within our defined notions of the ideas described above.

1.5 Important Aspects of the Novel

1. Treatment of History

Simply put history is the recording of actions of human beings done in the past, however if seen as a discipline that is specific to societies, one can see its significance as a disseminator of ideas. The earlier definition sees the act of recording as essentially unproblematic which is what has driven Western Historiography since Enlightenment when the content and methodology of what constitutes the subject of history today first got formulated. It was only in the twentieth century that this act of recording got problematised. Collingwood in *Idea of History* (1946) was one of the early historians to shift the emphasis from the act of objective recording outside events to the subjective realm of the historian's mind. He saw history as the record of past thoughts reenacted within the historian's mind. According to him the knowledge of an earlier era becomes possible with the historian projecting him (her) self into an earlier context. He was also the first historian to see the past events with a greater sense of complexity than as being easily understood and verifiable phenomenon that it was hitherto considered to be. With the coming of what is called the **Postmodernism** the mode of History writing has also been challenged. The postmodernists question the basic presumption of objectivity in history writing. They argue that objectivity in a political discourse like history becomes impossible because the position of the writer becomes aligned with power. Also the historian writes from a *point of view* that he cannot wish away. Some thinkers like Hayden White have taken an extreme position on this line of reasoning and have suggested a complete obliteration of the line between history and fiction. History is written by a historian and made available to the common people through history textbooks. Here what we look at is the power connotations of history- that it flows from authority to the common people. Also the traditional subject matter of history has been the conquests of the kings and the kingdoms. As a result the traditional history writing has essentially been about kings (replaced by powerful governments in recent times) written by court (state-approved) historians in the public chronicles (textbooks). When we consider these problems of history writing, other sources of writing history emerge. In recent times the school of **Subaltern studies** has provided a solution. The word "Subaltern" literally means subordinate or low-ranking. What these historians have done is attempted to rewrite the Indian history from the perspective of the common people. The power of the pen is shifted from the "court historian" to the traditionally less powerful common people. The historians under Subaltern studies also make use of unconventional sources like stories, *kissas*, folktales, songs etc. to uncover a past written by those in power. In recent time a sense of acute skepticism has come to play in our understanding of historical reconstructions which has abundantly got reflected in our literature. Salman Rushdie in presenting to us his story through Saleem Sinai of *Midnight's Children* consciously ascribes to him statements that are half-truths and at other times completely false.

This deliberate injecting of falsehood in the story is a strategy to evoke mistrust in the reader who is indirectly made aware of unreliability of all sources. These new authors have signalled death of the once existent sage-authors, the know-all reservoirs brimming with all the knowledge of all the world. What reads like a Shakespearean anachronism (the famous one being about chiming clocks in Greek times in Julius Caesar!) is confirmed in course as being deliberate and intended. The book uses the analogy of the perforated sheet where it acts as a screen for the doctor to examine the diseased body of a beautiful noble lady. The perforated sheet allows the

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doctor to examine the relevant body part only and shroud the rest in parda. The doctor as expected falls in love with the hidden lady (in fact her limited exposure adds to the fetish all the more!), but the whole is unfortunately not a sum total of parts as the doctor had imagined. The perforated sheet has since become a symbol of limited perception.

In the context of contemporary writing in English the pressing question is: what makes the author suggest a contest between history and personal experience? As mentioned earlier the credibility of public narrations has of late come under scrutiny. Whether it is Salman Rushdie treating history and religion with a celebratory irreverence or Mukul Kesavan attempting a revision of the Civil Disobedience Movement from the point of view of the Muslim Congressmen, or the scores of personal memoirs, giving a personal record of public events, a skeptical look at history has characterized great deal of Indian Writing in English for the past few decades. Most of these authors have been a part of the infamous history – they have either witnessed or been affected by events like partitioning of the country and consequently the writing of it. It is not unnatural then that they as witnesses to the discrepancy between lived events and recordings of them become natural critics to this entire enterprise. Some like Kesavan who is himself a historian claims to achieve through fiction that which history has denied to him. According to Jon Mee they are ‘responses to debates currently circulating within Indian culture from this perspective the desire to return to Indian History might be seen as the expression of a generally critical attitude to the form of nation-state of has emerged since 1947.’

Amitav Ghosh is concerned with both these facets of history writing: its claim of objectivity and its alignment with position of powers. *The Shadow Line* tries to examine History especially the writing of Indian History and its treatment of certain events in Post-Independence India like Partition and Civil Strife. It is here that he shows the deceptive depiction of Partition by Indian History. Firstly the history writers justify partition by falsely creating difference between the two sides (refer: the upside-down house) and then completely ignoring the human suffering that it entailed. Similarly the depiction of Calcutta riots experienced by the narrator is not given any place in history in spite

of the influence it exerts on his psyche. By providing stories and anecdotes as a means of relating history he provides an alternative to the public history that emanates from the centers of power and aligns it to the people.

2. Title of the Novel

The title ‘The Shadow Lines’ is evocative of one of the major concerns of the novel: that of the creation of nations with boundaries that are both arbitrary and invented. This issue becomes more pertinent when viewed in the context of the Partition of the Indian subcontinent. That which, on surface, is projected as completely opposed to another is actually a part of it. The author uses the trope of house to explain this. As children Tha’mma and Mayadebi witness the family dispute between their father and his elder brother (Jethamoshai) that leads to the division of the house.

Tha’mma as a child in Dhaka house makes stories about the upside down house (the other half of the house occupied by the uncle’s family) and narrates them to the younger sister. In the other half of the house, these stories talk of everything as being upside-down. The artificial constructedness of the ‘otherness’ of the house is very evident and gives to the keen reader a foretaste of a similar exercise in constructing the difference between the two sides of a partitioned nation. What is significant is that the two nations were united at one time but the course of history (or failure of vision) makes them two and for sustaining their separation this difference has to be invented. It is ironic therefore that Tha’mma who was herself a creator of that artificial difference cannot see through the strategy of the state. “But if there aren’t any trenches or anything, how are the people to know?” The case of the Partition of the Indian subcontinent has been very different because the state has been forced to create a difference where none existed and show the two nations as inherently opposed.

It is the fear that comes of the knowledge that normalcy is utterly contingent, that the spaces that surround one, the streets that one inhabits, can suddenly and without warning become as hostile

as a desert in a flash flood. It is this that sets apart the thousand million people who inhabit the subcontinent from the rest of the world-not language, not food, not music-it is the special quality of loneliness that grows out of the fear of the war between oneself and one's image in the mirror.

Perhaps this oblivion on Tha'mma's part is tantamount to a deliberate non-admission of facts that are deeply disturbing. The oblivion of Tha'mma therefore becomes her survival strategy.. Nationalism too gets redefined in various ways through experience. Whereas the *great historical project* of nationalism first undermines community (here the Bengali Community that is common between the East and the West Bengal.) to formulate nation, it then 'narrates the nation.' The theorist Bhaba sees this project as comprising of the creation of 'the narratives ... that signify a sense of 'nationness': the...pleasures of one's hearth and the... terror of the space of the other.' This idea however in the context of the Indian subcontinent gets problematised because the *otherness* being talked of has to be created rather than merely alluded to. People in the newly formed nations of Pakistan and Bangladesh are prompted through narration 'language, signifiers, textuality, rhetoric' to create a difference where none exists. Therefore what the book looks at is the creation of artificial difference between two nations that are inherently one.

Another subtle manner in which the author exposes this strategy is by describing the experience of an Indian (Ila) outside India (London). While in London, she inhabits that space where the India-Pakistan-Bangladesh differentiation melts down. During their visit to London she takes Robi and the narrator out for dinner 'at my (Ila's) favourite Indian restaurant.' As it turns out the 'Indian place' that she has been talking about is a small Bangladeshi place in Clapham! A seemingly insignificant incident ridicules the intense feeling of difference that these two countries otherwise harbour and how these differences are reduced to a naught if viewed from a space that is outside the two. So these boundaries that are created due to political reasons seem tangible enough to be called *lines* but if analysed closely, fade away like *shadows*.

3. Structure of the Novel

Everyone lives in a story...because stories are all there are to live in. The structure of *The Shadow Lines* comprises of two important characteristics:

That of a non-linear structure and a digressive narrative. *The Shadow Lines* is a novel without a defined Beginning, Middle and an End, instead it relies on a loop-structure of a story- within a -story. This is in turn linked to the second characteristic of digressive narrative. This interferes with what is called the 'unity of theme and action' as a hallmark of good writing as perceived by the Western poetics. This novel is essentially told through stories. It is due to this fact that we can say that the narrator is more of a listener than speaker. His method of narration is in 'bringing together' available versions rather than telling new stories. Out of this coming together of varied and contradictory versions emerges a better version that is more representative and inclusive. It is without one definable speaker (see the note on history). Both these elements of an unnamed narrator and a non-linear progression are more characteristic of Indian than Western poetics. Indian works have also traditionally not used the Western cause-effect structures, the links in the stories are non-linear and so is their progression. The western ideal of a palpable beginnings, middle and end is not present in the Indian works. A story as seen in this novel is a form that is not moving towards a preconceived culmination but as being constituted of several voices, all of which serve to make it richer. The narrator tells the story from various vantage points in time and space. Most of the stories begin like jigsaw puzzles with a limited meaning but conclude with an intelligible pattern. The various parts of a jigsaw puzzle or the incomplete story are supplied by various characters. The narrator is important to the extent of bringing all of them together a task enormously important and without which in spite of their existence these versions at best remain partially meaningful. In order to evoke an insight their coming together is inevitable. The structure of the novel that brings together many stories is also important in that the ideas that seek a definition through this novel (like Nationalism, Citizenry, community etc.) are given a fuller representation through this source than the partial view given by history and the disruptive and radical one of anecdotes.

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The book has two sub-sections: *Going Away and Coming home*. Both phrases indicate the queer sense of home and homelessness that the Partition victims have experienced that allows them to dispense with a fixed point that signifies a point of departure.

4. **Theme of Partition in the Novel**

“At the origin of India and Pakistan lies the national trauma of Partition, a trauma that freezes fear into silence, and for which *The Shadow Lines* seeks to find a language, a process of mourning, and perhaps even a memorial.” The year 1947 spelt for India a heightened consciousness of the very idea of a nation. Not only was freedom from the colonial rule ushered in and a long cherished desire of a free country made available to the Indians, it also meant that the arrival of freedom signalled a virtual dislocation for a big fraction of the population: The birth of the free nation was accompanied by excruciating labour pains of the event of Partition. Histories of both sides portray this event in passing as a misfortune that arose out of the power interests of the ‘other’ side. In the history textbooks the struggle for Independence is seen to have concluded successfully, it was hailed as a model of the practice of the new philosophy of *ahimsa*. It can however legitimately be called non-violent only if we chose to gloss over the very existence of the event of Partition that accompanied the midnight decree of freedom- the biggest migration of human population that the sub-continent or perhaps the world has ever witnessed. It entailed loss of human life on both sides. In its magnitude it was one of the most important events in the Indian history and it affected the life patterns of thousands of families who travelled in caravans, horses, carts and cattle from West Punjab and in homemade boats from East Bengal. How does history talk of these migrants? How does history justify this act of the state at that time? Urvashi Butalia in her book *The Other Side of Silence* says that the state has strangely made no memorials to mark this momentous event. However the memory of Partition has very well been preserved by the communities in the confines of their homes through stories and anecdotes told by the way of mouth and passed through one generation to the other. Of late this interest in the documentation of the private experience of Partition has been performed by our Literature. Indian Writing in English has seen a spurt in the publication of Partition related Literature. *The Shadow Lines* is, among other issues, a book about the Bengal Partition. The experiences of Tha’mma through the trope of the divided house (as discussed earlier) clearly bring out her side of the story about the event. The story of the old uncle *Jethamoshai* captures the poignant side of the human experience of Partition and of course the depiction of the penury and destitution of Tha’mma’s poor relatives capture the economic effects of Partition.

5. **Community and Communal Strife**

The Shadow Lines takes up the issue of Partition (1947) and the author presents through it an elaborate critique of the whole idea of a nation as it emerged in the circumstances. **Community** as a condition prior to Partition is seen as an ideal state and the narratives that the community produces are seen as being more representative of their experience than history. The natural community in the Indian subcontinent across Punjab and Bengal got split into two nations following the call for Partition. What followed was the physical dislocation of 15 million people from the places that their communities had traditionally called home. Those who crossed over to the Indian side arrived landless, clueless and resourceless to be a part of the rejoicing in Delhi on the eve of country’s Independence. The Partition had thus disrupted the existence of ‘natural communities’. A classification about natural and interest oriented communities is used by Sudipta Kaviraj to draw up an elaborate case about the difference between *nation* and *community*. He draws heavily on the work of the sociologist Toennies to discuss two kinds of communities: *gemeinschaften* which is the primary, traditional group, and which according to Kaviraj ‘one does not make an interest actuated decision to belong.’ On the other hand is *gesellschaften*, similar to modern nations, which are based on the convergence of political and economic interests. The Partition necessitates the disruption of *gemeinschaften* embodied by the old communities in Bengal and Punjab in order to create *gesellschaften*: India and Pakistan. Further, ‘these imagined communities can place their boundaries in time and space anywhere they like.’...unlike the former which have ‘naturally limited contours.’ So whereas the former state reflects a cultural bonding, the latter is based on political interest. To these groups are also

then linked their own forms of narration. Narratives, according to Kaviraj 'are always told from someone's point of view...they try to paint a picture of some kind of an ordered, intelligible, humane and habitable world...literally produce a world in which the self finds home.' The *gemeinschaften*, therefore has its own community specific narratives and *gesselschaften* acquires it in due course. Whereas the former lives in age old stories, shared in various forms by the community, the latter finds a home in Histories. Community also comes to us as a concept through the reading of the experience of Partition. Community, as it appears through the government documents gets reduced to numbers that bear the brunt of state policy. These communities are visualised by the state as characterised by one single characteristic-language or religion. These are the communities on paper and convenient as subjects for policy formulation. But 'real' communities lie outside the ambit of these documents and as Melville talks of places such as 'kokovoko, an island far away to the West and South' which is not 'down in any map because true places never are', these communities too are only lived, seldom represented. The Partition of India was based on the justification of communal tension between Hindus and Muslims but our literatures have presented to us far more complex designs of communities with composite structures that have for considerable time shared a common culture in spite of religious differences. In this regard Bhalla argues that there are hardly any chronicles, songs, kisses and *tamashas* in Punjab, which record a long history of irreconcilable hatred between Hindus and Muslims. What the Governments never addressed was that culture instead of religion could be an equally valid characteristic defining communities, that culture far predated religion as a constituent of a community, that it was absurd to lump together culturally alien Muslims of Bangladesh and Pakistan as one nation and force the East and West sides of Punjab and Bengal respectively to be declared a part of India. Subsequently the Nationalists construct the other side as a country politically, ethically and *inherently* opposed to itself.

The Partition of India in this sense was an important event because it cartographically relocated what were once closely existing natural communities and instead formulated an *imagined community* of the nation. The history of India being the narrative of the modern nation rather than the primordial (and now secondary) community told the tale of the nation and obliterated that of the society. Riots between communities as a characteristic 20th Century phenomenon figure in the book prominently. The author also focuses on how they are portrayed variedly by the newspapers and the author's imagination. Whereas in the author's imagination they have stood out as a single most important event of his childhood, in the newspapers and other sources they do not even merit a mention. The author looks for reasons that lead to this silence in portrayal of riots by the state. The reason, of course is not far to find: the difficulty in representing an enemy that arises from *within* rather than *without*. The new age stories (literature) therefore become the narrative of the communities and make up for the silence in history when it comes to the portrayal of events like partition and riots. It records what happened he partition victims and subsequently victims of the numerous civil strifes whose point of view always remains under represented because these incidents undermine the very *notion of a nation* that history purports to create. It is also ironic that post partition, people across the border share all their old stories but from a point completely separate histories. And as Ghosh points out the nature of this relationship is governed by ... that indivisible sanity that binds people to each other Independently of their governments. And that prior, independent relationship is the natural enemy of government, for it is in the logic of the states that to exist at all they must claim the monopoly of all relationships between people. (230) It is shown how when the communities give way to nation their narration is taken over by a totalizing history. In *The Shadow Lines*, Tha'mma receives her ideas about the new nation that she comes to inhabit after Bangladesh becomes another country.

Some voices in the contemporary Indian Writing in English have studied the writing and historical justification of partition in this light. Historians have tried to read a communal angle into the event and tried to trace a genealogy of such events with a 'retrospective intelligibility' that leads to a known and expected end. It is interesting to note, therefore, in this light that

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while they highlighted stray incidents of communal violence in the pre-partition time to give a historical justification to the inevitable phenomenon of Partition, in *The Shadow Lines*, on the other hand riots, civilstrife and communal riots do not find expression in the official records. This happens because the same incidents, which at one time supported the political decisions will at the present only go on to, hamper its legitimacy. In both cases the community experience and its depiction suffers. The accounts of partition completely ignore the fact of the composite quality of relationships that existed between people of different religions and that there were other potent factors of their cohesion like a shared cultural ethos. *Train to Pakistan* by Khushwant Singh talks of such a definition of community in the village of Manomajra. Some of these books show the existence of an alternate religion with people of different faiths looking upon a common shrine (in this case a sandstone slab) as religious. Interestingly, this feature about close knit cohesive communities later gets transported to the imagined community of the state of otherwise riot-ravaged India.

6. Postcolonial Literature

As students of History we have all come across the term *Colonial*. We also know that the germs of modern day economic progress of the first world countries really lie in the movement called *Industrial Revolution*. With the coming of this movement in 17th century Europe, several fundamental changes were made in the means and modes of production. With the coming of mechanical support and subsequently industry the medieval economic model of feudalism was replaced by *Capitalism*. Capitalism was spurred on by the then pervasive ideology of *Utilitarianism* inspired by ideologues like Jeremy Bentham. The chief concern of this movement was "the greatest good of the greatest number." Not only was this 'goodness' solely material in nature, it also did away with all faith in morality and right action. Therefore to look for material benefit became the chief concern of those who held the means of production i.e. the capitalists.

The coming of Industry led to quick production of a large quantity of goods. To begin with this seemed like a welcome change from the earlier arduous methods of production that were both labour intensive and time consuming. However soon a new concern began to plague the capitalists: that of depleting home markets and lack of raw materials.

Simultaneously another development was taking place: the advancement of geography with the coming of sophisticated sea vessels and implements like magnetic compass. This meant that the Capitalists could not only get new places and markets to sell their mass produced goods but also find treasures of cheap raw materials. Thus began an unequal relationship between these two kinds of blocks of nations: one, mostly European, the beneficiary of Industrial Revolution looking for markets and raw materials and the other, belonging to Asia, Africa and America waiting to be exploited.

This exploitation that lasted over two centuries did not remain merely material in nature. It transformed itself to other forms: it became ideological, cultural and also spiritual. If we talk of India, the colonial exploitation on the economic front included a systematic destruction of the existing Indian Industry and the exploitation of its rich raw materials that included crops, minerals and metals. Dadabhai Naoroji, the first Indian to criticize this gross exploitation of India as a colony by the British said in this regard that Britain had acted like a "sponge" sucking out all that was valuable year after year with impunity and depositing the spoils on its shores. Gradually the ambition of the Raj increased and what they desired subsequently was conquering the colony also culturally and spiritually. It is in this regard that they imposed English as a method of instruction and also introduced 'the classics of English Literature' into Indian classrooms.

This total exploitation of India went on till the year 1947 when India attained freedom. Post World War II has seen many of these erstwhile colonies attain freedom partly as a result of sustained Popular Movements against foreign rule and partly because as a consequence of the economic ill effects of WWII most of these erstwhile colonies became incapable of supporting overseas rule.

For these countries in Asia, Africa and S.America, the experience of colonialism has become a major reference point in understanding their recent history. When we see this perception in the literature of these countries we study it as **Post-Colonial literature**. In their book *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (1989), Bill Ascroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin say that though historically Post-Colonial means “after colonisation”, in literature it signifies “all the experience affected by the colonial process from the beginning of colonisation to the present day.” John Theime, the editor of the famous *Arnold Anthology of Post-Colonial Literature* (1996) talks of two pivotal concerns of Post-colonialism:

- (i) Interrogation of Euro centric conceptions of culture;
- (ii) Interrogation of former canonical orthodoxies of “English Studies.”

The methods, modes and means of analyzing information, perceiving life experiences and institutions have, under colonial influence always been affected by the notion of European superiority and native people’s inferiority. With the coming of Post-colonialism this placement of Europe in the center as a model has ceased. The cultural systems and ethos of these new nations are now being analysed not with an outside European standard but by their own standard. It is like the locus of control has shifted from without to within. In India this talk of the change in the curriculum of English departments emerged and was first *appealed* by the introduction of a cursory paper on Commonwealth Literature. However the growing consensus on revising syllabus cannot be ignored for long. Recent years have seen a remarkable change in both the content and approach to the teaching of English in the entire country. The syllabii have not only seen an inclusion of more Indian writers writing in English but also that of Indian Writing in regional languages translated into English. Though in India we have not taken the radical route of “abolition of the English Department” as suggested by the famous Nigerian author Ngugi Wa Th’ongo, we have certainly considered rereading the prescribed English texts and the new Indian and Other World writings with a renewed sensibility by which we are no longer the subjects. Indian Writing in English today has to shake off the western influence it has been wearing since it was first introduced and has to begin asserting its credentials more genuinely.

7. Home/Homelessness

In the novel *The Shadow Lines* home is in an allegorical relationship with nation. Tha’mma talks of her upside-down house in Dhaka and the story of that house is in deed the story of partitioned India. As children living in a joint family in Dhaka, Tha’mma and her sister Mayadebi are witness to the feud between their father and his brother. Things come to such a pass that they think of dividing their house. This division is so tangible that an actual line is drawn in the middle of the house dividing everything including the commode. In this ludicrous detail the partition comes out for the reader as an event that was both irrational and avoidable. Another aspect of Partition of the house that is later applied to the nation is about the ideological division that follows this material division. Once the Partition has taken place, the other side of the house becomes inaccessible to everybody including the two girls, Tha’mma and Mayadebi.

Since Tha’mma is the elder one, she talks of the house as the **upside down house** in which everything is the opposite of how things naturally are. The two nations just like the two parts of a household were united at one time but the course of history (or failure of vision) divides them and for sustaining their separation the difference has to be created. These stories that Tha’mma creates to bring alive to her younger sister the situation of the other part of the house, are in spirit comparable to the modern version of fake national pride that is also likewise based on false stories of difference. Her decision to go to Dhaka, which is her erstwhile home in order to bring back her old sick uncle, is a very unsettling time for her. Routine activity of furnishing her personal details while finishing the documentation for her visa forms raise fundamental doubts about her identity. For the first time the sure shot and composed Tha’mma goes through pangs of some fundamentally disturbing interrogation. She wonders as to how the ‘place of her birth had come to be messily at odds with her nationality’. She cannot resolve the chaos that surfaces in the patterns that are so essential to her identity. The book has two sub-sections:

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Going Away and Coming home. Both phrases indicate the queer sense of home and homelessness that the Partition victims have experienced that allows them to dispense with a fixed point that signifies a point of departure.

1.6 Summary

- The novel follows the life of a young boy growing up in Calcutta and later on in Delhi and London. His family - the Datta Chaudharis - and the Prices in London are linked by the friendship between their respective patriarchs - Justice Datta Chaudhari and Lionel Tresawson.
- The narrator adores Tridib because of his tremendous knowledge and his perspective of the incidents and places. Tha'mma thinks that Tridib is type of person who seems 'determined to waste his life in idle self-indulgence', one who refuses to use his family connections to establish a career. Unlike his grandmother, the narrator loves listening to Tridib. For the narrator, Tridib's lore is very different from the collection of facts and figures.
- The narrator is sexually attracted to Ila but his feelings are passive.
- He never expresses his feelings to her afraid to lose the relationship that exists between them. However one day he involuntarily shows his feelings when she was changing clothes in front of him being unaware of his feelings. She feels sorry for him.
- Tha'mma does not like Ila. 'Why do you always speak for that whore'- She doesn't like her grandson to support her. Tha'mma has a dreadful past and wants to reunite her family and goes to Dhaka to bring back her uncle. Tridib is in love with May and sacrificed his life to rescue her from mobs in the communal riots of 1963-64 in Dhaka.

Self-Assessment

1. Choose the correct options:

- (i) The Shadow Lines given Sahitya Akademi Award for English in
- (a) 1980 (b) 1981
(c) 1989 (d) 1990
- (ii) The protagonist of a middle class boy
- (a) Tridib (b) Ila
(c) May (d) Narrator
- (iii) is a good looking blande having a long hair.
- (a) May (b) Tridib
(c) Nick (d) None of these
- (iv) The Headmistress of girls school in Calcutta
- (a) Ila (b) May
(c) Grandmother (d) None of these

1.7 Key-Words

1. Trauma : A deeply distressing or disturbing experience.
2. Protagonist : The leading character experience or a major character in a drama, movie, novel or other fictional text.

1.8 Review Questions

1. How is the novel "The Shadow Lines" both an example of and diversion from the *Bildungsroman* (novel of growth) tradition of novel?

2. What are Tha'mma's views on Nation and Nationalism? How do her experiences account for these? How are her views challenged in the novel?
3. How does the author use the trope of a divided feud-ridden house to discuss the issue of Partition of India?
4. According to the author "The Shadow Lines" was influenced by the 1984 Anti-Sikh riots. How does the book deal with the question of civil strife and rioting in Modern India? Discuss in detail the narrator's description of his experiences as a schoolboy caught in the 1964 Calcutta riots, their lasting influence on the narrator and also his subsequent questioning of their depiction in history?
5. Discuss the growth of the narrator's relationship with Ila from being a schoolboy in Calcutta to an adult in London.
6. How does the book question the writing of history? Discuss the portrayal of the Partition of India in history books and how in this regard "public chronicles" are challenged by "private chronicles"?
7. What are the "Shadow Lines" that the author talks about? How is the question of invented Nationhood esp. in relation with the Partition of India discussed in the book?
8. How does the non-linear structure of the book compliment its theme?
9. Discuss the relationship of the English family of the Prices and the Dutta-Chaudhary family of Bengal spanning three-generations.

Answers: Self-Assessment

1. (i) (c) (ii) (d) (iii) (c) (iv) (c)

1.9 Further Readings



Books

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Unit 2: Amitav Ghosh; Shadow Lines: Detailed Study of Part – I (A Bird’s Eye View)

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Objectives

After reading this Unit students will be able to:

- Have a bird’s eye view of the Shadow Lines.
- Discuss the novel Shadow Line.

Introduction

The Shadow Lines is a stunning novel – amusing, sad, wise and international in scope. It chronicles the story of two families, one in Calcutta the other in London from the outbreak of World War II to modern times. Inter-alia, *The Shadow Lines* is also a book about the prodigious imagination of its narrator who is the chronicler of the lives around him and presents the events with amazing insight, sometimes skipping from city to city in the same breath and recreating events that happened before he was born with marvelous accuracy and about the lines and borders that are being drawn world over to divide and isolate one man from the other.

2.1 Shadow Lines – A Bird’s Eye View

The *Shadow Lines* among other things deals with the Narrator’s growth from a tiny world, reverent of his mentor to a matured and grown up man of the same age as Tridib and in London too. So great is the influence of Tridib that he warily or unwarily copies him and toes his line. He does his Ph.D. on the textile trade between India and England in 19th century as Tridib did on Sena dynasty of Bengal. Their field remains the same viz. history.

Tridib, his guide, fires his imagination and instills a passionate zeal to learn to travel and take a flight into imagination without actually leaving the ground. Thus before Tridib left him forever he had nurtured the things taught by him so well that they became the corner stone of his itinerary. He had imagined everything so well and precisely that the whole world existed in right contours and forms in corner of his mind so that whenever he needed any information or recollect the past he just had to strain his brain and things would get going for him.

Traveling in his imagination with seriousness and precision handed him many a gift. He was a well-traveled and well-read man. The desire to read, analyze and reason had well developed in him. Whether it was spotting Prices house in London or India House or capturing Nick alive in his mind and growing with him in his thoughts for 17 long years he would never fail. He had learned to use his imagination pretty well and differed from Ila and his grandmother who were land-

locked and stagnated pools. Where Tha'mma could not foresee or imagine the border in its reality, Ila made a mess everywhere she went because of the lack of her power to anticipate, to imagine.

One evening when they were sitting out in the garden Tha'mma wanted to know whether she would be able to see the border between India and East Pakistan from the plane. When the Narrator's father laughed and said, why, did she really think the border was a long black line with green on one side and scarlet on the other, like it was in a school atlas, she was not so much offended as puzzled.

'No that wasn't what I meant, she said, Of course not. But surely there's something – trenches perhaps, or soliders, or guns pointing at each other, or even just barren strips of land, Don't they call it no-man's land?'

This is because of the two reasons, the first is her inability to imagine and the second is because of her traditional or conservative approach where she would rather like her things clearly chalked out and defined.

The grandmother thought this over for a while, and then she said: But if there aren't any trenches or anything, how are people to know? I mean where's the difference then And if there's no difference both sides will be the same; it'll be just like it used to be before, when we used to catch a train in Dhaka and get off in Calcutta the next day without any body stopping us. What was it all for then – partition and all the killing and everything – if there isn't something in between?

The Narrator's father got a bit perplexed on this and did not know what his mother actually expected and told her that it was the modern world. The border did not exist on the frontiers rather it was right inside the airport. She would cross it when she would fill in all those forms about her nationality, place of birth etc.

The answer confounded her and she slumped into the chair. She had not known all these things neither did she expect them.

Painfully the novelist describes her inability to come to terms with partition and accept the fact that her place of birth was now a foreign city and she would have to go to the place instead of coming as she earlier used to say.

The narrator puts it very subtly. 'It was not till many years later that I realized it had suddenly occurred to her then that she would have to fill in Dhaka as her place of birth on that form, and that the prospect of this had worried her in the same way that dirty schoolbooks worried her because she liked things to be neat and in place – and at that moment she had not been able to quite understand how her place of birth had come to be so messily at odds with her nationality. If she happened to say she was going to teach me Bengali grammar for example, I would laugh and say: But Tha'mma, how can you teach me grammar? Eventually the phrase passed on to the whole family and became a part of its secret lore.'

Slowly and gradually, disenchantment of Tha'mma with the place across the border coverts into hideousness. After the post partition blues and the death of Tridib in one of such riots in Dhaka, which is also the sensational event of the novel, her perspective changes. Now she has aversion for the inhabitants of the other side of the border. She gives away the most cherished gift of her husband, a necklace that she was presented with in a foreign country and with which she had never parted.

'It was the first thing, he ever game me – in Rangoon, soon after we were married. They have wonderful rubies there. I couldn't bear to give it away. He wouldn't like it. I haven't taken it off once in these thirty-two years – not even when I had my gallbladder operation. They wanted me to take it off, but I made them sterilize it instead. I wasn't going to have my operation without it. It's become a part of me now', Tha'mma explains to the narrator.

And then one day in the 1965, more than one and a half years after her trip to Dhaka, she gave it away.

The narrator playfully asks her about her chain one day, 'Tha'mma! I shouted, what's happened to your chain? What have you done with it?'

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She turned to look at me then. Her hair was hanging in wet ropes over her face, her eyes were glazed and her spectacles had fallen off. I was frightened by the sight of her. I wished I hadn't shut the door behind my back.

I gave it away, she said, her glazed, unfocused eyes alighting, not on me, but on a point on the wall above my head.

Why Tha'mma? I said. Why did you do that?

I gave it away, she screamed, I gave it to the fund for the war. I had to, don't you see? For your sake; for your freedom. We have to kill them before they kill us; we have to wipe them out.

She becomes so frantic and desperate that the few drops of blood, which came out of her hand when she struck the radio in rage; she wants to donate it to the hospital so that it could be used for the solidiers.

Ila thought not as obstinate and impulsive as Tha'mma, is a bold and a free girl. She does not want to be tied to any one place or culture. She wishes to lead a free and unstrained life. She would not respect her uncle Roby when he restrains her from leading a kind of free life in a Calcuttan hotel as she used to see in other places of the world. She would snub at him and even entered a verbal duel with him over this in a hotel in Culcutta where she had gone with Roby and the narrator. She wanted to dance and when Roby refused she wanted to go with anybody who would dance with her. Roby objected to this saying,

'I can't dance, he said, raising his head to look at her. And even if I could, I wouldn't in a place like thus. I think you should sit down, for you're not going to dance either.

At first she was merely surprised.

I'm not going to dance? She said. Why not?

Because I won't let you, said Robi evenly.

You won't let me? She said. The muscles of her face went slowly rigid.

'You won't let me? She said. Why, who do you think you are? Robi folded his arms across his chest. It doesn't matter who I am, he said, I won't let you.

She turned to look at the narrators, her lips going thin and bloodless. Does he think, she asked him, that I'm one of his college freshers or something? Does he think because he's got a lot of muscles, he can stop me? Does he think I'm scared of a college bully? Well let's see him stop me.'

After that Ila gets up to take the hand of the businessman with whom she wanted to dance and Roby instantly puts him down with a knock of his. A brief ruckus is created in the hotel and he gives a quick word of apology to every body, pays up the bill quickly and moves out with others. Out side he says to Ila,

'You shouldn't have done what you did. You ought to know that, girls don't behave like that here.'

What the fuck do you mean? She spat at him. What do you mean 'girls'? I'll do what I bloody well want, when I want and where.

No you won't, he said. Not if I'm around. Girls don't behave like that here.

Why but? She screamed. Why fucking well not?

You can do what you like in England, he said. But here there are certain things you cannot do. That's our culture, that's how we live.

Then she waved to a taxi. It stopped and she darted into it, rolled down the window, and shouted: Do you see now why I've chosen to live in London? Do you see? It's only because I want to be free. Free of what? The narrator said.

Free of you! She shouted back. Free of your bloody culture and free of all of you.'

But she has to pay a price for this kind of life that she leads. She is a failure both at home and outside. She suffers from racial discrimination outside India but still sings praises of those lands. Nothing that happens in India is as great as that happens in London even if it is mundane, trivial

or banal. 'We could never create history', she feels. But she is blithely ignorant of the enormity of Indian culture or even the little sense of being an India.

She further avers about the westerners and some western things great in her eyes:

'At least they knew they were a part of the most important events of their time—the war and fascism, all the things you read about today in history books, That's why there's a kind of heroism even in their pointless deaths; that's why they're remembered and that's why you've led us here. You wouldn't understand the exhilaration of events like that—nothing really important ever happens where you are.'

Tridib in the novel acts as a link between India and England as he invariably figures in one place or the other. He is a character of a different hue. Blessed though with an impressive personality, paradoxically he is a carefree man who does a little for a good or proper settlement in life. Thamma is critical of him because of this. But the fact remains that he is a darling of many.

He wins the hand of a foreign Memshaib in his nonsensical, carefree and innocent manner. Though in one of the letters he gives an erotic description of a couple in a wartime bomb devastated London theatre, there is no evil growing in his mind.

He remains a powerful factor and is an advocate of the frontier free world where one has as much of a chance to live in harmony and love as another. And his million-dollar story about a man in love with the woman across the seas become immortal in the pages of *The Shadow Lines*.

'Ah, said Tridib. That's the trick, you see. It happened everywhere, wherever you wish it. It was an old story, the best story in Europe, told when Europe was a better place, a place without borders and countries; it was a German story in what we call Germany, Nordic in the north, French in France, Welsh in Wales, Cornish in Cornwall: it was the story of a hero called Tristan, a very sad story, about a man without a country, who fell in love with a woman-across-the-seas....'

History has proved this time and again. Kargil united India after a long lull. The people were swept by a feeling of nationalism and everybody came forward to help the hardy soldiers in Kargil in any way he could.



Did u know?

The *Shadow Lines* gets across one fact of life very well that external threat unites the people. The personal, social and political differences sink in the face of a national tragedy or when the existence is at stake.

In the past when the tyranny and operation of the British became too much, the mighty empire was challenged with an outbreak of the revolt of 1857 and partition of Bengal united the whole India in the same way.

In the novel, Mayadebi experiences the same thing when she goes to London for a brief period during 1940s on the eve of her husband's posting there. She narrates her experience. The couple of months she had spent in London had been so exciting—the atmosphere had changed so dramatically. People were becoming friendlier, in the shops, on the streets, she couldn't help noticing. Everyone had become so much nicer. Often when she and Tridib were out walking, people would pat him on the head and stop to have a little chat with her; the shopkeepers would ask her where and how her husband was, and when was to have his operation. But it wasn't just—everyone was being friendly with everyone else. There was a kind of exhilaration in the air.

Mayadebi says that she had been lucky. She had been able to watch England coming alive and she would have missed that fact if she had not been there.

Tresawsen adds saying, 'People don't believe me, but it's the same over there—in Germany though of course in a much more grotesque way. It was odd coming back here—like stepping through a looking glass.'

The supporters of universal civilization assert that the unification of the earth's inhabitants is neither a remote utopian vision nor, ultimately, a matter of choice. It constitutes the next inescapable

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stage in the process of social evolution, a stage towards which all the experience of past and present is impelling us. Until this issue is acknowledged and addressed none of the ills afflicting our planet will find solutions, because all the essential challenges of the age we have entered are global and universal, not particular or regional. So powerful is the light of unity that it can illuminate the whole earth. The Shadow Lines wishes to establish such orders. How far is this attainable is yet to be seen but it certainly wants to do away with the petty differences that are killing the mankind everywhere. Whether it is Tridib, the narrator, Roby or Tha'mma—they are all disillusioned and disappointed by these differences which are a source of many a trouble afflicting the humankind. Roby cannot get over the trauma of Tridib's death and this haunts him like a nightmare. He thinks that he will be able to forget it but it comes back to him no matter how hard he tries, wherever he goes. He says,

'I've never been able to rid myself of that dream ever since it first happened. When I was a child I used to pray that it would go away: if it had, there would have been nothing else really to remind me of that day. But it wouldn't go; it stayed. I used to think: if only that dream would go away, I would be like other people; I would be free. I would have given anything to be free of that memory.

'Free', he said laughing.

And then he also muses on the subversive and the secessionist tendencies of some of the misguided people. So far as freedom is concerned, turning away from a piece of land or carving out a new state does not make the person free. The whole thing is a mirage.

'.....and then I think to myself why don't they draw thousands of little lines through the whole subcontinent and give every little place a new name? What would it change? It's a mirage; the whole thing is a mirage. How can anyone divide a memory? If freedom were possible, surely Tridib's death would have set me free. And yet, all it takes to set my hand shaking like a leaf, fifteen years later, thousands of miles away at the other end of another continent, is a chance remark by a waiter in a restaurant.'

Tridib had always been against these lines and had been a visionary. He had gone for the world without these lines. His tragic end marks a very poignant part of the story and increases an aversion for the mind troubling bickerings and bizarre human nature. Though man is a social animal and craves for the company he cannot stay in peace with them either.

The narrator has also done a lot of work on these lines and wondered about the strange calculus they present. His work on Bartholomew's Atlas where he has measured the distances between various countries and the conclusion he reaches is quite contrary.

2.2 Themes

The Shadow Lines hosts a number of themes. The first and foremost being that it is an attempt to draw the attention of the world to do away with borders that divide the people. Humanity after all is the same everywhere and any attempt to create differences is not only hazardous but also futile. There is nothing on earth that can divide a memory. Many lines and borders may be drawn but it can never set people free of their reminiscences, free of their associations, free of the love and a sense of belonging for their place of birth. The second thing it considers is how many of these lines can be drawn or divisions made. It is all a mirage. The world cannot be divided into innumerable small stages to satisfy the urge of the people to give their frantic sense of nationalism a political entity and a name. In Indian context, first it was the creation of Pakistan then the demand arose for Punjab, the North East and then Kashmir. Partition or secession is no solution. It may on the other hand trigger never ending hostilities and violence. There can be no better example than India.

For Dutta Choudarys the borders have already stopped existing. They frequent from one country to another and are quite at home and comfortable in other states. For Sahib and family India, London or Dhaka; it's all the same. He is as comfortable there as he is in India.

For Ila, frontiers of nations have reduced to airport longes. Like her father she is also a frequent visitor of the countries. But besides territorial borders, she does not recognize cultural borders as well which as the novel reveals may be fatal.

Tridib is another character that projects the theme of universal brotherhood and amity. His ideal story is about a time when Europe was a better place, a place without borders and countries – , a man without a country who fell in love with a woman across the seas. In his powerful imagination there exist lots of countries and people but no frontiers.

The narrator believes in the reality of space, that the distance separates but is sadly mistaken. He felt that the two pieces of land would slip away from each other like the tectonic plates of Gondwanaland but is amazed to find that there had never been a movement in the four-thousand-year-old history of that map when the places they knew as Dhaka and Calcutta were more closely bound to each other than after they had drawn their lines – so closely that he (narrator) in Calcutta had only to look into the mirror to be in Dhaka; a moment when each city was the inverted image of the other locked into an irreversible symmetry of the line that was to set them free-their looking glass borders. These border that are drawn are mere shadow lines according to the author, which often play a role opposite to what they are actually meant to. They reflect not the differences but the similarities and interdependence.

There are a good number of instances, which show a good fusion of language, culture and countries to bring home the point that the earth after all is like one country. But at the same time *The Shadow Lines* is also a warning for the cultureless identity. Ila is a burning example.

The views have also been expressed on the concept of nationalism that is gaining ground in today's world. The author has held the extreme form of nationalism responsible for many a problem these days. The separatist and secessionist tendencies are the outcome of it. Love of country, passion inspired nationalism and intoxication of patriotism cannot but lead to jingoism. The novel ignores the existence of nationalism. Tha'mma is ridiculed as 'a still surviving specimen of fossilized nationalism'.

Time and distance are taken to be shadows. The novel makes a smooth transition from present to the past and from past to the future without causing any friction. The novel highlights the reality of the frictions people create around their lives.

Amongst other things, *The Shadow Lines* is a fine blend of amusement, wisdom, pathos and sentimentality. Despite being Indian in origin it is international in scope. The novel is not written sequentially and it is one of its chief features. It keeps moving back and forth and happens at many places at one and the same time. Time and distance are the challenges to be overcome in the novel.

The Shadow Lines also talks about the havoc and the terror created by the riots. Despite the orgy of violence, bloodshed and merciless killing, they have a transient existence. They are washed out from the public memory before long. The narrator is at a loss to know that his friend, Malik at Delhi does not remember anything about the riots that took place in Calcutta and Dhaka almost the same time in which many were killed including his role model Tridib and neither do the newspaper carry and significant report on it or attach much importance.

Characters in the novel intermingle not as members of a distinct culture but as complex individuals in a world where geographic boundaries have truly become the shadow lines. These boundaries are like a mirror that seem to reflect not their differences but their similarities. May Price falls in love with Tridib and Nick marries Ila? The Prices are in good relationship with Dutta Choudary's family and this friendship spans over three generations. The British and the Indians remained locked for three hundred years in 'ruler and the ruled' relationship. The cultural differences do exist but it is not that people cannot live in harmony.

Removal of the boundaries or the borders so that the earth becomes but one country and mankind its citizen or to talk in more practical terms, formation of a world Government or at least peaceful co-existence without losing the cultural identity seems to be the message of the novel.

The Shadow Lines sparks off a debate between tradition and modernity. Good fences make good neighbours and limitations or fences are the touchstone of sanity is put under a test. The characters by whom the two concepts are conveyed are strong ones. Both are the radical women. One is rooted in tradition the other in modernity. On one hand we Tha'mma, a radical, and nationalist rooted in tradition but despised and mugged at invariably for nurturing primitive or supposedly

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orthodoxed views in the context of the modern day scenario. The author is not very keen to buy her theory of nationalism and tradition. Ila represents to a great extent the modern cosmopolitan world, and is a free high flying girl, a girl without barriers, hurdles and stops. The borders have long seized to exist for her. But quite painfully she suffers the brunt of not belonging to any one territory, one culture and one identity. Where then lies the scope for universal civilization needs more explanation and no doubt it, too, may suffer from limitations. The Shadow Lines is therefore not a solution to modern diaspora but is certainly an attempt to make an appeal to the think tanks of the world; leaders and intellectuals to spare a thought on the philosophy of the novel; to do some hard thinking and put some sense and sanity into the minds of the people.

The Shadow Lines besides dealing with some serious themes is also a picturesque novel. It deals with crowded, shabby and traffic-torn Calcutta with road side vendors and petty shopkeepers to picturesque and clean London; from traditional matriarchs to liberal and friendly Prices; giving snippets of war torn Germany and England. It captures the swining moods, whims and fancies of the people of scenic Kashmir and its inhabitants-innocent and pure.

It is the people at the lower level who get carried away by the emotions and indulge in what should not be done. Political bosses would still be all smiles and interact with warmth and courtesy with their counterparts while their respective side would be burning with hatred and vengeance. The aftermath affects these people the most. They become the playthings of the one in power, of religious zealots. It has been the sad experience of humanity that the religious passions are fanned more strongly than any other things. In these aspects The shadow lines is the novel of realism. It has message it wanted. The rest is for the recipients to decide and act.

So far as removing the boundaries and meaning of nationalism is concerned I personally don't quite agree with the opinion expressed in the novel. To take the universal civilization, world government etc. is far fetched or at least is very distant dream.

Customs and traditions by which man lives and proclaims his identity are rooted in culture. Culture is identifiable with territory and is evolved over the years. Culture demarcates one person from the other and territory one country from the other. Their norms, practices, beliefs are different from the rest and are likely to continue or persist. The Dutta Rai Choudarys in Dhaka divided and got separated after one generation. The property was divided and a line passed through bisecting the nameplate and an old commode. They were lawyers and wanted the division and handing over the property in lawyer like precision. This has a touch of India's real past. All Government property including tables, chairs, other office furniture and fans were counted and property accounted for the clear division.

I believe nationalism in itself is not to blame, if anybody is to blame then it is people for their material dream and their desire for power and rule. Any way, it has been a tremendous and commendable on part of Ghosh to make an attempt to bring the world in harmony and cordial relationship.

The novel highlights the two polarities of human nature. While there can be people on whom sense prevails and they mould palpably volatile situation to their control, there just may be another section which would make a mess of it and the human blood so spilled would shine in the flickering flames of the torched houses. Mu-I-Mubarak is just the kind of incident, which establishes the above fact.

This incident establishes that the riots, insurgence, unrest or mutual hatred is all the result of how you take up the situation and interpret it. If people take the brotherly stand and work in a secular way there is no reason to vie for each other's blood. Man gets carried away by his emotions if he does not exercise his reason and follow a little restraint. Mu-I-Mubarak incident clearly establishes this. On one hand it shows how the people of a particular area remained free of any communal brutality and butchery, which humanity usually has to undergo during such moments and how on the other hand the places which had nothing to do with it got involved and brought about the tragedy in so many lives.

On 27th December 1963, the relic disappeared from the mosque. There was an eerie calm as the news spread and then huge black flag demonstrations, marches of thousands of men women and children took place. The property was torched and destroyed but there was one special thing

about it that the whole episode did not report of the single loss of life. Thousands of people took part in demonstrations but they comprised Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, and Buddhists et al. A remarkable unity was displayed.

In Pakistan also there were meetings and demonstrations in both wings of the country. It was declared that the theft of the relic was an attack upon the identity of the Muslim. Karachi observed 31st December as a 'Black Day' and soon other cities followed the suit.

Later when the relic was recovered there was rejoicing all over Kashmir but while the people were dancing on the streets and organizing thanks giving meetings in Kashmir, a procession marching against the disappearance of the relic turned violent in Dhaka. A couple of lives were lost and properties of Hindus were put to fire. Over the next few days the riots spread outwards from Khulna into the neighbouring towns. Hindu refugees began to pour over the border into India. Soon Calcutta also erupted and mobs went rampaging through the city killing Muslims and burning and looting their shops and houses.

Once the riots started in Khulna the government of East Pakistan lost no time in sending the army there to put down the 'disturbances'. But it was already too late. One of the headlines of 7th January read: Fourteen die in frenzy off Khulna.

Over the next few days the riots spread outwards from Khulna into the neighboring towns and districts and towards Dhaka. Soon Hindu refugees began to pour over the border into India, in trains and on foot. The Pakistani government provided these trains with armed guards and appeared to have done with it could to protect them. At some places on the border the trains were stopped by mobs, some of which were heard to chant the slogans 'Kashmir Day zindabad' (perhaps at that very moment, the crowds in Kashmir were shouting 'Central intelligence zindabad'). But there did not appear to have been any serious attacks on the trains. The towns and cities of East Pakistan were now in the grip of a 'frenzy' of looting, killing and burning.

In Calcutta rumours were in the air – especially that familiar old rumour, the harbinger of every serious riot – that the trains from Pakistan were arriving packed with corpses. A few Calcutta dailies printed pictures of weeping, stranded Hindu refugees, along with a few lurid accounts of the events in the East. On 8th and 9th January, with refugees still pouring in, rumours began to flow like floodwaters through the city and angry crowds began to gather at the stations.

And so, the vents followed their own grotesque logic, and on 10th January, the day the cricket Test began in Madras, Calcutta erupted. Mobs went rampaging through the city, killing Muslims, and burning and looting their shops and houses.

The police opened fire on mobs in several places and a dusk to-dawn curfew was imposed on part of the city.

'Stray incidents' of arson and looting continued for a few days, in Dhaka as well as Calcutta, despite the presence of the two armies. It took about a week before the papers could declare that 'normalcy' had been 'restored'.

There are no reliable estimates of how many people were killed in the riots of 1964. The number could stretch from several hundred to several thousand; at any rate not very many less than were killed in the war of 1962.

It is evident from the newspapers that once the riots started responsible opinion in both India and East Pakistan reacted with an identical sense of horror and outrage. The University communities of both Dhaka and Calcutta took the initiative in doing relief work and organizing peace marches and newspapers on both sides of the border did some fine, humane pieces of reporting. As always there were innumerable cases of Muslims in East Pakistan giving shelter to Hindus, often at the cost of their own lives, and equally, in India, of Hindus sheltering Muslims. But they were ordinary people, soon forgotten – not for them any Martyr's Memorials or Eternal Flames.

The two governments levelled a series of symmetrical accusations. None of the two seemed to own up the responsibility for it. They wanted to wash their hands off the affair by blaming it on the other. On 7th January a spokesman of the External Affairs Ministry in New Delhi declared that the situation of 'lawlessness' in East Pakistan was an 'inevitable consequence of the incitement

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and provocative statements' made by Pakistani leaders and the Pakistani press. A few days later the External Affairs Ministry was informed of the Pakistani government's view that the communal incidents in East Pakistan were being played up by the Indian Press in order to 'divert the people's attention from the serious happenings in Kashmir'. But even more curiously, within a few days an almost congratulatory note entered into the exchanges between the ministries as they reviewed their respective successes in quelling the disturbances. For a while the Presidents of the two countries even seriously considered assuring a joint appeal for communal harmony. But soon enough, that plan went the way of all good intentions in the subcontinent, and the memory of the riots vanished into the usual cloud of rhetorical exchanges.

They have no use for memories of riots.

By the end of January 1964 the riots had faded away from the pages of the newspapers, disappeared from the collective imagination of 'responsible opinion', vanished, without leaving a trace in the histories and bookshelves. They had dropped out of memory into the crater of a volcano of silence.

The narrator's tryst with the redemptive mystery takes place in London a day before he has to leave it after almost a year. He has to fly back to India and goes to meet May. She spared the narrator of the courage and the tedious task of asking her the manner of Tridib's death. She narrated the whole sequence of events from the place they left the old man's house. There was already disturbance in the air and when they were on their way home, their car was stopped by a mob. They broke the windscreen and injured the driver. When the security man fired a shot at them, they fell back for a moment but then they spotted the old man coming on the rickshaw with Khalil driving it. The mob fell on them. Tha'mma forgetting about the old man shouted at the driver to drive away but May Price shouted back at her. In that moment of death and devastation, the old woman appeared to her as a cowardly and impotent creature. She threw open the door of the car and ran after them. Tridib shouted her name and lost no time to run after her and soon caught up with her and pushed her. May thought that he had come to pull her back but he instead moved and done to death with the other two. Soon the crowd melted away into the narrow lanes. When May Price reached the spot she found three bodies. They had cut Khalil's stomach open. The old's man head was chopped off and Tridib's throat was cut from ear to ear.

After narrating the tale, there was a pause and she and the narrator finished the ice cream and he thanked her for the nice dinner. He rose to go. When he finally took her leave she was in the kitchen. There was a note in her voice that made him wonder. He stepped into the kitchen and touched her arm. Her face was wet with tears.

'Don't go', she said. 'Please; I don't want to be along I am afraid.'

The narrator grasped her shoulder then, and she learnt her head against his chest so that he could feel her face wet against his shirt. He stroked her hair, once, twice, and then afraid of frightening her as he'd done once before. He tried to step back. She held him for an instant and then she let go and straightened up.

'Do you think I killed him?' She said. Then she continued, 'I used to think so too, I thought I'd killed him. I used to think: perhaps he wouldn't have got out of that car if I hadn't made him. If I'd understood what I was doing. I was safe you see I could have gone right into the mob, and they wouldn't have touched me, an English Memshaib, but he, he must have known he was going to die. For years I was arrogant enough to think I owed him his life. But I know now I didn't kill him; I couldn't have, if I'd wanted. He gave himself up. It was a sacrifice. I know I can't understand it, I know I mustn't try, for any real sacrifice is a mystery.'

After that, the narrator stays at her place and they lay in each other's arm quietly in the night. He was happy and grateful for she had given him the final redemptive mystery.

Self-Assessment

1. Choose the correct options:

- (i) Who wanted to see the border between India and East Pakistan?
 - (a) Tha'mma
 - (b) Tridib
 - (c) May
 - (d) None of these

- (ii) Who asks Tha'mma for her chain
- (a) May (b) Tridib
(c) Nick (d) The Narrator
- (iii) is obstinate and impulsive.
- (a) Tha'mma (b) May
(c) The Narrator (d) None of these
- (iv) The mighty empire was challenged with an outbreak of the revolt of
- (a) 1856 (b) 1857
(c) 1847 (d) None of these

2.3 Summary

- *The Shadow Lines* is a stunning novel—amusing, sad, wise and international in scope. It chronicles the story of two families, one in Calcutta the other in London from the outbreak of World War II to modern times.
- The *Shadow Lines* among other things deals with the Narrator's growth from a tiny world, reverent of his mentor to a matured and grown up man of the same age as Tridib and in London too. So great is the influence of Tridib that he warily or unwarily copies him and toes his line. He does his Ph.D. on the textile trade between India and England in 19th century as Tridib did on Sena dynasty of Bengal. Their field remains the same viz. history.
- The *Shadow Lines* hosts a number of themes. The first and foremost being that it is an attempt to draw the attention of the world to do away with borders that divide the people. Humanity after all is the same everywhere and any attempt to create differences is not only hazardous but also futile. There is nothing on earth that can divide a memory. Many lines and borders may be drawn but it can never set people free of their reminiscences, free of their associations, free of the love and a sense of belonging for their place of birth. The second thing it considers is how many of these lines can be drawn or divisions made. It is all a mirage. The world cannot be divided into innumerable small stages to satisfy the urge of the people to give their frantic sense of nationalism a political entity and a name. In Indian context, first it was the creation of Pakistan then the demand arose for Punjab, the North East and then Kashmir. Partition or secession is no solution. It may on the other hand trigger never ending hostilities and violence. There can be no better example than India.
- The narrator believes in the reality of space, that the distance separates but is sadly mistaken. He felt that the two pieces of land would slip away from each other like the tectonic plates of Gondwanaland but is amazed to find that there had never been a movement in the four-thousand-year-old history of that map when the places they knew as Dhaka and Calcutta were more closely bound to each other than after they had drawn their lines—so closely that he (narrator) in Calcutta had only to look into the mirror to be in Dhaka; a moment when each city was the inverted image of the other locked into an irreversible symmetry of the line that was to set them free—their looking glass borders. These border that are drawn are mere shadow lines according to the author, which often play a role opposite to what they are actually meant to. They reflect not the differences but the similarities and interdependence.
- Characters in the novel intermingle not as members of a distinct culture but as complex individuals in a world where geographic boundaries have truly become the shadow lines. These boundaries are like a mirror that seem to reflect not their differences but their similarities. May Price falls in love with Tridib and Nick marries Ila? The Prices are in good relationship with Dutta Choudary's family and this friendship spans over three generations. The British and the Indians remained locked for three hundred years in 'ruler and the ruled' relationship. The cultural differences do exist but it is not that people cannot live in harmony.
- The *Shadow Lines* besides dealing with some serious themes is also a picturesque novel. It deals with crowded, shabby and traffic-torn Calcutta with road side vendors and petty

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shopkeepers to picturesque and clean London; from traditional matriarchs to liberal and friendly Prices; giving snippets of was torn Germany and England. It captures the swining moods, whims and fancies of the people of scenic Kashmir and its inhabitants-innocent and pure.

- The novel highlights the two polarities of human nature. While there can be people on whom sense prevails and they mould palpably volatile situation to their control, there just may be another section which would make a mess of it and the human blood so spilled would shine in the flickering flames of the torched houses. Mu-I-Mubarak is just the kind of incident, which establishes the above fact.

2.4 Key-Words

1. Warily : Taught to be wary of strangers.
2. Trenches : A deep furrow, ditch or cut.

2.5 Review Questions

1. Who is Tridib's love-across-the sea? Discuss the relationship between Tridib and May.
2. Discuss Ila as a typical example of the cosmopolitan, travelling diasporic. Also highlight her experiences, including that of marrying Nick, which bring out her troubled racial and cultural identity?

Answers: Self-Assessment

1. (i) (a) (ii) (d) (iii) (a) (iv) (b)

2.6 Further Readings



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Unit 3: Amitav Ghosh – Shadow Lines: Detailed Study – II (Plot and Criticisms)

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Objectives

After reading this Unit students will be able to:

- Understand – the Plot of Shadow Lines.
- Discuss the Novelist's Criticism and Philosophy.

Introduction

The novel is primarily a tale and as such it must be strong in the story interest. It must provide amusement for the leisure hour and a welcome relief from the strain of practical affairs. It must be gripping in its interest. Any novel, which provides wholesome and stimulant refreshment, is fully justified, but to be really great it must deal not with sheer trifling, which lie upon the surface of life, but with passions, and conflicts and problems, which constitute the very quality of life. It must have greatness of subject and universality of appeal. It does not mean that the subject chosen must be from high life, as the simplest story of the humblest people may also be as appealing as the story of kings or princes.

1. A good plot that deals with events and actions.
2. The characters i.e. men and women who carry out its action and to whom things happen.
3. Dialogue, that is, the conversation of the characters.
4. Scene and time of action i.e. the place and time where the action proceeds and the actors play their parts. It may be some limited region or its action may span large number of places, cities sometimes even countries.
5. Its treatment of life and its problems should be realistic. Thus, it is realism, which distinguishes it from the earlier prose romances. The novel does not provide escape from life and its problems, but rather a better understanding of them. It also reflects the very spirit of the age in which it is written.
6. It demonstrates the author's views of life and of some of the problems of life. It thus gives the author's criticism of life or his philosophy of it.

Notes

3.1 Plot

The novel deals with events and actions and things, which are suffered and done, and this is what that constitutes the plot. Plot is the basic framework of any piece of writing around which the story is woven. The plot may also be defined as a systematic organization and arrangement of incidents. A good plot is skilfully constructed and avoids gaps and inconsistencies. The events when proceed logically and spontaneously aid the plot to be good. The novelist's method of narration often makes a tedious plot also interesting.

A good plot grips the attention and the interest of the reader while a loose plot wavers the interest. A compact, symmetrical and a well worked out plot gives aesthetic pleasure.

Credibility of authenticity is another quality of a good plot. It should seem to move naturally and be free from any touch of artificiality.

Plot may be simple or compound. A simple plot comprises one story and compound has two or more stories in combination. A compound plot to be successful should have the unity of the stories, that is, they should be wrought harmoniously together. If this element of judicious blend of the story lines were missing, then it would become loose which will be technically imperfect. Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* is an example of a loose plot.

A loose plot is the story of detached incidents or episodes having little logical connection with each other. Some unity that is there is provided by the personality of the hero who binds the scattered elements together.

Dialogue

The conversation of these characters comprises the third element of the novel viz. dialogue. It is often so closely connected with the characterization that it appears to be a fundamental part of it.

In the first place it should always constitute an organic or natural element in the story, that is, it should really contribute, directly or indirectly, either to the movement of the plot or to the exposition or the explanation of the characters in their relations with it. Irrelevant conversations, however smart or witty, cause aberration and should therefore be avoided. They break the fundamental law of unity. Examples of such contravention can be found in plenty in the discussions on society, politics, art and literature, which fill many pages in the novels of many authors.

Setting

The time and place of action in the novel is called setting. It includes the entire background of the story – the manners, customs, ways of life the natural background or the environment.

Thus there are novels of the sea and of military life; of the middle classes, the upper classes, the lower classes; of industrial life, commercial life, artistic life, clerical life; and so on. Commonly the local type of characters are presented amidst their local or normal surroundings but often the novelist changes the background or transports his characters to different environment that becomes the novel's place of happenings and hence its setting. Setting also includes the portrayal of some special classes, social groups and places.

3.2 Novelist's Criticism and Philosophy

The fifth element of the novel is the writer's criticism, interpretation or philosophy of life. Every novel before being written lies in the conceptualized form in the novelist mind. Since novel is concerned directly with life; with the ephemeral beings – men and women, their relationships, their passions, feelings and reactions, their joys and sorrows, highs and lows of life, the novelist's comments or suggestions or his experiences invariably come into the novel which are defined as his criticism, interpretation or philosophy of life.

It goes without saying that the great novelists of the world have also been great thinkers and observers of life. Therefore, their novels are the classic examples of some fine work done on the understanding and appreciation of the problems plaguing the human beings and life in general. Therefore, it is impossible for the novel not to reflect his thinking and his criticism of it.

3.3 The Shadow Lines – A Critique

The *Shadow Lines* began to be written after the assassination of Mrs. Indira Gandhi in the year 1984. The riots and the general massacre that began in Delhi and followed in other cities have an oblique bearing on the novel. The undertones of political vendetta are pervasive in the novel and can be felt when the efficacy of nationalism is questioned in today's context.

The *Shadow Lines* raises a few very important questions against the backdrop of emergence of increasing city-states everywhere and its demarcation and delineation on the maps. These shadow lines that are drawn cannot divide a memory or experience as Tha'mma and her old uncle believe and so do many others. The narrator's grandmother has got great affinity for Dhaka and her uncle who is ninety years old is staying there even after the partition and is reluctant to come to India. He lived with a Muslim family whom he had given shelter in his house during the partition. He is being looked after by the same family and he refuses to move away from this place. He says that if he moves out of his native place and transfers to Calcutta and they decide to draw a line once again then where would he go, having spent all his life in united India and being so enmeshed in Bengali culture where in the past Hindus, Muslims and Bengalis spoke the same language, shared the same culture and sprang from the same racial stock, and on the floor in a certain Bengali manner and celebrated their own Bengali new year on 15th April. Rabindra Nath Tagore was held in high esteem by one and all. He was born there, had spent his life there and would die there only. The same was the reaction of the narrator's grandmother also who is a staunch nationalist. She vents the similar feelings. Back in History in 1905, Lord Curzon, one of the able viceroys to rule India, tried to split Bengal into two halves on the plea of better administration and management. He tried to take advantage of the religious gulf between the two major communities but his efforts ended in failure in 1911 when the Bengalis irrespective of their religions got together and a bloody revolt proved that Bengalis were more prone to nationalist sentiments than to religious passions. Tha'mma wanted to visit her old house in Dhaka and actually went there with Tridib and May where she met her ninety-year-old uncle being attended by Khalil – the rickshaw driver and his family. She was quite surprised to find that her uncle who would even avoid the shadow of a Muslim while eating was being fed by a Muslim family. It is here that Tridib, he and Khalil become the victims of the riot.

However, the cold-blooded killing of Tridib in front of her eyes changes her perception. She too becomes a victim of aversion for those Pakistanis. Indians [undivided] who lived side by side for generations had suddenly turned on each other in a frenzy of killing. Troubled by the death of Tridib in Dhaka riots, she gives away her only gold chain to the war fund of 1965, 'For your sake; for your freedom', she tells her grandson, 'we have to kill them before they kill us; we have to wipe them out.' She takes comfort in the organized propriety of war now. We are fighting them properly at last, she says, with tanks and guns and bombs. Tha'mma is a staunch nationalist and British imperialism has made her senses sharp and keen and forged the theme of nationhood and the formation of Indian nation state. She tells him the story of her youthful days of college in 1920s when Indians were fighting the British tooth and nail for the freedom and there were a few militant revolutionary societies operating secretly in Bengal. One of her classmates was arrested by a police party in the middle of the lecture. He was a shy and bearded youth hut with exemplary courage and spirit of definance. How she had wanted to help him and his societies; to cook food for them, to wash their clothes even go to the front to kill the British officers with a pistol in her hand. Though she is unable to get over the trauma of partition and uses her coordinates of

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distance and time, which separate the two nations along with the hoard of other things, she very soon realizes the truth of it after Tridib's death. This sense was already in her when she told the narrator: Those people took a long time to build that country, hundreds of years, years and years of war and bloodshed. Everyone who lives there has earned his right to be there with blood – with their brothers' blood with their fathers blood and their sons' blood. They know they are a nation because they have drawn their borders with blood. Was is their religion. That's what it takes to make a country. Once that happens, people forget they were born this way or that, Muslim or Hindu, Bengali or Punjabi: They become a family born of the same pool of blood. That is what you have to achieve for India, don't you see? Ironically this happened with India too and against a common enemy as well but each time Indians fought it was for British and not for themselves. Indian – Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs fought together bravely against the British in World Wars I and II and in other wars in the British interest.

However, her nationalist faiths fail her after the sad experience in Dhaka. She wants completely to do away with other half: Pakistan occupied 'east'. She thinks of a solid demarcation between the two nations but once again she fails because she comes to realize that these borders have a feeble existence and no bloodshed can make them real and opaque. There had been a spree of violence, plunder and rape on either side of the border during the partition but even then it remained porous and so is now. It would be desirable here to make a mention of narrator's feelings who believed in the reality of nations and borders; he believed that across the border there existed another reality. The only relationship his vocabulary permitted between those separate realities was war or friendship. He did not realize then that the relations between countries are governed more by diplomacy and hypocrisy than the blatant truth.

On narrator's father's remark that she might see some greenery between the two countries at the border, she is totally swept off her feet: But if there aren't any trenches or anything, how are people to know? I mean where is the difference then? And if there is no difference both sides will be the same. It will be just like it used to be before. When we used to catch a train in Dhaka, and get off in Calcutta the next day without anybody stopping us. What was it all then – partition and all the killing and everything if there isn't something in between?

The novel does not explain the meaning of political freedom in the modern world but it certainly raises this question to think over. The force of nationalism, which can be destructive at times, however, has been well demonstrated in the novel. The shadow Lines we draw between people and nations can be both an absurd illusion and source of terrifying violence. In 1964, Tha'mma flies of Dhaka, she wonders if she would be able to see the borders between India and East Pakistan from the plane because after so much of violence and human slaughter, she feels that two nations would have built strong walls to distinguish. When her son laughs and asks her if she thought that the border was a long black line with green on one side and scarlet on the other like it was in a school atlas, she says, 'of-course not'. But surely there is something – trenches perhaps or soldiers or guns pointing at each other or even just a barren strip of land, which they would call no man's land? When she is told that she might see some green fields, she laments the mutilation of motherland for nothing. Born in Dhaka and separated from her birthplace by a history of bloodshed and lines on a map, Tha'mma loses her linguistic accuracy when she thinks of 'home'. She fails to understand how her place of birth had come to be so messily at odds with her nationality. Where politically it may be essential to have a separate identity and sovereignty the same cannot be said of the people of that state. It may be something thrust upon them, not required by them because they cannot divide the experience or their memories. (General Cariappa on the eve of bidding adieu to the Muslim soldiers on partition said, " We have shared a common destiny so long, that our history is inseparable. We have been brothers and we shall never forget the great years we have lived together. We shall meet again and whenever we meet it will be like brothers.")

The very place of birth can become alien to them that to go there would mean the possession of a passport or visa and couple of other paper work, may not just be acceptable. The old man when persuaded to come to India says, 'Once your start moving you never stop. That is what I told my sons when they took the trains. I don't believe in this India shindia. It is all very well. You are going away now but suppose when you get there, they decide to draw another line somewhere? What will you do then? Where will you move to? No one will ever have you anywhere. As for me, I was born here and I will die here.'

The Narrator finds a hero in Tridib and superimposes his personality over him. He has made him his star, a guide and motivating spirit. Tridib has given him worlds to travel in and eyes to see them with and has taught him well to use his imagination with precision. The narrator takes it down well and is always engaged in the imaginative renewal of times, places, events and past peoples. He often gets lost sitting under his grandmother's watchful eyes pretending to do his homework in what Tridib had told him about the sloping roofs of Colombo. The pattern they made, how sharply they rose if one looked at them from below, the mossiness of their tiles when one saw them close up, from a first floor window, and soon he felt that he too could see how much more interesting they were than the snake and the lizard, in the very ordinariness of their difference.



Did u know? The story of *The Shadow Lines* is told by an unnamed and undescribed narrator who despite this handicap is distinctly placed in the novel.

The narrator soon developed this into an uncanny ability and becomes potently armed with his newfound possession and when he goes to London he picks his way to Mrs. Price's house unaided. In the same way he also locates the Left Book Club where Alan Tresawsen had worked before the war. Tridib had once told him about that. And he is quite right. Similarly coming out of the tube station in London, he asks for Sumatra Road and guesses that the air raid shelter should be near by where Maya Devi, Mrs. Price and uncle Alan ducked into on their way back from Mill Lane, when one of those high caliber bombs exploded on Solent Road around the corner, blowing up most of the houses there. He precisely remembers that it was first of October 1940, two days before uncle Alan died. The narrator readily accepts with pride that Tridib had shown him something truer about Solent road, a bomb-devastated picture a long time ago in Calcutta, which had undergone fruitful change.

Once Ila, Robi and the narrator go for a couple of beers in the Grand Hotel in Calcutta. After a drink Ila wished to dance but both narrator and Robi refuse. She says that if they don't dance with her she would dance with somebody else and picks up a businessman.

Robi restrains her saying that girls didn't behave like that there. When she actually leaves for the businessman, Robi gets up and knocks him down. They come out and Ila shouts at him for behaving so violently, and says that she would do what she likes and that is why she had chosen to live in London. It's only because she wanted to be free, free for their culture, free of all of them. This incident adds an important dimension to her character to be reviewed only afterwards. Later when author discusses something about Ila's stay in London with Tha'mma, she says it is not freedom she wants, she wants to be left along to do what she pleases that is all any whore would want. She will find it easy enough over there, that is what those places have to offer. But that is not what it means to be free.

Narrator's grandmother is quite perverse to the idea of narrator's association with Ila in any way other than an ordinary friendship. But she had guessed it correctly that he was in love with her whom she regarded a whore and had been visiting prostitutes in Delhi. Just before a day of her death she writes a letter to the Dean of narrator's college in Delhi that he be thrown out because

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his conduct was not appreciable. Though the narrator is able to save the situation, he wonders how Tha'mma had come so near the truth.

Ila shares her house in London along with a few others. They comprised a bearded Irish computer scientist, a girl from Leiceser who had dropped out in her second year at the North London Polytechnic to work with the Forth International, and a gloomy young Ghanaian who was very active in the Anti-Nazi League. They would spend their evenings sitting around the deal table in the kitchen drinking mugs of tea and some time, when they could afford it, beer. Their conversations were hackneyed and common place and involved the discussion about the petty issues. Despite their bickering, Nick Price and Ila continued to visit each other and this culminates in their marriage, a marriage that is to prove unsuccessful for Nick's flirtatious attitude. Nevertheless they continued to live together under the same roof. Nick Price was unsuccessful with his job in Kuwait and comes to live off his wealthy wife. He thinks of starting some business with Ila's parental help. Thus the novel also sees the high and low of British society.

The narrator is in love with Tridib's niece Ila. But his love is never reciprocated though both of them spent quite sometime together in India as well as in London. Ila once takes him in dark room in Rai Bazar and both of them hide under the table and play houses. Ila calls it a cellar, which is similar to the one in Mrs. Price's house where she plays houses with Nick Price, her lover. The narrator remembers this experience for a long time and the same is relived with her on his visit to Mrs. Price's house years later in London where he went for his Ph.D. thesis. The narrator surprises everyone there with his remarkable ability to memorize and keep the stories in his mind, Tridib had told him. He finds May's house and the Cherry tree inside it and makes Roby remark, 'You are a mystic from the East. You have done it again.'

May Price, the daughter to Tresawsen, is kind and simple. She is a student studying at the Royal College of Music and Plays the oboe and joins an orchestra. She had a strong face and a square jaw and her thick straight hair came down to her shoulders. She had a wonderful smile, which lit up her blue eyes and gave her quality of her own and set her apart. When narrator visits her after 17 years of the Dhaka episode, he finds that she was exactly looking the same as he had seen her in Calcutta except that her shoulders had broadened for her height and had thickened; she seemed top heavy now and had not added an inch to her waist.

She earns her living by playing her organ in an orchestra though with a bored mechanical precision. Her income is not much but still she works for philanthropic causes and has joined a couple of small relief agencies, which provided housing for the survivals of an earthquake in Central America. She found great deal of satisfaction in her work and religiously collects money for her cause moving from road to road.

May becomes a victim of cultural dislocation when she comes to India and it sets the stage for personal and public tragedy. Her uncompromising humanitarian approach to humans and animals alike requires that she force Tridib's while they are on the drive to stop and attend to a wounded dog on a highway. Tridib who is driving with May and narrator in the car ignores the plight of the dog and moves ahead but May takes a glimpse and forces him to stop and turn around. She herself slits the throat of the animal to relieve him of the pain. Tridib hesitant in the beginning lends her the helping hand on seeing the energy and commitment of May Price for a Stray dog. The same humanitarian stint comes to the fore when they are surrounded by a rioting mob in Dhaka, overriding all the concerns of the rest of the party she jumps out of the car to save the old man of 90 who is following them on the Rickshaw.

Tha'mma had become widowed at a young age. In order to bring up her son she takes up a job of school teacher and continues there for 27 years. She is quite proud of the fact that she had not taken the help of anybody even from her own rich sister Maya Devi. She retires after 27 years and during this time she had maintained an effective control on her household. After this she becomes a bit lax and wishes to see her native house in Dhaka. By a coincidence Sahib gets a promotion and

a transfer to Dhaka and May Price also visits India during this time. All of them fly together to Dhaka. There were some signs of trouble there and Sahib had forbidden them to move to the old locality during that period but strong-willed and obstinate as Thamma is, she put her foot down for a particular day and goes there with Tridib and May Price. In the mob frenzy, Tridib is killed there, so is her old uncle whom she had gone to retrieve.

Self-Assessment

1. Choose the correct options:

- (i) A good plot deals with
- | | |
|----------------------|-------------------|
| (a) Events | (b) Actions |
| (c) Both (a) and (b) | (d) None of these |
- (ii) The time and place of action in the novel is called
- | | |
|-------------|-------------------|
| (a) Plot | (b) Theme |
| (c) Setting | (d) None of these |
- (iii) The Shadow Lines began to be written after the assassination of Mrs. Indira Gandhi in the year.
- | | |
|----------|-------------------|
| (a) 1988 | (b) 1984 |
| (c) 1991 | (d) None of these |
- (iv) May Price, the daughter of Tresvasen, is
- | | |
|---------------------|-------------------|
| (a) Kind and simple | (b) Aggressive |
| (c) Delectable | (d) None of these |

3.4 Summary

- Any novel, which provides wholesome and stimulant refreshment, is fully justified, but to be really great it must deal not with sheer trifling, which lie upon the surface of life, but with passions, and conflicts and problems, which constitute the very quality of life. It must have greatness of subject and universality of appeal. It does not mean that the subject chosen must be from high life, as the simplest story of the humblest people may also be as appealing as the story of kings or princes.
- The novel deals with events and actions and things, which are suffered and done, and this is what that constitutes the plot. Plot is the basic framework of any piece of writing around which the story is woven. The plot may also be defined as a systematic organization and arrangement of incidents. A good plot is skilfully constructed and avoids gaps and inconsistencies. The events when proceed logically and spontaneously aid the plot to be good. The novelist's method of narration often makes a tedious plot also interesting.
- A good plot grips the attention and the interest of the reader while a loose plot wavers the interest. A compact, symmetrical and a well worked out plot gives aesthetic pleasure.
- A loose plot is the story of detached incidents or episodes having little logical connection with each other. Some unity that is there is provided by the personality of the hero who binds the scattered elements together.
- The time and place of action in the novel is called setting. It includes the entire background of the story – the manners, customs, ways of life the natural background or the environment.
- The Shadow Lines began to be written after the assassination of Mrs. Indira Gandhi in the year 1984. The riots and the general massacre that began in Delhi and followed in other cities have an oblique bearing on the novel. The undertones of political vendetta are pervasive in the novel and can be felt when the efficacy of nationalism is questioned in today's context.

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3.5 Key-Words

1. Assassination : A person who seeks to promote human welfare.
2. Humanitarian : An attack intended to ruin someone's reputation.

3.6 Review Questions

1. Discuss the plot of the Shadow Lines.
2. What is dialogue?
3. What do you mean by settings? Discuss
4. Discuss the Shadow Lines as critique.

Answers: Self-Assessment

1. (i) (c) (ii) (c) (iii) (b) (iv) (a)

3.7 Further Readings



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Unit 4: Amitav Ghosh: Shadow Lines: Detailed Study of Part – III (Critical Appreciation)

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Objectives

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Objectives

After reading this Unit students will be able to:

- Assess the novel Shadow Lines.
- Critically examine the Shadow Lines.

Introduction

One of the chief features of The shadow Lines is that it is not written sequentially. The novel moves back and forth with little regard to the chronology of time and distance.

Therefore distance in The Shadow Lines is a challenge to be overcome by the use of imagination and desire until space melts. Time and space coalesce in a seamless continuity. Both Tridib and the narrator are engaged in the creation of the world as it comes alive to them or to their powerful imagination. Tridib's idea of romantic love in a place without history, without a past is magnificent. It is in this continuation that his ideal becomes the story of a man who fell in love with a woman across the seas. He also does the same and their love between them is powerful and passionate despite a great distance separating them. He has built a whole world with May Price to the extent that he imagines love making with her in wartime London's ruined cinema ball.

His stories and anecdotes about India, England and far away places serve food for thought for the young narrator and he follows in Tridib's foot prints to create worlds for him as it existed and will exist for him. 'Stories are all there to live in', Tridib tells him for if you don't invent stories for yourselves you will have to live in other's invention of them. Narrator begins to imagine the slooping roofs of Ila's house, as it must have existed when Tridib asked him if he noticed that fact. The pattern they made if one wheeled in the sky above them, how sharply they rose if one looked at them from below. Narrator by his dominant imagination is able to create Nick Price in blood and flush and keeps him in his memory as if he had really met him face to face, after Ila tells him about Nick under the table in Rai Bazaar and when he actually meets Nick Price in London he tells him, " I have grown with you."

4.1 The Shadow Lines – A Critical Appreciation

The Shadow Lines is undoubtedly a benchmark in Indian writing in English. The book stirs up a number of themes. Time and distance in The Shadow Lines are illusory. The novel moves back

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and forth and the events are not narrated sequentially. The narrator is a man with great and penetrating insight. He cannot only peep into the past and future but also into the lives of characters. The novel questions the efficacy of borders. The family of Dutta Choudarys and Prices in London defy the borders between them and there is a continuous to and fro movement between the two. They have good relations despite the racial and cultural differences. Ila gets married to Roby and May falls in love with Tridib. Had the tragedy not struck, then the two might have tied the nuptial knot. It, therefore, demonstrates that there is not much difference between the people across the globe. The humanity is same everywhere. It would not be too bold to say that Ghosh has gone a little too far to bring the people together.

Time and again he has tried to drive home the point that the borders that are drawn are more a source of violence than a mark of an actual separation. After the division of India, a carousal of violence was let loose. People living as brothers for centuries together turned on each other killing, ransacking and maiming one another. 'All the instances of brotherhood and unity of the past were thrown to the wind. The happenings on one side affected and controlled the events on the other. The undivided India had long been living in peace and harmony and though people followed different religions, they stayed in mutual cooperation. It was towards the beginning of 20th century that the seeds of dissension were sown by some people in connivance with and on provocation of the ruling masters and the matters came to such a pass where the partition was the only choice. M.A. Jinnah's obstinate stand for a different nation for the Muslim population was not only myopic but also hazardous. Even after partition, the people lived peacefully except those led by the rumour mills of their brothers being attacked and killed in the other parts. The most to suffer were typical plodding countrymen who did not even know who M.A. Jinnah or J.L. Nehru was or what was India being partitioned for. The old uncle to Tha'mma gives entry to a Muslim family, which stays with him and looks after him. Khali, the rickshaw driver is more concerned for him than his own family; and both the innocents are killed in the riots. The old folks stay where their roots are. They have an unqualified love and a deep sense of belonging for the place where they have been born. Tha'mma wants to get back to her native place in Dhaka and her uncle does not want to come to India. Both of them do not believe in the borders. Riots and other things of such nature are very transient in nature and get sucked up in the history and fade away from public memory before long. *The Shadow Lines* makes it amply clear.

The resurgent nature of the people's separatist tendencies is certainly taking the world by storm. Where on one hand, the world has become a miniature globe due to the rapid progress of information technology and means of transport; the other differences have cropped up that are obstacles to linking people and promotion of world peace or the idea of one Government. Be it in India or Sri Lanka or Africa or Ireland, there is constant effort to establish a separate identity by secessionists. Nationalism has been under a constant attack for these developments.

The *Shadow Lines* questions the sanity and efficacy of the borders that divide. These lines that are drawn on maps and on lands are powerless. These lines may put the people in different groups but they cannot divide and experience or memory as experienced by Tha'mma, her 90-year old uncle, Roby or by the narrator but they are certainly capable in one thing, that is, wreaking havoc, spree of violence, rape, murder and loot. In most of these cases the commoners neither have a say nor a will for such division. It is a handiwork of a few hungry of either power or ruled by fanatic dispositions.

Ghosh has also been able to comment on the riots, which are the result of people's insensitivity to their religion and the religion of others. A few amongst them, by fiery speeches or actions, play on the most sensitive realm of human beings—emotions and put them against each other. While the gullible bathe in blood and mutilation of limbs, they revel over a drink in the air-conditioned rooms.

If people think that they can divide the people by dividing the territory then they are sadly mistaken. The lines are only a mirage. No body can ever divide a memory or experience. The happenings in Kashmir on the eve of disappearance of the hair relic clearly demonstrated the same and benevolent nature of man. The villages on the Indian borders are more close to each other than the relatives on the either side. They still cross over without fear and get their daughters and sons married in the families across the border. These lines cannot set people free, had it been so Tridib's death would have set Roby free.

However, despite the weaknesses of these borders they also have their strengths which *The Shadow Lines* blithely ignores and no matter how much we may dislike them they would continue to exist and have their weightage. These lines, which mark the borders and distinguish one piece of land from the other, are certainly not warranted but even if these lines were not drawn the differences would persist. Then the culture, the origin, the customs and the influence of the areas would become the natural boundaries. We may do away with the lines that we sketch with the pencils on the map and by barbed wires or trenches on the land, the whole humanity is hard to be put under one umbrella. This is what suggests at the present. To say that earth is but one country and mankind its citizens will be rhetorical. A line has got to be drawn somewhere. To talk in practical terms even a large family gets cracked up and divisions take place like in the case of Tha'mma's joint family where the walls were erected to mark the separation. Then what can be said about the nations housing millions of people some times divided by the lines of caste, religion, origin, customs etc and about the world housing the nations? Good fence make good neighbours. Fences are the touchstone of sanity, to take in practical terms. Distance separates but it also goes without says that it makes the hearts go fonder. One has to respect the other in order to keep the good relationship and good neighborliness and this comes only if each maintains certain distance.

The narrator gives an incident of Jammu and Kashmir when Mu-i-Mubarak believed to have been the heir of prophet Mohammad himself was lost. In Kashmir the riots did not break out. The situations though was very tense and volatile, did not have any effect on the health of the people. People expressed their anger; and violence irrupted but it had a difference. It was not directed against other religious communities but against all the properties identified with the Government and Police. It happened this way because situation was not exploited by the so-called self-appointed guardians of humanity and religious communities. The sanity prevailed. The emotions of the people were not played with. The credit also goes to Maulana Masudi— an authentic leader, forgotten and unsung today who persuaded the first demonstrators to march with black flag instead of green and there by drew various communities of Kashmir together in a collective display of mourning.

Similarly, when it was discovered and restored to its place there was a lot of rejoicing. People came out on the street, danced together, and distributed the sweets though Pakistan was provoking the local populace. People were chanting 'central intelligence Jindabad' while on the other side a procession protesting against the displacement of the relic turned violent and many people were killed and injured. Thus it depends upon how you take up a situation. What surprised the narrator was that even after so many killings, looting and arson, riots are transient in public and Government's memory. The newspapers talked about the test match at Madras, which happened during the same time, and about the congress and other political news, the riots were never discussed. When they were happening the newspapers gave the details and details after details of accurate description. But once they were over there was nothing left to describe and they never spoke of it again. The *Shadow Lines* has thus an escapist tendency here as the narrator states, "But for those other things we can only use words of description when they happen and then fall silent.

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For to look for words of any other kind would be to give them meaning, and that is a risk we cannot take any more than we can afford to listen to madness." Such an approach can at best be described as wishing away the realities. But the hard fact is that realities do not go away simply because you close your eyes to it. The riots that are not discussed or causative factors sorted out would not bring one to reality and equip one to face the menace and stop its recurrence. It shows the lack of courage to take up the situation.



Notes

The Shadow Lines has also thrown some light on the riots, their nature and brutalities. The riots erupt due to the impulsive and rash action caused by provocation, more easily in those superfluous religious enthusiasts and self appointed champions who lose no time in fanning hatred and subversive activities.

The state is not free from the blame because it does nothing to restrict them or discourage them. Very often the existence of the Government depends upon them. Speaking or taking a stand against them means losing the popular votes for they do command those particular sections whose wrath may turn the tide against them.

The shadow lines is a continuous struggle of the author to undo the demarcations to prevent the establishment of the borders. And to reinforce his ideology, he has even gone to the extent that nationalism is a defunct force. Nationalism has been under attack in the novel, which is perceived as a hurdle in the unification of mankind. Tha' mma initially is projected as a great enthusiast of the concept of the nation and nationalism, the one who would not mind holding a pistol and killing for freedom. She believes in strength and opines that without building a good body first, one cannot build a strong nation, and similar other views. Her nationalism is broad enough to include the two nations and the line drawn as border between her native place in Dhaka and her present stay at Calcutta disturbs her. She stills grows nostalgic about her home in Dhaka. After the border between the two countries was demarcated, she believes that it separates. She believed that there would be trenches or soldiers pointing guns at each other. That the two would be distinct identities but to her dismay she finds otherwise and that is the reason she laments: Why all this killing, so much of blood shed if there was nothing to demarcate. It would be the same when we used to take a train from Dhaka and reach Calcutta. After the cruel killing of Tridib and the old man on the street of Dhaka her nationalism shrinks. It comes to denote India now. She tells her grandson that they must treat them now with guns and bullets and gifts away her only necklace to the war fund. She grows fanatical to the extent of donating a few drops of blood that drip when she bangs her fist on the radio. But the million-dollar question, which is best explained by Roby outside in London, is how many lines can be drawn. Everywhere they are doing it to be free –in Assam, the northeast, Punjab, Sri Lanka, Tripura. People are shot by terrorists and separatists and the army and the police. 'You will find somewhere behind it all that single word; every one is doing it to be free.' says he. He also remembers an incident when he would tell his policemen to be firm and kill whole villages if necessary to track down the terrorists for they should be willing to pay a price of their unity and freedom and on his return he would find a note saying ' we are going to get you, nothing personal, we have to kill you for our freedom'. Roby sums this up by saying: "why don't they draw thousands of little lines through the whole sub continent and give every free place a new name?" 'What would it change? It is a mirage, the whole of this is a mirage.' Even after hundreds of lines are drawn peace will not prevail. It will only lead to greater distrust

and sour relations. No one can divide the memory. People in that case also [after the borders are marked] continue to be on friendly terms then why to do all this? And this also happens to be the message to *The shadow Lines*.

Nationalism has been painted black in *The shadow lines*. It is held responsible though obliquely for division and separation. *Tha'mma* has been ridiculed as fossilized specimen of nationalism. However, to hold nationalism only responsible for such results in my opinion would be unfair. And to affirm the death of nationalism would be making a profound and authoritative statement.

It is agreed that the present form of nationalism can become the greatest obstacle to world unity and world peace. Nationalism was present in nascent form in very early societies. The tribal instinct has been magnified beyond limits resulting in political megalomania. But only nationalism is not to blame. There are other forces as well, which are responsible for division and conflict. Race, religion, colour, caste, economic difference, customs and languages are potent factors for realization of world government or world peace, Unlike *Dutta Choudarys* and the *Prices* in London, crossing national frontiers is quite a task for an average man. They have overcome the nationality and the borders because they are privileged and rich. Taking off from one country and landing in another is not difficult for them nor is their stay in different places. They might view the world as one but a common man still sticks to his place of birth that he calls his motherland and it is dearer a place than any other place on the earth. He has his reservations about other countries.

The novel has also thrown some light on the Hindu-Muslim relationship in the past. In the riots during the division, there were instances of Muslim families in Pakistan giving shelter to Hindus at the risk of their own life and Hindus in India doing the same. The discrimination and differences between the two communities are predominantly illusory. *Khalil* was a Muslim and a poor man but looked after the old man as if he was his own father but the bitter truth and irony remains that both the innocents are killed as it always happens. The mob does not distinguish between the rich and the poor, co-religionists or pagans.

Self-Assessment

1. Choose the correct option:

- (i) The shadow lines questions the
- | | |
|----------------------|-------------------|
| (a) Sanity | (b) Efficacy |
| (c) Both (a) and (b) | (d) None of these |
- (ii) ridiculed as fossilized specimen of nationalism.
- | | |
|------------------|--------------------|
| (a) May | (b) <i>Tha'mma</i> |
| (c) The Narrator | (d) None of these |
- (iii) was killed cruelly.
- | | |
|----------|-------------------|
| (a) May | (b) The Narrator |
| (c) Nick | (d) <i>Tridib</i> |

4.2 Summary

- The *Shadow Lines* is undoubtedly a benchmark in Indian writing in English. The book stirs up a number of themes. Time and distance in *The Shadow Lines* are illusory. The novel moves back and forth and the events are not narrated sequentially. The narrator is a man with great and penetrating insight. He cannot only peep into the past and future but also into the lives of characters.

Notes

- The novel questions the efficacy of borders. The family of Dutta Choudarys and Prices in London defy the borders between them and there is a continuous to and fro movement between the two. They have good relations despite the racial and cultural differences. Ila gets married to Roby and May falls in love with Tridib.
- Time and again he has tried to drive home the point that the borders that are drawn are more a source of violence than a mark of an actual separation. After the division of India, a carousal of violence was let loose.
- The Shadow Lines questions the sanity and efficacy of the borders that divide. These lines that are drawn on maps and on lands are powerless. These lines may put the people in different groups but they cannot divide and experience or memory as experienced by Tha'mma, her 90-year old uncle, Roby or by the narrator but they are certainly capable in one thing, that is, wreaking havoc, spree of violence, rape, murder and loot. In most of these cases the commoners neither have a say nor a will for such division. It is a handiwork of a few hungry of either power or ruled by fanatic dispositions.
- The narrator gives an incident of Jammu and Kashmir when Mu-i-Mubarak believed to have been the heir of prophet Mohammad himself was lost. In Kashmir the riots did not break out. The situations though was very tense and volatile, did not have any effect on the health of the people.
- The shadow lines is a continuous struggle of the author to undo the demarcations to prevent the establishment of the borders. And to reinforce his ideology, he has even gone to the extent that nationalism is a defunct force. Nationalism has been under attack in the novel, which is perceived as a hurdle in the unification of mankind.
- Nationalism has been painted black in The shadow lines. It is held responsible though obliquely for division and separation. Tha'mma has been ridiculed as fossilized specimen of nationalism. However, to hold nationalism only responsible for such results in my opinion would be unfair. And to affirm the death of nationalism would be making a profound and authoritative statement.
- The novel has also thrown some light on the Hindu-Muslim relationship in the past. In the riots during the division, there were instances of Muslim families in Pakistan giving shelter to Hindus at the risk of their own life and Hindus in India doing the same. The discrimination and differences between the two communities are predominantly illusory.

4.3 Key-Words

1. Fanatic : A person filled with excessive and single minded zeal, especially for an extreme religious or political cause.
2. Efficacy : The ability to produce a desired or intended result.

4.4 Review Questions

1. Briefly describe the novel 'Shadow Lines'.
2. Write a critical appreciation of the novel 'Shadow Lines.'

4.5 Further Readings

Notes



Books

1. Bagchi, Nivedita. "The Process of Validation in Relation to Materiality and Historical Reconstruction in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*." *Modern Fiction Studies* 39:1 (Spring 1993). pp. 187-202.
2. Bose, Brinda. (ed.) 2003. *Amitav Ghosh : Critical Perspectives*. Delhi: Pencraft Couto, M. 1988. 'Threads and Shards,' (review of *The Shadow Lines*), *Times Literary Supplement*, 28 October -3 November 1988, 1212.
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4. The Oxford UP (India) - Delhi: Oxford UP, 1995 - edition contains 4 articles: Kaul, AN. "A Reading of *The Shadow Lines*." pp. 299-309.
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6. Roy, A. 2000. 'Microstoria: Indian Nationalism's "Little Stories" in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*,' *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 35:2 (2000), pp. 35-49.
7. Sundar Rajan, Rajeswari. "The Division of Experience in *The Shadow Lines*." pp. 287-298.
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9. In Viney Kirpal, ed. *The New Indian Novel in English: A Study of the 1980's* (New Delhi: Allied Publishers Ltd.

Notes

Unit 5: Amitav Ghosh: Shadow Lines: Theme of Nationality

CONTENTS

- Objectives
- Introduction
- 5.1 Themes of Shadow The Lines
- 5.2 Summary
- 5.3 Key-Words
- 5.4 Review Questions
- 5.5 Further Readings

Objectives

After reading this Unit students will be able to:

- Portray the novel 'Shadow Lines.'
- Discuss themes of 'Shadow Lines.'

Introduction

The Shadow Lines portray discreetly though casually the racial. Ila was often out by Nick Price in school or on their way home, as he was ashamed of being seen in the company of an Indian. Ila conjures up a story about Magda who was troubled and beaten by Denise, a strongly built girl. Unconsciously she gives a vent to her trauma of prejudice, which she had faced.

Though the world is becoming a globe and lines across the nations are either being weakened or removed totally still the differences persist at the same time. Many new nations are either being divided or new ones are emerging after drawing these lines. These lines can be a source of perpetual and terrifying violence. Though the author defies these lines, he has respect for one's culture and roots in his utopian word of harmony and peace without which the person would only have a blank identity. Ila is a concrete example of this who respects neither territorial nor culture frontiers.



Did u know? One of the most important themes, which also becomes an important feature of *The Shadow Lines*, is the inefficacy of the lines drawn as borders whom author calls as shadow lines.

Another Important feature of *The Shadow Lines* is the havoc and the terror created by the riots, which find a mention in the novel. Despite the orgy of violence, bloodshed and merciless killing, they have a transient existence. They are washed out from the public memory before long. The narrator is at a loss to know that his friend, Malik at Delhi does not remember anything about the riots that took place in Calcutta and Dhaka almost the same time in which many were killed including his role model Tridib and neither do the newspapers carry any significant report on it or attach much importance. 'Then what is all this violence for?' he questions.

The *Shadow Lines* underlines the fact that human kind everywhere is the same. Characters intermingle not as members of distinct culture but as complex individuals in a world where geographic boundaries have truly become the *shadow Lines*. These boundaries are like a mirror that seem to reflect not their differences but their similarities. May Price falls in love with Tridib and Nick marries Ila? The Prices are in good relationship with Dutta Choudary's family and this friendship spans over three generations. The British and the Indians remain locked for three hundred years in 'ruler and the ruled' relationship. The cultural differences do exist but it is not that cannot live in harmony.

The role of nationalism in the modern times has been under attack in the novel. While it served a useful purpose in modern India in the first half of the previous century, the same cannot be said of it in the second half. Thamma is projected as a staunch nationalist who would give up her life to get freedom. The nationalist fervor in her is brimming. She worships strength and tells her grandson that he cannot build a strong nation unless he has a strong body and makes him go for a run everyday. It is because of this that she likes Robi for his big body and powerful muscles.

Nationalism is responsible for the great strides some countries have made. It distinguishes the countries from mere geographical entities to living entities. Nationalism had been present in embryonic sense as a feeling and a force in very early societies on earth. India and many other colonies owe their freedom to the spirit of nationalism. But there is no denying the fact that nationalism in the modern sense has emerged as a military force with imperialistic designs. It derives its strength from the race, culture, language and few other things common to a community progress and its identity so much so that it does not remain limited to a nationality but becomes a nation. And this is the negative aspect of nationalism, which has also been the focus of study in *The Shadow Lines*. To say 'Nationalism creates nations where they don't exist' will not be all that wrong.

Women are more powerful and active characters in the novel than their counterparts who are passive with an exception to the Prices.

Removal of the boundaries or the borders so that the earth becomes but one country and mankind its citizens or to talk in more practical terms, formation of a world Government or at least peaceful co-existence without losing the cultural identity seems to be the message of *The Shadow Lines*.

5.1 Themes of The Shadow Lines

First and foremost theme of *The Shadow Lines* is that it is an attempt to draw the attention of the world to do away with borders that divide the people. Humanity after all is the same everywhere and any attempt to create differences is not only hazardous but also futile. There is nothing on earth that can divide a memory. Many lines and borders may be drawn but it can never set people free of their reminiscences, free of their associations, free of the love and the sense of belonging for their place of birth. The second thing it considers is how many of these lines can be drawn or divisions made. As Roby rightly pointed out, it is all a mirage. The world cannot be divided into innumerable small states to satisfy the urge of the people to give their frantic sense of nationalism a political entity and a name. If such a thing could give freedom then perhaps it was worth it but as Roby himself is tediously familiar of the fact that it is not. Tridib's death would have set him free but in seventeen years of his demise Roby has not been able to either forget him or his manner of death. Similarly in Indian context, first it was the creation of Pakistan then the demand arose for Punjab, the North East and then Kashmir. Partition or secession is no solution. It may on the other hand trigger the never-ending hostilities and violence. There can be no better example than India. For a privileged section of society like Dutta Choudarys, the borders have already stopped existing. They frequent from one country to another and are quite at home and comfortable in other states. For Sahib and family India, London or Dhaka; it's all the same. He is as comfortable there as he is in India.

Notes

For Ila frontiers of nations have been reduced to airport lounges. Like her father, she is also a frequent visitor of the countries. But besides territorial borders, she does not recognize cultural borders as well which, as the novel reveals, may be fatal.

Tridib's ideal story is about a time when Europe was a better place, a place without borders and countries—, a man without a country who fell in love with a woman across the seas. In his powerful imagination there exist lots of countries and people but no frontiers.

Narrator believes in the reality of space, that the distance separates but is sadly mistaken. He felt that the two pieces of land would slip away from each other like the tectonic plates of Gondwanaland but is amazed to find that there had never been a moment in the four-thousand-year-old history of that map when the places they knew as Dhaka and Calcutta were more closely bound to each other than after they had drawn their lines —so closely that he (narrator) in Calcutta had only to look into the mirror to be in Dhaka; a moment when each city was the inverted image of the other locked into an irreversible symmetry of the line that was to set them free—their looking glass borders. These borders that are drawn are mere shadow lines according to the author, which often play a role opposite to what they are actually meant to. They reflect not the differences but the similarities and interdependence.

Tha'mma is another example in the novel who cannot bring her to adjust to the fact that her freedom of movement has been restricted by the line that we call border. Her Dhaka is still very alive and colourful in her memory as it was before in reality until Tridib's killing in Dhaka.

There are a good number of instances, which show a good fusion of language, culture and counties to bring home the point that the earth after all is like one country. But at the same time The shadow Lines is also a warning for the cultureless identity. Ila is a burning example.

Another theme of the novel is the concept of nationalism that is gaining ground in today's world. The author has held the extreme form of nationalism responsible for many a problem these days. The separatist and secessionist tendencies are the outcome of it. Love of the country, passion inspired nationalism and intoxication of patriotism cannot but lead to jingoism. Thus nationalism which had and which has great uses can become the greatest obstacle to world peace. This tribal instinct has been magnified beyond all measures resulting in political and economic megalomania. And the novel in its enthusiasm to prove the point has gone a little too far to proclaim that nationalism is a defunct force and in this background Tha'mma is ridiculed as 'a still surviving specimen of fossilized nationalism.'

Another theme of The shadow Lines is that the time and distance are shadows. The novel makes a smooth transition from present to the past and from past to the future without causing any friction. The novel highlights the reality of the fictions people create around their lives. Tridib says that every one lives in the story for stories are all there to live in, it is just a question of which one we choose. Thus it is a flight into the imagination where distance and time melt away. The story moves back and forth and many event in London are just the reliving of the events the narrator had imagined sitting in Calcutta. These events, however, do not bring about any dislocation because in time and space actual and imagined have a harmonious co-existence.

Self-Assessment

1. Choose the correct options:

- (i) It is all a mirage
 - (a) Roby
 - (b) Tridib
 - (c) Narrator
 - (d) None of these
- (ii) Shadow Lines is a warning for the cultureless identity, for example
 - (a) Ila
 - (b) Tridib
 - (c) Grand Ma
 - (d) None of these

5.2 Summary

- The *Shadow Lines* portray discreetly though casually the racial. Ila was often out by Nick Price in school or on their way home, as he was ashamed of being seen in the company of an Indian. Ila conjures up a story about Magda who was troubled and beaten by Denise, a strongly built girl. Unconsciously she gives a vent to her trauma of prejudice, which she had faced.
- Another Important feature of *The Shadow Lines* is the havoc and the terror created by the riots, which find a mention in the novel. Despite the orgy of violence, bloodshed and merciless killing, they have a transient existence. They are washed out from the public memory before long. The narrator is at a loss to know that his friend, Malik at Delhi does not remember anything about the riots that took place in Calcutta and Dhaka almost the same time in which many were killed including his role model Tridib and neither do the newspapers carry any significant report on it or attach much importance. "Then what is all this violence for?" he questions.
- The *Shadow Lines* underlines the fact that human kind everywhere is the same. Characters intermingle not as members of distinct culture but as complex individuals in a world where geographic boundaries have truly becomes the *shadow Lines*.
- Another theme of the novel is the concept of nationalism that is gaining ground in today's world. The author has held the extreme form of nationalism responsible for many a problem these days. The separatist and secessionist tendencies are the outcome of it. Love of the country, passion inspired nationalism and intoxication of patriotism cannot but lead to jingoism.
- Another theme of The shadow Lines is that the time and distance are shadows. The novel makes a smooth transition from present to the past and from past to the future without causing any friction. The novel highlights the reality of the fictions people create around their lives. Tridib says that every one lives in the story for stories are all there to live in, it is just a question of which one we choose. Thus it is a flight into the imagination where distance and time melt away.

5.3 Key-Words

1. Hazardous : Dangerous.
2. Dislocation : Disturbance from a proper, original, or usual place or state.

5.4 Review Questions

1. Discuss the theme of Nationality in *Shadow Lines*.
2. Time and distance are shadows. Discuss.
3. Write a short notes on the themes of *Shadow Lines*.
4. What are the features of *Shadow Lines*?

5.5 Further Readings



Books

1. Bagchi, Nivedita. "The Process of Validation in Relation to Materiality and Historical Reconstruction in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*." *Modern Fiction Studies* 39:1 (Spring 1993). pp. 187-202.

Notes

2. Bose, Brinda. (ed.) 2003. *Amitav Ghosh : Critical Perspectives*. Delhi: Pencraft Couto, M. 1988. 'Threads and Shards,' (review of *The Shadow Lines*), *Times Literary Supplement*, 28 October -3 November 1988, 1212.
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Unit 6: Amitav Ghosh: Shadow Lines: Characterisation

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Objectives

Introduction

6.1 Characterisation

6.2 Summary

6.3 Key-Words

6.4 Review Questions

6.5 Further Readings

Objectives

After reading this Unit students will be able to:

- Know various characters in Shadow Lines.
- Discuss the role of Tridib and Grandmother.

Introduction

The characters or the dramatis personae are the ones to whom things happen and they suffer and carry out the action of the novel. A novel's success to a great extent depends upon the vivid and graphic characterization. The characters should appear to be lively and move us as people in real life do. We should sympathize with them as we do with people in real life and their remembrance should linger in our memory when the book is laid aside and its details perhaps forgotten.

Commonly, there are two ways to portray the characters—one is direct or analytical and the second is indirect. In the first case, the novelist sketches his characters from the outside, dissects their passions, motives, thoughts and feelings, explains and comments on their acts. In the second case he stays out and his characters reveal themselves through their speech and action. The remarks, observations and judgments of other characters often make an enhancement in our understanding of them.

The plot and characterization are always united in a novel. In some novels the interest of particular character(s) is uppermost and action is used mainly with reference to this and in the other one the plot is uppermost and characters are used mainly to carry out the action. When the plot and characterizations are brought out together harmoniously and logically it proves to be a success. In the novel(s) where the interest of the plot is uppermost, the personality of the actors often suffers and they are not given either the due weightage or importance. The plot has little or no reference to them and their case may be like that of puppets being pulled at will by the showman.

6.1 Characterisation

6.1.1 Tha'mma

Born in Jindabahaar in Dhaka in a joint family, she grew up when the Indian National Movement was gaining a militant note and fight against the British was jointly being spearheaded by Mahatma Gandhi and the militant nationalists together. Tha'mma was quick tempered with a deep sense of freedom. She is proud, stubborn and strong-willed. She along with Ila is an itinerant character.

Notes

Her dislocation is a product of her circumstances. She is perplexed at the history that has led her place of birth to be so messily at odds with her nationality and has made her a foreigner in her hometown, Dhaka. She relates an incident of her college life of 1920s when one of her classmates was arrested by the police for revolutionary terrorism who looked shy and frail but had a great resolution and unrepentance for serving the cause of national freedom. Tha'mma so fervently wished to help him in any way she could, right from cooking the food to washing the clothes. She states that she could even have killed the British and the Police Officers for freedom.

She gets married to a man who gets postings in the neighboring countries and leaves Dhaka and goes to different places before finally coming down to Calcutta after her husband's premature death from pneumonia. She takes up the teaching job in one of the local schools and continues to serve there for twenty-seven years and retires as a Principal in the year 1962. It was with this job that she brings her son up and takes pride in her refusal for help from anybody especially from her rich sister Maya Devi. Tha'mma is a strict disciplinarian who was very punctilious about the right use of time and lost her temper if anybody wasted it. This was one of the reasons for her disapproval of Tridib and his waste of time. For her time was like a toothbrush: it went mouldy if it was not used and it began to stink. In her house no chessboard or any pack of cards was allowed. There was a battered Ludo Set somewhere but the narrator was only allowed to play when he was ill.

The second person that did not find her favour was Ila, the daughter of her sister Maya Devi. She did not want that her grandson should associate himself in anyway other than ordinary friendship with her and regards her as a whore. For her, Ila is firmly outside the pale of sobriety and common Indians, her looks and her clothes were inappropriate to her Bengali middle class origins: 'Her hair cut short like a bristle on the tooth brush, wearing tight trousers like a Free School Street whore', she comments. Her concept of freedom is quite different from that of Ila. On Narrators' interference that she stays in London because she wants freedom, Tha'mma quips 'It is not freedom she wants—She wants to be left alone to do as she pleases; that is all that any whore would want. She will find it easily enough over there; that is what those places have to offer. But that is not what it means to be free.' Ila on her part regards her as a fascist. Tha'mma's dislike for her is so much that a day before her death she writes to the Dean in Delhi where the narrator was pursuing his Ph.D that her grandson had been visiting the whores and he should be sent home. Until before her retirement, she had always been careful to maintain a titular control of the running of the household: Everybody was kept in her place by her; mother at housekeeping, father at his job and the narrator at his school and homework. Mother was not allowed to listen to her favourite programme on the radio more than once a week but now she did not seem to care any more. The narrator states that it was his mother that he was to go then when he was hungry and wanted the keys to the cupboard in which the Dalmot was kept or when he wanted money to buy peanuts at the lake. There seemed to be quite a change that came over her and now she would often look out of the window and get lost in herself.

Tha'mma was a woman with conviction and views of her own which she did not want to be flouted or over-ruled. She had contempt for the Sahib for his drinking but a deeper insight would reveal that it was based on the same iron fairness that she picked up from the school, which prompted her to pass commands. She dismissed one of her closest friends—a good-natured but chronically lazy woman; from her job in the school. For Sahib, she thought that he was not fit for his present high job; that he was weak and spineless and it was impossible to think of him being from under threat, of reacting to a difficult or dangerous situation with that controlled, accurate violence which was the quality she priced above all others in men who had to deal with matters of states. It was in continuation of her iron fairness that she does not approve of helping her relative, a sister in law in Calcutta, when she goes to visit her. The lady wanted her son to be

placed somewhere through her connections but she later said, "Don't get taken in by these stories. Once these people start making demands it never ends. Did anyone do anything to help me when I was living like that?"

Thamma is a steadfast nationalist. She is in love with her place of birth in Dhaka and cannot forget it in any way. The partitioned India and the line drawn between Calcutta; her present place of stay and Dhaka does not make any sense to her. She comes to realize that borders have a weak existence and not even the history of bloodshed can make them truly impregnable. She is undiplomatic and straight. For her, it is either this way or that but no in between. She had believed that she would be able to see the borders between India and East Pakistan from the plane. She also believes that there must be something— trenches perhaps or soldiers or guns pointing at each other or just barren strips of land which would be called no man's land but when she is told that she might see some green fields she is baffled and what she says raises a very important question. 'But if there aren't any trenches or anything, how are people to know? I mean, where's the difference then? And if there's no difference, both sides will be the same; it will be just like it used to be before, when we used to catch a train in Dhaka and get off in Calcutta the next day without anybody stopping us. What was it all for then— partition and all the killing and everything— if there isn't something in between?' Born in Dhaka, separated from her birthplace by a history of bloodshed and lines on the map she loses her linguistic precision in terms of her home. She fails to understand how her place of birth had come to be so messily at odds with her nationality. In her bafflement she says she would come home to Dhaka rather than saying 'she would go home to Dhaka' and this becomes a family joke.

She had long believed that nostalgia is a weakness. 'It is everyone's duty to forget the past and look ahead and get on with building the future', she used to say. But one in Dhaka, she understands the harsh reality of the border and realizes that dislocated people like her have no home but in memory. Stunned by her nephew Tridib's death by a riotous mob in Dhaka she develops a great hatred for Pakistanis. In 1965, one and a half years after her arrival from Dhaka, the Indo-Pak war starts and she gifts away her only necklace which was the last remembrance of her husband which she had never parted with even when she underwent gall-bladder stone surgery; to the war fund so that they may fight them properly at last with tanks and guns and bombs. She says to her grand son 'For your sake, for your freedom.'

Her concepts of nationalism, nationhood and the formation of Indian state are quite clear and forceful. It is observed in her perception of her early days when she saw, felt and experienced the tremors of British imperialism. Her sense of freedom and nationhood was sharpened. She finds Ila to be at odds with England and feels she has grafted herself on it. She tells her grandson—It took those people a long time to build that country; hundred of years, years and years of wars and bloodshed. Everyone who lives there has earned his right to be there with blood: with their brother's blood and their fathers' blood and their sons' blood. They know they are a nation because they have drawn their borders with blood. Regimental flags hang on all their cathedrals and their churches are lined with memorials of men who died in wars, all around the world. War is their religion. That is what it takes to make a country. Once that happens people forget they were born this way or that, Muslim or Hindu, Bengali or Punjabi. They become a family born of the same pool of the blood. That is what you have to achieve for India, don't you see? Hence when she suffers the greatest burden of historical dislocation, she finds herself aghast and at loss for words. She says: then what was the need for all this bloodshed and violence. However, her action in Dhaka in the face of the grim tragedy of the mob attack when she asks the driver to take away the car leaving her old uncle behind whom she had gone to retrieve puts her in the tight spot. Her earlier avowal of killing instinct when she narrated the incident of her classmate now sounds hollow.

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6.1.2 Ila

Ila is the grand daughter of Maya Devi and Tridib's niece. Her father keeps getting transferred from one country to another and as such she is raised all over the world. She is ultra modern in looks, behaviour and thinking. Tha'mma and she stand on two extreme ends of a bar. She lives in the present. With the memories of the past and the imagination of the future she does not have to do anything. Ila is an unimaginative realist. She could not be persuaded to believe that a place did not merely exist but it had to be invented in one's imagination. That is why although she had lived in many places she had never traveled at all. For her, current was the real. She attaches no value to the past and does not have any good reminiscences. That is why her boy friends change as quickly as one changes the toothbrush. It was also because of this and her lack of roots in one culture that she is unable to think of the compatibility of her relationship or subsequent marriage with Nick Price and it ends in failure. She functions as the obverse of the imaginative traveler. She is the globe-trotting daughter of a diplomat who himself is a world traveler. She has traveled a lot in her young age but experienced nothing. For her, the traveling of the world wide countries stay in her memory as nothing but the pictures of airport lounges and the locations of the toilets. For her the London Underground is just a mode of transportation. Here she stands in a total contrast to the narrator who believes passionately that a place does not merely exist but it has to be invented in one's imagination. She is also a victim of cultural dislocation and mal-adjustment for being raised all over the world. She fails to cultivate roots and sense of belonging for any place. Ila's cosmopolitanism is superfluous, as it is not rooted in any of the cultures. For Tha'mma, Ila is firmly outside the pale of sobriety and decent living. Whatever it may be, Ila is honest about what she is and does not have to do the double speak. She does not like Roby when he refuses to drink in the Grand Hotel. 'Drink!' cried Roby, 'In a place like that?' She said sharply, 'what is the matter you do drink, don't you? What about that story you were telling me about the send off you got from your fans in college. You are a little hypocrite.' For Ila morality if it existed could only be in absolute. She could understand and admire someone who never ate meat on principle but a person who was vegetarian only at home was to her, the worst kind of hypocrite. She also knew that Roby was quite happy to risk expulsion occasionally by smuggling bottles of rum into his college room and drinking the nights away with his friends. But she could not feel the difference between the two locales and the circumstances. There was a kind of difference between the monastic life of college where the students often played truant or indulged in one nasty thing or the other for they would often revel in observing the rules more by its breach. But there was nothing wrong in it. These differences would not come to her straightforward nature. Her looks and her clothes are inappropriate to her Bengali middle class origins. Tha'mma quips, "... Her hair cut short like the bristles on the toothbrush wearing tight trousers like a free school street whore. According to her she stays in London because she wants to be free, free of everybody. But it is not the freedom she wants, she wants to be left alone to do as she pleases, that is all that any whore would want. She will find it easily enough over there, that is what those places have to offer. But that is not what it means to be free." The same thing is reflected when along with Robi and the narrator she goes to the nightclub in the Calcutta's Grand Hotel where the three of them go drinking and she wants to dance with a businessman. Robi stops her and pushes the businessmen away. She gets furious and says what did you think you were doing? Robi says that girls do not behave like that over her. She could do what she liked in England but there are certain things she couldn't do. 'That is our culture that is how we live', adds he. She breaks away from them and shouts to the narrator, 'Do you see why I have chosen to live in London. Do you see, it is only because I want to be free-free of your bloody culture and free of you?' Her Childhood relationship with Nick is founded on an illusion of infallibility and decency of the British society. When the adult narrator discovers that Nick sleeps with other women even after being married to Ila, it does not surprise him much. The cultural or racial divides do the work here and the burden of indivisible Shadow Lines is borne greatest by her. Her marriage with Nick Price is a total disaster but she hides the

facts as age goes on to believe that one day it would be all right. She tells the narrator, 'I wouldn't leave him if he moves a whole bloody message parlor from Bangkok into the house. He knows that perfectly well. He knows that I love him so much that I would never leave him'. She definitely wins our admiration for her total surrender to Nick and her boundless love for him. Towards the end, the Narrator said, Ila had called up a few days before his departure saying that she would be too willing to help him but a day before he actually left for India, the narrator phoned her up, she expressed her inability as Nick and she were going on a holiday after a brief fight and told him not to believe anything she had said about Nick's infidelity the other day i.e. he was sleeping with other women in the house.

Calcutta's social environment is stifling for her and she escapes to London. She marries an Englishman, buys a house, finds a job, tries to settle down but fails. She lives in London because she wanted to be free, a freedom that is really shallow.

Ila shares a house in London with a group of people who are activists in various movements like the Forth International and the Anti-Nazi League. She is regarded as an upper class Asian Marxist. She grandly imagines that their endeavor will become a part of history, that in the future everyone will look to them quite in Nigeria, India, Malaysia etc.

Whatever the case may be she is more of a sympathetic character than an object of scorn or repulsion.

6.1.3 Narrator

The *Shadow Lines* come to us through the narration but the narrator remains unnamed and undescribed. In spite of that he is decisively placed in the novel. He is Thamma's grandson and is greatly influenced by her uncle Tridib in every way and superimposes his identity on his own. From him, the narrator learns about tropical snakes, Irish myths, Indian archeology and the London gossip. Tridib fires the boy's imagination with a longing to know, to experience and know the world not through passing the examinations but by the use of powerful and precise imagination.

Tridib had told him of the desire, real desire which was pure, painful and primitive that could carry one beyond the limits of one's mind to other places and other times and if one was lucky, even to a place where there was no border between oneself and one's image in the mirror. The narrator, as if almost by Divine revelation finds the house of Prices at Lymington Road in London unaided as he had conjured it up with concrete precision as Tridib and Ila had told him. This made Nick remark 'you are positively a mystic from the East. You have done it again.' In the same way narrator is able to tell about the inside of the house and lead his way himself until he finds a Cherry tree about which he had made a mention. Thus we find that Tridib had given him the worlds to travel in by telling him the stories and pointing out places in the Bartholomew's Atlas and had given him eyes also to see them with, so that long before the Narrator actually moves out of Calcutta his world had included Cairo, Madrid, Colombo etc. and he had infused life into them by his precise imagination.

In the beginning, he says Tridib went to England when he was eight, 'I have come to believe that I was eight too when Tridib first talked to me about the journey. I had decided that he looked like me'. Tridib becomes his mentor and guiding force. Despite his grandmother's disapproval of him and his ills, he stuck to him if not directly then furtively. Tridib has a shaping influence on him and has made him toe his line unconsciously. The narrator carries Tridib's talisman all through his life and wins wide appreciation for his remarkable power to see and imagine. He meets Tridib at the *adda* where he often used to come and the local lads would stick around him. He used to wield considerable influence over them because of his lively ways and enchanting personality and the narrator was thankful to him for the petty favours which his present secured for him. Narrator as a boy had not been more than a few hundred miles from Calcutta but had traveled infinite distance with Tridib in his room. He used to tell him about his experiences and stories and pointed

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the places out on Bartholomew's Atlas. This brings him in direct contrast to Ila who though having visited a number of countries had not traveled at all except remembering worldwide string of departure lounges and the location of ladies toilets.

The narrator is undoubtedly blessed with a sharp memory and surprises all by telling the way to May's house without anybody's help and once inside; the location of the kitchen, staircase and the Cherry tree. Nick takes him to be an Oriental mystic.

Narrator is in love with his cousin Ila and this love remains unconsummated throughout. He is always admonished against relationship with her by his grandmother and at times even scolded. But the fact remained that he remained that he remained enchanted by her to a very great extent until her marriage with Nick Price. It was for this that Tha'mma wrote a letter to his Dean in Delhi complaining that he had been visiting the whores and should be, as a punishment, sent home.

When the narrator learns Tridib's nature of death and discusses the gruesome nature of the riots; to his great dismay he finds that the riots had disappeared from the collective memory of the public. They did remember the cricket match between India and England but nothing about the riots. The people were reveling in the euphoria of the war with China in 1962. They felt that India was going to teach the Chinese a lesson. To narrator's utter disbelief riots paled into insignificance in the wake of the greater evil-war. During the partition there were many Muslims who gave shelter to Hindus and hid them in their houses for weeks together at the cost of their life and the same thing happened on the other side as well. But they were ordinary people, soon forgotten. There were no Martyr's Memorials or Eternal flames for them. Both the Governments indulged in issuing the press statements for peace and communal harmony and remained unsung than that of butchery that lingered with ghastly memory. Narrator to his dismay finds that he is nothing but a chronicler of the people around him.

6.1.4 Tridib

Son of a high official in the foreign office who held string of important offices in India and abroad, he stayed in the big mansion along with his grandmother at Ballygunji in Calcutta as his father mostly stated out on foreign assignments. He is fond of reading and is a voracious reader and the room where he stays is full of files of them. His knowledge about snakes and circumcision rights of some of the desert tribes surprises the narrator. He has an attractive personality and at Gole bazaar *adda* which he frequents, he has a number of admirers who comprise the local lads. Though he does not cultivate a long lasting friendship or companionship for that matter with them, still whenever he visits, there is a big crowd of them around him. He is a versatile entertainer and though he cannot get started on his own career, has a high influence on the lives around him. People stick to him when he is around. He was pursuing a Ph.D. in Ancient Indian History on Sena dynasty of Bengal. He is a wizard who has powerful imagination and penetrating eyes. He has an uncanny ability to look beyond time and space. His imagination knows no boundaries. He falls in love with May who stays in London and despite the distance separating them their love is intense. Tridib's ideal is the story of Tristen, " a man without a country who fell in love with a woman across the seas—"This however, is also one of the themes of *The Shadow Lines* which Tridib covers with his love for May Price. He knows of no borders and demarcations.

He has a shaping influence on the narrator who regards him as his mentor and guide. Narrator states that Tridib has given him worlds to travel in and eyes to see them with. Tridib has given him worlds to travel in and eyes to see them with. Tridib had often pointed out the places on the map and told him the stories in his room so that even before he had actually moved out of Calcutta, his world had expanded to include many places. He had already experienced and traveled without actually moving out. Like Tridib, narrator too possesses a strong imagination. His boyhood is filled with Tridib's London memories and his own visit there later is a reliving of the scenes and events of Tridib's experiences there. Though Tridib has got a strong imagination,

he never lived in the world of fantasy. He was much more contemptuous of fairylands than anybody else could be. He believed that we could not see without inventing what we saw.

However, he does not find favour with Tha'mma who wants that her grand child should not associate himself in any way with him. According to her, he is a loafer and a wastrel who does not do any proper work and lives off his father's money. He wasted his time, and for grandmother this was the biggest sin that any one could have committed. He was often spotted at Gole Bazaar *Adda* where he would be the center of attraction and would command the boys with his gossips. The wasted time began to stink according to her but narrator did not find Tridib's time, which could stink though he wasted it. Tha'mma believed that with his connections he could have got a high positions job and could have ruled the country like a lord. But he wasted his time in self-indulgence. Whatever the case may be, Tha'mma does like him in her own little way. Whenever he visited her house she went out of her way to give him a welcome by making an omelet herself that she rarely did for anybody else and made him comfortable. But she made it a point that he did not stay there for a long because a baneful object had the power of casting its influence even from a distance. Though he might not have been able to get started on his own career, he has a lot of influence on the lives of those around him. From Tridib, the narrator learns about snakes and Irish myths, about Indian archeology and London gossip. He fires narrator's imagination with a desire to know everything not by the middle class mentality of qualifying the examinations in good grades but by the use of his powerful imagination.

Tridib had told him of the desire that can carry one beyond the limit of one's mind to other times and other places and if one was lucky to a place where there was no border between oneself and one's image in the mirror. This strikes another theme of *The Shadow Lines* where the time and the distance are coalesced. The novel moves back and forth and the events do not follow sequentially.

Tridib had met May as a child in England when he had gone there to stay in 1940. Thereafter he had been sending Mrs. Price regular greetings but he sent a separate one for May when he was 27 and May 19. After the first three chatty letters, he writes a long and pornographic one giving an account of a child's view of a couple making love in war-torn London. He had expected May to meet – as a stranger in a ruin. He wanted them to meet as the completest of strangers – strangers across the seas. He wanted them to meet far from their friends and relatives – in a place without a past, without history, free, really free, two people coming together with the utter freedom of strangers. However, when May Price does come to visit him in India it results in his death, a tragedy.

Both Tha'mma and May are responsible for his tragic death as much as he himself is for his. He is a shy man who is able to write bold letters to May but on her arrival is like a young, diffident and shy boy. The pangs of the violent death of his great grand uncle, the 90-year-old uncle of his mother would not move him when the mob runs after him but a few sarcastic, inciting words of May did. His male ego was prompted and he left the car to run after her. The zeal of Tha'mma to save her uncle from the trouble torn Dhaka and bring him to India despite the warnings given to her by Sahib brings her to her native place in Jindabahar Lane in old Dhaka. On their return they are surrounded by a mob when May Price unlocks the door of the car and runs out to save the old man from being cut to pieces.

It would be unfair to term his action as only rash. He must have had a determination, gravity and basic courage when he ran after May and pushed her and instead of pulling her back to the car, went forward and fell on the people's back to get to his grand uncle. He is cut from ear to ear. For a long time (17 years) May is not able to overcome this ghastly scene and accuses herself of his murder. She tells it to the narrator that if she had not got out of the car he would not have followed her and if only she knew what she was doing, the tragedy could have been averted. But later she changes her stand and says that nobody could have touched her as she was an English Memshahib, but he must have known he was going to die. Thus towards the end, May Price shifts the blame

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on to Tridib himself and terms it as a sacrifice, which she cannot understand and must not try also because 'any real sacrifice is a mystery'. She invents this term and suffixes it to Tridib's nature of death.

6.1.5 May Price

May Price is a daughter of Tresawsen and is kind and simple. She is a student studying at the Royal College of Music and plays the oboe and joins an orchestra. She stays at 44 Lymington Road, London. She had got broad shoulders with average height and wasn't pretty. She had a strong face and a square jaw and her thick straight hair came down to her shoulders. She had a wonderful smile, which lit up her blue eyes and gave her quality of her own and set her apart. When the narrator visits her after 17 years of the Dhaka episode, he finds that she was exactly looking the same as he had seen her in Calcutta except that her shoulders had broadened for her height and had thickened; she seemed top heavy now and had not added an inch to her waist.

She earns her living by playing her organ in an orchestra though with a bored mechanical precision. Her income is not much but still she works for philanthropic causes and has joined a couple of small relief agencies, which provided housing for the survivors of an earthquake in Central America. She found great deal of satisfaction in her work and religiously collects money for her cause moving from road to road.

May becomes a victim of cultural dislocation when she comes to India and it sets the stage for personal and public tragedy. Her uncompromising humanitarian approach to humans and animals alike requires that she force Tridib while they are on the drive to stop and attend to a wounded dog on a highway. Tridib who is driving with May, and the narrator in the car ignores the plight of the dog and moves ahead but May takes a glimpse and forces him to stop and turn around. She herself slits the throat of the animal to relieve him of the pain. Tridib hesitant in the beginning but lends her the helping hand on seeing the energy and commitment of May Price for a stray dog. The same humanitarian stint comes to the fore when they are surrounded by a rioting mob in Dhaka; overriding all the concerns of the rest of the party she jumps out of the car to save the old man of 90 who is following them on the Rickshaw.

As a 19-year-old girl, May Price is curious and wide-eyed who gets fascinated by the sight of the cotton man twanging his long bow. She is so much delighted by his instrument that she asked the narrator to stop the cotton man for she would like to hear the sound of his instrument. She pays him Rs. five for that and he happily goes away. Another quality of May that shifts the spotlight on her is her kind and forgiving nature. In a drunken stupor narrator attempts to force himself upon her a couple of time on his drive from Lymington Road to May Price's apartment and finally does manage to tear off her brassiere but May pushes him out and forgives him the next morning when the narrator asks for pardon. She had quite loved him when she had visited India and took him along wherever she went.

6.1.6 Roby

The younger brother to Tridib and son of Sahib, a high profile diplomat is strongly built and is a favourite of Tha'mma for she believes that one cannot build a strong nation without building a strong body first. And she tells the narrator also that he is not like him; frail and thin.

Like his father, he had also traveled extensively but does not make a cultureless identity. He is very much Indian and tells Ila in Grand hotel when she insists on a dance; if not with them then with others, 'Girls don't behave like that here. You may do what you like in London. Here, there are certain things you cannot do. That is our culture; that is how we live', he quips. Strong as he is, he knocks down the businessman whom Ila selects for the dance and leaves the hall with her.

It was the same strength, conviction and a sense of morality, which made him rebel against the college union, and face them single handedly when they gave a call for strike over a student's

expulsion by the college authorities. The concerned student had asked a girl to walk up to his room for a cup of tea or some such thing. The students union was unanimous in calling for a strike but Roby alone in the whole college refused to go along with every one else. He did not argue or make speeches; he merely refused to attend the union meetings. And when some of the union leaders threatened to give him a beating, they found to their surprise that he was relieved at the prospect of settling the issue by a straightforward physical contest. Such was his standing in the college that eventually made the leaders call off the strike. For him a rule is a rule. If you break one you have to be willing to pay the price. He did not know the nitty-gritties of right and wrong but he had a certain sense, which told him about the morality. He certainly had his conscience or intuition, which led him directly to what he knew he ought to do.

The same thing he follows when as a collector he has to govern his district. He would tell the policemen, 'You have to be firm, you have to do your duty, you have to kill the whole village if necessary. We have nothing against the people; it is the terrorists we want to get. We have to be willing to pay a price for our freedom.' And often when he would get back home, he would find an anonymous note waiting for him saying 'we are going to get you, nothing personal, we have to kill you for our freedom.' It would be like reading his own speech transcribed on a mirror. This concept of freedom baffles him a bit. 'Everyone is doing it to be free', he muses. In Assam, The North East, Punjab, Sri Lanka, Tripura—people shot by terrorists and separatists and the army and the police. One would find a single word behind all this, 'everyone is doing it to be free.' Even he wanted to be free of the scaring and horrible killing of his brother Tridib in the mob frenzy at Dhaka. But he couldn't. He also reinforces the theme of the novel, which was earlier stated by Tha'mma: *can anyone divide a memory?* Perhaps none. If it were possible then Tridib's death would have done it; it would have set him free. That is, he would have forgotten him and the manner of his death but it is not the case. Fifteen years later thousands of miles away at the other end of the globe, a chance remark by a waiter in a restaurant about Jindabahal locality—the place where he was killed sets his hand shaking like a leaf.

6.1.7 Khalil

Justice would not be done if this character is not spoken about. Simple-minded, naive, short statured and jovial by heart, Khalil is not stupid as reported. His simplicity and love of mankind, which are rare these days, have given that impression though it is corrected in the novel itself. Khalil is a refugee from Murshidabad and has come to stay with Tha'mma's old uncle. The gentleman had given him space in his house so that others of his relations do not claim any rights in the house. However, it is he who takes to look after him in his old age. The years of service and care have taught him the old man's needs and his understanding. He is quite right to say that he wouldn't go. He takes him out on the plea of taking him to the court and himself dresses him up, even ties his shoelaces. He is simple-minded and loving in his care as well. He is a rickshaw puller and has got his wife and two small kids. He looks after the old man as if he were his own father. In the past years there has been trouble in that area and he has earned the rage of many a co-religionist for tending to a Hindu in the Muslim dominated locality. However, this does not deter him from looking after this old man.

Tha'mma comes to Dhaka to take her old uncle back to India but Khalil refuses to send him back. He is poor and manages with difficulty the two ends of life but is good enough not to discard the person who had given him the shelter. He cuts across all the lines that could isolate one man from another and the factors prompting divisions don't come to his mind. He becomes disheartened when Tha'mma insists on taking the old man back and the mechanic Saifuddin seconds her. He is at loss to think whom his two kids would address 'grandfather'. He gives his final nod only on the condition that if the old man does not feel comfortable in India he would be brought back. The cruel irony of fate however, does not let this innocent man live long and he is cut in the stomach

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by the riotous mob and becomes a martyr to a good cause along with Tridib. His fate might be a doomed one but he continues to shine, though nobody makes any mention of him or has a word for his glorification.

Self-Assessment

1. Choose the correct option:

- (i) Tha'mma was born in
 - (a) Dhaka
 - (b) Jindabahr
 - (c) Calcutta
 - (d) None of these
- (ii) 'For your sake, for your freedom' said by
 - (a) Tha'mma
 - (b) Tridib
 - (c) The Narrator
 - (d) None of these
- (iii) Ila is the grand daughter of
 - (a) Tridib
 - (b) Tha'mma
 - (c) Maya Devi
 - (d) None of these
- (iv) Who is unnamed and undescribed?
 - (a) Tridib
 - (b) Tha'mma
 - (c) The Narrator
 - (d) None of these

6.2 Summary

- Commonly, there are two ways to portray the characters—one is direct or analytical and the second is indirect. In the first case, the novelist sketches his characters from the outside, dissects their passions, motives, thoughts and feelings, explains and comments on their acts. In the second case he stays out and his characters reveal themselves through their speech and action. The remarks, observations and judgments of other characters often make an enhancement in our understanding of them.
- The plot and characterization are always united in a novel. In some novels the interest of particular character(s) is uppermost and action is used mainly with reference to this and in the other one the plot is uppermost and characters are used mainly to carry out the action. When the plot and characterizations are brought out together harmoniously and logically it proves to be a success. In the novel(s) where the interest of the plot is uppermost, the personality of the actors often suffers and they are not given either the due weightage or importance. The plot has little or no reference to them and their case may be like that of puppets being pulled at will by the showman.

6.3 Key-Words

- 1. Punctilious : Showing great attention to detail or correct behaviour.
- 2. Philanthropic : Showing concern for humanity.

6.4 Review Questions

- 1. Briefly explain the characters in the Shadow Lines.
- 2. What is meant by characterisation?
- 3. Give a character sketch of Tridib.

Answers: Self-Assessment

Notes

1. (i) (b) (ii) (a) (iii) (c) (iv) (c)

6.5 Further Readings



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Unit 7: Amitav Ghosh: Shadow Lines – Narrative Techniques

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- Objectives
- Introduction
- 7.1 Narrative Techniques
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Objectives

After reading this Unit students will be able to:

- Discuss Narrative Techniques of Shadow Line.
- Analyse the Shadow Lines.

Introduction

Amitav Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines* deals with political freedom in the modern world, nationalism and the shadow lines we people draw between us and nations. The line we have drawn is an absurd illusion. It is also a source of terrifying violence like a partition of India into Pakistan and Hindustan. The novel tells the story of the three generations of the narrator’s family spread over Dhaka, Calcutta and London. He lines up characters from different nationalities, religions and culture in a close knit, palpable world.

7.1 Narrative Techniques

The story revolves around the narrator’s search to find out about Tridib’s death which the family wants to forget but the narrator cannot because Tridib was his mentor and had given him ‘words to travel in’ and ‘eyes to see them with’. Through Tridib, the narrator learns using his imagination with precision. The novel also gives us the views of the various characters like Tha’mma, Ila, May, Jethamoshai and Robi and what boundaries mean to each of them.



Did u know? Memory is the history that determines our perception of the present and our identity. Since we cannot change the history, it depends on us to choose the memory that suits our point of view.

But, the memories that we choose to forget are more important than the ones we choose to remember. This is what Amitav Ghosh is trying to communicate to the readers through this novel. The language used by the narrator is quite simple and easy to understand and the meaning of the text is beautifully conveyed, wherein lies the strength of the novel. The narrator also uses the technique of going back and forth in time which keeps the interest of the reader built in. Such moments are rare indeed these days when one takes a book in the hand and is completely captivated by it after reading the first few pages. That happened to me recently when I started reading “*The Shadow Lines*” by Amitav Ghosh.

“The Shadow Lines,” Ghosh’s second novel, was published in 1988, four years after the sectarian violence that shook New Delhi in the aftermath of the Prime minister, Indira Gandhi’s assassination. Written when the homes of the Sikhs were still smouldering, some of the most important questions the novel probes are the various faces of violence and the extent to which its fiery arms reach under the guise of fighting for freedom. Ghosh’s treatment of violence in Calcutta and in Dhaka is valid even today, more than ten years after its publication. What has happened recently in Kosovo and in East Timor show that answers still evade the questions which Ghosh poses about freedom, about the very real yet non-existing lines which divide nations, people, and families.

Much has been written about Amitav Ghosh’s novels. “The Novels of Amitav Ghosh”, edited by R. K. Dhawan was published this year by Prestige Books, New Delhi. If I find it necessary to say something more about Ghosh’s writing it is because this novel moved me as none other did in the recent times.

Before that stage arrives the reader is catapulted to different places and times at breath taking tempo. The past, present and future combine and melt together erasing any kind of line of demarcation. Such lines are present mainly in the shadows they cast.



Notes

The Shadow Lines is the story of the family and friends of the nameless narrator who for all his anonymity comes across as if he is the person looking at you quietly from across the table by the time the story telling is over and silence descends.

There is no point of reference to hold on to. Thus the going away - the title of the first section of the novel - becomes coming home - the title of the second section. These two titles could easily have been exchanged. The narrator is very much like the chronicler Pimen in Pushkin’s drama Boris Godonow. But unlike Pushkin’s Pimen this one is not a passive witness to all that happens in his presence, and absence. The very soul of the happenings, he is the comma which separates yet connects the various clauses of life lived in Calcutta, London, Dhaka and elsewhere. The story starts about thirteen years before the birth of the narrator and ends on the night preceding his departure from London back to Delhi. He spends less than a year in London, researching for his doctorate work, but it is a London he knew very well even before he puts a step on its pavements. Two people have made London so very real to him - Tridib, the second son of his father’s aunt, his real mentor and inspirer, and Ila his beautiful cousin who has travelled all over the world but has seen little compared to what the narrator has seen through his mental eye. London is also a very real place because of Tridib’s and Ila’s friends - Mrs. Price, her daughter May, and son Nick. Like London comes alive due to the stories related by Ila and Tridib, Dhaka comes alive because of all the stories of her childhood told to him by his incomparable grandmother who was born there.

The tragedy is that though the narrator spends almost a year in London and thus has ample opportunity to come to terms with its role in his life, it is Dhaka which he never visits that affects him most by the violent drama that takes place on its roads, taking Tridib away as one of its most unfortunate victims. Violence has many faces in this novel - it is as much present in the marriage of Ila to Nick doomed to failure even before the “yes” word was spoken, as it is present on the riot torn streets of Calcutta or Dhaka. But the speciality of this novel is that this violence is very subtle till almost the end. When violence is dealt with, the idea is not to describe it explicitly like a voyeur but to look at it to comprehend its total senselessness.

Thus the way “violence” is brought into the picture extraordinarily sensitive: The narrator says, talking of the day riots tore Calcutta apart in 1964, “I opened my mouth to answer and found I had nothing to say. All I could have told them was of the sound of voices running past the walls of my

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school, and of a glimpse of a mob in Park Circus." I have never experienced such a sound, but God, how these sentences get under the skin, how easy it is to hear that sound, how the heart beats faster on reading these sentences!

There are many other reasons why "The Shadow Lines" is so special a book. It has many of the characteristics that elevate a book to the level of unforgettable literature. First of all there is this simple language. These days when doing acrobatics with words and language has become equivalent to paving new directions in the literary scene, it is heart warming to read a book in which straight forward language is used to convey what the author wants to say. And what messages are conveyed, what new ideas are unearthed! I am one of those readers who likes reading because of the power inherent in words. Whenever I read a new book, I always hope that the book contains sentences and words - at least a couple of them - that illuminate the heart and mind for a long time after reading, sentences which simply make life easier to live. There is a treasure of such sentences to be discovered in "The Shadow Lines". For example, look at what Ghosh says about knowledge and ignorance: "...he knew the clarity of that image in his mind was merely the seductive clarity of ignorance; an illusion of knowledge created by a deceptive weight of remembered detail." And there is this most beautiful of all sentences I have read for a long, long time - "And yet, when I look at her (the grandmother), lying crumpled in front of me, her white thinning hair matted with her invalid's sweat, my heart fills with love for her - love and that other thing, which is not pity but something else, something the English language knows only in its absence - ruth - a tenderness which is not merely pity and not only love." It is this tenderness of feeling, this feeling of "ruth" of which the novel is so full of, which moves me. For all the violence that plays the central role in the novel, it is this abundant feeling of tenderness in the novel that the narrator feels for the people, for Tridib, for Ila, for the grandmother, for May, for Robi, that has remained with me. Ghosh is also a humorous writer. It is serious humour. Single words hide a wealth of meaning, for example, the way Tridib's father is always referred to as Shaheb, Ila's mother as Queen Victoria, or the way the grandmother's sister always remains Mayadebi without any suffix denoting the relationship. Also look at this passage that describes how the grandmother reacts on discovering that her old Jethamoshai is living with a Muslim family in Dhaka. "She exchanged a look of amazement with Mayadebi. Do you know, she whispered to Robi, there was a time when that old man was so orthodox that he wouldn't let a Muslim's shadow pass within ten feet of his food? And look at him now, paying the price of his sins." "Ten feet! Robi explained to May in hushed whisper, marvelling at the precision of the measurement. How did he measure? He whispered back at my grandmother. Did he keep a tape in his pocket when he ate?" "No, no", my grandmother said impatiently. "In those days many people followed rules like that; they had an instinct". "Trigonometry!", Robi cried in a triumphant aside to May. "They must have known Trigonometry. They probably worked it out like a sum: if the Muslim is standing under a twenty-two foot building, how far is his shadow? You see, we're much cleverer than you: bet your grandfather couldn't tell when a German's shadow was passing within ten feet of his food." As I read Robi's comments, I laughed, at first. Then I had to swallow hard at centuries old injustice these words were trying to hint at. Finally, another important reason the novel succeeds is because the main characters are very real, almost perfectly rounded. I specially love the grandmother. She is the grandmother many of us recognise. In her fierce moral standards, spartan outlook of life, intolerance of any nonsense - real and imagined, she is as real as any patriarch or matriarch worth the name. And there is this very loveable character of the narrator. It is that of a boy who warms your heart, it is that of a man who knows and has lost love - more than once in his life - and thus makes you feel like hugging him close to your heart. On all scores Amitav Ghosh's "The Shadow Lines" is a novel which must be read and re-read, thought about and discussed upon. It is a book that stays with the reader long after the last page has been turned and the light has been switched off.

How might Shadow Lines by Amitav Ghosh be considered a post colonial novel? looking at you quietly from across the table by the time the story telling is over and silence descends. Before that

stage arrives the reader is catapulted to different places and times at breath taking tempo. The past, present and future combine and melt together erasing any kind of line of demarcation. Such lines are present mainly in the shadows they cast. There is no point of reference to hold on to. Thus the going away - the title of the first section of the novel - becomes coming home - the title of the second section. These two titles could easily have been exchanged. The narrator is very much like the chronicler Pimen in Pushkin's drama *Boris Godonow*. But unlike Pushkin's Pimen this one is not a passive witness to all that happens in his presence, and absence. The very soul of the happenings, he is the comma which separates yet connects the various clauses of life lived in Calcutta, London, Dhaka and elsewhere.

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Self-Assessment

1. Choose the correct options:

- (i) The *Shadow Lines* is the story of the
- | | |
|--------------|-----------------------|
| (a) War | (b) Family and Friend |
| (c) Politics | (d) None of these |
- (ii) The story starts about
- | |
|---|
| (a) Fifteen years before the birth of the Narrator |
| (b) Thirteen years before the birth of the Narrator |
| (c) After the assassinations of Indira Gandhi |
| (d) None of these |
- (iii) Mrs. Price is the daughter of
- | | |
|------------|--------------------|
| (a) May | (b) Nick |
| (c) Tridib | (d) None of these. |

7.2 Summary

- The story revolves around the narrator's search to find out about Tridib's death which the family wants to forget but the narrator cannot because Tridib was his mentor and had given him 'words to travel in' and 'eyes to see them with'. Through Tridib, the narrator learns using his imagination with precision. The novel also gives us the views of the various characters like Tha'mma, Ila, May, Jethamoshai and Robi and what boundaries mean to each of them.

Notes

- The narrator also uses the technique of going back and forth in time which keeps the interest of the reader built in. Such moments are rare indeed these days when one takes a book in the hand and is completely captivated by it after reading the first few pages. That happened to me recently when I started reading "The Shadow Lines" by Amitav Ghosh.
- "The Shadow Lines," Ghosh's second novel, was published in 1988, four years after the sectarian violence that shook New Delhi in the aftermath of the Prime minister, Indira Gandhi's assassination. Written when the homes of the Sikhs were still smouldering, some of the most important questions the novel probes are the various faces of violence and the extent to which its fiery arms reach under the guise of fighting for freedom. Ghosh's treatment of violence in Calcutta and in Dhaka is valid even today, more than ten years after its publication. What has happened recently in Kosovo and in East Timor show that answers still evade the questions which Ghosh poses about freedom, about the very real yet non-existing lines which divide nations, people, and families.
- The Shadow Lines is the story of the family and friends of the nameless narrator who for all his anonymity comes across as if he is the person looking at you quietly from across the table by the time the story telling is over and silence descends. Before that stage arrives the reader is catapulted to different places and times at breath taking tempo. The past, present and future combine and melt together erasing any kind of line of demarcation. Such lines are present mainly in the shadows they cast.
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- Thus the way "violence" is brought into the picture extraordinarily sensitive: The narrator says, talking of the day riots tore Calcutta apart in 1964, "I opened my mouth to answer and found I had nothing to say. All I could have told them was of the sound of voices running past the walls of my school, and of a glimpse of a mob in Park Circus." I have never experienced such a sound, but God, how these sentences get under the skin, how easy it is to hear that sound, how the heart beats faster on reading these sentences!
- Ghosh is also a humorous writer. It is serious humour. Single words hide a wealth of meaning, for example, the way Tridib's father is always referred to as Shaheb, Ila's mother as Queen Victoria, or the way the grandmother's sister always remains Mayadebi without any suffix denoting the relationship. Also look at this passage that describes how the grandmother reacts on discovering that her old Jethamoshai is living with a Muslim family in Dhaka. "She exchanged a look of amazement with Mayadebi. Do you know, she whispered to Robi, there was a time when that old man was so orthodox that he wouldn't let a Muslim's shadow pass within ten feet of his food? And look at him now, paying the price of his sins."
- How apt is the title of the novel "The shadow lines"? Contribution of colonialism in The shadow line. Comment- 'Postcolonial perspectives of Amitav Ghosh's Novels' Comment on the title of Amitav Ghosh's The Glass Palace? What is the significance of mirrors and reflections in the Shadow Lines? In what form does society appear in shadow lines? Can anyone point out instances in the book, Shadow Lines, where the author makes references to historical events character analysis of grandmother.
- How apt is the title of the novel "The shadow lines"? Contribution of colonialism in The shadow line. Comment- 'Postcolonial perspectives of Amitav Ghosh's Novels' Comment on

the title of Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace*? What is the significance of mirrors and reflections in the *Shadow Lines*? In what form does society appear in shadow lines? Can anyone point out instances in the book, *Shadow Lines*, where the author makes references to historical events character analysis of grandmother. Which is a good passage to analyze from 'The *Shadow Lines*' by Amitav Ghosh for a class presentation?

7.3 Key-Words

1. Absurd illusion : Wildly unreasonable, illogical, or inappropriate.
2. Terrifying : Cause to feel extreme fear.

7.4 Review Questions

1. Examine the title of the novel *Shadow Lines*.
2. Could you please explain the idea of 'History, Politics and the Individual in the novels of Amitav Ghosh'?
3. What is a summary and character analysis of *Shadow Lines* by Amitav Ghosh?

Answers: Self-Assessment

1. (i) (b) (ii) (b) (iii) (a)

7.5 Further Readings



1. Bagchi, Nivedita. "The Process of Validation in Relation to Materiality and Historical Reconstruction in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*." *Modern Fiction Studies* 39:1 (Spring 1993). pp. 187-202.
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4. The Oxford UP (India) - Delhi: Oxford UP, 1995 - edition contains 4 articles: Kaul, AN. "A Reading of *The Shadow Lines*." pp. 299-309.
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Unit 8: Rupa Bajwa: Sari Shop – Introduction to the Text

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8.1 Sari Shop – Introduction to the Text

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8.3 Key-Words

8.4 Review Questions

8.5 Further Readings

Objectives

After reading this Unit students will be able to:

- Know about Rupa Bajwa.
- Discuss Sari Shop.

Introduction

Rupa Bajwa (b. 1977) hails from Amritsar, Punjab. Her debut novel *The Sari Shop* was longlisted for the Orange Prize for Fiction 2004. **She** (born 1976 in Amritsar, India) is an Indian writer who lives and works in Amritsar, Punjab. In 2004, she published her first novel, *The Sari Shop*, which explores her hometown and the class dynamics of India. The novel won the writer flattering reviews, with reviewers calling her India's new literary find. *The Sari Shop* was long listed for the Orange Prize for Fiction in 2004. The novel won the XXIV Grinzane Cavour Prize for best first novel in June 2005, the Commonwealth Award in 2005 and India's Sahitya Akademi Award English 2006. Rupa Bajwa's second novel 'Tell Me a Story' has been released in April 2012. Again, some reviews are very good, but she has once again created controversy among the 'literary circles' in Delhi, since a part of her novel lampoons these very people. Currently, Rupa Bajwa is working on her third novel. The book has been wisely prepared in two parts, and the feel given to these two parts is so different that, even though there is a smooth and logical flow of happenings between the two, it could have easily been sold as two separate books! So, I thought it would make more sense to look at the two parts uniquely and review accordingly.

8.1 Sari Shop – Introduction to the Text

Ramchand, the protagonist, and all the main characters in the story, either work at or visit *The Sari shop* regularly. So the story has little to do with how the sari shop itself came into existence, or about its sales figures, or the number of varieties of silk-threaded draperies that the shop carries. All those people who scorned at the idea of having to read something that deals with boring saris, and moreover, Sari Shops-*come back!* It is definitely not a "chick flip". You can't but help getting reminded of the *Amol Palekar era of Hindi movies* reading the opening half of the book. There is this plain, simple-minded, lonely hero with a poignant past, his only company being his two colleagues: one, a mature, advice-giving family man, and another, a quick-witted carefree boy. The latter named **Hari**, has almost been sold out to the readers, by being presented as extremely adorable and cheerful; just like a comedian, who though crass and crude reaches out to the audience. The

parts where **Ramchand** pursues English-language education, his turmoil while encountering with a professor in the shop, the homework he does before visiting a royal customer's house, and the effort he puts in while sitting with his books, trying to make sense out of them- all form a very delightful read. However, towards the end of the first part, the story drags, becomes repetitive, and you wish the author would move on to unravel **Lakhan Singh's** story, and also the mystery behind the woman who *drinks*. You also become impatient as the apparently-unimportant characters such as **Tina Kapoor** and **Bhimsen Seth** are pointlessly discussed extensively.

Ramchand had overslept, waking up only when the loud noises of a brawl in the street below had jolted him out of sleep. He rubbed his eyes, got out of bed and walked to the window. He peered through the rusted iron bars at the two people who were fighting. One was a milkman, who had been cycling back after delivering milk. He had large, zinc-coated iron cans (that looked like aluminium) strung on either side of his bicycle, and one of these now-empty milk cans had bumped into a pedestrian on the narrow street. A quarrel had flared up, and the two were shouting loudly, red-faced and angry. Ramchand sleepily brushed his teeth by the window, leaning against the wall. He watched the fight to its end, when the previously interested spectators began to get bored and calmed the two men down. It was just a ritual; people in street fights thought they lost face if they stopped before spectators intervened. The two finally went on their way. After that, Ramchand just forgot to watch the clock. He continued to stare vacantly out of the window for a long time, his mind still fuzzy with sleep. The morning was cold. His limbs and mind both felt frozen. He moved slowly.

By the time Ramchand looked at the little red clock on the table and realized that he was late, it was too late. He bathed and dressed in a hurry, dropping things all over the place, scalding himself when he warmed water for his bath on the kerosene stove, fumbling with the buttons of his shirt and spilling hair oil on the already dirty floor. Finally, he ended up misplacing the heavy iron lock, along with the key stuck in it. He found both right under his nose on the table after he had spent fifteen minutes searching for them everywhere. He rushed out of his room and made his way towards the shop then, half-running and half-walking through the narrow streets of the crowded bazaar, hurrying past pedestrians, dodging rickshaws and nearly running into vegetable carts. He could feel his toes perspiring inside his grey woollen socks.

Even at ten in the morning, the bazaar was throbbing with activity. The halwai was already installed in front of the Mishthaan Sweet Shop, pressing jalebi batter into squiggly shapes that floated and simmered in the oil in a big iron cauldron. All the shops had opened for the day and, Ramchand noted guiltily, all the shop assistants were already in place, trying to sell things with fixed, attentive smiles on their shiny, bathed faces. The older part of Amritsar, the original walled city, was full of bazaars – small ones that only the locals knew about, tiny bazaars that sold bangles and cloth very cheap but could be reached only on foot through tiny alleys; and the big, main bazaars where the streets were wider and the roads slightly cleaner. The bazaars of Amritsar were busy places where every day, throughout the year, transactions were made, prices were bargained over, shops were opened in the mornings and shut in the evenings. It was as if it had been so since the beginning of the world and would continue to be so till the end. There were no empty spaces. Just a jumble of old red-brick houses, aged grey concrete buildings, shops, signboards, numerous tiny temples at street corners and crowded streets thronged with people, cows, stray dogs, and fruit and vegetable carts. There were no gates, doorsteps led straight from the streets into houses. Crumbling buildings ran into each other like cardboard boxes stuck together with glue. Their terraces overlapped, there were no boundary walls – you couldn't tell where one finished and the next began. Occasionally there would be a gap in the mass of buildings, where a very narrow alley would nudge aside the unyielding walls and squeeze itself painfully through the solid structure, joining another similar narrow lane at some other end. It could take years to

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become familiar with the maze-like network of lanes and alleys and short cuts in the old city.

Money, congestion and noise danced an eternal, crazy dance here together, leaving no moving space for other, gentler things. The actual walls that had once surrounded the city had fallen away long ago, but the ghosts of the wall still separated the old city from the newer one that flourished outside. The shop where Ramchand worked was one of the oldest in the city, tucked neatly between Talwaar Furnishings and Draperies and Chanduram's Fabrics. It was in one of the main bazaars, buried away in the heart of the city, yet with parking space for customers who came in cars. In this bazaar the shops were larger, older, with good reputations and old, regular customers, and the shop owners were all considered respectable people from old business families.

A large fading green signboard over the entrance of the shop said Sevak Sari House in flourishing red letters in old-fashioned calligraphy, both in English and Punjabi. The signboard was slightly misleading. The shop did not just sell saris. The ground floor stocked fabric for men's clothes as well. There were dreary browns, blues and blacks here. But very few people visited Sevak Sari House to buy Men's Suitings and Shirtings. There were other, larger shops that had a wider range devoted entirely to men – the Raymond showroom two lanes away, for instance. So the ground floor of the shop wore a dusty, jaded look. It was the first floor of the shop that sold saris. Packed from shelf to shelf with crisp Bangladeshi cottons, dazzling Kanjeevarams, Benaras silks, chiffons, crepes and satins, it was the first floor that pulsed with an intoxicating, rich life of colour and silk and brought in the customers and profits. And it was because of the huge success of the first floor that Sevak Sari House had been known for decades as the best sari shop in Amritsar. The suiting and shirting cut-pieces in the ground floor cowered under the sparkling, confident dazzle above.

There was also a second floor that customers never saw. It contained a big storeroom and a small toilet that was used by Mahajan and the shop assistants. Ramchand was one of the six shop assistants who worked in the sari section. Ramchand stood uncertainly at the entrance of the shop, his palms cold with sweat despite the chilly December morning, thinking of Mahajan's rage that would soon descend on him. Ramchand peered in. Mahajan was talking to somebody over the phone. Making the best of it, Ramchand sprinted across the ground floor under Mahajan's disapproving eyes.

There was a Ganesha idol installed near the foot of the staircase that led up to the first floor. Ramchand would usually stop before this idol for a moment every morning, with folded hands and closed eyes, and then after an elaborate bow, would make his way upstairs. But today he just hurried up the shaky wooden steps as fast as he could. His heart thudded inside his chest. Any moment now Mahajan would stop him and give him a dressing down. But he climbed up to the first floor safely. In the small space on top of the staircase, and in the front of the big glass door that led into the sari section, he tried to get his breath back. Then he struggled with his shoes, first hopping on one foot and then on the other, trying to get them. His hopping made thumping noises on the wooden staircase.

And then Mahajan finally bellowed from below. 'Trying to break the place? Coming late? You think I don't notice? Am I blind? Stupid? Hunh? You think a shop can be run like this? You will come and go as you please? Are you a king or something? Raja Ramchand? Should we send an entourage and a bagghi to pick you up every day?' Ramchand stopped immediately and waited. Silence. Then he cautiously took off his shoes, washing his feet wouldn't smell so. He had taken a bath and worn fresh socks, and yet . . . He knew that the smell would become even stronger by the end of the day. Ramchand arranged his shoes neatly on the wooden shoe rack on the side of the wall, in the row assigned to the shop assistants. The other rows were for the delicate sandals, the kolhapuri chappals, the platform and stiletto heels of the female customers. Ramchand patted his

hair and straightened his kurta to make up for the feet, and walked in. He went to his allotted place and sat down cross-legged. The shop was an old-fashioned one and there were no counters. The entire floor space was spread out with thick mattresses covered with white sheets, and on these mattresses sat the shop assistants every day, facing the customers, and endlessly rolling and unrolling yards upon yards of important coloured fabric.

‘Namaste Ramchand Bhaiya. Late again?’ grinned Hari, sitting some distance away. Hari was the youngest among all the shop assistants. He was a careless, cheerful, young man with a cheeky face, who often got shouted at by Mahajan. However, unlike the effect they had on Ramchand, these unpleasant encounters always left Hari completely unfazed. In fact, on slightly dull days, they even cheered him up. ‘In from one ear, and out from the other,’ he would always say, beaming broadly, after Mahajan had spent considerable time and energy telling him what he thought of him. Because of Hari’s junior status, his inexperience and his indifference to the intricacies of fabric, he had been put in charge of Paraag Daily Wear Saris and Paraag Fancy Saris for Occasions. One didn’t need much skill or specialized knowledge of fabric to sell these. It would be a long time before Hari would be put in charge of anything else. Not that he cared. Ramchand smiled back at him. ‘What to do, yaar?’ ‘We could hear him shouting at you even through the door,’ Hari said, still grinning. ‘What to do, yaar?’ Ramchand said again, this time more gloomily. ‘Never mind,’ said Hari comfortingly. ‘You did a good deed for our Mahajan. If some people don’t get to shout at someone early in the morning, they can’t digest their breakfast properly. Now that raakshas Mahajan will have very good digestion.’ Hari cackled at his own joke. ‘For that is the sort of man our Mahajan is,’ he added, winking at Ramchand, and cackled again. Then he sighed theatrically.

Gokul sat placidly folding some saris into neat rectangles. He was in charge of very expensive crêpes, and in the wedding season he also helped with ornate wedding lehngas and saris. He was a grave-looking man in his forties who took his work very seriously. Mahajan thought a great deal of his experience and his sincerity, but this still didn’t save Gokul from occasional tongue lashes from Mahajan. About ten years back, Sevak Sari House had also decided to stock chunnis. For there were many Sardarnis from old Sikh families, matriarchs as well as young women, who came in to buy saris and asked hopefully whether they had chunnis as well. For them, saris were necessary, they were fashionable, but their real clothes were salwaar kameez. And so, after many of them had wistfully enquired about chunnis, saying that Sevak Sari House was so dependable, and that it was so difficult to get really good quality stuff in chunnis these days, Bhimsen and Mahajan had put their heads together and had decided to stock chunnis too.

And Gokul had made it his business to know his chunnis very well. There were no ordinary chunnis in Sevak Sari House. They sold saris, so if some chunnis had to be there, they had to be special. All of them were two and a half metres in length, and of the required width. No well-dressed sardaarni liked a chunni shorter or narrower than that; they thought that those kind of chunnis were for Hindu women or for very young girls. Apart from the length, the quality was taken care of. There were pure chiffon chunnis, there were lovely white silk chunnis that could be dyed to match any silk salwaar kameez, there were gold-edged bridal odhnis in red, pink and maroon, there were white chunnis with discreet light-coloured embroidery at the borders for widows from good families, there were the colourful ones embroidered with traditional phulkari work – usually bought by Sikh women for their daughters’ trousseau, and many others. And Gokul could handle all the customers who came in asking for chunnis. Despite this, Gokul didn’t swagger. He was in awe of Mahajan and was always warning Hari to be careful not to get into Mahajan’s bad books.

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Gokul now looked up at Hari and said, 'You be quiet, Hari! Calling Mahajan a raakshas at the top of your voice! You talk too much. Some day they will hear you and chuck you out. You have too long a tongue. That tongue won't earn you your living, boy.' But Gokul was smiling when he said this. He had a small, benign face and a dome-shaped head sparsely covered with wisps of hair. Ramchand also gave him a wan smile. Chander was unlocking a cupboard nearby. All the walls of the shop were either covered with shelves, or had sturdy built-in cupboards that could be locked up with the more expensive or delicate stock inside. While the three were talking, Chander didn't even look up once. He was a quiet man, very tall, and with a very pronounced Adam's apple. He often did not turn up for work, and maintained a melancholic silence whenever Mahajan shouted at him for this or for any other reason. He would just take in all the insults Mahajan hurled at him, staring into space all the while, biting his lower lip, not answering any of Mahajan's angry questions.

The two oldest shop assistants, Shyam and Rajesh, had been working at Sevak Sari House for a much longer time than any of the others. Shyam had greying hair, a thin face and a large gap between his two front teeth. Rajesh was plump, with slightly rheumy eyes. The two kept to themselves, confabulating in low voices about the rising prices, nought per cent interest home loans and where you could get the best bargains for household electrical appliances. They were paid slightly more than all the other shop assistants. Everyone knew this, but it was never mentioned, and the two men never admitted it officially. Shyam had a young daughter he was hoping to marry off to Rajesh's son. They lived in their own set, middle-aged world, went out for tea and meals together, and called all the other shop assistants 'boys', even Gokul, who was only a few years younger than them.



Did u know? The Sari Shop revolves around the anxieties of Ramchand, a lowly shop assistant at Sevak Sari House in Amritsar. Ramchand was not born poor. His parents are killed in an accident and he is brought up by his uncle.

Ramchand spent the morning arranging new stock. Bhimsen Seth, the owner of the shop, came in at about eleven. The shop had been set up by his grandfather, Sevak Ram. Bhimsen had taken over at the age of twenty. That was when a fifteen-year-old Mahajan had come to him looking for work. Bhimsen had taken him in, and Mahajan had worked his way up in the business. He had, over thirty years, proved himself to be honest, reliable, enterprising and a hard taskmaster. Now it was Mahajan who looked after most of the practical affairs of the shop, though under Bhimsen's supervision. Most of the time now, Bhimsen Seth didn't need to come to the shop every day. He had some other businesses running that he also had to see to. Ramchand didn't know whether Seth was his surname or if it was just a respectful way of addressing him. He had asked Gokul once, but Gokul didn't know either, and Ramchand didn't dare to ask anyone else. On the rare occasions that Bhimsen Seth did come to the shop, he just reclined prosperously in a corner of the first floor, surrounded by a garish assortment of pictures of Hindu Gods, burning incense sticks and greedily counting hundred rupee notes with his thick, stubby fingers. Ramchand watched him out of the corner of his eye sometimes. Bhimsen would intently flip the edges of the notes, and, if he happened to look up and catch Ramchand's eye, he would give him a slow, fleshy smile that chilled Ramchand's heart. He always found Bhimsen's benevolent manner a little sinister.

Self-Assessment

Notes

1. Choose the correct options:

- (i) Rupa Bajwa's second novel Tell me a story has been released in April
- (a) 2012 (b) 2008
(c) 2007 (d) 2002
- (ii) Sari Shop was Bajwa's Novel.
- (a) Second (b) Third
(c) Fourth (d) First
- (iii) The protagonist of the Novel Sari Shop
- (a) Hari (b) Ramchand
(c) Lakhan Singh (d) None of these
- (iv) The Sari Shop was listed for Orange Prize in
- (a) 2000 (b) 2002
(c) 2005 (d) 2009

8.2 Summary

- It was a well-crafted book, it began and ended well, the chapters flew seamlessly into each other. There was a good streak of humour running through it. It received favourable reviews in the press... goes the description given by the author about one of her characters, **Rina Kapoor's** book. Coincidentally, this could be the perfect account of the first part of the novel, that too, in the author's own words.
- *The Sari Shop* revolves around the anxieties of Ramchand, a lowly shop assistant at Sevak Sari House in Amritsar. Ramchand was not born poor. His parents are killed in an accident and he is brought up by his uncle. As soon as Ramchand is old enough to fend for himself his uncle finds him a job as a shop assistant where he is condemned to a life of ennui and drudgery and far from the education he craves so much. But all this changes suddenly when he is dispatched to the rich, English-speaking Kapoor household to deliver saris and fabrics for the daughter's trousseau. Seeing them converse in English, Ramchand's passion gets re-kindled and he buys himself a second-hand grammar book, an Oxford Dictionary, a fresh pair of socks and a bar of Lifebuoy soap. These four things, he is convinced, will give him the kind of life he has wanted since childhood.
- The novel captures the essence of Amritsar with all its gossip, its alleys, its busy bazaars, its eateries, mannerisms and its petty rivalries among the rich and bored women. RAMCHAND, a shop assistant in Sevak Sari House in Amritsar, spends his days patiently showing yards of fabric to the women of "status families" and to the giggling girls who dream of dressing up in silk but can only afford cotton. When Ramchand is sent to a new part of the city to show wares to a wealthy family preparing for their daughter's wedding, he is jolted out of the rhythm of his narrow daily life. His glimpse into a different world gives him an urgent sense of possibility. He begins to see himself, his life, and his future more clearly. And so he attempts to recapture the hope that his childhood had promised, arming himself with two battered English grammar books, a fresh pair of socks, and a bar of Lifebuoy soap. But soon these efforts turn his life upside down, bringing him face to face with the cruelties on which his very existence depends.

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- A poignant tale of a sari shop its customers and more importantly the salesmen and their lives. Ramchand is a timid young man who goes about doing his job quietly and trying to fulfill his dead parents' ambition of learning English. He buys books to teach himself English and feels he has died and gone to heaven when he is sent to the Kapoor Mansion to hawk saris. Alas! He also sees the wretchedness that is his co-worker Chander's life. Tragedy makes him erupt into an angry young man but only till his anger is dissipated - a few days and life is back to 'normal.'

8.3 Key-Words

1. Lampoon : Satirize, a speech or text criticizing someone or something in this way: "does this sound like a lampoon of student life"
2. Poignant : Evoking a keen sense of sadness or regret: "a poignant reminder", Keenly felt: "the sensation was most poignant in winter".

8.4 Review Questions

1. Explain Rupa Bajwa as a novelist.
2. Briefly introduce Sari Shop by Rupa Bajwa.

Answers: Self-Assessment

1. (i) (a) (ii) (d) (iii) (b) (iv) (c)

8.5 Further Readings



1. Bajwa, Rupa. 2004. The Sari Shop. New Delhi: Penguin.
2. Johnson, Harry M. An Introduction to Sociology.
3. Khushwant Singh. 2004. This Above All. The Tribune.
4. Lodge & Wood. 2003. Modern Criticism & Theory. Pearson Education.
5. Rege, Sharmila. 2003. Sociology of Gender. New Delhi: Sage Publications.

Unit 9: Rupa Bajwa: Sari Shop – Concept of Feminism

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Objectives

After reading this Unit students will be able to:

- Introduce Rupa Bajwa's the Sari Shop.
- Understand the Concept of Feminism.

Introduction

Rupa Bajwa's "The Sari Shop" set in the little city of Amritsar captures evocatively, the social atmosphere of small-town India. Her narrative encapsulates the spirit of the sari-shop environment with its spirited, intimate, interaction between shop personnel and regular patrons. In the background, the rustling silk, soft cotton and shiny synthetic saris reach out to us so realistically that we long to hold and caress them in our hands. Apart from that, the unplumbed pathos of Ramchand, an assistant in Sevak Sari Shop, whose world revolves around selling saris to the women customers, deadens our heart with sorrow. Ramchand's life and his isolation in the indifferent world are effortlessly carved out in fine detail. Is it surprising then, we are drawn to empathize with his empty, monotonous existence?

Ramchand's loss of his doting parents at a tender age is very moving. He is forced into menial work by his uncle who grabbed his inheritance. His desire to master English language is noteworthy, as it is rekindled one day, when he is sent to display sarees for the trousseau of a wealthy man's daughter. Suddenly, his life seems to acquire a purpose as he meticulously sets about learning new English words from "Radiant Essays" and "A Complete Writer" assisted by an old Oxford English dictionary. As he reads, he seems to grasp the meaning of his life and the avidity of life around him. It was a sad moment, when he began to understand the pathos of the underdog and the aggression of the conqueror; in this case the one on top of the social hierarchy. The transformation in Ramchand is to make him humane to the hurts of society and the woes of the secondary sex, women. Kamala, the wife of another sari shop assistant Chander, inadvertently opens his eyes to the double standards lived by men in the patriarchal society. At the end of it, Ramchand realizes the futility of trying to turn the system around and instead, finds comfort in lapsing into his routine existence. Our journey is outward with Ramchand, into the stagnant, oppressive social system and inward with him into his suffocating, futile ruminations. I could only throw up my hands in utter despair, at the futility of it all, when nothing materialized. I wished that Ramchand would have persevered.

The characterization in the novel I feel is pertinent to the trivial rivalries that seethe beneath the surface of life lived by petty traders and class-conscious, middle-class wives. The wives of rich industrialists with their empty lives and the educated class with their snobbish intellectualism, is

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skillfully caricatured. The lives of the lower middle class, their resigned acceptance of poverty, their escape into filmi world and their aspirations to higher things through English speaking jobs, brought a lump into my throat due to the streak of desperation that intertwined hope.

I found wonderfully comical moments in the novel as, when Hari, another shop assistant imitates the portly shop owner or when Ramchand sneaks into the wealthy wedding reception to taste the forty desserts set out on the table or his surprise when he sees all the women customers and the sarees from the shop on them. The laugh aloud moments are, when I took in the spiteful chatter of the ladies on a saree buying spree or observe Ramchand's sensual day dreams revolving around Sudha, the young wife of his landlord or see him ticking off his shop manager in a perfectly structured droll English or view his attempts to combat his smelly feet with lemon juice. It is laughter mixed with pathos, when I glimpsed Rina interviewing Ramchand to exploit his naïve, comical appeal in her debut novel, while Ramchand imagines himself as suave with Rina.

Is it not utter duplicity of the world where law exists for the rich while the poor timidly accept injustice? The brutal rape of Kamala, the involvement of the rich Guptas, the apathy of the educated, articulate and empowered Mrs Sachdeva, the police who pocket the bribe and punish the victim, the anguish of Ramchand who is just a bystander, left a lasting impression on me. Ramchand's new found perception, battles to bring some order into the skewered justice system in the society. His sanity rightfully takes a beating, withdraws into insanity with the intensity of its demoralization and returns to the present deceitful world to maintain its status quo. I honestly salute Ramchand's efforts, even though brief, to challenge the social hierarchical system of rich and poor.

Ramchand's attempts to imbue his life with some imagination and beauty by buying English books and trying to educate himself is very moving. At that particular moment, I recalled the mania of the Indians for the English language and their use of it as a benchmark to judge a person's knowledge and place in community. I believe, the novel is very perceptive in giving a social commentary of the society which reflects the existentialist torment of every human creature. At the same time, there is a fine balance between reality and expectation, as the incongruities of life is deftly woven into the story,

I found the novel darkly humorous as it effortlessly drew me into the lives of the characters as they go about their business of living. I feel, without our volition we can empathize with Kamala or Ramchand or sneer at the hollowness of Rina or Mrs Sachdeva. It may not possible for us to break out of our boundaries or change the world around us but sometimes it is necessary to just try and understand ourselves and our life. The novel definitely does that. Kudos to Bajwa for her sensitive effort...

Geetha Kariappa is a research scholar with her area of interest being "Feminist Criticism." She is actively involved in the field of Education and Softskills as a teacher and a trainer. She loves reading fiction, short stories and books on travel. She has written literary articles for many literary journals.

9.1 Sari Shop – Concept of Feminism

Rupa Bajwa has woven an intricate tale of the protagonist Ramchand trying to lift himself from the dregs of his lonely existence, by engaging with the people he meets on a more real level. Unfortunately he finds the phrase "two sides of the coin" to be true to almost all situations in life, where hope and desperation co-exist. Ramchand is 'everyman'-living in a small tenement in one of the by lanes of Amritsar. The contrasting strands of the life of the privileged and the plodding existence of the poor are like the weft and weave of the saris that are sold by Ramchand. Somehow threads interweave to create saris but a few crystals sewn in, or a shot of sari woven through can make a dramatic difference. It almost seems that Ramchand will lighten his dark lonely days with his efforts at self improvement. Ramchand for all his feeling of being unschooled, has studied that

special language that women speak when they shop and is good at his job at the Sevak Sari House. He is inspired to make a few changes to his dull existence after a glimpse into the life of the rich. But the consequences are quite the opposite! Ms. Bajwa has crafted an honest narrative of a town in modern India, replete with the heartbreak of humdrum existence.

Feminist enterprise has been so far a long struggle to universalize female behaviour, their common tales of woe and sufferings under realms of patriarchy and male oppression. Be it a question of rewriting of male texts or parametering of social structure, the set pattern of feminist view point has been struggle against androcentric ethics and female sensitivity in bonding, analysing and understanding each other universally. Nowhere have women been set against women, only men have been peeled, chopped and even roasted in certain instances.

In Indian context, the fashion in writing and criticism, pertains to this nouveau feminism in vocal, visual and literary form. Rupa Bajwa, the young girl from Amritsar and brave I must say, has dare set in a different view point with her text, *The Sari Shop*. The title itself is a potent symbol of Indian womanhood and all traditional and modern idiosyncrasies associated with it. This is Rupa Bajwa's debut work, and she bangs in a time when Jhumpa Lahiri, Shani Mootoo, Anita Nair and other young brigade is all over the scene. But she has a different identity of a small town like Amritsar, an image like Sari to unfurl, and a separate story than immigrant culture tale, and a separate woman to portray- an Indian woman, a wounded woman, a raped woman, a woman who dares against women, woman who assumes the status of an actual heroine/ role model when she pulls down glitters from fabrics of rich and suave feminist minds by poking fun at their miserableness of being hollow inside. Bajwa has presented in all its nakedness the common psychic inheritance of Indians' regarding women and the psychic makeup of women in general.

The continuous assessment all over the world has been of women as important as men but no evaluation of women' position in society with other women. The enigma of plural societies like India, which face more social, political and cultural cleavages, is complex and uneasy to differentiate. The feminisation of media especially T.V. has brought a new cult of upper upper or upper middle class bourgeois woman, obliterating our mind of the crude statistics of women facing unto untouchability, oppression, below poverty line (bpl status), unemployment graphs, illiteracy or ignorance factors, rising suicides, molestation, violence, rape etc etc

The embellished make believe world has bypassed our awareness of internal and external social system in terms of caste, creed, race, colour, ethnicity, religion and now with emerging social class. Though class in Indian context is not a new signifier, but Is the Indian writer in English especially woman writer aware of interclass struggle, class division, class oppression, class-consciousness and class solidarity among women themselves? The uniformity of biological status among women can't ignore rational, social, political and economic differences, where she is a different class from the other. So, there are 'fault lines' emerging among perceived feminist notions and theories, the fancied 'equality manifesto' not with men but with women in general seems itself 'unequal' in theory and reality. *The Sari Shop* is a work where representations of different Indian woman is given due analyses on the basis of numerous hybrid and heterogeneous class groups. The rationalisation of status and class adds to discrimination between and women and women and is discussed in terms of dominant and subordinate category. Frank Parkin has observed in the book 'Sociology of Gender':

"For the great majority of women the allocation of social and economical rewards is determined primarily by the position of their families and, in particular, that of the male head. Although women today share certain status attributes in common, simply by virtue of their sex, their claims over resources are not primarily determined by their own occupation but, more commonly, by that of their fathers or husbands. And if the wives and daughters of unskilled labourers have something in common with the wives and daughters of wealthy landowners, there can be no doubt that the differences in their overall situation are far more striking and significant. Only if

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the disabilities attaching to female status were felt to be so great as to override differences of a class kind would it be realistic to regard sex as an important dimension of stratification."

The delineated female characters in *Sari Shop* are better halves of someone rich and famous or somebody affluent and known. They are no entities in themselves. The novelist has called them all Mrs Sachdeva/ Kapoor/ Bhandari/ Gupta or the other. They have no name and identity of their own. It is all borrowed from husband's hierarchy and tradition. The feminist concern should embark on this hired 'image-identity bargain' of upper-upper class woman. For Kamla, the drunk, mad, ruffian sari assistant Chander's wife the title is not Mrs. Chander anywhere but Chander's wife or that charred Kamla, 'the mad woman in the attic' kind.

Bajwa introduces a gallery of female characters, all distinct and apart in style, language, mannerism, ideology and in particular how they choose a sari, admire its texture, colour and fabric and fancy it wearing them. Mrs Sandhu wife of a chief engineer in Punjab State Electricity Board, epitomises 'power psychology' "as her rolls of fat jiggled as she waddled" into her spotless house, furnished with latest gadgetry and fashionable architectural feature. Her picture perfect frame is summed up as "A beautiful house, status family, a caring husband and good looks... what more could a woman ask for."

Mrs Gupta the wife of a wealthy industrialist sits in her bedroom on a large bed covered with a peach satin bedspread, reminding of the "burnished throne" (A game of chess, *The Waste land*, T.S. Eliot). Her unusual, 'perky' and 'over confident manner' smelled through her room beaming of various loreal cosmetics, lakme, and her recent venture with feng shui, established her as another consumerist character. Mrs Sachdeva, Head of the English Deptt. at a local college, "liked to look plain and businesslike". She felt she "wasn't one of the idle housewives that this city was so full of. She was a literate woman" after all.

Mrs Bhandari, wife of the DIG of Police, who took pride in calling herself a 'social activist', 'spoke perfect English, had an unerring taste in clothes and any party that she organized was bound to be success.' was another straw brilliantly sketched by Bajwa. And then rich Ravinder Kapoor's wife and daughter, who had at one go, bought pashmeena shawls worth 10 lakhs, had enough of money and poise to astonish any millionaire in the town.

The personal likings and dislikings of women also rest on these social gimmicks. Mrs Kapoor dislikes Mrs Sachdeva the 'ordinary professor-type service class' women, coming to their mansioned house. Mrs Sandhu finds Mrs Bhandari 'snooty', may be because 'her English is so good', but her heaven of peace lies in the fact that 'Bhandari's are certainly not very rich and have only daughter still not married.'

The social nature of women is exposed in the eyes of Ramchand at times narrator, sufferer and omniscient observer with critical eye of a psychologist who peeps into their minds, hypocrisies, values and life style for "he had watched innumerable women choose saris He had seen variety, he had seen envy he had seen despair. He knew well the bitterness of a plain woman wordless triumph of the beautiful ones".

He finds in Mrs. Kapoor "a certain ruthlessness in the way she picked up a sari, ran a sharp eye a sharp eye over it and had glint in eyes before making up mind" .. Among the various sari images created by the author, the imagery used in describing women of different classes picking up the right sari is amazing to see. And in all the cases, Ramchand is made to observe and feel the things, sometimes with Prufrockian uneasiness and sometimes with moralisings of Tiresias.

Mrs Sachdeva the literate woman, Head of an English Department, likes dullish colours in choosing a sari, symbolic of her argument to stay apart from homogenisation with other females. The gorgeously decked up Rina Kapoor as bride dazzles Ramchand with her laughter and the way she sweeps the marble staircase regally with her bridal outfit leaves him spellbound.

The sari imagery reflects both beauty and ugliness of life real and reel. The 'rust red, blood red stains on Kamla's purple sari' and vomit stains on her blouse after her rape and violence become a profound motive for Ramchand to avenge her wrong. The sari image is convulsed, decontrolled and deconstructed with masterly superbness & intensity of pathos. After Kamla's death, the place inside the sari shop turned claustrophobic and grave, saris flew out at Ramchand whipping around 'engulfing him like a shroud' its black border suffocating him as if coercing him to take stock of situation and bear the burden of a saviour, a role which nature had imposed on him. Marxist/ socialist feminism rests on the creed of woman as tertiary consumer and primary producer in society, be it producing offspring in the womb or cooking and cleaning or reproducing and writing. The theorization and over theorisation has destabilized the whole system of study and epistemology, regarding women. The debate has rested more on patriarchy in every form and subordination of woman by it. Women's rights, demands and desires have reverberated all the corners by now. Rape, violence, prejudice and household inequities have become highly contested issues among women on behalf of women. The cumulative effect of publicising deficiency in social system for deprived women by affluent and economic advancement by few has generated a 'cultural lag' between the two, in which the basic values are eroded or changed for two groups and practically even in the name of feminism no cultural and intellectual intermixing is viable.

I see this onslaught of global capitalist consumerist culture on Indian scene in light of Rupa Bajwa's Sari Shop, which is a fine mimicking of welfare feminism. The class solidarity among opulent group of Mrs. Sandhu, Mrs Sachdeva, Mrs. Kapoor and types is empowered by class consciousness which they feel and generate by ignominious and condescending values to 'have nots'. The Sari Shop explains the meaning of existence in spheres of capitalism, chaos and conflict, when women themselves have fell a prey to consumerism. In the words of Ram Chand, the shop assistant :

"Life was grubby, clumsy, mean, flabby and meaningless.. Sick, sick, sick," (The Sari Shop, pp 111) enough to remind Burning Burning Burning Burning of Eliot's waste land. The Sari of Indian woman is exploited maximum as a potent metaphor, a vehicle for all kind of feminine expression. Sari is a symbol of womanhood and courtesy, but it also constraints their movements and gait, providing a negative implication of concept and The Sari Shop would be a fit and plausible metaphor of restricted and reserved life, compartmentalized thoughts, associated with various women groups, a fine camouflage behind which all the actual selves remain mystified. Hordes of women visited it daily, some as a part of routine activity which ended in cheap shopping bout at sari shop, some for weddings and parties, some need not visit, they could pedal saris some like Kapoors or some occasional visits by sombre lecturers like Mrs Sachdeva etc. The idiosyncrasies and oddities of women in choosing a sari or touching it brings out their common shared shopping idiocy. The pervading tone of buying, bargaining and spending sums a bizarre sentiment of meaninglessness in life, which Ramchand feels as "Money. Congestion and noise danced an eternal, crazy dance here together, leaving no moving space for other gentler things." (Sari Shop, pp, 5) The remarkable thing is why only Ramchand, the traditionally unfair male protagonist is forced into the situation, to save, revolt and protest moved by helplessness and misery of the rape victim. For it is Ramchand who instead of getting numbed by social pressure and worldliness remarks, "What constant injustice! What a warped way of living! How wrong it all was! He felt reckless, strong enough to do anything, fight anyone for justice, for truth." (Sari Shop pp 222) The two women rich, intellectual and powerful Ramchand chooses to narrate Kamla's story for 'more importantly they were women' are enraged by 'the whole ugly, sordid, jigsaw story.' This breakdown of gynocentric world in which women can't live in perfect harmony and friendship with each other for their double standards or sub standards is alarming! Mrs. Sachedeva pushes away the Saris on her lap and speaks in clenched teeth, "I don't want to listen to all that rubbish again that too in Hindi. How dare you, tell me filthy stories about the kind of women you seem to know". Thus, women overdo and cut each other to size, especially the pearl faced, upper-upper

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intelligentsia who find bonding with women of their class only, and not with women of Ramchand's social class type. The gynocentric view is made complete by shooting arrows not only in the direction of men, but also women who are mimicked for their false Anglo-rational feminist, ideals adored and adopted so naturally only to turn deaf to the cries of a marginalized soul for help. A woman is oppressed by women for their tacit understanding of not understanding her plight. Kamla is belied, betrayed and berated by class of her own sex whereas a lone male cries for her existence, her voice, emotion and identity.

Kamla the wronged, robbed, and raped woman becomes a symbol and prototype of emancipation and individuality, though, she says and does things theatrically in a schizophrenic manner, but it is the will of weaker woman, which overrules the high handedness of society ladies. The quagmire of assaults she bears throws a neon light on abyss of women's agony at the hands of women, envisioning true feminist to embark on a revolutionary struggle in terms of class conflict among women. Thus a better study lies in giving micro attention to axis of social constructs intertwined with gender and synthesising feminist dogmas with socio-cultural dimensions.

Self-Assessment

1. Fill in the blanks:

- (i) "The Sari Shop" set in the little city of
- (ii) Geetha Kariappa is a research scholar with her area of interest being
- (iii) She is actively involved in the field of Education and Softskills as a
- (iv) Ramchand is an in Sevak Sari Shop.

9.2 Summary

- Rupa Bajwa has woven an intricate tale of the protagonist Ramchand trying to lift himself from the dregs of his lonely existence, by engaging with the people he meets on a more real level. Unfortunately he finds the phrase "two sides of the coin" to be true to almost all situations in life, where hope and desperation co-exist. Ramchand is 'everyman' -living in a small tenement in one of the bylanes of Amritsar. The contrasting strands of the life of the privileged and the plodding existence of the poor are like the weft and weave of the saris that are sold by Ramchand. Somehow threads interweave to create saris but a few crystals sewn in, or a shot of zari woven through can make a dramatic difference. It almost seems that Ramchand will lighten his dark lonely days with his efforts at self improvement. Ramchand for all his feeling of being unschooled, has studied that special language that women speak when they shop and is good at his job at the Sevak Sari House.
- Feminist enterprise has been so far a long struggle to universalize female behaviour, their common tales of woe and sufferings under realms of patriarchy and male oppression. Be it a question of rewriting of male texts or parametering of social structure, the set pattern of feminist view point has been struggle against androcentric ethics and female sensitivity in bonding, analysing and understanding each other universally.
- Bajwa introduces a gallery of female characters, all distinct and apart in style, language, mannerism, ideology and in particular how they choose a sari, admire its texture, colour and fabric and fancy it wearing them. Mrs Sandhu wife of a chief engineer in Punjab State Electricity Board, epitomises 'power psychology' "as her rolls of fat jiggled as she waddled" into her spotless house, furnished with latest gadgetry and fashionable architectural feature. Her picture perfect frame is summed up as " A beautiful house, status family, a caring husband and good looks... what more could a woman ask for."
- The sari imagery reflects both beauty and ugliness of life real and reel. The 'rust red, blood red stains on Kamla's purple sari' and vomit stains on her blouse after her rape and violence

become a profound motive for Ramchand to avenge her wrong. The sari image is convulsed, decontrolled and deconstructed with masterly superbness & intensity of pathos. After Kamla's death, the place inside the sari shop turned claustrophobic and grave, saris flew out at Ramchand whipping around 'engulfing him like a shroud' its black border suffocating him as if coercing him to take stock of situation and bear the burden of a saviour, a role which nature had imposed on him. Marxist/ socialist feminism rests on the creed of woman as tertiary consumer and primary producer in society, be it producing offspring in the womb or cooking and cleaning or reproducing and writing. The theorization and over theorisation has destabilized the whole system of study and epistemology, regarding women.

9.3 Key-Words

1. Encapsulate : To sum up in a short or concise form; condense; abridge
2. Deceitful : Deceiving or misleading others, typically on a habitual basis

9.4 Review Questions

1. Discuss the concept of Feminism in Sari Shop.
2. Explain Rupa Bajwa as a Feminist.

Answers: Self-Assessment

1. (i) Amritsar (ii) Feminist Criticism
(iii) Teacher (iv) Assistant

9.5 Further Readings



1. Bajwa, Rupa. 2004. *The Sari Shop*. New Delhi: Penguin.
2. Johnson, Harry M. *An Introduction to Sociology*.
3. Khushwant Singh. 2004. *This Above All*. The Tribune.
4. Lodge & Wood. 2003. *Modern Criticism & Theory*. Pearson Education.
5. Rege, Sharmila. 2003. *Sociology of Gender*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.

Unit 10: Rupa Bajwa: Sari Shop – Detailed Study of the Text

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Introduction

10.1 Brief Introduction to the Text

10.2 Sari Shop – Detailed Study of the Text

10.3 Summary

10.4 Key-Words

10.5 Review Questions

10.6 Further Readings

Objectives

After reading this Unit students will be able to:

- Make a brief introduction to the Sari Shop.
- Discuss Sari Shop.

Introduction

Rupa Bajwa's debut book *The Sari Shop* was longlisted for the Orange Prize for Fiction 2004, an award that was eventually won by Andrea Levy for *Small Island*. The book has won the 27-year-old Amritsar girl flattering reviews the world over with reviewers calling her India's new literary find.

Ever since she put pen to paper nothing else has mattered to Rupa Bajwa - not the various jobs she juggled over the years, not marriage that her folks thought was the most important thing for her. It was just writing. And, as she says, "I had to write just to exist." For this 27-year-old Amritsar-based author time away from writing is time wasted. And it was a brave choice indeed, because despite the occasional news of an Indian getting a fat royalty cheque and big publicity, only a handful of writers can afford to live by their muse alone. For the majority, writing can barely pay for basic amenities.

But Rupa Bajwa has been a lucky author. Her debut book *The Sari Shop* (Penguin) was long listed for the Orange Prize for Fiction 2004. The book has won her favourable reviews the world over and she has been hailed as India's latest literary find.

However the journey to establish herself was a bumpy one for this young writer. From rented rooms in various cities she visited 'in search of peace to write' and hired computers on which she punched her story, Rupa Bajwa did have her moments of frustration and despair. Now riding on the wave of success of *The Sari Shop*, she has embarked on a full time career in writing. She is a prolific and a disciplined writer and is already on her second novel which she says would see the light of day soon.

Bajwa says she drags herself to her writing desk everyday no matter how hard it is. "I have a fairly regular schedule and write daily though sometimes creativity doesn't flow and it can get very frustrating. Everything is blank - mind, paper, computer screen. But one has to keep at it. Because there are times when I write intensely and non-stop for ten to twelve hours a day," she says.

Essence of Amritsar

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The Sari Shop is not autobiographical as most first books tend to be. However it does capture the essence of Amritsar with all its gossip, its alleys, its busy bazaars, its dhabas (eateries), mannerisms and its petty rivalries among the rich and bored women. "Bits of yourself always creep in, sometimes without you being aware of it," she says.

The book is about the underprivileged class but Bajwa has broken away from the usual practice of Indian writers who tend to focus on their sorry circumstances, their financial problems and their oppression by the rich. She has instead made her story revolve around the anxieties of Ramchand, a lowly shop assistant at Sevak Sari House in Amritsar.

Ramchand was not born poor. His parents are killed in an accident and he is brought up by his uncle. As soon as he is old enough to fend for himself his uncle finds him a job as a shop assistant where he is condemned to a life of ennui and drudgery and far from the education he craves so much.

But all this changes suddenly when he is dispatched to the rich, English-speaking Kapoor household to deliver saris and fabrics for the daughter's trousseau. Seeing them converse in English, Ramchand's passion gets re-kindled and he buys himself a second-hand grammar book, an Oxford Dictionary, a fresh pair of socks and a bar of Lifebuoy soap. These four things, he is convinced, will give him the kind of life he has wanted since childhood.

The plot for the book was developed from Bajwa's short story she wrote a few years ago. "The idea and the character stayed with me and I kept working on the story to make it a longer narrative," she says.

The Orange Prize selects fictional work of women writers across the world. "I wouldn't want to make any sweeping generalizations here. Of course your gender affects your perspective and your experience to a certain extent, but beyond that, when it comes to the nitty-gritty of writing, I think all writers - men or women - eventually have to struggle through the same things."

Reading has been Bajwa's passion since childhood but Amritsar doesn't have many good book shops and she had to get them from Delhi or Chandigarh. She has a big list of her favourite writers. As she says, "It is a pleasure to know that you can always read a good book - at least that is one thing you can count on in an otherwise uncertain world."

And sure enough those who have read The Sari Shop agree with her statement.

10.1 Brief Introduction to the Text

Sari Shop is about many things, but for the main character, Ramchand, it is about the development of character itself, particularly about putting one's morals into practice under morally impossible circumstances. Ramchand is born into a Hindu family of shop owners.

His mother is an observant Hindu who takes him to temple weekly, but he is too young to absorb any special identity or spirituality that can be called Hindu. As an adult, Ramchand proves to be especially

empathetic toward a Sikh couple who have lost two barely adult sons in an Indira Gandhi assault on the Golden Temple of Amritsar (Operation Blue Star, 1983), trying to give solace to them in their own home.

Ramchand's parents enrolled him into English medium school at age 6, but that same year, both parents were killed in a catastrophic bus accident. Ramchand was sent to a distant uncle in Amritsar for his education, but his uncle selected a more economical curriculum. Ramchand spent summers with his grandmother. At age 15, Ramchand was withdrawn from school and received a school leaving certificate. Ramchand did not leave school with the knowledge of English he had hoped to achieve. He observed later that no one had ever asked to see his certificate showing he completed eighth grade. His work would not require much reading, writing and figuring.

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The astonishing thing is that Ramchand's family expected him to support himself fully and to live independently from age 15 on--and he did without any further contact from his family apparently. The action of *The Sari Shop* opens when Ramchand is 26 and he has been living and working in the same place since he was 15. Through his work at the Sari Shop, Ramchand becomes acquainted with the absolute wealthiest families in town and even arranges a quick and dirty invitation to the wedding of one of Amritsar's wealthiest daughters.

There is a lot of description of the different kinds of saris available at the shop. They are divided by fabric, by design--by type of border, by type of skirt; there are saris and salwar kameezs, and each garment can have a head piece called by various names such as pallu or chunni. The colors are vividly described e.g. "bottle green."

Ramchand learns from his friends at the Sari House, particularly Chander, that one of the wealthiest families in Amritsar withheld temporarily, then permanently, three months of regular wages from a significant number of workers. Ramchand tries talking calmly to the factory owner and is firmly told that the profit margins don't allow the wages to be paid.

Ramchand also learns that Chander's wife is the victim of "persuasion" outside the law for demanding her husband's wages. She is drunk, arrested, raped, then sexually assaulted by the police using a lathi or night stick. In a different incident, Chander's wife Kamla threw a sharp object at another of the rich family heads, Ravinder Kapoor. This time the reaction was catastrophic. Kapoor --no doubt off the record--hired goons to break all of Kamla's bones, parade her naked through the slum neighborhood, and burn down her slum house with Kamla inside.

This systematic destruction of Kamla's life creates a moral crisis for Ramchand. The families responsible are the same ones who buy the most expensive saris. The other shop boys do not see the overall implications. Ramchand stays home two weeks without authorization trying to figure out what to do.



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The book has a lot of comical elements that ride on the gossip of the ladies from the different families as they browse the saris. There is real color in the book as the descriptions of the fabrics jump off the page.

For me one of the most charming threads in the story is Ramchand's desire to learn English. Bajwa really makes it clear how lack of context makes it so hard to span the words, when one word can have so many meanings. Ramchand needs the "tuition" that the rich boys are getting. He also deserves it. Yet Ramchand is making real progress.

10.2 Sari Shop – Detailed Study of the Text

Rupa Bajwa's "*The Sari Shop*" set in the little city of Amritsar captures evocatively, the social atmosphere of small-town India. Her narrative encapsulates the spirit of the sari-shop environment with its spirited, intimate, interaction between shop personnel and regular patrons. In the background, the rustling silk, soft cotton and shiny synthetic saris reach out to us so realistically that we long to hold and caress them in our hands. Apart from that, the unplumbed pathos of Ramchand, an assistant in Sevak Sari Shop, whose world revolves around selling saris to the women customers, deadens our heart with sorrow. Ramchand's life and his isolation in the indifferent world are effortlessly carved out in fine detail. Is it surprising then, we are drawn to empathize with his empty, monotonous existence?

Ramchand's loss of his doting parents at a tender age is very moving. He is forced into menial work by his uncle who grabbed his inheritance. His desire to master English language is noteworthy,

as it is rekindled one day, when he is sent to display sarees for the trousseau of a wealthy man's daughter. Suddenly, his life seems to acquire a purpose as he meticulously sets about learning new English words from "Radiant Essays" and "A Complete Writer" assisted by an old Oxford English dictionary. As he reads, he seems to grasp the meaning of his life and the avidity of life around him. It was a sad moment, when he began to understand the pathos of the underdog and the aggression of the conqueror; in this case the one on top of the social hierarchy. The transformation in Ramachand is to make him humane to the hurts of society and the woes of the secondary sex, women. Kamala, the wife of another sari shop assistant Chander, inadvertently opens his eyes to the double standards lived by men in the patriarchal society. At the end of it, Ramachand realizes the futility of trying to turn the system around and instead, finds comfort in lapsing into his routine existence. Our journey is outward with Ramachand, into the stagnant, oppressive social system and inward with him into his suffocating, futile ruminations. I could only throw up my hands in utter despair, at the futility of it all, when nothing materialized. I wished that Ramachand would have persevered.

The characterization in the novel I feel is pertinent to the trivial rivalries that seethe beneath the surface of life lived by petty traders and class-conscious, middle-class wives. The wives of rich industrialists with their empty lives and the educated class with their snobbish intellectualism, is skillfully caricatured. The lives of the lower middle class, their resigned acceptance of poverty, their escape into filmi world and their aspirations to higher things through English speaking jobs, brought a lump into my throat due to the streak of desperation that intertwined hope.

I found wonderfully comical moments in the novel as, when Hari, another shop assistant imitates the portly shop owner or when Ramachand sneaks into the wealthy wedding reception to taste the forty desserts set out on the table or his surprise when he sees all the women customers and the sarees from the shop on them. The laugh aloud moments are, when I took in the spiteful chatter of the ladies on a saree buying spree or observe Ramachand's sensual day dreams revolving around Sudha, the young wife of his landlord or see him ticking off his shop manager in a perfectly structured droll English or view his attempts to combat his smelly feet with lemon juice. It is laughter mixed with pathos, when I glimpsed Rina interviewing Ramachand to exploit his naïve, comical appeal in her debut novel, while Ramachand imagines himself as suave with Rina. Is it not utter duplicity of the world where law exists for the rich while the poor timidly accept injustice? The brutal rape of Kamala, the involvement of the rich Guptas, the apathy of the educated, articulate and empowered Mrs Sachadeva, the police who pocket the bribe and punish the victim, the anguish of Ramachand who is just a bystander, left a lasting impression on me. Ramachand's new found perception, battles to bring some order into the skewered justice system in the society. His sanity rightfully takes a beating, withdraws into insanity with the intensity of its demoralization and returns to the present deceitful world to maintain its status quo. I honestly salute Ramachand's efforts, even though brief, to challenge the social hierarchical system of rich and poor.

Ramachand's attempts to imbue his life with some imagination and beauty by buying English books and trying to educate himself is very moving. At that particular moment, I recalled the mania of the Indians for the English language and their use of it as a benchmark to judge a person's knowledge and place in community. I believe, the novel is very perceptive in giving a social commentary of the society which reflects the existentialist torment of every human creature. At the same time, there is a fine balance between reality and expectation, as the incongruities of life is deftly woven into the story, I found the novel darkly humorous as it effortlessly drew me into the lives of the characters as they go about their business of living. I feel, without our volition we can empathize with Kamala or Ramachand or sneer at the hollowness of Rina or Mrs Sachadeva. It may not possible for us to break out of our boundaries or change the world around us but sometimes it is necessary to just try and understand ourselves and our life. The novel definitely

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does that. Kudos to Bajwa for her sensitive effort...Geetha Kariappa is a research scholar with her area of interest being "Feminist Criticism." She is actively involved in the field of Education and Softskills as a teacher and a trainer. She loves reading fiction, short stories and books on travel. She has written literary articles for many literary journals.

Ramchand, a shop assistant in Sevak Sari House in Amritsar, spends his days patiently showing yards of fabric to the women of "status families" and to the giggling girls who dream of dressing up in silk but can only afford cotton. When Ramchand is sent to a new part of the city to show wares to a wealthy family preparing for their daughter's wedding, he is jolted out of the rhythm of his narrow daily life. His glimpse into a different world gives him an urgent sense of possibility. He begins to see himself, his life, and his future more clearly. And so he attempts to recapture the hope that his childhood had promised, arming himself with two battered English grammar books, a fresh pair of socks, and a bar of Lifebuoy soap. But soon these efforts turn his life upside down, bringing him face to face with the cruelties on which his very existence depends.

Bajwa dramatically illustrates the class gap in contemporary India in her debut novel, focusing on the fortunes of Ramchand, a lowly, disaffected clerk in a popular sari shop. The novel opens with Ramchand happily going about his duties serving the shop's mostly upper-class clients. Opportunity for advancement comes from an unlikely source when he attracts the attention of the beautiful, literate Rina Kapoor, whose family hires the shop to provide saris for her upcoming wedding. Inspired by his foray into a wider world ("there were cars and flowerpots and frosted glass trays with peacocks on them"), Ramchand embarks on a half-baked self-improvement effort that includes a reading program and some unintentionally comic attempts to learn English. Shortly afterwards, though, Ramchand sees the other side of Indian life when the wife of one of his co-workers, a woman named Kamla, descends into public drunkenness. Ramchand is a tenderly drawn character, reminiscent of Naipaul's innocent strivers, and the rest of the cast is vividly sketched. There are several typical first-novel flaws: the narrative is slow in the first half, and Bajwa's transitions between her character-driven subplots are occasionally uneven and erratic. But Bajwa's loving attention to detail—Ramchand washing his feet with lemon juice before he visits the Kapoors, the malicious chatter of the sari-shopping ladies—paints a compelling, acerbic picture of urban India. The Sevak Sari House in Bajwa's resonant first novel is a microcosm of its surrounding town, Amritsar, and perhaps of all of India. Ramchand, a shop assistant, seems content selling saris to wealthy matrons and their daughters. But when he is sent to the opulent home of the Kapoors with stacks of saris for them to scrutinize, he experiences his first hints of discontent. Vowing to educate himself to better his place in society, Ramchand purchases some used grammar books and a dictionary, through which he plods in his off hours. He is brought back to reality when he is again sent outside the shop, this time to a co-worker's shack. Stunned by the poverty and degradation he finds there, Ramchand plunges into a deep depression over the world's inequities. After a brief and courageous outburst aimed at his higher-ups, he retreats to his old compliant self, stuck in a rut that is at least secure. Biting humor, perceptive social commentary, and the poetic telling of a poignant tale combine for an exceptional debut.

Ramchand has obediently worked as a clerk at the Sevak Sari House in the city of Amritsar, India for eleven years; alternating his time between the Sari shop located in the city's old bazaar and his one room apartment with minimal possessions. His simple life, however, takes a drastic turn when he is ordered to take a selection of saris by bicycle to a prosperous family who is preparing for their eldest daughter's wedding. Upon entering this strange new world of extravagant automobiles, air conditioning, servants, and wall-to-wall plush carpet Ramchand's mind goes in a tailspin. He has never encountered such luxury before and is deeply affected.

From this point forward Ramchand's consciousness is awakened to the issues of class that surround him in his everyday life. He becomes interested in the lives of the various woman who visit the sari shop and listen to their conversations revealing their affluent life-styles and snobbery attitudes

towards others. At the same time, and also at the other end of the class spectrum, he becomes acquainted with the dire situation of his co-worker and his wife who reside in a tin shack in a poor section of the city. Ramchand's experiences quickly led him into a dizzying philosophical journey with potential serious ramifications for many.

While *The Sari Shop* contains an engaging and highly entertaining plot, Rupa Bajwa's prose is often uneven and lacks a clear direction, especially towards the middle, that can possibly be attributed to this being her debut novel. Hopefully her writing skills will improve and she will continue to publish thought-provoking books with memorable characters in the near future. Recommended, especially for those who enjoy Indian literature.

Longlisted for Britain's Orange Prize for Fiction in 2004, Rupa Bajwa's *The Sari Shop* turns the world of a small shop in Amritsar, India, into a microcosm of the society, allowing the author to explore big ideas within an intimate environment. Exploring the lives of ordinary shop salesmen, both at home and at work, as they struggle to make ends meet, she juxtaposes them against some of their wealthy clients, highlighting dramatically the economic contrasts in their lives and the differences in their expectations. From her opening description of the raucous awakening of a small neighborhood, she presents the kinds of homely details which make the setting easy to visualize, despite the cultural differences. Ramchand, now twenty-six, has been working as an assistant at the Sevak Sari House since he was fifteen, doing the same job day after day, going to a small dhaba with some of the other assistants for something to eat at night and sometimes to the movies. He has little hope of improving his station and, with his parents dead and no family in the city, little opportunity to meet a marriageable young woman or change his lonely life. Through flashbacks, the reader learns about Ramchand's family background and how he came to live alone in Amritsar. As Bajwa slowly draws the reader into the lives of other characters, the reader empathizes with them. Kamla, the wife of Chander, another of the shop assistants, is an especially pathetic case, a young woman who has been victimized by society, her husband, and her husband's former employers. Rina Kapoor, daughter of the wealthiest man in Amritsar, however, is also, in some ways, a victim of her economic situation, as are the women for whom shopping for saris is a primary activity. Only a few women here seek independent lives, these being women for whom it is an option because of their economic privilege. Kamla has no such options. When the lives of Ramchand, Kamla, Rina, and Chander intersect in a shocking climax, lives change forever.

The stunning ending is melodramatic, and Ramchand's change of character may not be completely realistic, but the story moves effectively from its quiet character study at the beginning into a compelling story of characters whose lives overlap, often unwittingly. Sometimes darkly humorous, the story has considerable charm because Ramchand himself inspires empathy. Intimate and thoughtful in its depiction of the various social strata which make up the community, the novel is more understated—less sensational and less political—than some of the more panoramic epics which have come from India in the past decade.

There are, apparently, an endless supply of narratives portraying the class inequalities in contemporary Indian life. Few of them have made it into the hands of western English readers. It is a treat that this one has overcome the narrowness of western ethnocentricity to give us an insight into the world of modern Indian culture. Rupa Bajwa opens the window for us to see the world she was born and raised in. While not biographical, it is still first hand. We see a world of rich, deep culture. But a culture, to the western mindset, of indescribable inequality without recourse to true justice. We witness a society at the crossroads of modernity and inescapable prejudice. It is not, at its core, a sad or tragic story. Neither is it a story inciting change to the established order. But it is an insight into the complex nature of the Indian psyche that must be unraveled and attempts made to resolve it before this nation can join the club of first world nations. This is Bajwa's first novel. Her newness is obvious, even to the unskilled. But that is not

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a criticism per se. Her imagination, vulnerability, and even her weaknesses are cause to want to read on to the end. It is because she is not yet refined that the reader extends her grace and continues on to learn what she has to say and see where her characters go.

Self-Assessment

1. Fill in the blanks:

- (i) Ramchand also learns that Chander's wife is the victim of outside the law for demanding her husband's wages.
- (ii) Chander's wife threw a sharp object at another of the rich family heads, Ravinder Kapoor.
- (iii) Kamla threw a sharp object on the head of
- (iv) Each garment can have a head piece called by various names such as pallu or chunni. This systematic destruction of Kamla's life creates a moral crisis for

10.3 Summary

- A gem of a novel about the stuff life's made of. It is another working day in Amritsar, and Ramchand is late again. He runs through the narrow streets to Sevak Sari House, buried in the heart of one of the city's main bazaars. There, amongst the Bangladesh cottons and Benaras silks, Ramchand and his fellow shop assistants sit all day, patiently rolling and unrolling yards of coloured fabric.
- Then, one afternoon, Ramchand is sent to a new part of the city with a bundle of saris carefully selected for a trousseau. His trip to Kapoor House jolts him out of the rhythm of his daily routine and his glimpse into this different world charges him with an urgent sense of possibility. And so, armed with a second-hand English grammar book and a battered Oxford Dictionary, a fresh pair of socks and a bar of Lifebuoy soap, Ramchand attempts to realize the dream that his childhood had promised. But soon these efforts turn his life upside down, bringing him face to face with the cruel reality of his very existence.
- The Sari Shop heralds the arrival of a writer who combines a profound sensitivity with humour and unflinching honesty. Rupa Bajwa's story is both heartbreaking and very real, and depicts a modern world in which hope and violence are permanently entwined
- Rupa Bajwa's "The Sari Shop" set in the little city of Amritsar captures evocatively, the social atmosphere of small-town India. Her narrative encapsulates the spirit of the sari-shop environment with its spirited, intimate, interaction between shop personnel and regular patrons. In the background, the rustling silk, soft cotton and shiny synthetic saris reach out to us so realistically that we long to hold and caress them in our hands. Apart from that, the unplumbed pathos of Ramchand, an assistant in Sevak Sari Shop, whose world revolves around selling saris to the women customers, deadens our heart with sorrow. Ramchand's life and his isolation in the indifferent world are effortlessly carved out in fine detail. Is it surprising then, we are drawn to empathize with his empty, monotonous existence?
- The characterization in the novel I feel is pertinent to the trivial rivalries that seethe beneath the surface of life lived by petty traders and class-conscious, middle-class wives. The wives of rich industrialists with their empty lives and the educated class with their snobbish intellectualism, is skillfully caricatured. The lives of the lower middle class, their resigned acceptance of poverty, their escape into filmi world and their aspirations to higher things through English speaking jobs, brought a lump into my throat due to the streak of desperation that intertwined hope.
- Bajwa dramatically illustrates the class gap in contemporary India in her debut novel, focusing on the fortunes of Ramchand, a lowly, disaffected clerk in a popular sari shop. The novel

opens with Ramchand happily going about his duties serving the shop's mostly upper-class clients. Opportunity for advancement comes from an unlikely source when he attracts the attention of the beautiful, literate Rina Kapoor, whose family hires the shop to provide saris for her upcoming wedding. Inspired by his foray into a wider world ("there were cars and flowerpots and frosted glass trays with peacocks on them"), Ramchand embarks on a half-baked self-improvement effort that includes a reading program and some unintentionally comic attempts to learn English. Shortly afterwards, though, Ramchand sees the other side of Indian life when the wife of one of his co-workers, a woman named Kamla, descends into public drunkenness. Ramchand is a tenderly drawn character, reminiscent of Naipaul's innocent strivers, and the rest of the cast is vividly sketched.

- There are, apparently, an endless supply of narratives portraying the class inequalities in contemporary Indian life. Few of them have made it into the hands of western English readers. It is a treat that this one has overcome the narrowness of western ethnocentricity to give us an insight into the world of modern Indian culture. Rupa Bajwa opens the window for us to see the world she was born and raised in. While not biographical, it is still first hand. We see a world of rich, deep culture.

10.4 Key-Words

1. Trousseau : The clothes, household linen, and other belongings collected by a bride for her marriage.
2. Prolific : Of an artist, author, or composer) Producing many works.

10.5 Review Questions

1. Give a brief introduction to the Novel Sari Shop.
2. Discuss the Rupa Bajwa's Sari Shop.
3. Explain the character sketch of Ramchand.

Answers: Self-Assessment

1. (i) Persuasion (ii) Kamla
(iii) Ravinder Kapoor (iv) Ramchand

10.6 Further Readings



1. Bajwa, Roopa. 2004. *The Sari Shop*. New Delhi: Penguin.
2. Johnson, Harry M. *An Introduction to Sociology*.
3. Khushwant Singh. 2004. *This Above All*. The Tribune.
4. Lodge & Wood. 2003. *Modern Criticism & Theory*. Pearson Education.
5. Rege, Sharmila. 2003. *Sociology of Gender*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.

Unit 11: Rupa Bajwa: Sari Shop – Theme

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- 11.2 Brief Description to Sari Shop
- 11.3 Summary
- 11.4 Key-Words
- 11.5 Review Questions
- 11.6 Further Readings

Objectives

After reading this Unit students will be able to:

- Know the story of real life of Indian People.
- Discuss various themes presented by Rupa Bajwa in Sari Shop.

Introduction

This is a poignant story of real life India and real life Indian people. It was completely believable. The protagonist, an earnest & simple sari-walla named Ramachand, works hard everyday, studies English on his own, lives a clean and modest life dictated by his beliefs in right and wrong, accepting the simple truths of his life and history.... the circumstances of his birth and sudden orphan status, the fact that his schooling abruptly ended with his parents' death, the loss of his inheritance through unscrupulous relatives, the limitations which became his reality by virtue of circumstances. Then his whole belief system is upended by an encounter with a colleague's wife and the reality of her brutal and bitter existence. I felt the story was incredibly realistic, a story about the real India, not the India we see through the eyes of Indian immigrants to the West, or those educated in the West or with western values. No, this was an India I have not read about before. It was very eye-opening and tender and sad

11.1 Theme – Rupa Bajwa

The nature of corruption is the theme that runs through two recent novels set in contemporary India - Akhil Sharma's *An Obedient Father* (2000) and Rupa Bajwa's *The Sari Shop* (2003). Both novels feature lower middle class protagonists with limited education, in North Indian settings where the struggle for upward mobility is the defining quest. Despite significant overlaps in the cultural territory they explore and the conclusions they reach, however Sharma and Bajwa offer interesting and instructive contrasts in perspective. While Bajwa is the native born and bred, Sharma's parents emigrated from Delhi to the USA when he was still a child. Can the differences in tone and viewpoint stem from the difference in the authors' relation to the setting?

Numerous reviewers have described Sharma's fictional universe in *An Obedient Father* (hereafter AOF) as 'unrelentingly grim'. The place is old Delhi, the time the early 1990s when within the course of a year, petty bureaucrat Ram Karan's life is turned upside down. His wife dies and so does his son-in-law; at home, his daughter Anita returns with her own daughter Asha to live with

him and at work Ram Karan is appointed moneyman and fall guy by his boss, Mr. Gupta. As wheeler and dealer and extractor of bribes from school principals however Ram Karan has only limited flair. As he admits: 'My general incompetence and laziness at work had been apparent for...long...this is common for a certain type of civil servant who knows that he is viewed with disdain by his superiors and that he cannot lose his job.' In Ram Karan's world, the rules of public life are meant to be circumvented - his cowardice and his talent for finding moral loopholes are assets that aid his success. He becomes Mr. Gupta's right-hand man when the latter commences an ill-fated run for Parliament.

Over the course of the novel it also becomes apparent that the rationalizations and excuses Ram Karan is so adept at seep into his personal life as well - the moral miasma he operates in includes rape and incest. As Ram Karan admits at a moment of typical self-abnegation, 'My mind was attracted to what is loathsome and humiliating.' His molestation of his own daughter Anita has remained a bitter family secret, but once he reaches for his granddaughter Asha, Anita becomes the avenging goddess, determined to expose and punish him. The shape of that retribution gives the novel its title.

If Ram Karan is the consummate insider working at the heart of India's political machine, Rupa Bajwa's protagonist in *The Sari Shop* Ramchand is the eternal man on the margin. Orphaned at a young age and rendered asunder from the fabric of family that supports Indian society, his work restricts him to the feminized, seemingly innocuous arena of the small town sari shop where he is a salesman. The Sevak Sari House is the narrow oblique lens through which he, with the reader, views contemporary North India. There are the customers, ladies of leisure from Amritsar's elite families and then there is the lower middle class existence of Ramchand and his colleagues.

Like AOF, the precise and inescapable gradations of class (and implicitly caste) and power configure the arena of possibilities in *The Sari Shop*; like the former novel, the struggle for upward mobility provides the motive force. Unlike Akhil Sharma's Ram Karan, however Bajwa's Ramchand is naïve and perhaps more pertinently, young. His path of self-improvement takes him through English essay books. But for all of Ramchand's comic efforts, there is horror also at the end of the *The Sari Shop* - in the rape of Kamla, the wretched wife of one of his colleagues, Ramchand sees the consequences of challenging the social order. The surfaces of this world may seem smooth but the edges are jagged.

The Kamla episode has been described by many reviewers as 'melodramatic' and implausible but in fact it is no more than the stuff of numerous newspaper headlines brought home. Read together with Sharma's more polished novel, *The Sari Shop* thus yields an interesting counterpoint. In AOF the political becomes personal; in *The Sari Shop* the personal becomes political. In both the iniquities of the public sphere cannot be escaped.

Neither Sharma nor Bajwa can offer the possibility of salvation for their characters - if Ram Karan succumbs to his daughter's brutal revenge, Ramchand survives by an equally terrible anaesthetization of sensibility. Yet despite the similarly bleak outlook the two novels have a remarkably dissimilar flavor. In Sharma's Delhi, the quality of the light is almost never untainted; in Ramchand's (and Bajwa's) Amritsar occasionally the sun shines down 'gently on him, with pleasant warmth'. As *The Sari Shop* progresses, these moments prove to be deceptive; yet while there is no more hope here than in AOF, the possibility of recognition serves almost as a proxy for redemption.

As an illustration consider the contrasting moments of revelation of injustice in either novel. In AOF, Anita's attempts to expose Ram Karan's incestuous tendencies to her relatives are met with no more than a mild curiosity; in *The Sari Shop* Ramchand's attempt to draw a seemingly sympathetic and enlightened college professor into condemning the incarceration and rape of Kamla are met with frank hostility. Yet Ramchand's own breakdown and horror at Kamla's fate

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undermines the conspiracy of silence that surrounds it. In Sharma's world, on the other hand, culpability is so pervasive that it is no longer even recognized - the conspiracy, if it can be called that, is one of indifference.

It is possible indeed to read AOF entirely as an allegory - in the obscenely obese character of Ram Karan we find an embodiment of the vitiated, dog eat dog way of life that characterizes the public sphere in post-colonial India; in his bloodless black ankles upon his death we see the lethal rot in that system. Numerous episodes throughout the novel document the comfortless, conscienceless cosmos that is Sharma's India. When a rich classmate in Asha's school throws away a used imported tissue, the other girls make a grab for it. When a monkey enters a women's restroom, two of the women inside manage to escape by locking the third one in to be mauled by the monkey. While these episodes early in the novel play for laughs (the humorist David Sedaris mentioned the monkey-in-the-bathroom tale in numerous interviews in praise of AOF's comic triumphs), the message is clear - Sharma's is a Darwinian world where self-preservation comes at the expense of others, even sometimes at the expense of self-respect. Similarly, in the sublime second chapter (which was earlier anthologized as 'If you sing like that for me' in *Best American Short Stories* 1996) Anita tries to love her husband by arranged marriage and finds that to him she is no more and no less than a life-style accessory, equivalent to a car or bungalow. Not surprisingly, social relations in this world are mediated entirely through the paradigm of use.

In the cultural landscape of Bajwa's novel the things that money can buy command a similar ascendancy in social relations - it is significant that its central arena is a shop. In the friendship of the Mrs. Sandhu, the government servant's wife and Mrs. Gupta, the businessman's, Bajwa hints at the oily nexus of corruption. The Sari Shop may be far removed from the hurly burly of public life but there is no doubt that its innocence is contaminated; and in time and unlike AOF, Ramchand comes to be the witness of that taint. Ramchand's perspective can most accurately be described as the 'critical insider', a term first used by distinguished Kannada writer U.R. Ananthamurthy. In allowing Ramchand the outsider's viewpoint and leaving some spaces uninfected by the malaise of apathy, Bajwa also opens up space for survival.

It is interesting then that the only opening possible in Sharma's world is escape. The final chapter is told in the narrative voice of Kusum, Ram Karan's youngest daughter who emigrated to the USA and married an American and who now returns to adopt the teenage Asha. The generosity of her relationship with her husband and daughter serves as a contrast to the murky, mean-spirited bonds her sister Anita has lived with. In a revealing dialogue at the end, as the plane lifts off from London's Heathrow airport, Kusum corrects Asha when the latter points to the geography they have just left behind - on the land below, says Kusum, are not paths but highways. The implicit metaphor is powerful - the highway connotes freedom and destination, features of a life in the West compared to the aimless dust paths of Delhi and/or India. Read in the light of its author's relation to the setting, AOF then is clearly the emigrant's passage to India. Like Forster's celebrated novel, Sharma's is an outsider's view. Like the other insider-outsider Sir Vidiadhar Suraj Prasad Naipaul, his vision has the merciless perspective of distance. AOF in effect offers a radical re-interpretation of Professor Godbole's mysterious comment quoted at the beginning of this essay. Culpability is indeed pervasive but in a more literal sense. The vision of AOF's characters is rendered opaque and limited by a self-serving culture that continues implicitly to excuse everything. Till the point of no return.

In comparison, *The Sari Shop* can be read as the insider's passage from ignorance to bitter knowledge. There is no forgiveness here either but there is the terrible grace of insight. Bajwa's characters may be no more able to change the direction of the world or even of their lives than Sharma's. But continuity is made possible precisely by the brief periods when they see through the systemic violence.

A gem of a novel about the stuff life's made of Rupa Bajwa's *The Sari Shop* is a poignant novel enhanced by its clearly etched out and identifiable stereotypical characters. The story revolves around Ramchand, an assistant in Sevak Sari Shop who goes about his humdrum life, mostly selling saris to wealthy clients who visit the store. The vivid illustration of the city of Amritsar with its gamut of people and places is indeed very compelling. The book also clearly brings out the class differences prevalent even in modern day India. The simplicity and palpability of the story are its major strengths.

11.2 Brief Description to Sari Shop

The novel opens with the description of a typical day in the life of Ramchand, in the bustling lanes of the older part of the town of Amritsar. Orphaned in his childhood and having to live with his uncle, he deals with many hardships and has to forgo his dreams of getting an education, as he is made to fend for himself at a young age. He starts out as an apprentice at the sari shop and from then on his life is primarily restricted to the store with occasional trips to the nearby dhaba and the movies.

Ramchand comes across as a sensitive man who happily goes about his work until one day he awakens to a window of possibilities after a visit to the house of Rina Kapoor, the daughter of the wealthiest man in town. This glimpse into the world of the English-speaking affluent people awakens in him the desire to better himself. He arms himself with a couple of second hand English language and letter writing books to learn English with renewed vigour. But, with the learning he becomes more aware of the travails and tribulations in the society around him. As he strives to learn English he realises the futility of situations when he finds out about the brutal rape of Kamla, one of his co-workers' wives.

Bajwa successfully gives the readers a clear insight into the lives of her individual characters and evokes empathy for them all, as they seem to be victims of their own trappings. Her portrayal of women characters range from the socially deprived like Kamla to the privileged few like Rina Kapoor. Then there are other well-defined characters such as Mrs. Sachdeva, the college professor and Shilpa, disinterested in education and looking forward to an arranged marriage by her parents.

Laced with dark humour, *The Sari Shop* ends with Ramchand ultimately resigning to his fate after going through varying emotions of loss, pain, angst, hope, disillusionment and resentment. Overall an impressive debut.

It is another working day in Amritsar, and Ramchand is late again. He runs through the narrow streets to Sevak Sari House, buried in the heart of one of the city's main bazaars. There, amongst the Bangladesh cottons and Benaras silks, Ramchand and his fellow shop assistants sit all day, patiently rolling and unrolling yards of coloured fabric.

Then, one afternoon, Ramchand is sent to a new part of the city with a bundle of saris carefully selected for a trousseau. His trip to Kapoor House jolts him out of the rhythm of his daily routine and his glimpse into this different world charges him with an urgent sense of possibility. And so, armed with a second-hand English grammar book and a battered Oxford Dictionary, a fresh pair of socks and a bar of Lifebuoy soap, Ramchand attempts to realize the dream that his childhood had promised. But soon these efforts turn his life upside down, bringing him face to face with the cruel reality of his very existence. The Sari Shop heralds the arrival of a writer who combines a profound sensitivity with humour and unflinching honesty. Rupa Bajwa's story is both heartbreaking and very real, and depicts a modern world in which hope and violence are permanently entwined.

Part one: Ramchand, the protagonist, and all the main characters in the story, either work at or visit *The Sari shop* regularly. So the story has little to do with how the sari shop itself came into existence, or about its sales figures, or the number of varieties of silk-threaded draperies that the shop carries. All those people who scorned at the idea of having to read something that deals with boring saris, and moreover, sari shops- *come back!* It is definitely not a "chick flip".

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You can't but help getting reminded of the *Amol Palekar era of Hindi movies* reading the opening half of the book. There is this plain, simple-minded, lonely hero with a poignant past, his only company being his two colleagues: one, a mature, advice-giving family man, and another, a quick-witted carefree boy. The latter named **Hari**, has almost been sold out to the readers, by being presented as extremely adorable and cheerful; just like a comedian, who though crass and crude reaches out to the audience.

The parts where **Ramchand** pursues for English-language education, his turmoil while encountering with a professor in the shop, the homework he does before visiting a royal customer's house, and the effort he puts in while sitting with his books, trying to make sense out of them- all form a very delightful read. However, towards the end of the first part, the story drags, becomes repetitive, and you wish the author would move on to unravel **Lakhan Singh's** story, and also the mystery behind the woman who *drinks*. You also become impatient as the apparently-unimportant characters such as **Tina Kapoor** and **Bhimsen Seth** are pointlessly discussed extensively. *It was a well-crafted book, it began and ended well, the chapters flew seamlessly into each other. There was a good streak of humour running through it. It received favourable reviews in the press...* goes the description given by the author about one of her characters, **Rina Kapoor's** book. Coincidentally, this could be the perfect account of the first part of the novel, that too, in the author's own words.

When we first meet Ramchand, a clerk in an Amritsar sari shop, he is late for work. Ramchand is habitually late for work. In fact, he is not terribly happy, longing instead for the life he would have had if his parents hadn't been killed in an accident when he was a child. One of the most affecting sections describes his childhood. His father took him on his lap, saying he would send him to an English school so Ramchand could have a better life than he. But the uncle who took him in after his parents' death also took him out of school and claimed his father's shop for his own. Thus, Ramchand is not even a shopkeeper, but a clerk in someone else's. So Ramchand decides to teach himself English; his bumbling attempts are both funny and sad. At the same time, an opportunity for advancement presents itself when a wealthy family comes to the sari shop to outfit the daughter for her wedding, and he is sent to their house. Ramchand starts to see his world expand.

But it's not quite so easy to escape the confines of poverty and lack of education—and this tale, while funny, is also heartbreaking. Ultimately, Ramchand is confronted with the choice of existence or principles. I thought Bajwa did a good job caricaturing upper class Indian families. She even pokes gentle fun at her own class—and maybe even herself—in the character of Rina, the rich, affianced daughter who publishes a book on a sari shop clerk. For me, this sly insertion redeemed the subject matter because it's too easy—too *hip* — to write about the victim, especially when the writer is clearly not one. All in all, *The Sari Shop* wasn't as powerful as some other Indian lit out there, but it was very readable.

The first thing you notice about this book – especially if you have not read *The Sari Shop* – is the cover. It is absolutely beautiful, with different pictures put together in an apparently random pattern, but which come together brilliantly. The cover I have tucked here doesn't do justice, so I am also inserting the link to the full cover jacket. Set partly in the small, buzzing town of Amritsar and partly in New Delhi, this is the story of Rani, a young Indian woman who enjoys her work in a local beauty parlour, loves telling bedtime stories to her little nephew, and is blissfully in love with Shah Rukh Khan, the movie star. However, her naturally happy disposition is marred by the real world. Her lower middle-class family lives in a state of constant struggle – to make ends meet, to hang on to their dreams, to keep their fragile lives from collapsing. However, as their financial troubles escalate, so do Rani's sister-in-law's taunts, brother's frustration and father's resignation. Rani's stories dry up. And her solitary journey of love and loss begins. Random events happen that affect each of them, changing their lives forever, and Rani finds herself in Delhi, in a sudden head-on collision with a world completely alien to her. She finds an unlikely ally in her employer, Sadhna, a stalled novelist, who has been unable to function in a savage literary marketplace.

The plot in itself is exceedingly simple. Rani is your girl-next-door in every middle class family.

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She left school after barely completing class nine and works in a beauty parlor as an assistant. Even though real-life-problems keep intruding in the form of a broken home which can barely survive the next monsoon and a vile sister-in-law, she is essentially happy reading *Filmfare*, watching Shah Rukh Khan movies and making up stories to her nephew, whom she loves like her own son. However, her carefree existence is disturbed by reality. The financial troubles are unending and domestic disputes escalate to such a point that her gentle, nonplussed father can not bear the onslaught of his son and daughter-in-law's taunts, and quietly dies. Rani has lost the connection she had with her brother and his wife, who now treat her as nothing more than a burden to be pawned off. It does not take her long to realize that the city she has loved from the first day will only now only suffocate her. She packs her meager belongings, bids her nephew a tearful goodbye and leaves Amritsar to work as a maid for Sadhna, a woman who has been disillusioned by a savage literary market place.

In Sadhna, we perhaps see an autobiographical glimpse of the author herself. Sadhna is a frustrated novelist whose first book released to great critical acclaim but who has now been struggling – unsuccessfully – to write her next. Acclaimed as the new 'literary find', she was expected to release her second novel within the subsequent couple of years. But she did not – could not – because she had lost the ability to write. Literature was not, as she had thought, a truthful, pure place where one could work hard to filter away the lies. It was a lie itself now, living in a savage marketplace.

Rupa Bajwa's first novel, *The Sari Shop*, was an immense success and released in 2004. This eight year gap between her first book and the second, **Tell Me A Story**, is highly reminiscent of Sadhna's story. I wonder whether she experienced the same emotions Sadhna talks about.

Backtracking to the plot: Rani comes to Delhi, to try and make sense of her life. According to the blurb, "...and her solitary journey of love and loss begins." It does not, not immediately. For the fifty pages that follow her arrival to Delhi, the pages are hazy, almost going nowhere. Rani comes across people completely alien to her, who spend thousands on a bottle of wine and can't bring themselves to be genuinely sad for a friend who has just lost a father.

This contrast becomes a little lost on the reader, initially. But the author has been gifted with the art of getting into the skin of her characters. Her words flow unrestricted and we follow the transformation of Rani into a sensible adult who has learned what life is quite early in her life. She has lost sight of the simple pleasures of life and has nobody to turn to. But an interesting friend is delivered in the form of Sadhna and it looks like she has begun healing from the pain of her loss, when another bombshell drops and her mettle is tested again. The novel ends at a disconsolate note, just short of abrupt and the reader is left feeling strangely out of sorts, wanting for more. Exactly what a good novel should do. To sum it up, I would say that the author has an excellent eye for detail and writes about ordinary people going about mundane tasks in a way that makes it highly readable.

Rani is with her nephew, watching Ravan being burnt as part of the Dusshera celebrations: When she opened her eyes, the fireworks were still going, the crowd was still cheering. And Rani had the strangest feeling. Hundreds, maybe even thousands, of humans had gathered, had put up effigies of a man, his brother and his son, and for some wrongs that the three had supposed to have done, god knows how many years ago, wrongs that these people had not even witnessed, they were punishing them. And they were celebrating the punishment. The hatred was being carefully kept alive. It did not seem like the celebration of good conquering evil. It seemed like the celebration of savagery, of unforgiving cruelty, of harsh judgement.

Rupa Bajwa's *The Sari Shop*, set in a world far removed from the one FIE usually addresses, explores the power of language through a narrative device. Ramchand, the sari shop attendant, glimpses the world inhabited by those who speak English in India and hopes to make sense of this world through a knowledge of English. The book he picks up – *Complete Letter Writer* – leaves him absurdly adrift among Phyllis and Peggy writing to each other about a motor tour to Caernarvon and Betws-y-Coed.

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The Sari Shop, even if only partially successful, is an attempt to look at a gated community from below, from the point of view of the world of the household – maids, drivers and washerwomen – and its extension into the commerce of daily life in the form of office boys and the owners and attendants at vegetable stalls and *kirana* stores. It actually works better than a novel far more acclaimed outside India for its portrayal of ‘the seamy side of the Indian reality’ – *The White Tiger*. The two books explore some of the same territory, but so much is shrugged off in Adiga’s book, including the ease with which the central character acquires his knowledge of English in a Bihar village, that his driver remains a cipher, a mouthpiece for the author himself, in tone and in thought. An experiment with form cannot be born out of the need to conceal an ignorance of the material at hand.

Ramchand’s fate as he seeks to make sense of a motor tour to Wales is not very removed from the one that awaits an Indian reader of recent works of FIE. Maybe we could rescue ourselves from this fate if we were used to reading literature that lay outside the Anglo-American world. Societies similar to ours have produced literature that resonates far more in our context. We should take note of the diversity of central Europe of the early twentieth century, a diversity Magris so vividly describes. I certainly find the echoes of my surroundings in the clash of languages and identities that was mediated by the vast bureaucracy of the Hapsburg Empire. The best guides to this era are still writers such as Robert Musil and Hermann Broch, and for this reason they are good guides to our world as well. I know of nothing quite as insightful about the Vishwa Hindu Parishad’s sudden emergence in small-town India as Broch’s *The Spell*, which traces the rise of fascism through the eyes of a doctor who has moved to a remote mountain village. These authors also point to another possibility we could explore, which is the presence of the intellect in the narrative, so far from the fear of ideas that besets the Anglo-Americans. I could quote from Zadie Smith again but I think a reader would be far better served by dipping into Musil’s *The Man Without Qualities*.

Self-Assessment

1. Fill in the blanks:

- (i) Ram Karan's youngest daughter who emigrated to the USA and married an American and who now returns to adopt the teenage
- (ii) As Ram Karan admits at a moment of typical
- (iii) The Sevak Sari Shop attracted all sorts. They have a strict task master of a boss called who used to ensure that they catered to all the customers in the best way they could.

11.3 Summary

- The novel opens with the description of a typical day in the life of Ramchand, in the bustling by lanes of the older part of the town of Amritsar. Orphaned in his childhood and having to live with his uncle, he deals with many hardships and has to forgo his dreams of getting an education, as he is made to fend for himself at a young age. He starts out as an apprentice at the sari shop and from then on his life is primarily restricted to the store with occasional trips to the nearby dhaba and the movies.
- The plot in itself is exceedingly simple. Rani is your girl-next-door in every middle class family. She left school after barely completing class nine and works in a beauty parlor as an assistant. Even though real-life-problems keep intruding in the form of a broken home which can barely survive the next monsoon and a vile sister-in-law, she is essentially happy reading *Filmfare*, watching Shah Rukh Khan movies and making up stories to her nephew, whom she loves like her own son.

- However, her carefree existence is disturbed by reality. The financial troubles are unending and domestic disputes escalate to such a point that her gentle, nonplussed father can not bear the onslaught of his son and daughter-in-law's taunts, and quietly dies. Rani has lost the connection she had with her brother and his wife, who now treat her as nothing more than a burden to be pawned off. It does not take her long to realize that the city she has loved from the first day will only now only suffocate her. She packs her meager belongings, bids her nephew a tearful goodbye and leaves Amritsar to work as a maid for Sadhna, a woman who has been disillusioned by a savage literary market place.
- Rupa Bajwa's first novel, *The Sari Shop*, was an immense success and released in 2004. This eight year gap between her first book and the second, **Tell Me A Story**, is highly reminiscent of Sadhna's story. I wonder whether she experienced the same emotions Sadhna talks about.
- **Rupa Bajwa's** *The Sari Shop*, set in a world far removed from the one FIE usually addresses, explores the power of language through a narrative device. Ramchand, the sari shop attendant, glimpses the world inhabited by those who speak English in India and hopes to make sense of this world through a knowledge of English. The book he picks up – *Complete Letter Writer*– leaves him absurdly adrift among Phyllis and Peggy writing to each other about a motor tour to Caernarvon and Betws-y-Coed.
- *The Sari Shop*, even if only partially successful, is an attempt to look at a gated community from below, from the point of view of the world of the household – maids, drivers and washerwomen– and its extension into the commerce of daily life in the form of office boys and the owners and attendants at vegetable stalls and *kirana* stores. It actually works better than a novel far more acclaimed outside India for its portrayal of 'the seamy side of the Indian reality' – *The White Tiger*. The two books explore some of the same territory, but so much is shrugged off in Adiga's book, including the ease with which the central character acquires his knowledge of English in a Bihar village, that his driver remains a cipher, a mouthpiece for the author himself, in tone and in thought. An experiment with form cannot be born out of the need to conceal an ignorance of the material at hand.

11.4 Key-Words

1. Embodiment : A tangible or visible form of an idea, quality, or feeling, the representation or expression of something in such a form.
2. Iniquities : Lack of justice or righteousness; wickedness; injustice

11.5 Review Questions

1. What is the theme of the Novel Sari Shop? Discuss.
2. What do you mean by the gem of novel about the stuff life's made of Rupa Bajwa.

Answers: Self-Assessment

1. (i) Asha (ii) Self-abnegation (iii) Mahajan

11.6 Further Readings



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Unit 12: Rupa Bajwa: Sari Shop – Characterisation and Plot Construction

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12.1 Characterization of the Novel Sari Shop

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12.3 Summary

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12.5 Review Questions

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Objectives

After reading this Unit students will be able to:

- Discuss the characterization in Sari Shop.
- Explain the Plot construction of Sari Shop.

Introduction

Rupa Bajwa's debut book *The Sari Shop* revolves around Ramchand a salesperson at a sari shop in the old area of Amritsar. Ramchand's life is chronicled and interwoven with stories and tidbits from the lives of others around him. Ramchand and his colleagues wait on the richest and the most powerful ladies in Amritsar who choose to come to this sari shop for the variety and quality that it promises. From university professors who look down upon money, and rich business people who look down on people who may not have the kind of money they had. The Sevak Sari Shop attracted all sorts. They have a strict task master of a boss called Mahajan who used to ensure that they catered to all the customers in the best way they could.

Ramchand lost his parents, who he adored and looked up to, in an accident when he was very young. He is brought up by his uncle and aunt. As he grows up, he realizes that he has been cheated by his uncle of the shop that his father owned and the jewelery that his mother owned. He is left with nothing. His uncle gets him at apprenticeship at the sari shop and that is where he stayed. He remembered how his father used to want that his son to learn English. He realizes that people who know English have an edge, and so he starts his journey to self-improvement. He picks up second-hand letter writing books, a dictionary and works hard at it even when in most cases, the context itself is not very clear to him.

What I really loved about the book is the way the author describes things in the book. Right from the way the old market area in Amritsar is set up, to Ramchand's sensitivity is beautifully portrayed. Ramchand's amazement when he sees women wearing the sarees that they bought at the shop. For some reason he had never put it together that people wear the expensive sarees they buy to functions and weddings. Instances of how the sales people at the shops are considered invisible or non-existent by the customers as they talk and gossip away while browsing through the saris. The rich-poor divide is well brought out. Ramchand is easily affected by the others around him. Even

a scolding from Mahajan for coming late has quite an impact on him. One day he unwittingly comes across some issues which he initially ignores and later his conscience prevents him from ignoring and carrying on with his life. Things come to a head when lives across the spectrum of society clash in a way which most of them would have never anticipated..

The ending especially is poignant and makes one wonder at how different people come to terms with what life offers them. The book has several stories, intricately woven into one. It was a 4/5 read for me. There was something that was missing from making it a completely wonderful read, for me.

12.1 Characterization of the Novel Sari Shop

Rupa Bajwa's "The Sari Shop" set in the little city of Amritsar captures evocatively, the social atmosphere of small-town India. Her narrative encapsulates the spirit of the sari-shop environment with its spirited, intimate, interaction between shop personnel and regular patrons. In the background, the rustling silk, soft cotton and shiny synthetic saris reach out to us so realistically that we long to hold and caress them in our hands. Apart from that, the unplumbed pathos of Ramchand, an assistant in Sevak Sari Shop, whose world revolves around selling saris to the women customers, deadens our heart with sorrow. Ramchand's life and his isolation in the indifferent world are effortlessly carved out in fine detail. Is it surprising then, we are drawn to empathize with his empty, monotonous existence?

Ramchand's loss of his dotting parents at a tender age is very moving. He is forced into menial work by his uncle who grabbed his inheritance. His desire to master English language is noteworthy, as it is rekindled one day, when he is sent to display sarees for the trousseau of a wealthy man's daughter. Suddenly, his life seems to acquire a purpose as he meticulously sets about learning new English words from "Radiant Essays" and "A Complete Writer" assisted by an old Oxford English dictionary. As he reads, he seems to grasp the meaning of his life and the avidity of life around him. It was a sad moment, when he began to understand the pathos of the underdog and the aggression of the conqueror; in this case the one on top of the social hierarchy. The transformation in Ramchand is to make him humane to the hurts of society and the woes of the secondary sex, women. Kamala, the wife of another sari shop assistant Chander, inadvertently opens his eyes to the double standards lived by men in the patriarchal society. At the end of it, Ramchand realizes the futility of trying to turn the system around and instead, finds comfort in lapsing into his routine existence. Our journey is outward with Ramchand, into the stagnant, oppressive social system and inward with him into his suffocating, futile ruminations. I could only throw up my hands in utter despair, at the futility of it all, when nothing materialized. I wished that Ramchand would have persevered.



Did u know? The characterization in the novel I feel is pertinent to the trivial rivalries that seethe beneath the surface of life lived by petty traders and class-conscious, middle-class wives. The wives of rich industrialists with their empty lives and the educated class with their snobbish intellectualism, is skillfully caricatured.

The lives of the lower middle class, their resigned acceptance of poverty, their escape into filmi world and their aspirations to higher things through English speaking jobs, brought a lump into my throat due to the streak of desperation that intertwined hope.

I found wonderfully comical moments in the novel as, when Hari, another shop assistant imitates the portly shop owner or when Ramchand sneaks into the wealthy wedding reception to taste the

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forty desserts set out on the table or his surprise when he sees all the women customers and the sarees from the shop on them. The laugh aloud moments are, when I took in the spiteful chatter of the ladies on a saree buying spree or observe Ramachand's sensual day dreams revolving around Sudha, the young wife of his landlord or see him ticking off his shop manager in a perfectly structured droll English or view his attempts to combat his smelly feet with lemon juice. It is laughter mixed with pathos, when I glimpsed Rina interviewing Ramachand to exploit his naïve, comical appeal in her debut novel, while Ramachand imagines himself as suave with Rina. Is it not utter duplicity of the world where law exists for the rich while the poor timidly accept injustice? The brutal rape of Kamala, the involvement of the rich Guptas, the apathy of the educated, articulate and empowered Mrs Sachadeva, the police who pocket the bribe and punish the victim, the anguish of Ramachand who is just a bystander, left a lasting impression on me. Ramachand's new found perception, battles to bring some order into the skewered justice system in the society. His sanity rightfully takes a beating, withdraws into insanity with the intensity of its demoralization and returns to the present deceitful world to maintain its status quo. I honestly salute Ramachand's efforts, even though brief, to challenge the social hierarchical system of rich and poor.

Ramachand's attempts to imbue his life with some imagination and beauty by buying English books and trying to educate himself is very moving. At that particular moment, I recalled the mania of the Indians for the English language and their use of it as a benchmark to judge a person's knowledge and place in community. I believe, the novel is very perceptive in giving a social commentary of the society which reflects the existentialist torment of every human creature. At the same time, there is a fine balance between reality and expectation, as the incongruities of life is deftly woven into the story,

I found the novel darkly humorous as it effortlessly drew me into the lives of the characters as they go about their business of living. I feel, without our volition we can empathize with Kamala or Ramachand or sneer at the hollowness of Rina or Mrs Sachadeva. It may not possible for us to break out of our boundaries or change the world around us but sometimes it is necessary to just try and understand ourselves and our life. The novel definitely does that. Kudos to Bajwa for her sensitive effort...

Geetha Kariappa is a research scholar with her area of interest being "Feminist Criticism." She is actively involved in the field of Education and Soft skills as a teacher and a trainer. She loves reading fiction, short stories and books on travel. She has written literary articles for many literary journals.

12.2 Plot of the Sari Shop

Bajwa dramatically illustrates the class gap in contemporary India in her debut novel, focusing on the fortunes of Ramchand, a lowly, disaffected clerk in a popular sari shop. The novel opens with Ramchand happily going about his duties serving the shop's mostly upper-class clients. Opportunity for advancement comes from an unlikely source when he attracts the attention of the beautiful, literate Rina Kapoor, whose family hires the shop to provide saris for her upcoming wedding. Inspired by his foray into a wider world ("there were cars and flowerpots and frosted glass trays with peacocks on them"), Ramchand embarks on a half-baked self-improvement effort that includes a reading program and some unintentionally comic attempts to learn English. Shortly afterwards, though, Ramchand sees the other side of Indian life when the wife of one of his co-workers, a woman named Kamla, descends into public drunkenness. Ramchand is a tenderly drawn character, reminiscent of Naipaul's innocent strivers, and the rest of the cast is vividly sketched. There are several typical first-novel flaws: the narrative is slow in the first half, and Bajwa's transitions between her character-driven subplots are occasionally uneven and erratic. But Bajwa's loving attention to detail – Ramchand washing his feet with lemon juice before he visits the Kapoors, the malicious chatter of the sari-shopping ladies – paints a compelling, acerbic picture of urban India.

The Sevak Sari House in Bajwa's resonant first novel is a microcosm of its surrounding town, Amritsar, and perhaps of all of India. Ramchand, a shop assistant, seems content selling saris to wealthy matrons and their daughters. But when he is sent to the opulent home of the Kapoors with stacks of saris for them to scrutinize, he experiences his first hints of discontent. Vowing to educate himself to better his place in society, Ramchand purchases some used grammar books and a dictionary, through which he plods in his off hours. He is brought back to reality when he is again sent outside the shop, this time to a co-worker's shack. Stunned by the poverty and degradation he finds there, Ramchand plunges into a deep depression over the world's inequities. After a brief and courageous outburst aimed at his higher-ups, he retreats to his old compliant self, stuck in a rut that is at least secure. Biting humor, perceptive social commentary, and the poetic telling of a poignant tale combine for an exceptional debut.

Ramchand has obediently worked as a clerk at the Sevak Sari House in the city of Amritsar, India for eleven years; alternating his time between the Sari shop located in the city's old bazaar and his one room apartment with minimal possessions. His simple life, however, takes a drastic turn when he is ordered to take a selection of saris by bicycle to a prosperous family who is preparing for their eldest daughter's wedding. Upon entering this strange new world of extravagant automobiles, air conditioning, servants, and wall-to-wall plush carpet Ramchand's mind goes in a tailspin. He has never encountered such luxury before and is deeply affected.

From this point forward Ramchand's consciousness is awakened to the issues of class that surround him in his everyday life. He becomes interested in the lives of the various woman who visit the sari shop and listen to their conversations revealing their affluent life-styles and snobbery attitudes towards others. At the same time, and also at the other end of the class spectrum, he becomes acquainted with the dire situation of his co-worker and his wife who reside in a tin shack in a poor section of the city. Ramchand's experiences quickly led him into a dizzying philosophical journey with potential serious ramifications for many.

While **The Sari Shop** contains an engaging and highly entertaining plot, Rupa Bajwa's prose is often uneven and lacks a clear direction, especially towards the middle, that can possibly attributed to this being her debut novel. Hopefully her writing skills will improve and she will continue to publish thought-provoking books with memorable characters in the near future. Recommended, especially for those who enjoy Indian literature.

Longlisted for Britain's Orange Prize for Fiction in 2004, Rupa Bajwa's *The Sari Shop* turns the world of a small shop in Amritsar, India, into a microcosm of the society, allowing the author to explore big ideas within an intimate environment. Exploring the lives of ordinary shop salesmen, both at home and at work, as they struggle to make ends meet, she juxtaposes them against some of their wealthy clients, highlighting dramatically the economic contrasts in their lives and the differences in their expectations. From her opening description of the raucous awakening of a small neighborhood, she presents the kinds of homely details which make the setting easy to visualize, despite the cultural differences. Ramchand, now twenty-six, has been working as an assistant at the Sevak Sari House since he was fifteen, doing the same job day after day, going to a small dhaba with some of the other assistants for something to eat at night and sometimes to the movies. He has little hope of improving his station and, with his parents dead and no family in the city, little opportunity to meet a marriageable young woman or change his lonely life. Through flashbacks, the reader learns about Ramchand's family background and how he came to live alone in Amritsar. As Bajwa slowly draws the reader into the lives of other characters, the reader empathizes with them. Kamla, the wife of Chander, another of the shop assistants, is an especially pathetic case, a young woman who has been victimized by society, her husband, and her husband's former employers. Rina Kapoor, daughter of the wealthiest man in Amritsar, however, is also, in some ways, a victim of her economic situation, as are the women for whom shopping for saris is a primary activity. Only a few women here seek independent lives, these being women for whom

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it is an option because of their economic privilege. Kamla has no such options. When the lives of Ramchand, Kamla, Rina, and Chander intersect in a shocking climax, lives change forever.

The stunning ending is melodramatic, and Ramchand’s change of character may not be completely realistic, but the story moves effectively from its quiet character study at the beginning into a compelling story of characters whose lives overlap, often unwittingly. Sometimes darkly humorous, the story has considerable charm because Ramchand himself inspires empathy. Intimate and thoughtful in its depiction of the various social strata which make up the community, the novel is more understated—less sensational and less political—than some of the more panoramic epics which have come from India in the past decade. Mary Whipple.

There are, apparently, an endless supply of narratives portraying the class inequalities in contemporary Indian life. Few of them have made it into the hands of western english readers. It is a treat that this one has overcome the narrowness of western ethnocentricity to give us an insight into the world of modern Indian culture. Rupa Bajwa opens the window for us to see the world she was born and raised in. While not biographical, it is still first hand. We see a world of rich, deep culture. But a culture, to the western mindset, of indescribable inequality without recourse to true justice. We witness a society at the crossroads of modernity and inescapable prejudice. It is not, at its core, a sad or tragic story. Neither is it a story inciting change to the established order. But it is an insight into the complex nature of the Indian psyche that must be unraveled and attempts made to resolve it before this nation can join the club of first world nations. This is Bajwa’s first novel. Her newness is obvious, even to the unskilled. But that is not a criticism per se. Her imagination, vulnerability, and even her weaknesses are cause to want to read on to the end. It is because she is not yet refined that the reader extends her grace and continues on to learn what she has to say and see where her characters go. I applaud this first effort and hope she will give us further enrichment into her world and opportunity to watch her mature into a major force in literature.

Self-assessment

1. Fill in the blanks:

- (i) lost his parents, who he adored and looked up to, in an accident when he was very young.
- (ii) The Sari Shop revolves around Ramchand a person at a sari shop in the old area of Amritsar.
- (iii) Rina Kapoor was a literate whose family hires the shop to provide saris for her upcoming

12.3 Summary

- Bajwa dramatically illustrates the class gap in contemporary India in her debut novel, focusing on the fortunes of Ramchand, a lowly, disaffected clerk in a popular sari shop. The novel opens with Ramchand happily going about his duties serving the shop’s mostly upper-class clients. Opportunity for advancement comes from an unlikely source when he attracts the attention of the beautiful, literate Rina Kapoor, whose family hires the shop to provide saris for her upcoming wedding. Inspired by his foray into a wider world (“there were cars and flowerpots and frosted glass trays with peacocks on them”), Ramchand embarks on a half-baked self-improvement effort that includes a reading program and some unintentionally comic attempts to learn English. Shortly afterwards, though, Ramchand sees the other side of Indian life when the wife of one of his co-workers, a woman named Kamla, descends into public drunkenness.

- While **The Sari Shop** contains an engaging and highly entertaining plot, Rupa Bajwa’s prose is often uneven and lacks a clear direction, especially towards the middle, that can possibly attributed to this being her debut novel. Hopefully her writing skills will improve and she will continue to publish thought-provoking books with memorable characters in the near future. Recommended, especially for those who enjoy Indian literature.
- The stunning ending is melodramatic, and Ramchand’s change of character may not be completely realistic, but the story moves effectively from its quiet character study at the beginning into a compelling story of characters whose lives overlap, often unwittingly. Sometimes darkly humorous, the story has considerable charm because Ramchand himself inspires empathy. Intimate and thoughtful in its depiction of the various social strata which make up the community, the novel is more understated – less sensational and less political – than some of the more panoramic epics which have come from India in the past decade. Mary Whipple.
- Her newness is obvious, even to the unskilled. But that is not a criticism per se. Her imagination, vulnerability, and even her weaknesses are cause to want to read on to the end. It is because she is not yet refined that the reader extends her grace and continues on to learn what she has to say and see where her characters go. I applaud this first effort and hope she will give us further enrichment into her world and opportunity to watch her mature into a major force in literature.

12.4 Key-Words

1. Perceptive : Having or showing sensitive insight.
2. Bystander : A person who is present at an event or incident but does not take part.
3. Avidity : Extreme eagerness or enthusiasm.

12.5 Review Questions

1. Discuss the characterization of Sari Shop.
2. What is the plot of Sari shop? Discuss.

Answers: Self-Assessment

1. (i) Ramchand (ii) Sales
(iii) Wedding.

12.6 Further Readings



Books

1. Bajwa, Roopa. 2004. *The Sari Shop*. New Delhi: Penguin.
2. Johnson, Harry M. *An Introduction to Sociology*.
3. Khushwant Singh. 2004. *This Above All*. The Tribune.
4. Lodge & Wood. 2003. *Modern Criticism & Theory*. Pearson Education.
5. Rege, Sharmila. 2003. *Sociology of Gender*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.

Unit 13: Rupa Bajwa: Sari Shop – Psychological Study

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Introduction

13.1 Sari Shop – A Psychological Study

13.2 Summary

13.3 Key-Words

13.4 Review Questions

13.5 Further Readings

Objectives

After reading this Unit students will be able to:

- Focus on the Sari Shop as a psychological study.
- Discuss how Ramchand is considered as protagonist.

Introduction

Rupa Bajwa is an Indian writer, born in Amritsar, Punjab, in 1976. She published in 2004 her first novel, *The Sari Shop*, which explores her hometown and the class dynamics of India. The novel has yielded the writer flattering reviews, with reviewers calling her India's new literary find. The novel won the Commonwealth award in 2005 and India's prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award for English 2006.

"Bajwa dramatically illustrates the class gap in contemporary India in her debut novel, focusing on the fortunes of Ramchand, a lowly, disaffected clerk in a popular sari shop. The novel opens with Ramchand happily going about his duties serving the shop's mostly upper-class clients. Opportunity for advancement comes from an unlikely source when he attracts the attention of the beautiful, literate Rina Kapoor, whose family hires the shop to provide saris for her upcoming wedding.

Inspired by his foray into a wider world ('there were cars and flowerpots and frosted glass trays with peacocks on them'), Ramchand embarks on a half-baked self-improvement effort that includes a reading program and some unintentionally comic attempts to learn English. Shortly afterwards, though, Ramchand sees the other side of Indian life when the wife of one of his co-workers, a woman named Kamla, descends into public drunkenness. Ramchand is a tenderly drawn character, reminiscent of Naipaul's innocent strivers, and the rest of the cast is vividly sketched. There are several typical first-novel flaws: the narrative is slow in the first half, and Bajwa's transitions between her character-driven sub plots are occasionally uneven and erratic. But Bajwa's loving attention to detail - Ramchand washing his feet with lemon juice before he visits the Kapoors, the malicious chatter of the sari-shopping ladies - paints a compelling, acerbic picture of urban India.

13.1 Sari Shop – A Psychological Study

The *Sari Shop* is a compact psychological study of a sari-walla in Amritsar. It focusses on the contrasts between his life and 1) what his father had hoped for him; 2) the customers of the sari shop; 3) his co-workers; 4) the suffering wife of this co-worker. These drive him to a breaking

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point. Unlike many books about India, this one does not end in utter tragedy. The novel is entirely modern in its setting and focused in its concerns. No reference is made to Amritsar's tragic history under the British Raj, but perhaps the author assumes that the reader cannot be unaware of the broader context of the novel. If you are unaware, I highly recommend Paul Scott's Raj Quartet.

Ramchand, a tired shop assistant in Sevak Sari House in Amritsar, spends his days patiently showing yards of fabric to the women of "status families" and to the giggling girls who dream of dressing up in silk but can only afford cotton. When Ramchand is sent to show his wares to a wealthy family preparing for their daughter's wedding, he is jolted out of the rhythm of his narrow daily life. His glimpse into a different world gives him an urgent sense of possibility. And so he attempts to recapture the hope that his childhood had promised, arming himself with two battered English grammar books, a fresh pair of socks, and a bar of Lifebuoy soap. But soon these efforts turn his life upside down, bringing him face to face with the cruelties on which his very existence depends. Reading group guide included.

This was an interesting book, along similar lines to the books by Kaled Housseini, however set in India and not quite as well written. It revealed a lot about the Indian class system and society and was quite sad. The only thing I did not like about this book, is that the main character had the potential to really make something of himself or perhaps to even challenge the status quo, however after one bad exchange, he gave up and went back to his mundane life, with the suggestion that he had given up his quest for self-achievement for good, which was pretty disheartening and not how I thought the story would end. Overall though, a pretty good read.

It was an interesting but ultimately depressing read. The main character, Ramchand, was very sympathetic. A sensitive young man who had lost his parents when he was 6 years old when their bus tipped over. He was taken in by a man who called himself uncle, who had a wife and several children of his own. But Ramchand was not treated like one of their own children. He grew up to be a solitary sort, having been sent to work in the sari shop when he was 15. His parents had instilled in him the importance of education and he had a yearning to improve himself.

At the Sari Shop, he is exposed to women from wealthy families and is inspired to study English, spending his meager earnings on books. One day one of his colleagues does not come to work and Ramchand is sent to find out why. He goes to the address in a squalid part of the city and finds his colleague's wife in a drunken stupor. This wife was also an orphan but her experiences had scarred her badly and having discovered her husband's liquor, she had become an alcoholic. Ramchand was moved to try and help her and almost lost his job and his sanity in the process. This story exposes the corrupting influence of wealth and the corrosive effects of poverty that continue in parts of India today. Ramchand is born into a Hindu family of shop owners. His mother is an observant Hindu who takes him to temple weekly, but he is too young to absorb any special identity or spirituality that can be called Hindu. As an adult, Ramchand proves to be especially empathetic toward a Sikh couple who have lost two barely adult sons in an Indira Gandhi assault on the Golden Temple of Amritsar (Operation Blue Star, 1983), trying to give solace to them in their own home.



Did u know?

The Sari Shop is about many things, but for the main character, Ramchand, it is about the development of character itself, particularly about putting one's morals into practice under morally impossible circumstances.

Ramchand's parents enrolled him into English medium school at age 6, but that same year, both parents were killed in a catastrophic bus accident. Ramchand was sent to a distant uncle in

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Amritsar for his education, but his uncle selected a more economical curriculum. Ramchand spent summers with his grandmother. At age 15, Ramchand was withdrawn from school and received a school leaving certificate. Ramchand did not leave school with the knowledge of English he had hoped to achieve. He observed later that no one had ever asked to see his certificate showing he completed eighth grade. His work would not require much reading, writing and figuring.

The astonishing thing is that Ramchand's family expected him to support himself fully and to live independently from age 15 on – and he did without any further contact from his family apparently. The action of *The Sari Shop* opens when Ramchand is 26 and he has been living and working in the same place since he was 15. Through his work at the Sari Shop, Ramchand becomes acquainted with the absolute wealthiest families in town and even arranges a quick and dirty invitation to the wedding of one of Amritsar's wealthiest daughters. There is a lot of description of the different kinds of saris available at the shop. They are divided by fabric, by design – by type of border, by type of skirt; there are saris and salwar kameezs, and each garment can have a head piece called by various names such as pallu or chunni. The colors are vividly described e.g. "bottle green." Ramchand learns from his friends at the Sari House, particularly Chander, that one of the wealthiest families in Amritsar withheld temporarily, then permanently, three months of regular wages from a significant number of workers. Ramchand tries talking calmly to the factory owner and is firmly told that the profit margins don't allow the wages to be paid. Ramchand also learns that Chander's wife is the victim of "persuasion" outside the law for demanding her husband's wages. She is drunk, arrested, raped, then sexually assaulted by the police using a lathi or night stick. In a different incident, Chander's wife Kamla threw a sharp object at another of the rich family heads, Ravinder Kapoor. This time the reaction was catastrophic. Kapoor – no doubt off the record – hired goons to break all of Kamla's bones, parade her naked through the slum neighborhood, and burn down her slum house with Kamla inside. This systematic destruction of Kamla's life creates a moral crisis for Ramchand. The families responsible are the same ones who buy the most expensive saris. The other shop boys do not see the overall implications. Ramchand stays home two weeks without authorization trying to figure out what to do. The book has a lot of comical elements that ride on the gossip of the ladies from the different families as they browse the saris. There is real color in the book as the descriptions of the fabrics jump off the page.

For me one of the most charming threads in the story is Ramchand's desire to learn English. Bajwa really makes it clear how lack of context makes it so hard to span the words, when one word can have so many meanings. Ramchand needs the "tuition" that the rich boys are getting. He also deserves it. Yet Ramchand is making real progress. I rarely give just two stars. The setting and details of life in India is very descriptive and visual. I enjoyed that. The story itself pulled me along but I was disappointed in the end. Some of the events seemed inevitable. The book jacket calls it a "satire." I just don't "get" it as such. Perhaps I'd have to have grown up in India.

Here is my biggest problem with the book (besides plot), there are endless references to specific things in India that are not commonly known by an American. These words are not italicized, nor is there a glossary. One could assume some general meanings. I found this disconcerting to the flow of the book. It is written in English, I presume, as there is no translator. However, when I want to read with a red pen in my hand, it is not a good sign. This could have been much tighter. If you love India, well, I still can't recommend it. There are so many beautifully written books about it. I'd say, pass. As I will pass along this copy to a friend who is so called to return to India, that I suspect she will overlook all of the picky details I have mentioned.

Rupa Bajwa makes her debut with a haunting story set in Amritsar. It is a quintessential Indian story, but one that diverges from the usual existential woe stories of the Indian middle class. This one goes a bit lower, in terms of the protagonist - a sari shop assistant, and through his eyes paints a miniature picture of 'the other india'. In spite of a troubled childhood, he lives an

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uncomplicated home-shop-home life, until one trip outside this routine, changes his outlook. Thus begins a journey - a search for a meaningful existence, which brings with it an empathy for others. Juxtaposed with him, is another character, who hasn't had a great childhood herself, and manages to fall deeper into the morass of her life, when she tries to rebel against the unfairness of it all. Their meeting brings about the next turning point in the story. Throughout the story there are several instances that show the superficiality of the people around him, especially the upper classes, and their innate selfishness. The climax has been treated extremely well - closing the door to the larger world. Tragic, but realistic. And it is perhaps that streak of realism that runs through the book, that forces the reader to feel for the characters, and their pain. Meanwhile, I think the author has managed to be a part of the novel too, literally, through the character of Rina Kapoor. A very good read, especially if you're into Indian fiction. This is a poignant story of real life India and real life Indian people. It was completely believable. The protagonist, an earnest & simple sari-walla named Ramchand, works hard everyday, studies English on his own, lives a clean and modest life dictated by his beliefs in right and wrong, accepting the simple truths of his life and history.... the circumstances of his birth and sudden orphan status, the fact that his schooling abruptly ended with his parents' death, the loss of his inheritance through unscrupulous relatives, the limitations which became his reality by virtue of circumstances. Then his whole belief system is upended by an encounter with a colleague's wife and the reality of her brutal and bitter existence. I felt the story was incredibly realistic, a story about the real India, not the India we see through the eyes of Indian immigrants to the West, or those educated in the West or with western values. No, this was an India I have not read about before. It was very eye-opening and tender and sad.

When it comes to contemporary fiction, I seek out the uncelebrated little novels more often than the awards shortlisters. This is one such book. It's the story of Ramchand, who is bestowed with a thrilling opportunity to experience the world outside his employer's sari shop. Rupa Bajwa has yet to publish a second novel, but I'll be ready to read it when she does. Ms. Bajwa's debut novel is a poignant tale to say the least. She has a compelling ability to write about and portray daily life in her hometown of Amritsar, India. She captures the culture and transfers it into words that make you feel YOU are THERE, in Amritsar. I could hear the sounds, see the sights, smell the smells and listen to the people. I will be looking forward to future novels by this author.

From back cover: "When Ramchand is sent to a new part of the city to show wares to a wealthy family preparing for their daughter's wedding, he is jolted out of the rhythm of his narrow daily life. His glimpse into a different world gives him an urgent sense of possibility. He begins to see himself, his life, and his future more clearly. And so he attempts to recapture the hope that his childhood had promised, arming himself with two battered English grammar books, a fresh pair of socks, and a bar of Lifebuoy soap. But soon these efforts turn his life upside down, bringing him face to face with the cruelties on which his very existence depends." Ramchand is a quiet, slightly withdrawn clerk at the Sevak Sari House, the most elite sari shop in the small city of Amritsar. Slowly sinking into apathy because of the drudgery of his day to day existence, Ramchand is startled back into life when he is chosen to deliver saris to the soon-to-be-married daughter of the most powerful family in town. Drawn to the elegance of Rina Kapoor's life, he vows to better himself to improve his lot in life. Using his valuable savings to purchase used books, Ramchand teaches himself to read English. In the midst of his self-improvement project, Ramchand is sent on another errand, a journey which takes him to the depths of Amritsar society. Dispatched to find an absent coworker, Ramchand learns more than he ever wanted about the tragedy of his colleague's home life. The more he learns about the crazy drunken wife of his coworker, the more disaffected Ramchand becomes with his life and the inequalities of Indian society. This book is a well-drawn picture of the extremes of Indian society. A quick read, *The Sari Shop* nevertheless provokes deeper reflection on the ties that bind us all to the life we know. In an interview at the end of the

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book, the author talks about writing it to express her frustration with Indian society and the vast inequalities facing women and the poor. I enjoy fiction about India, and believe this is one of the better treatments I've read on the subject. This debut novel certainly points to better things to come from Rupa Bajwa.

Self-Assessment

1. Fill in the blanks:

- (i) When Ramchand is sent to a new part of the city to show wares to a wealthy family preparing for their
- (ii) The novel won the Commonwealth award in and India's prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award for English
- (iii) Rupa Bajwa is an Indian writer, born in Amritsar. She published her first novel,
- (iv) Ramchand washing his with lemon juice before he visits the Kapoors.

13.2 Summary

- Ramchand, a shop assistant in Sevak Sari House in Amritsar, spends his days patiently showing yards of fabric to the women of "status families" and to the giggling girls who dream of dressing up in silk but can only afford cotton. When Ramchand is sent to a new part of the city to show wares to a wealthy family preparing for their daughter's wedding, he is jolted out of the rhythm of his narrow daily life. His glimpse into a different world gives him an urgent sense of possibility. He begins to see himself, his life, and his future more clearly. And so he attempts to recapture the hope that his childhood had promised, arming himself with two battered English grammar books, a fresh pair of socks, and a bar of Lifebuoy soap. But soon these efforts turn his life upside down, bringing him face to face with the cruelties on which his very existence depends.
- The Sari Shop is a compact psychological study of a sari-walla in Amritsar. It focusses on the contrasts between his life and 1) what his father had hoped for him; 2) the customers of the sari shop; 3) his co-workers; 4) the suffering wife of this co-worker. These drive him to a breaking point. Unlike many books about India, this one does not end in utter tragedy. The novel is entirely modern in its setting and focused in its concerns. No reference is made to Amritsar's tragic history under the British Raj, but perhaps the author assumes that the reader cannot be unaware of the broader context of the novel. If you are unaware, I highly recommend Paul Scott's Raj Quartet.
- At the Sari Shop, he is exposed to women from wealthy families and is inspired to study English, spending his meager earnings on books. One day one of his colleagues does not come to work and Ramchand is sent to find out why. He goes to the address in a squalid part of the city and finds his colleague's wife in a drunken stupor. This wife was also an orphan but her experiences had scarred her badly and having discovered her husband's liquor, she had become an alcoholic. Ramchand was moved to try and help her and almost lost his job and his sanity in the process. This story exposes the corrupting influence of wealth and the corrosive effects of poverty that continue in parts of India today.
- The Sari Shop is about many things, but for the main character, Ramchand, it is about the development of character itself, particularly about putting one's morals into practice under morally impossible circumstances. Ramchand is born into a Hindu family of shop owners. His mother is an observant Hindu who takes him to temple weekly, but he is too young to

absorb any special identity or spirituality that can be called Hindu. As an adult, Ramchand proves to be especially empathetic toward a Sikh couple who have lost two barely adult sons in an Indira Gandhi assault on the Golden Temple of Amritsar (Operation Blue Star, 1983), trying to give solace to them in their own home.

- Rupa Bajwa makes her debut with a haunting story set in Amritsar. It is a quintessential Indian story, but one that diverges from the usual existential woe stories of the Indian middle class. This one goes a bit lower, in terms of the protagonist - a sari shop assistant, and through his eyes paints a miniature picture of 'the other india'. In spite of a troubled childhood, he lives an uncomplicated home-shop-home life, until one trip outside this routine, changes his outlook. Thus begins a journey - a search for a meaningful existence, which brings with it an empathy for others. Juxtaposed with him, is another character, who hasn't had a great childhood herself, and manages to fall deeper into the morass of her life, when she tries to rebel against the unfairness of it all. Their meeting brings about the next turning point in the story.

13.3 Key-Words

1. Malicious : Characterized by malice; intending or intended to do harm: "malicious rumors
2. Vividly Sketched : producing powerful feelings or strong, clear images in the mind: a vivid description.

13.4 Review Questions

1. Write a short note on life and works of Rupa Bajwa.
 2. Discuss Sari Shop as a psychological study.
1. (i) Daughter's Wedding (ii) 2005, 2006
(iii) The Sari Shop (iv) Feet

13.5 Further Readings



Books

1. Bajwa, Roopa. 2004. The Sari Shop. New Delhi: Penguin.
2. Johnson, Harry M. An Introduction to Sociology.
3. Khushwant Singh. 2004. This Above All. The Tribune.
4. Lodge & Wood. 2003. Modern Criticism & Theory. Pearson Education.
5. Rege, Sharmila. 2003. Sociology of Gender. New Delhi: Sage Publications.

Unit 14: Aravind Adiga: the White Tiger – An Introduction

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Objectives

Introduction

14.1 Introduction to the White Tiger

14.2 Summary

14.3 Key-Words

14.4 Review Questions

14.5 Further Readings

Objectives

After reading this Unit students will be able to:

- Discuss life and works of Aravind Adiga.
- Introduce the White Tiger.

Introduction

Aravind Adiga is an Indian writer and journalist. His debut novel, *The White Tiger*, won the 2008 Man Booker Prize. Aravind Adiga was born in Madras (now Chennai) on 23 October 1974 to Dr. K. Madhava Adiga and Usha Adiga, both of whom hailed from Mangalore. His paternal grandfather was the late K. Suryanarayana Adiga, former chairman of Karnataka bank while his maternal great-grandfather, U. Rama Rao, was a popular medical practitioner and Congress politician from Madras. He grew up in Mangalore and studied at Canara High School, then at St. Aloysius High School, where he completed his SSLC in 1990. He secured first rank in the state in SSLC. Incidentally his elder brother Anand Adiga secured 2nd rank in SSLC and first rank in PUC in the state. After emigrating to Sydney, Australia, with his family, he studied at James Ruse Agricultural High School. He studied English literature at Columbia College, Columbia University in New York, where he studied with Simon Schama and graduated as salutatorian in 1997. He also studied at Magdalen College, Oxford, where one of his tutors was Hermione Lee.

Adiga began his journalistic career as a financial journalist, interning at the Financial Times. With pieces published in the Financial Times and Money, he covered the stock market and investment, interviewing, among others, Donald Trump. His review of previous Booker Prize winner Peter Carey's book, *Oscar and Lucinda*, appeared in *The Second Circle*, an online literary review. He was subsequently hired by TIME, where he remained a South Asia correspondent for three years before going freelance. During his freelance period, he wrote *The White Tiger*. He currently lives in Mumbai, India.

Aravind Adiga's debut novel, *The White Tiger*, won the 2008 Booker Prize. He is the fourth Indian-born author to win the prize, after Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy and Kiran Desai. (V. S. Naipaul, another winner, is of Indian origin, but was not born in India). The five other authors on

the shortlist included one other Indian writer (Amitav Ghosh) and another first-time writer (Steve Toltz). The novel studies the contrast between India's rise as a modern global economy and the lead character, Balram, who comes from crushing rural poverty.

"At a time when India is going through great changes and, with China, is likely to inherit the world from the West, it is important that writers like me try to highlight the brutal injustices of society (Indian). That's what I'm trying to do—it is not an attack on the country, it's about the greater process of self-examination."

He explained that "the criticism by writers like Flaubert, Balzac and Dickens of the 19th century helped England and France become better societies".

Adiga's second book, *Between the Assassinations*, was released in India in November 2008 and in the US and UK in mid-2009. The book features 12 interlinked short stories. His second novel and third published book, *Last Man in Tower*, was published in the UK in 2011

14.1 Introduction to The White Tiger

The White Tiger is the debut novel by Indian author Aravind Adiga. It was first published in 2008 and won the 40th Man Booker Prize in the same year. The novel provides a darkly humorous perspective of India's class struggle in a globalized world as told through a retrospective narration from Balram Halwai, a village boy. In detailing Balram's journey first to Delhi, where he works as a chauffeur to a rich landlord, and then to Bangalore, the place to which he flees after killing his master and stealing his money, the novel examines issues of religion, caste, loyalty, corruption and poverty in India. Ultimately, Balram transcends his sweet-maker caste and becomes a successful entrepreneur, establishing his own taxi service. In a nation proudly shedding a history of poverty and underdevelopment, he represents, as he himself says, "tomorrow."

The novel has been well-received, making the *New York Times* bestseller list in addition to winning the Man Booker Prize. Aravind Adiga, 33 at the time, was the second youngest writer as well as the fourth debut writer to win the prize in 2008. Adiga says his novel "attempt[s] to catch the voice of the men you meet as you travel through India — the voice of the colossal underclass." According to Adiga, the exigence for *The White Tiger* was to capture the unspoken voice of people from "the Darkness" – the impoverished areas of rural India, and he "wanted to do so without sentimentality or portraying them as mirthless humorless weaklings as they are usually." Introducing a major literary talent, "The White Tiger" offers a story of coruscating wit, blistering suspense, and questionable morality, told by the most volatile, captivating, and utterly inimitable narrator that this millennium has yet seen. Balram Halwai is a complicated man. Servant. Philosopher. Entrepreneur. Murderer. Over the course of seven nights, by the scattered light of a preposterous chandelier, Balram tells us the terrible and transfixing story of how he came to be a success in life – having nothing but his own wits to help him along.

Born in the dark heart of India, Balram gets a break when he is hired as a driver for his village's wealthiest man, two house Pomeranians (Puddles and Cuddles), and the rich man's (very unlucky) son. From behind the wheel of their Honda City car, Balram's new world is a revelation. While his peers flip through the pages of "Murder Weekly" ("Love – Rape – Revenge!"), barter for girls, drink liquor (Thunderbolt), and perpetuate the Great Rooster Coop of Indian society, Balram watches his employers bribe foreign ministers for tax breaks, barter for girls, drink liquor (single-malt whiskey), and play their own role in the Rooster Coop. Balram learns how to siphon gas, deal with corrupt mechanics, and refill and resell Johnnie Walker Black Label bottles (all but one). He also finds a way out of the Coop that no one else inside it can perceive.

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Balram’s eyes penetrate India as few outsiders can: the cockroaches and the call centers; the prostitutes and the worshippers; the ancient and Internet cultures; the water buffalo and, trapped in so many kinds of cages that escape is (almost) impossible, the white tiger. And with a charisma as undeniable as it is unexpected, Balram teaches us that religion doesn’t create virtue, and money doesn’t solve every problem – but decency can still be found in a corrupt world, and you can get what you want out of life if you eavesdrop on the right conversations.

Sold in sixteen countries around the world, “The White Tiger” recalls “The Death of Vishnu” and “Bangkok 8” in ambition, scope, and narrative genius, with a mischief and personality all its own. Amoral, irreverent, deeply endearing, and utterly contemporary, this novel is an international publishing sensation – and a startling, provocative debut.

The White Tiger’ tells the story of a poor Indian man, namely Balram Halwai, who wishes to leave the Darkness with its miseries and poverty so he could experience the life of the rich in the Light. His means of doing so turns out really bad, though. As a kid, Balram is taken out of school and starts working at an early age. He begins cleaning tables at tea shops, then works as a driver as well as a servant, and finally ends up being a successful entrepreneur. The whole novel (including the murder he commits and speaks about from the very first chapter) is told through letters in which he addresses some Chinese premier who wants to visit and know more about India. The first third of the novel was really brilliant. Balram’s childhood, how he got his name, the Ganga swallowing his mother as her corpse was being burned (shivers ran down my spine when I read that part), his father’s death on the hospital’s floor, the corruption in India, the oppression and the rigged elections... these were all so moving and beautifully written. However, I felt that the narrative got slow and quite boring in the middle and towards the end. I would have liked it better if there had been some good character I could truly care for. This might sound naive, but I’m one of those readers who like to have two parties in a story: the good guys and the bad ones. ‘The White Tiger’ was quite disappointing in this regard. I couldn’t grow emotionally attached to any of the main characters basically because they were all jerks in some way or another. Though mostly nice to his driver Balram, Mr Ashok bribed officials, was willing to send Balram to jail for a crime he never committed, and got morally corrupt soon after his wife left him. The protagonist, who I guess I was supposed to sympathize with (which I did at some point), was so selfish and didn’t really care neither about little Bharam nor about his family as a whole. Nevertheless, such fatal flaws in the characters reflect a realistic aspect of the human nature Adiga was possibly trying to show: purely good guys are not there. Generally, the author has a smooth style of writing and the book is worthy of being read. Got a lot of information about India, its people and culture while reading it... significance of the title “ The White Tiger”describe the evolution Of Balram’s opinion of his master and their relationship.

Self-Assessment

1. Fill in the blanks:

- (i) Aravind Adiga is an Indian writer and journalist. His debut novel, The White Tiger, won the 2008
- (ii) Adiga's second book,, was released in India in November 2008 and in the US and UK in mid-2009.
- (iii) His second novel and third published book,, was published in the UK in 2011.

14.2 Summary

- *The White Tiger* is the debut novel by Indian author Aravind Adiga. It was first published in 2008 and won the 40th Man Booker Prize in the same year. The novel provides a darkly humorous perspective of India's class struggle in a globalized world as told through a retrospective narration from Balram Halwai, a village boy. In detailing Balram's journey first to Delhi, where he works as a chauffeur to a rich landlord, and then to Bangalore, the place to which he flees after killing his master and stealing his money, the novel examines issues of religion, caste, loyalty, corruption and poverty in India. Ultimately, Balram transcends his sweet-maker caste and becomes a successful entrepreneur, establishing his own taxi service. In a nation proudly shedding a history of poverty and underdevelopment, he represents, as he himself says, "tomorrow."
- The novel has been well-received, making the *New York Times* bestseller list in addition to winning the Man Booker Prize. Aravind Adiga, 33 at the time, was the second youngest writer as well as the fourth debut writer to win the prize in 2008. Adiga says his novel "attempt[s] to catch the voice of the men you meet as you travel through India – the voice of the colossal underclass." According to Adiga, the exigence for *The White Tiger* was to capture the unspoken voice of people from "the Darkness" – the impoverished areas of rural India, and he "wanted to do so without sentimentality or portraying them as mirthless humorless weaklings as they are usually." Introducing a major literary talent, "The White Tiger" offers a story of coruscating wit, blistering suspense, and questionable morality, told by the most volatile, captivating, and utterly inimitable narrator that this millennium has yet seen.
- The *White Tiger* tells the story of a poor Indian man, namely Balram Halwai, who wishes to leave the Darkness with its miseries and poverty so he could experience the life of the rich in the Light. His means of doing so turns out really bad, though. As a kid, Balram is taken out of school and starts working at an early age. He begins cleaning tables at tea shops, then works as a driver as well as a servant, and finally ends up being a successful entrepreneur. The whole novel (including the murder he commits and speaks about from the very first chapter) is told through letters in which he addresses some Chinese premier who wants to visit and know more about India.

14.3 Key-Words

1. Assassinations : An assassination is a murder of an individual, who is usually a famous celebrity, politician, religious figure or royal
2. Transfixing story : Cause (someone) to become motionless with horror, wonder, or astonishment.

14.4 Review Questions

1. Describe the life and works of Aravind Adiga.
2. Write a short note on the novel the White Tiger.
3. Balram variously describes himself as "a man of action and change," "a thinking man," "an entrepreneur," "a man who sees tomorrow," and a "murderer." Is any one of these labels the most fitting, or is he too complex for only one? How would you describe him?
4. Balram blames the culture of servitude in India for the stark contrasts between the Light and the Darkness and the antiquated mind set that slows change. Discuss his rooster coop analogy and the role of religion, the political system, and family life in perpetuating this culture. What do you make of the couplet Balram repeats to himself: "I was looking for the key for years / but the door was always open"?

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Answers: Self-Assessment

1. (i) Man Booker Prize (ii) Between the Assassinations
(iii) Last Man in Tower

14.5 Further Readings



1. Aravind Adiga, 2008. *The White Tiger*. New Delhi. Harper Collins, Publishers India.
2. V.S. Naipaul, 1964. *An Area of Darkness*. London. Andre Deutsch.
3. V.S. Naipaul, 1990. *Million Mutinies Now*. London. Minerva Paperback.
4. 2008. Articles from *The Hindu Delhi, Literary Review*, Nov 2.
5. 2008. Articles from *The New Indian Express*, Sunday, 9 November.

Unit 15: Aravind Adiga: The White Tiger – Plot

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Introduction

15.1 The White Tiger – Analysis

15.2 Plot – The White Tiger

15.3 Summary

15.4 Key-Words

15.5 Review Questions

15.6 Further Readings

Objectives

After reading this Unit students will be able to:

- Discuss plot of the novel The White Tiger.

Introduction

Aravind Adiga's debut novel, *The White Tiger*, won the Booker prize this week. But its unflattering portrait of India as a society racked by corruption and servitude has caused a storm in his homeland. He tells Stuart Jeffries why he wants to expose the country's dark side.

It's the morning after Adiga, 33, won the £50,000 Man Booker award with his debut novel *The White Tiger*, which reportedly blew the socks off Michael Portillo, the chair of judges, and, more importantly, is already causing offence in Adiga's homeland for its defiantly unglamorous portrait of India's economic miracle. For a western reader, too, Adiga's novel is bracing: there is an unremitting realism usually airbrushed from Indian films and novels. It makes Salman Rushdie's Booker-winning chronicle of post-Raj India, *Midnight's Children* (a book that Adiga recognises as a powerful influence on his work), seem positively twee. The Indian tourist board must be livid.

Adiga, sipping tea in a central London boardroom, is upset by my question. Or as affronted as a man who has been exhausted by the demands of the unexpected win and the subsequent media hoopla can be. Guarded about his private life, he looks at me with tired eyes and says: "I don't think a novelist should just write about his own experiences. Yes, I am the son of a doctor, yes, I had a rigorous formal education, but for me the challenge of a novelist is to write about people who aren't anything like me." On a shortlist that included several books written by people very much like their central characters (Philip Hensher, for example, writing about South Yorkshire suburbanites during the miners' strike, or Linda Grant writing about a London writer exploring her Jewish heritage), the desire not to navel-gaze is surprising, even refreshing.

But isn't there a problem: Adiga might come across as a literary tourist ventriloquising others' suffering and stealing their miserable stories to fulfill his literary ambitions? "Well, this is the reality for a lot of Indian people and it's important that it gets written about, rather than just hearing about the 5% of people in my country who are doing well. In somewhere like Bihar there will be no doctors in the hospital. In northern India politics is so corrupt that it makes a mockery of democracy. This is a country where the poor fear tuberculosis, which kills 1,000 Indians a day,

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but people like me - middle-class people with access to health services that are probably better than England's - don't fear it at all. It's an unglamorous disease, like so much of the things that the poor of India endure.

"At a time when India is going through great changes and, with China, is likely to inherit the world from the west, it is important that writers like me try to highlight the brutal injustices of society. That's what writers like Flaubert, Balzac and Dickens did in the 19th century and, as a result, England and France are better societies. That's what I'm trying to do - it's not an attack on the country, it's about the greater process of self-examination."

That, though, makes Adiga's novel sound like funless didacticism. Thankfully - for all its failings (comparisons with the accomplished sentences of Sebastian Barry's shortlisted *The Secret Scripture* could only be unfavourable) - *The White Tiger* is nothing like that. Instead, it has an engaging, gobby, megalomaniac, boss-killer of a narrator who reflects on his extraordinary rise from village teashop waiter to success as an entrepreneur in the alienated, post-industrial, call-centre hub of Bangalore.

Balram Halwai narrates his story through letters he writes, but doesn't send, to the Chinese premier, Wen Jiabao. Wen is poised to visit India to learn why it is so good at producing entrepreneurs, so Balram presumes to tell him how to win power and influence people in the modern India. Balram's story, though, is a tale of bribery, corruption, skullduggery, toxic traffic jams, theft and murder. Whether communist China can import this business model is questionable. In any event, Balram tells his reader that the yellow and the brown men will take over the world from the white man, who has become (and this is where Balram's analysis gets shaky) effete through toleration of homosexuality, too slim and physically weakened by overexposure to mobile phones.

Halwai has come from what Adiga calls the Darkness - the heart of rural India - and manages to escape his family and poverty by becoming chauffeur to a landlord from his village, who goes to Delhi to bribe government officials. Why did he make Halwai a chauffeur? "Because of the whole active-passive thing. The chauffeur is the servant but he is, at least while he's driving, in charge, so the whole relationship is subverted." Disappointingly, Adiga only knows of the Hegelian master-slave dialectic from reading Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals*. But that dialectic is the spine of his novel: the servant kills his master to achieve his freedom.

The White Tiger teems with indignities masquerading as employee duties. Such, Adiga maintains, is India - even as Delhi rises like a more eastern Dubai, call-centres suck young people from villages and India experiences the pangs of urbanisation that racked the west two centuries ago. "Friends who came to India would always say to me it was a surprise that there was so little crime and that made me wonder why." Balram supplies an answer: servitude. "A handful of men in this country have trained the remaining 99.9% - as strong, as talented, as intelligent in every way - to exist in perpetual servitude." What Balram calls the trustworthiness of servants is the basis of the entire Indian economy; unlike China, he reflects, India doesn't need a dictatorship or secret police to keep its people grimly achieving economic goals.

"If we were in India now, there would be servants standing in the corners of this room and I wouldn't notice them," says Adiga. "That is what my society is like, that is what the divide is like." Adiga conceived the novel when he was travelling in India and writing for *Time* magazine. "I spent a lot of time hanging around stations and talking to rickshaw pullers." What struck him was the physical difference between the poor and the rich: "In India, it's the rich who have problems with obesity. And the poor are darker-skinned because they work outside and often work without their tops on so you can see their ribs. But also their intelligence impressed me. What rickshaw pullers, especially, reminded me of was black Americans, in the sense that they are witty, acerbic, verbally skilled and utterly without illusions about their rulers."

It is not surprising then that the greatest literary influences on the book were three great African-American 20th-century novelists - Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin and Richard Wright. "They all wrote about race and class, while later black writers focus on just class. Ellison's *Invisible Man* was extremely important to me. That book was disliked by white and blacks. My book too will cause widespread offence. Balram is my invisible man, made visible. This white tiger will break out of his cage."

For Indian readers, one of the most upsetting parts of that break-out is that Halwai casts off his family. "This is a shameful and dislocating thing for an Indian to do," says Adiga. "In India, there has never been strong central political control, which is probably why the family is still so important. If you're rude to your mother in India, it's a crime as bad as stealing would be here. But the family ties get broken or at least stretched when anonymous, un-Indian cities like Bangalore draw people from the villages. These really are the new tensions of India, but Indians don't think about them. The middle-classes, especially, think of themselves still as victims of colonial rule. But there is no point any more in someone like me thinking of myself as a victim of you [Adiga has cast me, not for the first time, as a colonial oppressor]. India and China are too powerful to be controlled by the west any more."

"We've got to get beyond that as Indians and take responsibility for what is holding us back." What is holding India back? "The corruption, lack of health services for the poor and the presumption that the family is always the repository of good."

Our time is nearly over. Adiga doesn't know how he will spend his prize money, isn't even sure if there's a safe bank in which to deposit it. Doesn't he fear attacks at home for his portrayal of India? After all, the greatest living Indian painter, M F Husain, lives in exile. "I'm in a different position from Husain. Fortunately, the political class doesn't read. He lives in exile because his messages got through, but mine probably won't."

Adiga, who says he has written his second novel but won't talk about it ("It might be complete crap, so there's no point"), flies home to Mumbai today to resume his bachelor life. His most pressing problem is that Mumbai landlords don't let flats to single men. Why? "They think we're more likely to be terrorists. I'd just like to say, through your pages, that I am not. In fact, if you check the biographies of Indian terrorists you'll find they are mostly family men who are well-off. It's a trend that needs to be investigated."

15.1 The White Tiger – Analysis

The *White Tiger*, Aravind Adiga's introduction novel that won the 2008 Man Booker Prize as well as received a great deal of critical commendation. This novel is an innovative and persuasive story about modern India. The book interesting from the perspective that how Adiga intertwines such a broad gamut of aspects of life in India – from local democracy to caste to religion to family duty to the rising technology centers and culture of entrepreneurship. The novel contains massive amount without being an extensive epic or losing its firm focus. The *White Tiger* is a moving story and an eye-opening picture of Indian society.



Did u know? The *White Tiger* tells the story of a young entrepreneur in India whose childhood nickname was the white tiger.

Towards the end of this debut novel, its voluble, digressive, murderous protagonist makes a prediction: "White men will be finished in my lifetime," he tells us. "In 20 years time it will just be

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us brown and yellow men at the top of the pyramid, and we'll rule the world." He's talking about the phenomenon at the heart of this dazzling narrative: the emergence of that much-heralded economic powerhouse, the "new India".

You have, no doubt, read about it. In fact, you may have done so courtesy of Aravind Adiga, who is Time magazine's Asia correspondent. But with *The White Tiger*, Adiga sets out to show us a part of this emerging country that we hear about infrequently: its underbelly. We see through the eyes of Balram, who was born into the "darkness" of rural India, but entered the light that is Delhi via a job as driver to Mr Ashok, the son of a rich landlord. Now, though, Balram has escaped servitude and is himself a rich businessman. What's more, his unlikely journey involved a murder.

The result is an Indian novel that explodes the clichés – ornamental prose, the scent of saffron – associated with that phrase. Welcome, instead, to an India where Microsoft call-centre workers tread the same pavement as beggars who burn street rubbish for warmth.

Adiga's whimsical conceit is to give us Balram's story via seven letters to the Chinese prime minister, who, Balram has decided, must be told the truth about India before a forthcoming state visit. So Balram begins: he tells of Delhi's servants, who live in rotting basements below the glass apartment blocks that are home to their employers. He tells of how Ashok's family bribe government ministers, and how national elections are rigged. Ashok, trendy and liberal, is forever expressing guilt over Balram's treatment, but his fine words never come to anything.

It's a thrilling ride through a rising global power; a place where, we learn, the brutality of the modern city is compounded by that of age-old tradition. "In the old days there were one thousand castes and destinies in India," says Balram. "These days there are two castes: Men with Big Bellies, and Men with Small Bellies." Soon enough, of course, Balram must tell us just how, exactly, he grew a Big Belly himself. Tired of a life of servitude, he takes the violent action that secures his place among Delhi's rich. Adiga's plot is somewhat predictable – the murder that is committed is the one that readers will expect throughout – but *The White Tiger* suffers little for this fault. Caught up in Balram's world – and his wonderful turn of phrase – the pages turn themselves. Brimming with idiosyncrasy, sarcastic, cunning, and often hilarious, Balram is reminiscent of the endless talkers that populate the novels of the great Czech novelist Bohumil Hrabal. Inventing such a character is no small feat for a first-time novelist.

Arch-defenders of India's claim to be truly democratic, even-handedly prosperous and corruption-free (and these must be few outside of the Indian cabinet) might balk at *The White Tiger*. Everyone else, surely, will be seduced by it.

15.2 Plot – The White Tiger

The White Tiger takes place in modern day India. The novel's protagonist, Balram Halwai is born in Laxmangarh, Bihar, a rural village in "the Darkness". Balram narrates the novel as a letter, which he wrote in seven consecutive nights and addressed to the Chinese Premier, Wen Jiabao. In his letter, Balram explains how he, the son of rickshaw puller, escaped a life of servitude to become a successful businessman, describing himself as a successful entrepreneur. Balram begins the novel by describing his life in Laxmangarh. There he lived with his grandmother, parents and brother and extended family. He is a smart child; however, he is forced to quit school in order to help pay for his cousin sister's dowry. He begins to work in a teashop with his brother in Dhanbad. While working in the teashop he begins to learn about India's government and economy from the customers' conversations. Balram describes himself as a bad servant and decides that he wants to become a driver.

Balam learns how to drive and gets a job driving Ashok, the son of the Stork, the local landlord. During a trip back to his village Balam disrespects his grandmother and tells the reader and the Chinese Premier that in the next eight months he intends to kill his boss. Balam moves to New Delhi with Ashok and his wife Ms Pinky Madam. Throughout their time in New Delhi, Balam is exposed to the extensive corruption of India's society, including the government. In New Delhi the separation between poor and wealthy becomes even more evident by the juxtaposition of the wealthy with poor city dwellers.

One night Pinky decides to drive the car by herself and hits something. She is worried that it was a child and the family eventually decides to frame Balam for the hit and run. The police, however, corrupt and lazy, tell them that no one reported a child missing so that luckily no further inquiry is done. Ashok becomes increasingly involved with the corrupt government itself. Balam then decides that the only way that he will be able to escape India's "Rooster Coop" will be by killing and robbing Ashok. One raining day he murders Ashok by bludgeoning him with a broken liquor bottle. He then manages to flee to Bangalore with his young nephew. There he bribes the police in order to help start his own driving service. When one of his drivers kills a bike messenger Balam pays off the family and police. Balam explains that his family was almost certainly killed by the Stork as retribution for Ashok's murder. At the end of the novel Balam rationalizes his actions by saying that his freedom is worth the lives of Ashok and his family and the monetary success of his new taxi company.

Self-Assessment

1. Fill in the blanks:

- (i) Adiga conceived the novel when he was travelling in India and writing for
- (ii) Balam is my invisible man, made visible. This white tiger will break out of his
- (iii) Adiga, sipping in a central London boardroom, is upset by my question.

15.3 Summary

- The White Tiger tells the story of a young entrepreneur in India whose childhood nickname was the white tiger. This novel is an innovative and persuasive story about modern India. The book interesting from the perspective that how Adiga intertwines such a broad gamut of aspects of life in India – from local democracy to caste to religion to family duty to the rising technology centers and culture of entrepreneurship.
- The novel contains massive amount without being an extensive epic or losing its firm focus. The White Tiger is a moving story and an eye-opening picture of Indian society.
- The White Tiger takes place in modern day India. The novel's protagonist, Balam Halwai is born in Laxmangarh, Bihar, a rural village in "the Darkness". Balam narrates the novel as a letter, which he wrote in seven consecutive nights and addressed to the Chinese Premier, Wen Jiabao. In his letter, Balam explains how he, the son of rickshaw puller, escaped a life of servitude to become a successful businessman, describing himself as a successful entrepreneur. Balam begins the novel by describing his life in Laxmangarh. There he lived with his grandmother, parents and brother and extended family. He is a smart child; however, he is forced to quit school in order to help pay for his cousin sister's dowry.

Notes

15.4 Key-Words

1. Grimly achieving : In a grim implacable manner
2. Chauffeur : A chauffeur is a person employed to drive a passenger motor vehicle, especially a luxury vehicle such as a large sedan or limousine
3. Skulduggery : Crafty deception or trickery or an instance of it.

15.5 Review Questions

1. Briefly explain the Novel The White Tiger by Aravinda Adiga.
2. What is the plot in the White Tiger? Discuss?

Answers: Self-Assessment

1. (i) Time magazine (ii) Cage
(iii) Tea

15.6 Further Readings



Books

1. Aravind Adiga, 2008. The White Tiger. New Delhi. Harper Collins, Publishers India.
2. V.S. Naipaul, 1964. An Area of Darkness. London. Andre Deutsch.
3. V.S. Naipaul, 1990. Million Mutinies Now. London. Minerva Paperback.
4. 2008. Articles from The Hindu Delhi, Literary Review, Nov 2.
5. 2008. Articles from The New Indian Express, Sunday, 9 November.

Unit 16: Aravind Adiga: The White Tiger – Detailed Study

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Objectives

After reading this Unit students will be able to:

- Discuss about the novel The White Tiger.

Introduction

Introducing a major literary talent, The White Tiger offers a story of coruscating wit, blistering suspense, and questionable morality, told by the most volatile, captivating, and utterly inimitable narrator that this millennium has yet seen.

Balram Halwai is a complicated man, Servant, Philosopher, Entrepreneur, Murderer. Over the course of seven nights, by the scattered light of a preposterous chandelier, Balram tells us the terrible and transfixing story of how he came to be a success in life – having nothing but his own wits to help him along.

Born in the dark heart of India, Balram gets a break when he is hired as a driver for his village's wealthiest man, two house Pomeranians (Puddles and Cuddles), and the rich man's (very unlucky) son. From behind the wheel of their Honda City car, Balram's new world is a revelation. While his peers flip through the pages of Murder Weekly ("Love – Rape – Revenge!"), barter for girls, drink liquor (Thunderbolt), and perpetuate the Great Rooster Coop of Indian society, Balram watches his employers bribe foreign ministers for tax breaks, barter for girls, drink liquor (single-malt whiskey), and play their own role in the Rooster Coop. Balram learns how to siphon gas, deal with corrupt mechanics, and refill and resell Johnnie Walker Black Label bottles (all but one). He also finds a way out of the Coop that no one else inside it can perceive.

Balram's eyes penetrate India as few outsiders can: the cockroaches and the call centers; the prostitutes and the worshippers; the ancient and Internet cultures; the water buffalo and, trapped in so many kinds of cages that escape is (almost) impossible, the white tiger. And with a charisma as undeniable as it is unexpected, Balram teaches us that religion doesn't create virtue, and money doesn't solve every problem – but decency can still be found in a corrupt world, and you can get what you want out of life if you eavesdrop on the right conversations.

Sold in sixteen countries around the world, The White Tiger recalls The Death of Vishnu and Bangkok 8 in ambition, scope, and narrative genius, with a mischief and personality all its own. Amoral, irreverent, deeply endearing, and utterly contemporary, this novel is an international publishing sensation – and a startling, provocative debut.

16.1 Detailed Study – The White Tiger

The Book “The White Tiger” from Aravind Adiga is about a man who writes a letter to the premier of China, Wen Jiabao. The name of the man is Balram Halwai. He lives in Bangalore, India. In his letter he wants to ask the premier, if it’s true that he wants to come to India and talk to Indian entrepreneurs, like Balram hear to on the All India Radio before. He also hears that the premier wants to know the truth about Bangalore and Balram knows, that he can tell him the real truth about Bangalore. He shows the premier the truth while talking about his life. For example what happen when he visit Bangalore for the first time. “See when you come to Bangalore and stop at a traffic light, some boy will run up to your car and knock on your window, while holding up a bootlegged copy of an American business book, wrapped carefully in cellophane.”

Balram begins to tell him a story about a day in his life, when he was driving in a car with his ex-employer Mr. Ashok and his wife Pinky Madam. Mr Ashok tells Balram to drive on the side of the street and then he was starting to ask him some questions. After he give his best to answer the questions. Mr. Ashok was wondering what Balram said. He tells his wife that Balram is just half-baked and haven’t finish the schooling.

Then Balram tells the Premier how he got his name. At the first day of school, the teacher changes his name from “Munna” into “Balram”. After that he give him a information about India and his dark an light sides. The Darkness comes from the River Ganges. He had a bad experience when Balram carry his dead mother to the ganges and his granny made the zeremony of death. His mother was wrapped from head to toe in a saffron silk cloth. Then he saw his mother burning on a wooden platform and then he fainted.

After that he tells something about an Indian village laxmangarh. He talk about this place where he lived. He mentions a water buffalo, which was important from his family in this time. He shows the premier the every day life with his family together.

There is a tea shop in the central of Laxmangarh where his father works as a rickshaw -puller. In front of the tea shop stops a car and somebody comes out. Another person is sitting in the car. It’s the Buffalo, one of the four landlords in Laxmangarh.

He is one of the chiefs in the lands around Laxmangarh. If someone wants to work for them, they have to ask these landlords for work. Balram know, that his father don't want to work with these landlords together, so he gets trouble with them. Balram’s brother Kishan wants, that Balram works in the tea shop of his father to earn more money, but this father said, that he have to finish the school. But Balram doesn’t want to visit the school anymore, because he get mobbed by his classmates. One day some of his classmates put a lizard in his face.

When Balram told him this story, his father wasn’t angry. His father Vikram and Balram visit the school and were killing the lizard. After narrating this event Balram writes that he soon has to end writing tonight, because it is almost two and he checks for other information on the poster. After looking for informations, he tells the premier about an inspection in the school, when he was a child. The inspectors prove the kids by reading a sentence form the board. The Inspectors is impressed about Balram in the way he reads the sentences. He asks Balram some more questions, for example which deals about the rarest animals that comes along only once in a generation. Balram answers this question with the white tiger.

The people there work very hard and do their job well. While working in the tea shop Balram starts spying other people’s conversations. In his mind a good way to learn more to hear new, different things. Sometimes the miners come to the tea shop and tell exciting stories. Firstly Balram wants to become a miner, but when he finds out, what a taxi driver earns a month, he changed his opinion.

Balram's granny recommends to keep the job in the tea shop. But Balram starts to search for a taxi driver, who should train him how to drive. In his letter he also describes the job situation in India, that many people are unemployed as they have not received any education, never had a chance to find a proper job.

Balram and Kishan go to a house, where many taxi drivers live. After several failures he finds a driver willing to teach him, but in return he needs to repair the taxi driver's car. After he finished has training he asked the Landlord Thakur Ramder for a job. This man tests Balram's skills.

The First Night Balram writes an email to the Chinese Prime-minster Mr. Jiabao who wants to visit Bangalore to get to know the truth about living in it. He tells about his life and describes his village Laxmangarh which is in the district of the rural Gaya. It's famous for the national history because some people say Buddha walked through it and close by it he got his enlightenment.

Balram calls himself half-baked because he never completed school and is half-educated. Therefore his ideas are half formed, half digested and half correct and he even gets his name by his teacher due to the fact that his parents just named him "munna", which means boy. The teacher backs him up and calls him "The white tiger" considering that the white tiger is the rarest animal in the jungle and appears only once in a generation.

His home hasn't got electricity or a water tap but a buffalo which is better fed by the women than the men. Balram talks about his dad who is a hard working rickshaw-puller and his mom who died and was set on fire by a priest on Mother Ganges. Later on his brother Kishan fetches him to go to the tea shop and since this day schooling is finished for him and he has to work in the shop. Through the chapter there are parts of a poster which describe Balram as a suspect because he has killed his master Mr. Ashok.

During the second night Balram thinks about his working for Mr. Ashok. After his father died of tuberculosis his brother Kishan takes care of him and marries one month later. Nevertheless Balram and Kishan pack off to Dhanbad with their cousin Dilip. They all get work in a teashop but Balram is fired because of spying on every customer in the shop. Therefore he is interested in becoming a car-driver. Moreover he would earn much money but he isn't able to pay for the driving lessons. Kishan and Dilip hand down good news to him because his grandmother, who asks for remembering her if he gets rich, agrees to invest in the lessons. Besides Balram has to send every rupee he earns back. His teacher is very strict and slaps him each time Balram makes a mistake nevertheless he is satisfied with him in the end and he takes him to a firework as reward.

After Balram has finished his lessons he searches for a household which needs a driver. Although he was not as successful as he has expected he keeps trying and is accepted finally after he tells his new masters Mr. Ashok, the Stork and Mukesh Sir he's from Laxmangarh. He makes a driving test in a Maruti Suzuki with them. Balram doesn't want any money from his masters but they want him to accept it. In the household of Mr. Ashok, Mukesh Sir and the Stork he is treated very well. There is always enough food, he gets a uniform and he shares a room with another servant, called Ram Parsad. In contrast to Ram who has a bed to sleep Balram has to lay on the floor, but for him it is much better than sleeping on the road.

Ram is the number one driver but if he is busy Balram is allowed to drive his masters instead of making tea or sweeping the floor. Because the masters like to drink whiskey Ram and Balram have to buy the most expensive one in the English liquor shop, 'Jackpot'. One morning Mr. Ashok's wife Pinky Madam, who actually plays badminton with her husband, knocks on Balram's door and likes to play with him but in contrast to Ram he's very bad in it.

Mr. Ashok wants his servants to move in another room, a better one with two separated beds and more privacy. He even tells Balram he was also born in Laxmangarh and orders to drive him and his wife to his birthplace. Pinky Madam thinks about a return date in New York because she

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wants to go back to America. After they have eaten at the Stork's mansion Balram's family arrives and takes a look at "his" car, the Honda City, with pride.

Later at home his grandmother wants him to marry even though he isn't ready yet. He imagines they are eating his brother, therefore he runs out to a hill desperately. When he comes down the hill Mr. Ashok and Pinky Madam wait for him at the car at the Stork's mansion because they had wondered where he has been. Pinky Madam asks about New York again but regarding India's development and the servants who are part of the family already, Mr. Ashok would rather stay in India.

The Fourth Morning: The chapter starts with Balram's explanation how he got his date of birth. An uniformed man came to school for the up coming election to write down the pupils ages. Due to the fact that Balram does not know his age the man says he is eighteen and able to vote from now on and this day is his birthday. Another day Balram watches a deal between the opponents of the great socialist party and the communists which has to do with the politics in Laxmangarh. During his work in the tea-shop he eavesdrops a dialogue saying a man was killed who was disturbing the official celebration of the socialist election-win. After it Balram talks about the visit of the great socialist and Vijay Laxmangarh's new deputy who is the former bus conductor. At his master's - Mr. Ashok - home Balram finds out that the other driver Ram, who his servant number one, is a Muslim. The Storks disapproves of this religion and thinks that Ram is a Hindu, Balram threatens Ram. Finally Ram is afraid to be discovered and leaves Mr. Ashok's home. Balram becomes the servant number one.

The Fourth Night: The fourth chapter opens with Balram continuing his story by mentioning how weird and confusing Delhi is. He explains that the names and numbers of the several streets do not follow any system of logic, which serves as a transition to his duties as a driver. Whilst driving Mr. Ashok, Mukesh Sir and Pinky Madam around the city to drop them off at a mall, Balram gets constantly mocked by Mukesh Sir for getting lost all the time and immediately protected by Mr. Ashok who feels pity for him.

Since Balram can't enter the mall like all servants he waits among the other drivers in front of the mall. He notices a magazine called "Murder Weekly" that features violent stories about fictional murders in detail that seem to fascinate most of the servants. After driving his masters home, further mockery from Mukesh Sir and cleaning the car Balram returns to the servants' quarter in the basement of the building his masters are living in. There he gets mocked and abused by the other servants until he decides to move in a little room where he can be alone even though it is in horrible shape and full of roaches. The next day Balram gets to drive Mr. Ashok and Mukesh Sir to the headquarters of the Congress Party where he has to wait for two hours after dropping them off. While he suspects his masters to be bribing some politician he is impressed by his surroundings, such as the Presidents house, and feels a strong need to belong to the upper part of the city. Whilst continuing his duties Balram suspects a crisis in the relationship of Mr. Ashok and Pinky Madam and has to face further abuse from Mukesh Sir until he has to drop him off at the railway one day leaving Ashok as his only master. Throughout the time he gets yelled by Pinky Madam for his low hygiene Balram feels a strange attraction towards her which he suppresses since the tension between her and Mr. Ashok seems to be growing. They bond once again over mocking Balram together on another trip to the mall where Balram rejoins the other drivers waiting in front of it. While the other drivers are busy reading the newest edition of "Murder Weekly" Balram notices that servants are being kept out of the mall and that the bouncers are identifying them by their clothing. Therefore he figures that he has to buy proper clothing in order to get into the mall himself, which he does later on after having bought new shoes, clothes and toothpaste. Apart of this exciting new experience Balram has to face further humiliation by Pinky Madam and Mr. Ashok who make him dress up as a maharaja for their own amusement and having him drive them to a party where he has to wait with the other drivers once again. On the way back an

intoxicated Pinky Madam buys a little Buddha statue for Balram and then insists to drive the vehicle herself, leaving Balram alone on the road. This turns out to be another mockery since Mr. Ashok and Pinky Madam pretend to run over Balram and then pick him up again to continue driving home.

During the tour they commit a hit-and-run on a poor child and force Balram to cover it up by cleaning the car several times. In response Mukesh Sir returns on the next day who treats Balram really nice for the first time while Mr. Ashok is still busy comforting Pinky Madam who suffered a severe shock. It turns out the behavioural change of Mukesh Sir towards Balram only served the purpose to ease him in into taking the blame for the whole incident, thus Balram is supposed to go to jail instead of them.

The Fifth Night: In the beginning of the fifth chapter, Balram describes the principle of the Rooster Coop. In a Rooster Coop, all chickens are stuffed together tightly. They are so busy trying to find a breathing space in order to keep alive that they don't even think about breaking out of the Coop. In Balram's opinion, 99.9 % of the Indians, the servants, are imprisoned in such a Rooster Coop by the rich. Although these men have the same abilities as the rich, they were taught to be slaves so well that they don't make any attempt to break out of the Coop. Furthermore, they know that their families will be as good as dead if they should try to betray their masters.

When Balram is supposed to go to jail for the hit-and-run committed by Pinky Madam, he feels like being trapped in this Coop and not able to break out of it. He is so terrified that he doesn't even think about running away. Fortunately, nobody has reported the accident and Balram doesn't have to go to prison. The one who delivers this message to Balram is Pinky Madam – she is the only one in the family who actually seems to feel guilty about the death of the unknown child. Balram realises that the atmosphere in the family is not the best. Pinky Madam appears quite upset, and some days later she commands him to drive her to the airport at two in the morning. When Mr. Ashok realises that his wife has left him for good, he turns his anger on Balram, until the latter kicks him in the chest to stop him. Mr. Ashok doesn't know how to deal with the situation. He spends much time being drunk and being driven around through Delhi aimlessly. It melts Balram's heart to see his master so lost and powerless and he gives his best trying to distract him and care for him. He thinks that it is his duty to be like a wife to Mr. Ashok now that Pinky Madam is gone. The master-servant-relationship becomes quite close. Still, Balram can't tell where his sincere concern for his master ends and his self-interest begins – without Mr. Ashok he wouldn't have any job and money. The beginning intimacy between the two of them comes to a sudden end when the Mongoose arrives from Dhanbad and Mr. Ashok tells him that he is glad to have 'someone real' by his side again. The Mongoose has a letter from Balram's grandmother and reads it aloud for him – although Balram can read: she wants him to send more money and to come home in order to marry. The next morning, Balram finds Mr. Ashok massaging his feet himself. Immediately, the servant bred into him grabs the feet of his master, which really upsets Mr. Ashok and makes him shout 'How stupid can you people get?'

Reflecting this situation, the thought of murder crosses Balram's mind for the first time ('I had a vision of a pale stiff foot pushing through a fire. "No," I said.'). He does some yoga to push the evil feelings away, until he is interrupted by the other drivers who notice that something is going on. Balram is observed by them and as long as he is, he can't break out of the Coop, which is obviously guarded from the inside.

The Sixth Morning: Balram comes to describing how he changed from an innocent village boy to a corrupted man. He claims that these changes just happened in him because they first happened in his master. Having been alone for some time, Mr. Ashok starts going to discos. In the small car, Balram can feel that his master is horny as if they would share the same body. While waiting in front of a hotel, the driver with the diseased lips tells Balram that the best-case scenario for a driver is to have a house in a slum and a child in college. When Mr. Ashok leaves the hotel, he is

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accompanied by a Nepalese looking girl. The fact that his still married master betrays his wife drives Balram furious. As he waits for the two of them to come out of a cinema, he talks to a book seller, who is sure that the Naxals are planning some kind of revolutionary civil war. After driving Mr. Ashok and the girl home, he takes the car for a ride on his own, listening to loud music, and spits on the seats afterwards.

As he eavesdrops on his master the next morning, he realises that the girl – Uma – is Mr. Ashok's old lover. He feels guilty for having condemned his master and punishes himself by pinching his palm. Mr. Ashok tells Uma that she can trust Balram because he is 'stupid as hell, but honest'. Balram's master spends the evening with a political assistant whose minister he bribes. After the meeting, the assistant persuades Mr. Ashok to spend the evening with him and to have some fun. The assistant, too, talks about a possible civil war, because he has seen lawyers beating down a judge whose order they didn't like. The two passengers drink whisky in the car and then go to pick up a blond whore from Ukraine who looks like the famous actress Kim Basinger. Mr. Ashok says that he sees someone and doesn't need a whore, but he can't get out of the situation. Balram wants to give him advice, but he is just the driver. When Mr. Ashok follows the assistant and the whore inside a hotel, he looks like a guilty little boy. Balram swears to defend his master's honour because the latter couldn't defend him against being corrupted by others.

Having driven Mr. Ashok home, Balram drives back to the hotel, wishing to see the blond girl again. He is sent away by the guards, but finds a strand of golden hair on the seat which he keeps around his wrist. As he drives through Delhi, he feels as if the city would understand him. The Sixth Night While Mr. Ashok is jogging around the block Balram suddenly asks Vitiligo-Lips for a golden-haired prostitute. Vitiligo-Lips wants to arrange something for him.

Balram says there are four ways for a servant to betray his master to get extra cash: 1st He can sell petrol from the car. 2nd He can go to a corrupt mechanic and inflate the price that is to pay and keep the rest for himself. 3rd He can sell the empty whisky bottles. 4th He can use the car as a freelance taxi. He never had cheated his master before but he starts to do that for a couple of weeks and even feels rage instead of guilt while doing it. Later he will be ashamed of his behavior. "The more I stole from him, the more I realize how much he had stolen from me."

The moment he has enough money he goes to Vitiligo-Lips again and asks for the prostitute -not for his master Mr. Ashok but for himself. Although she is golden-haired she isn't as pretty as the women Mr. Ashok has met. Nevertheless things start to happen and suddenly Balram jumps out of the bed because he has discovered something he is not able to stand. The hair has been dyed only. He leaves and in consequence he had spent all his money for nothing.

Balram arrives at his room and discovers a surprise there. Mr. Ashok is sitting on his bed and says he would know where Balram has been. The shocking moment passes fast because Mr. Ashok was told that he has been at the temple. Without any indication Mr. Ashok names his dissatisfaction with his life. He thinks everything seems to be wrong. In his opinion actually Balram's life is more livable. Therefore Mr. Ashok wants Balram to show him his life. He has dinner with him. Balram can't understand this because he wants to be like Mr. Ashok.

Mukesh comes to town again. He persuades Mr. Ashok to marry again. But as Mr. Ashok is able to convince him to leave some time to find a woman by himself. Mukesh gives him a red bag with lots of money inside. He has to bring it to the minister again.

As they are waiting in a traffic jam some beggars come along the road. Without thinking about it Balram gives them one rupee. The Mongoose gets really angry and shouts at him. Watching Balram he keeps his eyes on the rearview mirror the whole drive. Later in their apartment the Mongoose checks the breath of Balram because he thinks he was drinking and sends him away

angrily.

When Mukesh leaves some days later Balram dances around the platform at the train station the moment the train disappears. As Mr. Ashok is on the phone again Balram has to bring the red bag full of money downstairs to the car. Mr. Ashok would follow in a minute. As Balram is standing in front of the elevator he suddenly turns around as if he is on the run and runs fast down the stairs. The reader is left in one moment of uncertainty. However some time later Balram is waiting for his master in the car with the red bag and all his untouched money on the backseat. As he is talking to the city while he is driving Mr. Ashok to the minister again Delhi tells him that the money truly belongs to Balram and no one else. "In your heart you've already taken it."

Balram is in a really bad conflict with his conscience. On the one hand he is aware of Mr. Ashok as a good and gracious master. If he fulfills his plan his family will be in danger and he would disappoint his father who wanted him to be an honest man. On the other hand his father wanted him to be a man and his family is for a long time far away from him. Moreover Mr. Ashok gave Balram the blame for the car accident and the child's death.

Fulfilled with these thoughts he goes to the train station secretly and without any obvious reason. "So this is what it will be like." He thinks for himself as if he is practicing his escape. Balram gets a free day telling his master he would go to the temple although it is a lie. He wants to go to the famous "red-light-district" in Delhi. Though he changes his mind seeing the women behind the glasses looked like animals.

So he goes straight on to an older part of the city. Balram gets to a secondhand market where books are sold. It's really impressive for him. Therefore he names it "wonder of the world". There he meets an old bookseller. This man tells him a lot about poetry and poets. This point is really important for Balram.

On the way home an image of a buffalo appears in front of his eyes. On a carriage are a lot of buffalo skulls. The buffalo says to Balram that he has brought a lot of shame to his family and all of them will die. Moved by this happening the servant awakes again and he wants to tell Mr. Ashok about his secret, but his master doesn't listen. In contrast he thinks Balram wants to marry and gives him money for the festivity.

The next day Balram goes unintentionally to the slums of Delhi. He throws all the rupees he got from his master away for the non-existing wedding. As he comes home he is in a real rage but immediately stopped by a boy. This boy is Dharam, his nephew, who is sent to Balram. He should help and find something to work for him. Partly relieved Balram realizes that the boy has stopped him from a murder. One night a lizard is on the mosquito net of Balram who is totally shocked. Dharam has to kill it and gives his uncle the feeling that he won't have to worry about Dharam destroying his plan because he won't recognize he was planning something as he has seen Balram this frightened.

The new woman in Mr. Ashok's life doesn't really like Balram and makes plans for a replacement driver. Mr. Ashok and her stop talking about it as Mr. Ashok gets to know that his party hasn't the majority anymore. Therefore he is in big trouble and all the money seems to be wasted. Trying to save something he lends his car, including Balram, to two politicians. They let Balram drive around the whole night and drink all the whisky that was in the car. After Balram has brought them to their hotel again he grabs the empty bottle to get some money for it. At a moment's notice he smashes the whisky bottle right on the floor. He picks the biggest part up again keeping and hiding it in the car as a weapon and tidies everything, so nobody will notice something.

The next day Balram sees Mr. Ashok making a deal with another servant. Balram wonders if it is

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a new replacement driver. He asks for a moment off and goes together with his nephew to the zoo. Seeing the white tiger Balram is so overwhelmed that he faints.

"The moment you recognize the beautiful in the world, you stop being a slave." Afterwards he wants Dharam to write to his Grandma about the day. He also explains what a person in the zoo has been saying: Fainting is a sign for saying goodbye to the grandmother as the fainting person is beware of the fact that he would die. Just one day after that Mr. Ashok wants to be brought to all the banks again. When the red bag was well filled Balram drives to a part of the city which is out of civilization. No one is there but the two of them. Balram stops and tells his master a wheel has to be broken. The road is all empty, so everything is perfect for Balram.

Balram asks his master for help and gets him out of the car this way. Mr. Ashok kneels down. Balram gives him a last hint saying, "It's been giving problems ever since that night we went to the hotel in Jangpura." . Without any hesitation Balram hits his master Mr. Ashok with the broken bottle and kills him by breaking his neck like it's done with chickens. Balram breaks out of the Rooster Coop. Leaving the dead body behind he drives to the railway station but before he leaves he thinks of his nephew he has left alone. Nevertheless it's a big risk for him he decides to go back and catches up Dharam.

The Seventh Night: After committing the murder Balram plans how he can get to Bangalore. He decides to travel by train, zigzagging the country together with his nephew Dharam who considers the journey as holidays.

In one train he recognizes a police poster with a photo of himself. While talking to an illiterate man he gets the proof that the photo looks like a stereotypical Indian. He makes up the false story that the man on the poster has caught two terrorists. The other man remarks that the searched man looks like him. The first four weeks in Bangalore Balram needs to calm his nerves and to forget about the murder. Dharam and he stay together at a hotel which offers good food. Balram also remarks that Bangalore is full of strangers and outsiders.

Balram notices that everyone drinks coffee and of course he wants to try out but he doesn't know how to drink it at first. After watching other people he gets to know everyone drinks it differently. As well Balram has doubts whether Bangalore is the right city to live in. Still he rents a flat and he wonders how to fit into the city. Like he has heard the voice of Delhi he tries to notice the voice of Bangalore.

According to this he discovers the most important business aspect which is outsourcing. He realizes the people are working at night because their masters live in America, so he asks himself how - especially the girls - come home again. There isn't a train system like in other cities, therefore he develops the idea of a taxi service. First he hasn't got a chance to start with his business because every company already had an organisation like that. But then he tries to think about what Mr Ashok would do. Finally he goes to the police and bribes the inspector with more than ten thousand rupees. Even the wanted poster of Balram is in the station, but he has success. That is why two days later a company calls because they want to have a taxi service.

Little by little this "start- up" grows into a big business. Balram owns twenty- six vehicles and sixteen drivers. From now on Balram is the master instead of the servant. He even calls himself Ashok Sharma and offers an own website in English. Instead of treating his drivers badly like every other master in the town he looks after them nicely.

He is of the opinion that he has learned his real education from the road and the pavement. By listening to some men on the streets he obtains courage that one day there will be a revolution in India which will destroy the "Rooster Coop". He observes that only four men in history have led a successful revolution: Alexander the Great, Abraham Lincoln, Mao and maybe Hitler.

Balram also changes his previous mind of golden- coloured hair girls like they always are in the shampoo advertisement. He doesn't trust the TV and the posters anymore and thinks it's not healthy. Also he believes that the Nepali and Indian girls are the best prostitutes.

After hearing mobile phones cause cancer in the brain and testicles he throws it away because his brain is too important for him. The novel ends with the statement of Balram in which he declares that the yellow and brown men will reign the world in about twenty years.

Self-Assessment

1. Fill in the blanks:

- (i) Balram learns how to siphon gas, deal with corrupt mechanics, and refill and resell
- (ii) Balram Halwai is a man.
- (iii) Balram watches his employers bribe foreign ministers for tax breaks, barter for girls, drink liquor (single-malt whiskey), and play their own role in the

16.2 Summary

- The Book "The White Tiger" from Aravind Adiga is about a man who writes a letter to the premier of China, Wen Jiabao. The name of the man is Balram Halwai. He lives in Bangalore, India. In his letter he wants to ask the premier, if it's true that he wants to come to India and talk to Indian entrepreneurs, like Balram heard on the All India Radio before. He also hears that the premier wants to know the truth about Bangalore and Balram knows, that he can tell him the real truth about Bangalore. He shows the premier the truth while talking about his life. For example what happens when he visits Bangalore for the first time. "See when you come to Bangalore and stop at a traffic light, some boy will run up to your car and knock on your window, while holding up a bootlegged copy of an American business book, wrapped carefully in cellophane."
- Balram begins to tell him a story about a day in his life, when he was driving in a car with his ex-employer Mr. Ashok and his wife Pinky Madam. Mr Ashok tells Balram to drive on the side of the street and then he was starting to ask him some questions.
- There is a tea shop in the central of Laxmangarh where his father works as a rickshaw - puller. In front of the tea shop stops a car and somebody comes out. Another person is sitting in the car. It's the Buffalo, one of the four landlords in Laxmangarh.
- He is one of the chiefs in the lands around Laxmangarh. If someone wants to work for them, they have to ask these landlords for work. Balram knows, that his father doesn't want to work with these landlords together, so he gets trouble with them.
- Balram's granny recommends to keep the job in the tea shop. But Balram starts to search for a taxi driver, who should train him how to drive. In his letter he also describes the job situation in India, that many people are unemployed as they have not received any education, never had a chance to find a proper job.
- Balram calls himself half-baked because he never completed school and is half-educated. Therefore his ideas are half formed, half digested and half correct and he even gets his name by his teacher due to the fact that his parents just named him "munna", which means boy. The teacher backs him up and calls him "The white tiger" considering that the white tiger is the rarest animal in the jungle and appears only once in a generation.

Notes

16.3 Key-Words

1. Single-malt whiskey : Single malt whiskey is a whiskey made at one particular distillery from a mash that uses only malted grain, ordinarily barley
2. Coruscating : To emit flashes of light; sparkle

16.4 Review Questions

1. Discuss the Balram Halwai as a complicated man.
2. Who is the Protagonist in this Novel? Explain.
3. Discuss the Novel entitled as the White Tiger.
4. Discuss Balram's opinion of his master and how it and their relationship evolve. Balram says "where my genuine concern for him ended and where my self-interest began, I could not tell". Where do you think his self-interest begins?
5. Compare Ashok and his family's actions after Pinky Madam hits a child to Balram's response when his driver does. Were you surprised at the actions of either? How does Ashok and his family's morality compare to Balram's in respect to the accidents, and to other circumstances?

Answers: Self-Assessment

1. (i) Johnnie Walker Black Label bottles (ii) Complicated
(iii) Rooster Coop

16.5 Further Readings



1. Aravind Adiga, 2008. The White Tiger. New Delhi. Harper Collins, Publishers India.
2. V.S. Naipaul, 1964. An Area of Darkness. London. Andre Deutsch.
3. V.S. Naipaul, 1990. Million Mutinies Now. London. Minerva Paperback.
4. 2008. Articles from The Hindu Delhi, Literary Review, Nov 2.
5. 2008. Articles from The New Indian Express, Sunday, 9 November.

Unit 17: Aravind Adiga: The White Tiger – Theme

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Objectives

After reading this Unit students will be able to:

- Discuss about the novel The White Tiger.
- Understand the various themes of the novel.

Introduction

The White Tiger provides a darkly humorous perspective of India's class struggle in a globalized world as told through a retrospective narration from Balram Halwai, a village boy. In detailing Balram's journey first to Delhi, where he works as a chauffeur to a rich landlord, and then to Bangalore, the place to which he flees after killing his master and stealing his money, the novel examines issues of religion, caste, loyalty, corruption and poverty in India. Ultimately, Balram transcends his sweet-maker caste and becomes a successful entrepreneur, establishing his own taxi service. In a nation proudly shedding a history of poverty and underdevelopment, he represents, as he himself says, "tomorrow."

The novel has been well-received, making the New York Times bestseller list in addition to winning the Man Booker Prize and holds the rating of 4.5 stars out of 5. Aravind Adiga, 33 at the time, was the second youngest writer as well as the fourth debut writer to win the prize in 2008. Adiga says his novel "attempt[s] to catch the voice of the men you meet as you travel through India - the voice of the colossal underclass." According to Adiga, the exigence for The White Tiger was to capture the unspoken voice of people from "the Darkness" - the impoverished areas of rural India, and he "wanted to do so without sentimentality or portraying them as mirthless humorless weaklings as they are usually.

I found it ironic that Balram goes through such trouble to break out of the coop (which is something he claims only a White Tiger can do) but in actuality all he was doing was moving from the group of people associated with the darkness to the group of people associated with the light.

He goes through many names in the novel and finally once he "breaks out of the coop" he ends up using the name Ashok. Ashok was the man so wrapped up in the coop he had no idea he was even in it and that was Balram very reason for killing him. Balram never actually breaks OUT of the coop, to me it seemed as if he had dug himself further into it, and taking on this name symbolized that.

So Personally I saw that the theme was more: "don't play into societies views, remain an individual" (the white tiger, rare, his true alias, the only name that fits the main character throughout the novel, ace in a generation).

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17.1 Themes

Globalization

The White Tiger takes place in the modern day world where increased technology has led to world globalization, and India is no exception. In the past decade, India has had one of the fastest booming economies. Specifically Americanization in India has played its role in the plot, since it provides an outlet for Balram to alter his caste. To satisfy Pinky's want for American culture, Ashok, Pinky, and Balram simply move to Gurgaon instead of back to America. Globalization has assisted in the creation of an American atmosphere in India. Ashok justifies this move by explaining "Today it's the modernist suburb of Delhi. American Express, Microsoft, all the big American companies have offices there. The main road is full of shopping malls—each mall has a cinema inside! So if Pinky Madam missed America, this was the best place to bring her". By blackmailing Ram Parsad, the other driver, Balram is promoted and drives Ashok and Pinky to their new home.

Ashok is even convinced India is surpassing the USA, "There are so many more things I could do here than in New York now...The way things are changing in India now, this place is going to be like America in ten years". Balram is noticing the rapid growth as well. From the beginning of his story he knows that in order to rise above his caste he should become an entrepreneur. Although his taxi service is not an international business, Balram plans to keep up with the pace of globalization and change his trade when need be. "I'm always a man who sees 'tomorrow' when others see 'today.'" Balram's recognition of the increasing competition resulting from globalization contributes to his corruption.

Individualism

A white tiger symbolizes power and majesty in East Asian cultures, such as in China and Japan. It is also a symbol for individualism and uniqueness. Balram is seen as different from those he grew up with. He is the one who got out of the "Darkness" and found his way into the "Light".



Did u know? Throughout the book, there are references to how Balram is very different from those back in his home environment. He is referred to as the "white tiger" (which also happens to be the title of the book).

Freedom

In an interview with Aravind Adiga, he talked about how "The White Tiger" was a book about a man's quest for freedom. Balram, the protagonist in the novel, worked his way out of his low social caste (often referred to as "the Darkness") and overcame the social obstacles that limited his family in the past. Climbing up the social ladder, Balram sheds the weights and limits of his past and overcomes the social obstacles that keep him from living life to the fullest that he can. In the book, Balram talks about how he was in a rooster coop and how he broke free from his coop. The novel is somewhat of a memoir of his journey to finding his freedom in India's modern day capitalist society. Towards the beginning of the novel, Balram cites a poem from the Muslim poet Iqbal where he talks about slaves and says "They remain slaves because they can't see what is beautiful in this world." Balram sees himself embodying the poem and being the one who sees the world and takes it as he rises through the ranks of society, and in doing so finding his freedom.

Immoral corruption

Balram is from a low caste in India where he grew up with barely anything. As a child, Balram was seen as an intelligent and honest fellow in a crowd of thugs. He was a pure soul and was

untainted. However, growing up, he was exposed into a lot of corruption and immoral behavior, such as the time with the doctors just let his father die. His childhood ultimately set Balram up for a lifetime of immoral and corrupt behavior as he moved up his social ladder and into the higher castes. To work his way up, Balram ends up cheating, stealing, and even murdering in order to have his way. Balram becomes very selfish, evident by his many immoral actions, due to the entrepreneur/businessman side of him. This can be seen as both an immoral and moral, depending on how you look at it. If one looks at it in a more business lens, business is all about doing everything one can to beat out whoever one are competing against. Finding ways to ensure the competition does not succeed, finding ways to get ahead of everyone else, and coming out on top are all a big part of the business world. It can be seen as being moral because of competitive nature of our globalized capitalist economic system. In a capitalist economy, any way one can get ahead is fair game. However, if one is looking at this from a non-business standpoint, the actions Balram does are very immoral. He cheats people to put himself in a position to gain for himself. Balram does everything in his power for personal gain, even killing his boss.

Social class/caste

The book shows a modern day, capitalist Indian society with free market and free business. It also shows how it can create economic division. In India there are not social classes, there are social castes. The novel portrays India's society as very negative towards the lower social caste. Balram refers to it as the "Darkness". When Balram was asked which caste he was from, he knew that it could ultimately cause a biased stance in his employer and determine the future of his employment. There is definitely a big difference seen in Balram's lower caste from back home and his current higher caste in their life-styles, habits, and standards of living. This novel is showing how our economic system today creates socioeconomic gaps that create a big division in society. It limits opportunity, social mobility, health, and other rights and pleasures that should be given to all. There is a big difference in the amount of money spread around in society today and this book is alluding to that fact.

Marriage in India

To save their reputation and the marriage, the family has to take out a loan from the Stork. Balram is forced to drop out of school and work in a teashop to help raise money to pay back the debt – triggering the events of the rest of the story.

His cousin's wedding is not the only marriage that disrupts Balram's life. When Pinky Madam leaves for New York, Mr. Ashok sinks into depression. In addition to drinking and womanizing, he finally accepts his family's dirty business, ferrying bribes for The Stork. Balram joins in his boss' decline – eventually murdering Mr. Ashok to pocket the bribe himself.



Notes

Marriage plays a key role in Indian society as well as the novel. When Balram's cousin becomes engaged, his family "gets screwed" with a large dowry they cannot afford.

The Indian Family

In an interview with *The Guardian*, Adiga emphasizes the importance of family in Indian society. "If you're rude to your mother in India, it's a crime as bad as stealing would be here," he explains. For Balram to abandon his family, then, is perhaps his greatest crime. "This is a shameful and dislocating thing for an Indian to do," Adiga remarks of his protagonist.

Balram also understands the severity of his actions. Fear for his family is the largest obstacle he must overcome to carry out Mr. Ashok's murder. In the days before, he has visions – imagining a

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buffalo in the street blaming him for the deaths of his family. Even after he becomes a businessman in Bangalore, he goes to the temple to pray for their spirits.

China's Relationship to India

At the beginning of the novel, Balram mentions to the Premier that China is the only nation he admires besides Afghanistan and Abyssinia. Why? Because he read in a book called *Exciting Tales of the Exotic East* that these are the only 3 countries never to be ruled by outsiders. He dubs China the "freedom-loving nation," a place that has never been subject to a master-slave relationship with the West. But although he hears on All India Radio that "you Chinese are far ahead of us in every respect," Balram observes that China does not have entrepreneurs – hence the Premier's visit to Bangalore.

China, then, becomes a foil to India, which he describes as a nation with "no drinking water, electricity, sewage, public transportation ..." but chock full of entrepreneurs. For this reason, Balram tells the Premier his story, believing that China and India are destined to become the next great superpowers. "In 20 years' time, it will just be us brown and yellow men at the top of the pyramid, and we'll rule the whole world."

Lightness and Darkness

Perhaps Balram's favorite motif is the duality of "Light" and "Dark." From the very beginning, he attempts to navigate from his hometown in "The Darkness" to become a member of urban society. Light, then, becomes a multifaceted symbol of time (the future), wealth (lots of it), location (Bangalore), and obligation (none) – while Darkness represents the past, poverty, rural India – and most importantly – loyalty to family and master.

These themes battle each other throughout the novel. Even after he has established himself in Bangalore, he continues to seek ways to differentiate himself from the "Darkness." When 1 of his White Tiger drivers runs over a boy, he visits the family and offers their surviving son a job. He realizes this decision may make him appear weak, but he argues he has no choice. "I can't live the way the Wild Boar and the Buffalo and the River lived, and probably *still* live, back in Laxmangarh. I am in the Light Now."

Self Assessment

1. Fill in the blanks:

- (i) Balram Halwai, a boy.
- (ii) Pinky Madam hits a to Balram's response
- (iii) Balram's journey first to Delhi, where he works as a to a rich landlord

17.2 Summary

- The White Tiger takes place in the modern day world where increased technology has led to world globalization, and India is no exception. In the past decade, India has had one of the fastest booming economies. Specifically Americanization in India has played its role in the plot, since it provides an outlet for Balram to alter his caste. To satisfy Pinky's want for American culture, Ashok, Pinky, and Balram simply move to Gurgaon instead of back to America.
- Throughout the book, there are references to how Balram is very different from those back in his home environment. He is referred to as the "white tiger" (which also happens to be the title of the book). A white tiger symbolizes power and majesty in East Asian cultures, such as in China and Japan. It is also a symbol for individualism and uniqueness.
- In an interview with Aravind Adiga, he talked about how "The White Tiger" was a book about a man's quest for freedom. Balram, the protagonist in the novel, worked his way out

of his low social caste (often referred to as “the Darkness”) and overcame the social obstacles that limited his family in the past.

- Balram is from a low caste in India where he grew up with barely anything. As a child, Balram was seen as an intelligent and honest fellow in a crowd of thugs. He was a pure soul and was untainted.
- The book shows a modern day, capitalist Indian society with free market and free business. It also shows how it can create economic division. In India there are not social classes, there are social castes. The novel portrays India’s society as very negative towards the lower social caste. Balram refers to it as the “Darkness”.
- Marriage plays a key role in Indian society as well as the novel. When Balram’s cousin becomes engaged, his family “gets screwed” with a large dowry they cannot afford.
- At the beginning of the novel, Balram mentions to the Premier that China is the only nation he admires besides Afghanistan and Abyssinia. Why? Because he read in a book called *Exciting Tales of the Exotic East* that these are the only 3 countries never to be ruled by outsiders.

17.3 Key-Words

1. Retrospective : Looking back on or dealing with past events or situations
2. Wrapped up : Deeply devoted to; "bound up in her teaching"; "is wrapped up in his family

17.4 Review Questions

1. The novel offers a window into the rapidly changing economic situation in India. What do we learn about entrepreneurship and Balram's definition of it?
2. The novel reveals an India that is as unforgiving as it is promising. Do you think of the novel, ultimately, as a cautionary tale or a hopeful one?
3. Discuss the themes of the Novel The White Tiger.

Answers: Self-Assessment

1. (i) Village (ii) Child
(iii) Chauffeur

17.5 Further Readings



Books

1. Aravind Adiga, 2008. The White Tiger. New Delhi. Harper Collins, Publishers India.
2. V.S. Naipaul, 1964. An Area of Darkness. London. Andre Deutsch.
3. V.S. Naipaul, 1990. Million Mutinies Now. London. Minerva Paperback.
4. 2008. Articles from The Hindu Delhi, Literary Review, Nov 2.
5. 2008. Articles from The New Indian Express, Sunday, 9 November.

Unit 18: Aravind Adiga: The White Tiger – Characterisation

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18.1 Text – The White Tiger

18.2 Characterisation

18.3 Summary

18.4 Key-Words

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Objectives

After reading this Unit students will be able to:

- Explain the role of Balram Halwai.
- Discuss important characters.

Introduction

Balram Halwai murdered his master, got away with it and is now free. But is he? In the aftermath of the crime, Balram has become a slave to India's economic system. He spends his days sleeping and his nights slogging away at building his start-up taxi company. As the story opens, he recalls, over seven nights, how he transformed from a young boy, born into a caste of lowly sweet-makers, into one of the most wanted men in India.

Adiga explores Indian economics, culture and politics with this darkly satirical take on contemporary Indian life. He takes us from small town Laxmangarh, to the capital of Delhi, and finally, to Bangalore, the city which best represents where India's economics, politics and culture are headed. He does this through the eyes of the charismatic, egotistical Balram Halwai, as he writes to the premiere of China, Wen Jiabao, who is coming to visit India.

18.1 Text – The White Tiger

Introducing a major literary talent, *The White Tiger* offers a story of coruscating wit, blistering suspense, and questionable morality, told by the most volatile, captivating, and utterly inimitable narrator that this millennium has yet seen. Balram Halwai is a complicated man. Servant. Philosopher. Entrepreneur. Murderer. Over the course of seven nights, by the scattered light of a preposterous chandelier, Balram tells us the terrible and transfixing story of how he came to be a success in life – having nothing but his own wits to help him along. Born in the dark heart of India, Balram gets a break when he is hired as a driver for his village's wealthiest man, two house Pomeranians (Puddles and Cuddles), and the rich man's (very unlucky) son. From behind the wheel of their Honda City car, Balram's new world is a revelation. While his peers flip through the pages of *Murder Weekly* ("Love – Rape – Revenge!"), barter for girls, drink liquor (Thunderbolt), and perpetuate the Great Rooster Coop of Indian society, Balram watches his employers bribe foreign ministers for tax breaks, barter for girls, drink liquor (single-malt whiskey), and play their own role in the Rooster Coop. Balram learns how to siphon gas, deal with corrupt mechanics, and refill and resell Johnnie Walker Black Label bottles (all but one). He also finds a way out of the Coop that no one else inside it can perceive. Balram's eyes penetrate India as few outsiders can: the cockroaches and the call centers; the prostitutes and the worshippers; the ancient and Internet

cultures; the water buffalo and, trapped in so many kinds of cages that escape is (almost) impossible, the white tiger. And with a charisma as undeniable as it is unexpected, Balram teaches us that religion doesn't create virtue, and money doesn't solve every problem – but decency can still be found in a corrupt world, and you can get what you want out of life if you eavesdrop on the right conversations.

Balram begins by explaining that he is not just any murderer. Should the Premier wish to know more. Balram reminisces about his job as a driver for the Stork's family. After his father dies of tuberculosis, the family sends his brother Kishan to work in the city of Dhanbad. Balram and his cousin, Dilip, come along, and the 3 get work in a local teashop. Balram furthers his education by eavesdropping on the customers. He overhears a conversation about how much money drivers earn and decides he wants to be a chauffeur. Granny Kusum and the family agree to pay for driving classes on the condition that Balram send his earnings home every month. Balram's driving teacher is an old, fat, hookah-puffing taxi driver. For every hour Balram spends learning to drive, he spends several under the cars doing free repairs. When his training is complete, his teacher takes him out for a final lesson: he brings Balram to a whorehouse and lets him choose a prostitute. The hard work has only begun. Balram goes door-to-door asking for work, but he is rejected for weeks. One day he sees a lone figure walking the grounds of a mansion. He decides, "This is the master for me." He begs the guard at the front gate to let him speak to the master with no success. Balram continues to argue loudly. An older gentleman appears on the terrace. It is the Stork. Balram yells that he is from the Stork's village. He falls at the Stork's feet and begs for work, showering him with compliments. After a test drive, Balram is hired. Balram spends his days cooking, cleaning, and washing two spoiled Pomeranians named Puddles and Cuddles. Since he is the 2nd driver, he only drives when the 1st driver, Ram Parsad, is busy. Once every week, Ram Parsad and Balram are sent to the "Jackpot" English Liquor Store to purchase expensive American whiskey. This is the only time they work as a team. Otherwise they never speak a word to each other even though they share a room. At night, Balram massages the Stork's feet, listening to conversations between the Stork and his two sons: Mukesh Sir (aka "the Mongoose") and Mr. Ashok. One day, Mr. Ashok asks Balram to drive him to the village of Laxmangarh. He was born there and wants to see the village again. The ride to Laxmangarh is tense. Mr. Ashok and his American wife, Pinky Madam, argue. Pinky Madam demands to know when they will return to New York. Mr. Ashok dodges the question, and Pinky Madam accuses him of lying to her. When they arrive in Laxmangarh, Balram's family comes to see him. They are in awe of his khaki uniform and the fancy Honda City car. But Balram is in trouble because he hasn't sent any money home for months. Granny Kusum threatens to marry him off to keep him in line. Balram does not want to be married. They argue and he stomps out of the house. When Balram drives Mr. Ashok and Pinky Madam home, his family gathers at the side of the road to say goodbye. Balram speeds right past them out of town. He decides to cut ties with his family and never return to Laxmangarh. During the drive home, Mr. Ashok and Pinky Madam continue to argue about returning to America. Mr. Ashok says he prefers India. He feels he can accomplish more in India and he likes having servants. Further down the road, trucks are blocking the way home. A group of men in red headbands is shouting at a group of men in green headbands. Madam Pinky is alarmed. Balram promises to continue his story – but first he will have to explain about Democracy. This will have to wait for the following night because it's time for him to go back to work. It is 2:44 in the morning, "the hour of degenerates, drug addicts and Bangalore-based entrepreneurs."

18.2 Characterisation

Balram Halwai

The narrator Balram Halwai grew up in the fictive village Laxmangarh in India. Like most families in this region his family is very poor. Furthermore he lost his parents very early. His family neither gave him a name nor a date of birth. They just called him "Munna" meaning "boy". His father always wanted him to go to school to learn how to write and to read in reason to give him better possibilities. At the school he got the name "Balram" by his teacher. One of the most important facts is that the school inspector named him "The white Tiger" the rarest animal in the jungle

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because he is the cleverest child in Laxmangarh. Because of debts at the landowner "Stork" Balram's family takes him out of school to earn money in the tea house. His further education he gets by eavesdropping conversations of the tea house guests. After the death of his parents his grandmother Kusum decides about his future. As he wants to become a driver Kusum pays his introduction in condition that Balram supports his family when he is a driver. Against all expectations he gets a job as driver and servant at the "Storks" house. In the eyes of "Mr. Ashok" his young master he is the perfect servant. Balram identifies with his master and he's really fortunate to have a boss like that. He worries about him and his image: "On Mr. Ashok's privacy I allowed no one to infringe". Furthermore he stops chewing paan because Pinky Madam points out that his teeth were disgusting. More and more he starts casting off his role as a local jerk. When he is forced to take his responsibility for an accident caused by Pinky Madam he begins to mistrust and to doubt the loyalty of his master.

There are early signs for the murder of Mr. Ashok. First he can't overcome his thoughts to murder his good-natured master but at the end it's a cold-blooded and well planned deed. Therefore he risks his families well-being but he doesn't feel responsible for them anymore. After Balram's flight he founds a driver company with the stolen money of Mr. Ashok. This underlines his spirit, shrewdness and intelligence. When one of his drivers caused an accident he behaves loyal and supports his driver. His action shows the difference between him and Mr. Ashok during an accident. While Mr. Ashok wallows in self-pity Balram feels sorry for his driver and the victim.

The positive features of Balram aren't curious because he is the narrator of the story. Balram presents himself as an above-average and smart boy who grows with his experiences and changed from a naive, poor child to a hardened, rich metropolitan. He looks with a cynical attitude, a moral indignation at the conditions in India and at his own life. But at the end Balram is a lonely people. He is lonely because of his living condition. But he is also lonely because he is dissociated from his comrades. He even keeps his nephews away from himself. Between them stands the deed which changed everything: "One day, I know, Dharam, this boy who is drinking my milk and eating my ice cream in big bowls, will ask me....And then I'll have to come up with an answer- or kill him, I suppose."

His master's murder will follow Balram every time. Even if he hopes to find the way back in community.

Balram's family

The family of Balram is poor but very traditional. Men and woman sleep in different corners of their house and all members of the family adore and carry for the water buffalo, which is fed by the woman still before they make the meal for their husbands. The water buffalo is a fat, glossy skinned creature and gets top priority. Every member of the family works hard for the well-being of their relatives.

Vikram Halwai

Vikram Halwai is the father of Kishan and his younger brother Balram who is the first person narrator.

Vikram is a poor man nevertheless he is a man of honour and courage.

He earns money for his family as a rickshaw-puller in Laxmangarh. Laymangarh is a little village in northern India.

Also he is a patient and quite person. He never crouched while waiting for passengers. He only stands there alone, drinking tea and thinking.

Vikram Halwai is a man who has a plan. His son Balram is his plan. For him it is very important that his son Balram goes to school. That is why he doesn't accept that Balram works in the tea shop. His son should be able to read and to write for having a better future.

Certainly he doesn't feel happy about the fact that his son is afraid of a lizard but he is a thoughtful father and so he goes with his son to school and kills the lizard. "My whole life, I have been treated like a donkey. All I want is that one son of mine - at least one - should live like a man." His whole

life he worked very hard to nourish his family and now the only thing he wants is that his son has a better life as his life was.

Finally he contracts with tuberculosis. Balram and Kishna bring him to the Lohia Universal Free Hospital on the other side of the river but there wasn't a doctor. After a life with hard work he died of his illness.

Balram's mother

Balram's mother is dead and considered as crazy by Balram's grandmother, that's why Grandmother Kusum is glad that Balram's mother isn't alive anymore and can't influence the family.

Kusum

Balram's grandmother is called Kusum and the oldest member of the family. She has her own opinion of the future of her grandsons and barges in the parenting of her son, the father of Balram and his brother, f.e. "That night she told my father: 'He just stood there gaping at the fort - just the way his mother used to. He is going to come to nothing good in life, I'll tell you that right now.'" Another example is that she persuades his son to let Balram and his brother work in the teashop. After the death of Balram's parents she decides about his future. All in all she only wants the best for her grandsons, although she calls Balram a "coward" because of his fright against lizards.

Kishan

Kishan is Balram's older brother and works in the teashop for the stork as well. He began to work there after the wedding of his cousin Meera to earn money for the family because the dowry tears a hole in their budget and that's why he hasn't finished school. After the wedding of the second cousin Reena, he retrieves his brother out of school to work in the teashop, too. Kishan is in pursuance of the owner of the tea-shop an assiduous and dependable worker.

After the death of their father Kishan marries his wife and two weeks after the wedding he leaves his home and travels to Dhanbad to work there. Balram and their cousin Dilip attend him.

He's a typical older brother and cares for his younger brother Balram.

Dharam

Dharam is Balram's nephew. Balram takes this little boy along to Bangalore and Dharam considers this journey as his first holidays. He had never left his home for holidays before. It seems like Balram is a kind of archetype for his nephew, because Dharam trusts him blindly. Furthermore Dharam is very observing and notices instantly that his uncle is thoughtful and not really happy ("One morning Dharam said: 'Uncle, you look so depressed'"). With his barefaced and childish character he whips up a smile at Balram's face. In the end of the story Dharam is the residue of Balram's family ("Dharam, last of my family, and me.").

Cousins

- Dilip attends Balram and Kishan to Dhanbad.
- Meera is married and the dowry therefore is the reason why Kishan had to leave school and begin to work.
- Reena is married with a boy from the next village and they celebrate a traditional wedding. Because of the dowry for the family of the husband also Balram has to leave school and work in the tea-shop.

Uncles

Balram's uncles do backbreaking work to provide for the family.

Aunts

Balram's aunts work with his cousins and his grandmother every day "in the courtyard". Every woman has her own exercise to do and to care for the families well-being.

Notes

The rooster coop

The author frequently mentions the rooster coop when describing the situation or characteristics of the servant class in India and he also defends himself for murdering his master with it. The author first describes how the rooster coop looks like in the market in Old Delhi, in order to give the visualization to the target audience: “Hundreds of pale hens and brightly coloured roosters stuffed tightly into wire-mesh cages, packed as tightly as worms in a belly, pecking each other and sitting on each other, jostling just for breathing space; the whole cage giving off a horrible stench...The roosters in the coop smell the blood from above. They see the organs of their brothers lying around them.”

However, the chickens are not trying to escape from the poor-constructed cage. Hence, the author compares those chickens living in a miserable condition with the poor class in India. “The very same thing is done with human beings in this country” From his analysis of the structure of the inequality in the country, the author comes to believe that liability for the suffering of the servant also lies with the mentality of the servant class, which he refers as “perpetual servitude”. This ideology is so strong that “you can put the key of his emancipation in a man’s hands and he will throw it back at you with a curse”.

According to his philosophy, individual action is the key to break out of the rooster coop and the servants are self-trapping. He validates his evil actions to his master by saying, “I think the Rooster Coop needs people like me to break out of it. It needs masters like Mr. Ashok – who, for all his numerous virtues, was not much of a master – to be weeded out, and exceptional servants like me to replace them.

Self-Assessment

1. Choose the correct options:

- (i) Dilip attends Balram and Kishan to
 (a) Patna (b) Dhanbad (c) Old Delhi (d) None of these
- (ii) Reena is married with a boy from the next village and they celebrate a wedding.
 (a) Modern (b) Ancient (c) Traditional (d) Both (a) and (b)
- (iii) Dharam is Balram’s
 (a) Son (b) Nephew (c) Grand son (d) None of these
- (iv) Balram's grandmother is called Kusum and the oldest member of the family.
 (a) Kishan (b) Kusum (c) Laxman bai (d) None of these

18.3 Summary

- Introducing a major literary talent, *The White Tiger* offers a story of coruscating wit, blistering suspense, and questionable morality, told by the most volatile, captivating, and utterly inimitable narrator that this millennium has yet seen. Balram Halwai is a complicated man, Servant, Philosopher, Entrepreneur, Murderer. Over the course of seven nights, by the scattered light of a preposterous chandelier, Balram tells us the terrible and transfixing story of how he came to be a success in life – having nothing but his own wits to help him along. Born in the dark heart of India, Balram gets a break when he is hired as a driver for his village’s wealthiest man, two house Pomeranians (Puddles and Cuddles), and the rich man’s (very unlucky) son.
- Balram begins by explaining that he is not just any murderer. Should the Premier wish to know more. Balram reminisces about his job as a driver for the Stork’s family. After his father dies of tuberculosis, the family sends his brother Kishan to work in the city of Dhanbad. Balram and his cousin, Dilip, come along, and the 3 get work in a local teashop.
- The narrator Balram Halwai grew up in the fictive village Laxmangarh in India. Like most families in this region his family is very poor. Furthermore he lost his parents very early. His family neither gave him a name nor a date of birth.

- The family of Balram is poor but very traditional. Men and woman sleep in different corners of their house (p. 17) and all members of the family adore and carry for the water buffalo, which is fed by the woman still before they make the meal for their husbands.
- Vikram Halwai is the father of Kishan and his younger brother Balram who is the first person narrator.
- Vikram is a poor man nevertheless he is a man of honour and courage (p.23).
- He earns money for his family as a rickshaw-puller in Laxmangarh. Laymangarh is a little village in northern India.
- Balram's grandmother is called Kusum and the oldest member of the family. She has her own opinion of the future of her grandsons and barges in the parenting of her son, the father of Balram and his brother, f.e. "That night she told my father.
- Kishan is Balram's older brother (p.37) and works in the teashop for the stork as well (p. 32). He began to work there after the wedding of his cousin Meera to earn money for the family because the dowry tears a hole in their budge and that's why he hasn't finished school.
- Dharam is Balram's nephew. Balram takes this little boy along to Bangalore and Dharam considers this journey as his first holidays. He had never left his home for holidays before.
- The author frequently mentions the rooster coop when describing the situation or characteristics of the servant class in India and he also defends himself for murdering his master with it. The author first describes how the rooster coop looks like in the market in Old Delhi, in order to give the visualization to the target audience

18.4 Key-Words

1. Charismatic : The term charisma has two senses: 1) compelling attractiveness or charm that can inspire devotion in others, 2) a divinely conferred power or talent.
2. Nourish : To provide with food or other substances necessary for life and growth; feed, to foster the development of.

18.5 Review Questions

1. In what ways did Balram's character transform from the beginning of his story to the end in *The White Tiger*?
2. Were Balram's actions a consequence of his character or circumstances?
3. Why is *The White Tiger* structured as a letter to Premier Jiabao?
4. How did Balram justify the murder of his master, knowing he was putting his entire family in danger, in *The White Tiger* by Adiga?

Answers: Self-Assessment

1. (i) (b) (ii) (c) (iii) (b) (iv) (b)

18.6 Further Readings



1. Aravind Adiga, 2008. *The White Tiger*. New Delhi. Harper Collins, Publishers India.
2. V.S. Naipaul, 1964. *An Area of Darkness*. London. Andre Deutsch.
3. V.S. Naipaul, 1990. *Million Mutinies Now*. London. Minerva Paperback.
4. 2008. Articles from *The Hindu Delhi, Literary Review*, Nov 2.
5. 2008. Articles from *The New Indian Express*, Sunday, 9 November.

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Unit 19: Aravind Adiga: The White Tiger – Critical Appreciation

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Objectives

After reading this Unit students will be able to:

- Understand the novel White Tiger.
- Make a critical analysis of the novel.

Introduction

The White Tiger, Aravind Adiga's debut novel, won the 2008 Man Booker Prize and has received much critical acclaim. *The White Tiger* tells the story of a young entrepreneur in India whose childhood nickname was the white tiger. This novel is an original and compelling story about modern India.

The White Tiger won critical praise for its author, first time novelist Aravind Adiga, who won the 2008 Man Booker Prize for his novel. *The White Tiger* tells the story of a young man, Balram Halwai, who grows up in "the Darkness" of rural India and moves to Delhi as an adult, working as the chauffeur for a wealthy man from his village. The novel is structured as a letter Balram is writing to the Premier of China, explaining how he came to be an entrepreneur in Bangalore.

One remarkable aspect of *The White Tiger* is how Adiga weaves such a broad spectrum of aspects of life in India – from local democracy to caste to religion to family duty to the rising technology centers and culture of entrepreneurship. The novel contains multitudes without being a sprawling epic or losing its tight focus. *The White Tiger* is a moving story and an eye-opening portrait of Indian society.

The White Tiger is presented as an epistolary novel, a series of letters written over the period of seven nights. It's just an excuse, of course, for the narrator, Balram Halwai, to tell his story – a supposedly creative approach that, at least initially certainly gets the reader's attention. The person Balram is writing to is the premier of China, Wen Jiabao, due to visit the city Balram is living in – Bangalore, India – in a week's time. What, one wonders, could possess an Indian entrepreneur living in Bangalore to write at such length to the premier of China? Balram does have a story to tell, but unfortunately the connection to his ostensible audience (the Chinese premier) is barely made. Sure, Balram explains that he can tell the premier all about Indian entrepreneurship – something he hears China is missing – and he makes the occasional comparisons between India and China, but it ultimately proves to be a feeble excuse for him to unburden himself, and because the premise is so poorly utilised undermines much of the novel.

19.1 The White Tiger – Critical Appreciation

Notes

The *White Tiger* by Aravind Adiga, has once again drawn the attention of thousands of Indian readers not only for winning the Man Booker Prize 2008 but primarily for its realistic and graphic picture of some of the most canny truths about India. It is perhaps the most drastic and bitter facts that have impressed the judges, who have got a revealing inside into India. Hence the book, as a whole, presents the crude, dark and naked facts about India, and that has added all the merits for the award of the coveted Man Booker Prize.

The entire plot of the novel pivots round the protagonist Balram Halwai, a young man born and brought up in a remote village of Bihar, who narrates his story of life in the form of a letter to a foreign dignitary, the Chinese Prime-Minister who is on his visit to Bangalore on an official assignment. In his talk Halwai begins to tell the Chinese Premier the story of his life. We are introduced to the poverty of rural Bihar, and the evil of the feudal landlords.

Halwai's voice sounds like a curious mix of an American teen and a middle-aged Indian essayist.

While unfolding his life of adventure and struggle, he is mainly concerned with painting a realistic picture of his village, his people, the feudal Zamindars of India and particularly all those entrepreneurs who have arisen from dubious position to the great heights of business magnets. But it is the graphic picture of the country and the portrayal of the characters that really matter in the novel. To begin with we have the portrayal of a school teacher who is thus painted by the narrator.

The teacher turned aside and spat - a jet of red paan splashed the ground of the classroom. He licked his lips.

While describing about India to the foreign Prime-Minister, he explains and immediately depicts the great river of India called

Ganga which flows through his village. That black river am I talking of - which is river of Death, whose banks are full of rich, dark, sticky mud whose grip traps everything that is planted in it, suffocating and choking and stunting it? Why, I am talking of Mother Ganga, daughter of the Vedas, river of illumination, protector of us all, breaker of the chain of birth and rebirth. Everywhere this river flows, that area is the Darkness. Please understand, Your Excellency, that India is two countries in one: an India of Light, and an India of Darkness. The ocean brings light to my country. Every place on the map of India near the ocean is well-off. But the river brings darkness to India - the black river. And then he gives a vivid picture of the buffalo that always stands in front of his house as a member of the family: The water buffalo. She was the fattest thing in our family; this was true in every house in the village. All day long, the women fed her and fed her fresh grass; feeding her was the main thing in their lives. All their hopes were concentrated in her fatness, sir. If she gave enough milk, the women could sell some of it, and there might be a little more money at the end of the day. She was a fat, glossy-skinned creature, with a vein the size of a boy's penis sticking out over her hairy snout, and long thick pearly spittle suspended from the edge of her mouth; she sat all day in her own stupendous crap. She was the dictator of our house! And finally completes the picture of his village home with an account of women quarreling with each other: Every now and then they stop their work, because it is time to fight. This means throwing metal vessels at one another, or pulling each other's hair, and then making up, by putting kisses on their palms and pressing them to the other's cheeks. At night they sleep together, their legs falling one over the other, like one creature, a millipede. The novel opens with such shocking but vivid account of India's village people, landscape and, above all, a devastating account of haves and have-nots during the narration of the personal life of the protagonist Balram Halwai who, while serving his rich master as a driver, learns the art of entrepreneurship and himself becomes a great entrepreneur by killing his own master after robbing him of all his money. Hence neither the plot nor character analysis nor the novel itself appears to be worthy for

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any of its artistic features or narrative style. All that matters is the graphic account of the sordid, sinking and dark and debased picture of different aspects of India, the land of what he calls the "half baked men" and "human spider". Hence it is the description of various faces of India that is said to have any merit. Thus while describing the tea shops on the bank of Ganga, he looks at the men working in the tea shop - "men, I say, but better to call them human spiders that go crawling in between and under the tables with rags in their hands, crushed humans in crushed uniforms, sluggish, unshaven, in their thirties or forties or fifties but still 'boys'. But that is your fate if you do your job well - with honesty, dedication, and sincerity, the way Gandhi would have done it, no doubt." Similarly to him there are two kinds of Indian: 'Indian' liquor men and 'English' liquor men. 'Indian' liquor was for village boys like me-"toddy, arrack, country hooch. 'English' liquor, naturally, is for the rich. Rum, whisky, beer, gin-anything the English left behind." Close to this he comes to give an interesting history of the poor and rich which is full of bitter irony: The history of the world is the history of a ten-thousand year war of brains between the rich and the poor. Each side is eternally trying to hoodwink the other side: and it has been this way since the start of time. The poor win a few battles (the peeing in the potted plants, the kicking of the pet dogs, etc.) but of course the rich have won the war for ten thousand years. That's why, one day, some wise men, out of compassion for the poor, left them signs and symbols in poems, which appear to be about roses and pretty girls and things like that, but when understood correctly, spill out secrets that allow the poorest man on earth to conclude the ten-thousand-year-old brain-war on terms favourable to himself. The irony becomes all the more pungent when he says : See, the poor dream all their lives of getting enough to eat and looking like the rich. And what do the rich dream of ? Losing weight and looking like the poor. Similarly the dogs of the rich people are different from the dogs of the poor. The dogs of the rich are treated as more than servants of the rich houses because: The rich expect their dogs to be treated like human, you see - they expect their dogs to be pampered, and walked, and petted, and even washed! And guess who had to do the washing? I got down on my knees and began scrubbing the dogs, and then lathering them, and foaming them, and then washing them down, and taking a blow dryer and drying their skin. Then I took them around the compound on a chain while the king of Nepal sat in a corner and shouted, 'Don't pull the chain so hard! They're worth more than you are! Talking of his upbringing, he demonstrates how every successful entrepreneur in India is incomplete: Fully formed fellow, after twelve years of school and three years of university, wear nice suits, join companies, and take orders from other men for the rest of their lives. Entrepreneurs are made half-baked clay. To him politics to Indians is a game played through media and All India Radio. The health minister announces to eliminate malaria, the chief minister announces to eradicate malnutrition, and the finance minister announces especial budget for the entire electrification of India. The author however, comments. This is the kind of news they feed us on All India Radio, night after night: and tomorrow at dawn it'll be in the papers too. People just swallow this crap. Night after night, morning after morning. Amazing, isn't it?

His accounts of the cities of India are full of bitter ironical remarks that reveal the real condition of the people living here. Talking of the city of Delhi, he comments: And all the roads look the same, all of them go around and around grassy circles in which men are sleeping or eating or playing cards, and then four roads shoot off from that grassy circle, and then you go down one road, and you hit another grassy circle where men are sleeping or playing cards, and then four more roads go off from it. So you just keep getting lost, and lost, and lost in Delhi. Thousands of people live on the sides of the road in Delhi. They have come from the darkness too- you can tell by their thin bodies, filthy faces, by the animal-like way they live under the huge bridges and overpasses, making fires and washing and taking lice out of their hair while the cars roar past them. And about the jails of Delhi, he says:

The jails of Delhi are full of drivers who are there behind bars because they are taking the blame for their good, solid middle-class masters. We have left the villages, but the masters still own us, body, soul and ...

But it is the account of the Bangalore city which is all the more interesting:

When I drive down Hosoor Main Road, when I turn into Electronics City Phase I and see the companies go past, I can't tell you how exciting it is to me. General Electric, Dell, Siemens - they're all here in Bangalore. And so many more are on their way. There is construction everywhere. Piles of mud everywhere. Piles of stones' Piles of bricks. The entire city is masked in smoke, smog, powder, cement, dust. It is under a veil. When the veil is lifted, what will Bangalore be like? His account of the working people of Bangalore is quite revealing: Outsourcing which meant doing things in India for Americans over the phone. Everything flowed from it - real estate, wealth, power, sex. So I would have to join this out-sourcing thing, one way or the other. One of the devices of portraying the land lords of village lies in his use of animal characters which appears close to the art of Orwell in his novel *Animal Farm*. Thus he calls the four rich landlords as 'the Buffalo', 'the Stork', 'the Wild Boar' and 'the Ravan', revealing thereafter the animal traits that these persons possess. Take for example the character of the Wild Boar who owned all the good agricultural land around Laxmangarh. If you wanted to work on those lands, you had to bow down to his feet, and touch the dust under his slippers, and agree to swallow his day wages. When he passed by women, his car would stop; the windows would roll down to reveal his grin; two of his teeth, on either side of his nose, were long, and curved, like little tusks.

It is, however, the author's use of satire that gives a shocking insight into the Indian politician, minister, and ruler. Ironically he calls the Indian public man as the Great socialist who uses his own mechanism of exploitation. He explains these in his own way :

Now, imagine that I'm a doctor. I beg and borrow the money and give it to the great Socialist, while touching his feet. He gives me the job. I take an oath to God and the Constitution of India and then I put my boots up on my desk in the state capital.' He raised his feet on to an imaginary table. 'Next, I call all the junior government doctors, whom I'm supposed to supervise, into my office. I take out my big government ledger. I shout out, "Dr. Ram Pandey." He pointed a finger at me; I assumed my role in the play. I saluted him: 'Yes, sir!' He held out his palm to me. 'Now, you - Dr. Ram Pandey-will kindly put one-third of your salary in my palm. Good boy. In return, I do this.' He made a tick on the imaginary ledger. 'You can keep the rest of your government salary and go work in some private hospital for the rest of the week. Forget the village. Because according to this ledger you've been there. You've treated my wounded leg. You've healed that girl's jaundice.'

Although the author makes use of symbols, but each symbol has a shallow significance. The little rectangle mirror inside the car is one such symbol that at moments strips both the driver and the master completely because every now and then; When master and driver find each other's eyes in this mirror, it swings open like a door into a changing room, and the two of them have suddenly caught each other naked?

Similarly the title of the novel *The White Tiger* attempts to suggest a good deal of symbolical values in the book. The White Tiger is associated with many experiences of the Protagonist. First it was the school inspector who spotted Balram Halwai as the brightest boy in the school for having answered all his questions and he called him the white tiger. All his close friends and associates always addressed him as the white tiger, particularly at moments of great crisis in life. When rejected in the selection of training for driving, he fell back in dejections, but was lifted by his cousins Kishan, and Dilip who addressed him as 'white tiger' and finally when he visited the Delhi zoo and fainted under the impact of the white tiger in the cage. The entire significance of the novel revolves round the white tiger in a cage, for Balram Halwai, always feels to have been chained bound in his country like a white tiger in a cage. Hence in his letter to his granny, he writes 'I can't live the rest of my life in a cage, Granny. I'm so sorry.' He falls down fainted, and the term is used here as opposite of the paper tiger, metaphorically suggesting an India human being who finds himself completely bound and chained like the white tiger; everywhere they are like Balram, his village people, his driver friend and above all, even the educated young Indians, who

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appear half baked men,' human spiders in 'half baked cities In fact it is this concept of human beings bound in the cage that brings out the central theme of the novel revealing the situation wherein the poor people of India are like rooster in a basket. Nothing could be more bitter and ironical than the following remark: Indians are the world's most honest people, like the prime minister's booklet will inform you? No. It's because 66.6 per cent of us are caught in the Rooster Coop just like those poor guys in the poultry market.

And further he adds; Never before in human history have so few owed so much to so many, Mr. Jiabao. A handful of men in this country have trained the remaining 99.9 percent - as strong, as talented as intelligent in every way - to exist in perpetual servitude; a servitude so strong that you can put the key of his emancipation in a man's hands, he will throw it back at you with a curse.

This dominating theme of the novel is all that the author aims at conveying to the readers, projecting India, the poor down-trodden people of India and the Indian landscape which he calls darkness as against the rich palaces of affluent people which are termed as light. The entire merit of the novel lies solely in its attempts at exposing the dark sides of India. Often critics like to appreciate what we usually term as the realistic picture, the naked truth and the sordid reality that novelists, authors or artists try to record in their literary works. Aravind Adiga, too, makes all out attempt to show India with all its darkness. It is true that 'the black' has its own beauty, but the appeal and value of the black entirely depends on its complete veracity, authenticity and of course in the perfection of its expression. Analyzed from this angle, we find that apart from its sheer dark pictures of India, the novel lacks in its authenticity, complete and absolute truth as well as artistic mode and stylistic feature. Looking through its dark canvas against which the entire plot of the novel has been drawn, one is immediately reminded of V.S. Naipaul and his novel like *An Area of Darkness* and many other novels on India, wherein he too paints the dark side of India. But great differences emerge between the two novelists. Although Naipaul's account appears as one of outsider's views on India, while Adiga's accounts becomes that of an insider's view on India, both the artists differ in their approach, treatment and stylistic expression of the subject. While Naipaul is an excellent artist par excellence both in his expression and narrative style, Adiga's expression is dull, drab and bereft of any stylistic features. Although both the writers may be charged for lacking in authenticity, whereas Naipaul possesses the art of sweeping off the readers by his power of stylistic features, Adiga's weakness is clearly exposed through lack of a polished and perfect mode of expression. Similarly while Naipaul's experiences of India are expressed through a global lens, Adiga looks at things purely from the Indian angle. Thus the difference that surfaces quite is perceptible between both. A close examination of the form of the novel also reveals a lack of consistency in his use of the form of the novel. The novel begins in the epistolary form as the author writes letter to the Chinese Prime Minister, but after a few chapters, he gives up this form and lapses into free expression. In the same way, sometimes the author appears erratic as he imitates the style of the picaresque novel, particularly like the novel *Tom Jones*, he makes the truth stand on its head, a mode of expression that appears quite suitable to the central theme of the novel, but this mode appears only at moments to disappear later without making any lasting effect on the mind of the reader. It seems the author has little sense of the art of characterization; for there are very few characters in the novel, and even these have little flesh or blood. Commenting on his art of characterization, Amitav Kumar rightly observes: I found Adiga's villains utterly cartoonist, like the characters in a bad Bollywood melodrama. However, it was his presentation of ordinary people that I found not trite but also offensive.

Further commenting on the authenticity of the novel, the reviewer says: But even at such moments, the novel reveals its great weakness. Who is looking here? Let's remember that the village to which the car is returning is not only the employer's village but also Halwai's - he is returning to the place where he was born and grew up and has only recently left. Yet does it appear to be the

account of a man who is returning home? He recognizes no landmark or person, he has no emotion, he has no relationship to the land or the people.

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Did u know? India, a land of people with empty bellies, deceitful ways and always their hairs stretched out for Western goods of any kind.

Finally, he exposes the bad intention of the novelist as he observes: This is at the heart of the book's bad faith. The first - person narration disguises a cynical anthropology. Because his words are addressed to an outsider, the Chinese Premier, Halwai was at freedom to present little anthropological mini-essays on all matters Indian. It is "India for Dummies" that proves quite adept at finding the vilest impulse in nearly every human being it represents. I don't only mean every member of a corrupt and venal ruling class, but also of the victim class itself, portrayed in the novel's pages as desperate and brazenly cannibalistic.

Above all, Adiga forgets and perhaps deliberately overlooks the fact that the India he presents is not the whole of India nor the real India. All the rich people, all the entrepreneurs, all the politicians and, of course, all the rulers and ministers are cheats, dishonest, murderer and upstarts as painted by Adiga. But there are some good persons, good soul and well - meaning rulers who have a good deal of humanity to uphold faith, truth and honesty. Hence the review of the book by the Economist describing as giving "glimpses of Real India" does not bring out the whole of India. It may be Adiga's India, but it is certainly not everybody's India. The novel, as a whole, is not that great or successful, as it had been held, because a reader with an alert and sensitive mind feels rather disappointed and depressed for not finding what one usually expects from a work of art with all the artistic values and mature and universal vision. Certainly it is not the whole of Indian nor the real Indian. It is, at best, a work that holds up only one of the many aspects of India, i.e. its poverty, darkness and the low slum picture of India. Commenting on the novel, a well known Tamil literary critic, B. Jayamohan observes : A perfect example of literature becoming extended journalism is *The White Tiger*. Reading it, I felt Aravind Adiga was the byline for a cover story in some big news paper! It's perfectly told and edited, but it's one lifeless sketch that looked more based on the usual news stock It's highly intelligible to the regular English reader, because he anyway gets to read similar narration every day. Adiga thus faces no linguistic challenges of depicting various kinds of people with different cultural and social conditions of this vast country. He gladly glides through the repeatedly polished language of our popular media. So, it is natural for a screenplay writer also to pick stories from the Indian media and then pay a short visit to, say, the Mumbai slums. Result; a film like *Slumdog Millionaire*. It's always a safe theme because for more than 300 years the West has been trained to believe this one kind or 'reality' about India. This last issue opens up a whole debate on the subject on which many literary works can be discussed. In fact, the whole crux of the matter pivots round what Amitav Bachan said in his comment regarding selling poverty in the world market. The issue takes us to a series of works written on the dark side of Indian. Take for example V.S. Naipaul's *An Area of Darkness* published in 1964 that depicted India, a land of people with empty bellies, deceitful ways and always their hairs stretched out for Western goods of any kind. Later this was followed by his book *A Million Mutinies Now*, which depicts the same kind of squalid and filth that the author found all over the country. In such work Naipaul paints an unpleasant and most unpalatable image of India that appeared to please mostly the Western readers. Needless to say foreign writers have long held up such dark mirror of India for their readers. For example Mahatma Gandhi dismissed Katherine Mayo's book *Mother India* as a "drain inspector's report." But apart from foreigners, Indian writers and artists from film industry continued to depict the destitute Indian life with all its slums and

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dingy huts that became quite attractive and saleable. When Satyajit Ray's films starting from *Pathar Panchali* (1955) to others began to make waves in Europe, there were murmurings that he summed to be promoting a persistent image of poverty and deprivation. But it is pertinent to note here that Satyajit Ray's motive was not to expose the sheer filth and darkness of India, nor did he ever aim at making a commercial film. Obviously the picture was depicted by a writer of India origin, but steeped in foreign culture and spirit who looked at Indian not through the green lens of the West, and never visualized or processed to show India in poor light; for his chief aim was to tell stories about a land and people he loved, and for whom he deeply felt and passionately thought. This brings us to the much talked of successful film *Slumdog Millionaire* which, like the *White Tiger* tells a moving story about the poor. Like many of the earlier stories, it depicts the dark and naked picture of India, of course, in altogether a different setting and necessary love and genuine feelings for the motherland and that too by pleasing the western eyes. The well-known novelist and screen play writer T.N. Murari in his article 'The Love to See us Poor'. (*The New Indian Express*, January 25, 2009) makes pertinent comment on the success of *White Tiger* and *Slumdog Millionaire*.

Their international success reassures the world which views us through the grim prism of our poverty, that India has not changed - much. *India Shining*, 'Incredible India', 'India Inc,' unsettles the western nations. They need the poor as long as they're at a safe distance, stuck in India. Our poverty gives them a sense of superiority and they feel threatened with whatever little success we have had. We still have the poor, the vast slum, farmer suicides, to reassure them that the India they know and bold at arm's length, is still with them. Recently a friend in London forwarded me an email from two of her friends travelling in India. They had been in Delhi and did not even notice our lutyen's Delhi, the glittering shopping malls, the Meres cruising the roads, but wrote at length about the dirt, the poor and the crippled. I do have other friends abroad who have no wish to visit India - our image of poverty frightens them. India still elicits the opposite extremes of emotion - love and hate. History has not been kind to us. Two centuries of British colonialism did impoverish India in the 1600s, India produced 22.5 percent of the world's GDP and Britain a mere 1.8 per cent. By 1870, we were reduced to a poor third world country while Britain produce 9.1 per cent of the world GDP. Today, we're the Horaitus Alger of nations. Similarly commenting on the final impact of the film the famous art critic Bardwaj Rangan in his article in *Indian Express* (January 25, 2009) observes:

The problem isn't one of plausibility that this slumdog's life was built around the exact kind of episodes that would, one day make him a millionaire - because that is the very stuff of fairy tales whether from the Brother's Grimm or Bollywood.

The problem is when something this ridiculous begin to be taken as real, as representation of a nation's reality more than a mere movie.

Because a movie - a shrewdly constructed artifice that explodes joyously on the big screen - is all the *Slumdog Millionaire* is meant to be. Let's embrace the heartbreaking moment such as the one where Jamal and his brother as children nod off on top of a train and link their hands in each other's to keep from plummeting into the countryside hurtling past beneath. Let's lose ourselves in the long distance romance underscored by the exquisite ache of AR Rahaman's love theme. Let's cheer our throats hoarse at the end when the impossible is rendered not just possible but inevitable. But let's not whip ourselves into a lather about it - for a few images of picture postcard squalor cannot begin to highlight the complex realities of our country.

Finally another art critic comments in his thoughtful article with a relevant question:

Poverty sells. Will the world then see us differently if we had no poor? I doubt it. They love our poverty too much to believe we've banished it. Forever. (Murari) Murari arrives at a true evaluation of Indian writers in English depicting India for what the western people believe, like and appreciate.

This is confirmed by no one but by the objective perception of Francis Gautier in his article on "Religion, Marxism and Slum dog"

(The New Indian Express, March 16, 2009) We Westerners continue to suffer from a superiority complex over the so called Third World in general and India in particular. Sitting in front of our television sets during prime time news with a hefty steak on our table, we love to feel sorry for the misery of others, it secretly flatters our ego, and makes us proud of our so-called achievements.' That is why books such as *The City of Joy* by Dominique Lapierre, which gives the impression that India is a vast slum, or a film like *Slumdog Millionaire*, have such an impact.

In the film, India's foes have joined hands. Today, billions of dollars that innocent Westerners give to charity are used to convert the poorest of India with the help of enticements such as free medical aid, schooling and loans. If you see the Tamil Nadu coast post tsunami, there is a church every 500 meters. Once converted, these new Christians are taught that it is a sin to enter a temple, do puja, or even put tilak on one's head, thus creating an imbalance in the Indian psyche Francois Gautier, too, like Murai ends his article with question?

When will West learn to look with less prejudice at India, a country that will supplant China in this century as the main Asian Power? But this will require a new generation of Ideologists, more sincere, less attached to their outdated Christian values, and Indians more proud of their own culture and less subservient to the West.

Considering all the factors and taking into account the motive behind these writings we may conclude that whether it be Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* or Adiga's *White Tiger*, the basic quest of their creators is the same: India-baiting. Their India is an odd country that has lost its natural master: Only that it sometimes comes as a subtext. Like, in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, which depicts Western value system as the saviour of all India evils. Finally we agree with what B. Jayamohan opinion on the matter:

Indian English writing and crossover films are a particular genre of creative works popular in India and abroad now.

But they can be never addressed as Indian works. The India they narrate is the India in the wishful thinking of the average westerner. The real India is in the native Indian writings - we'll discover it one day.

Self -Assessment

1. Choose the correct options:

- (i) Satyajit Ray's films starts from
- | | |
|---------------------------------|----------------------------|
| (a) <i>The City of Joy</i> | (b) <i>Pather Panchali</i> |
| (c) <i>Slumdog Millionaires</i> | (d) None of these. |
- (ii) *Midnight's Children* is written by
- | | |
|----------------------|--------------------|
| (a) Salman Rushdie's | (b) Shakespeare |
| (c) Aravind Adiga | (d) None of these. |
- (iii) V.S. Naipaul's *An Area of Darkness* was published in
- | | |
|----------|--------------------|
| (a) 1951 | (b) 1960 |
| (c) 1964 | (d) None of these. |

19.2 Summary

- “As Balram’s education expands, he grows more corrupt. Yet the reader’s sympathy for the former teaboy never flags. In creating a character who is both witty and psychopathic, Mr Adiga has produced a hero almost as memorable as Pip, proving himself the Charles Dickens of the call-centre generation.”
- “Balram’s violent bid for freedom is shocking. What, we’re left to ask, does it make him – just another thug in India’s urban jungle or a revolutionary and idealist? It’s a sign of this book’s quality, as well as of its moral seriousness, that it keeps you guessing to the final page and beyond.”
- “With strong, sympathetic characters, a swell of political unrest and an entertaining plot, the book rattles along at top speed under Balram’s chirpy navigation.”
- “Aravind Adiga’s first novel is couched as a cocksure confession from a deceitful, murderous philosopher runt who has the brass neck to question his lowly place in the order of things. His disrespect for his elders and betters is shocking – even Mahatma Gandhi gets the lash of his scornful tongue. (...) Balram has the voice of what may, or may not, be a new India: quick-witted, half-baked, self-mocking, and awesomely quick to seize an advantage. (...) There is much to commend in this novel, a witty parable of India’s changing society, yet there is also much to ponder. (...) My hunch is that this is fundamentally an outsider’s view and a superficial one. There are so many other alternative Indians out there, uncontacted and unheard. Aravind Adiga is an interesting talent and I hope he will immerse himself deeper into that astonishing country, then go on to greater things.”
- “As a debut, it marks the arrival of a storyteller who strikes a fine balance between the sociology of the wretched place he has chosen as home and the twisted humanism of the outcast. With detached, scatological precision, he surveys the grey remoteness of an India where the dispossessed and the privileged are not steeped in the stereotypes of struggle and domination. The ruthlessness of power and survival assumes a million moral ambiguities in this novel powered by an India where Bangalore is built on Bihar.”
- “Aravind Adiga’s riveting, razor-sharp debut novel explores with wit and insight the realities of these two Indians, and reveals what happens when the inhabitants of one collude and then collide with those of the other. (...) The pace, superbly controlled in the opening and middle sections, begins to flag a bit towards the end. But this is a minor quibble: Adiga has been gutsy in tackling a complex and urgent subject. His is a novel that has come not a moment too soon.”
- “It’s a thrilling ride through a rising global power (.....) Adiga’s plot is somewhat predictable – the murder that is committed is the one that readers will expect throughout – but *The White Tiger* suffers little for this fault. Caught up in Balram’s world – and his wonderful turn of phrase – the pages turn themselves. Brimming with idiosyncrasy, sarcastic, cunning, and often hilarious, Balram is reminiscent of the endless talkers that populate the novels of the great Czech novelist Bohumil Hrabal.”
- “We can’t hear Balram Halwai’s voice here, because the author seems to have no access to it. The novel has its share of anger at the injustices of the new, globalised India, and it’s good to hear this among the growing chorus of celebratory voices. But its central character comes across as a cardboard cut-out. The paradox is that for many of this novel’s readers, this lack of verisimilitude will not matter because for them India is and will remain an exotic place. This book adds another brick to the patronising edifice it wants to tear down.”
- “The novel’s framing as a seven-part letter to the Chinese prime minister turns out to be an unexpectedly flexible instrument in Adiga’s hands, accommodating everything from the

helpful explanatory aside to digressions into political polemic. (...) One might note the distinctive narrative voice, rich with the disconcerting smell of coarse authenticity. It is simultaneously able to convey the seemingly congenial servility of the language of the rural poor as well as its potential for knowing subversion. It sends up the neo-Thatcherite vocabulary of the new rich, their absurd extravagance and gaudy taste, but manages to do it tenderly and with understanding. (...) Adiga's style calls to mind the work of Munshi Premchand, that great Hindi prose stylist and chronicler of the nationalist movement"

- "Adiga's message isn't subtle or novel, but Balram's appealingly sardonic voice and acute observations of the social order are both winning and unsettling."
- "At once a fascinating glimpse beneath the surface of an Indian economic "miracle," a heart-stopping psychological tale of a premeditated murder and its aftermath, and a meticulously conceived allegory of the creative destruction that's driving globalization. (...) That may sound like a lot to take in, but *The White Tiger* is unpretentious and compulsively readable to boot."
- "In bare, unsentimental prose, he strips away the sheen of a self-congratulatory nation and reveals instead a country where the social compact is being stretched to the breaking point. There is much talk in this novel of revolution and insurrection: Balram even justifies his employer's murder as an act of class warfare. *The White Tiger* is a penetrating piece of social commentary, attuned to the inequalities that persist despite India's new prosperity. It correctly identifies – and deflates – middle-class India's collective euphoria. But Adiga, a former correspondent for Time magazine who lives in Mumbai, is less successful as a novelist."
- "His voice is engaging – caustic and funny, describing the many injustices of modern Indian society with well-balanced humour and fury. But there's little new here – the blurbs claim it's redressing the misguided and romantic Western view of India – but I suspect there are few to whom India's corruption will come as a surprise. As social commentary, it's disappointing, although as a novel it's good fun."
- "I found the book a tedious, unfunny slog (.....) The tone of the writing is breezy-absurd, which means we can't hold the writer accountable for anything that happens in the book. (...) There's no accountability in the breezy-absurd school of literature! Everything goes! Nothing is real! Lie back and open wide. (...) Echoes of the Indo-Internationalist club of literature can be heard throughout."
- "Adiga's training as a journalist lends the immediacy of breaking news to his writing, but it is his richly detailed storytelling that will captivate his audience. (...) *The White Tiger* contains passages of startling beauty (...). Adiga never lets the precision of his language overshadow the realities at hand: No matter how potent his language one never loses sight of the men and women fighting impossible odds to survive. (...) *The White Tiger* succeeds as a book that carefully balances fable and pure observation."
- "Extraordinary and brilliant (...) Talk of "lessons" should not be taken to suggest that *The White Tiger* is a didactic exercise in "issues", like a newspaper column. For Adiga is a real writer – that is to say, someone who forges an original voice and vision."
- "What Adiga lifts the lid on is also inexorably true: not a single detail in this novel rings false or feels confected. *The White Tiger* is an excoriating piece of work, stripping away the veneer of 'India Rising'. That it also manages to be suffused with mordant wit, modulating to clear-eyed pathos, means Adiga is going places as a writer."
- "It is certain of its mission, and pursues it with an undeviating determination you wouldn't expect in a first novel. It reads at a tremendous clip. Its caricatures are sharply and confidently

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- drawn. It is full of barbed wit, if not — and not trying to be, so far as I can tell — actually funny. It won't win any prizes for subtlety. But it hasn't been nominated for one of those."
- "Balram's cynical, gleeful voice captures modern India: no nostalgic lyricism here, only exuberant reality."
 - "*The White Tiger* resembles the stories in *Murder Weekly*. It is quick, entertaining and full of vividly drawn types: the scheming servant, the corrupt businessman, the spoilt wife. Its lack of subtlety can be wearying, as can its cynicism. But it is a useful counter to optimistic tales of India's roaring economy."
 - "Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* is one of the most powerful books I've read in decades. No hyperbole. This debut novel from an Indian journalist living in Mumbai hit me like a kick to the head (.....) This is an amazing and angry novel about injustice and power"
 - "Does *The White Tiger* live up to its own ambitions ? Sort of. There comes a moment in this book where the narrative has a real chance to leave behind the pop and fluff of *The Nanny Diaries* irony and achieve a deep Orwellian insight. (...) Yes, it's fresh, funny, different, and it will please those looking for insights into contemporary India, but *The White Tiger* offers something less than it might have achieved."
 - Sold in sixteen countries around the world, *The White Tiger* recalls *The Death of Vishnu* and *Bangkok 8* in ambition, scope, and narrative genius, with a mischief and personality all its own. Amoral, irreverent, deeply endearing, and utterly contemporary, this novel is an international publishing sensation — and a startling, provocative debut.
 - In total, the book maps the bundle of contradictions that make India what it is - an ancient land coming to terms with democracy and globalization.

19.3 Key-Words

1. Emancipation : Freeing someone from the control of another; especially a parent's relinquishing authority and control over a minor child.
2. Depicts : Show or represent by a drawing, painting, or other art form, portray in words; describe.

19.4 Review Questions

1. What view of India could Pinky Madam give with regards to gender, cultural differences to the West and differences in society?
2. The author chose to tell the story from the provocative point of view of an exceedingly charming, egotistical admitted murderer. Do Balram's ambition and charisma make his vision clearer? More vivid? Did he win you over?
3. Why does Balram choose to address the Premier? What motivates him to tell his story? What similarities does he see between himself and the Premier?
4. Because of his lack of education, Ashok calls Balram "half-baked." What does he mean by this? How does Balram go about educating himself? What does he learn?
5. What's is the significance of the quote?
6. Describe Adiga's writing style in *The White Tiger*.
7. Which symbols support one of the central themes in *The White Tiger*? Why/how?

8. Discuss Balram's reasons for the murder: fulfilling his father's wish that his son "live like a man," taking back what Ashok had stolen from him, and breaking out of the rooster coop, among them. Which ring true to you and which do not? Did you feel Balram was justified in killing Ashok? Discuss the paradox inherent in the fact that in order to live fully as a man, Balram took a man's life.
9. Balram's thoughts of his family initially hold him back from killing Ashok. What changes his mind? Why do you think he goes back to retrieve Dharam at the end of the novel? Does his decision absolve him in any way?

Answers: Self-Assessment

1. (i) (b) (ii) (a) (iii) (c)

19.5 Further Readings



1. Aravind Adiga, 2008. *The White Tiger*. New Delhi. Harper Collins, Publishers India.
2. V.S. Naipaul, 1964. *An Area of Darkness*. London. Andre Deutsch.
3. V.S. Naipaul, 1990. *Million Mutinies Now*. London. Minerva Paperback.
4. 2008. Articles from *The Hindu Delhi, Literary Review*, Nov 2.
5. 2008. Articles from *The New Indian Express*, Sunday, 9 November.

Unit 20: Premchand: Godan – Introduction to the Text

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Objectives

After reading this Unit students will be able to:

- Know the life and works of Premchand.
- Discuss the introduction to Godan.

Introduction

Premchand was the pen name adopted by the Hindi writer Dhanpatrai who was born on 31 July 1880 at Lamati near Varanasi. His early education was in a madarasa under a Maulavi, where he learnt Urdu. When he was studying in the ninth class he was married, much against his wishes. He was then fifteen. In 1919, while he was a teacher at Gorakhpur, he passed his B.A., with English, Persian and History. He had a second marriage with Shivarani Devi, a child-widow, who wrote a book on him, 'Premchand Gharmein' after his death.

Premchand's literary career started as a freelancer in Urdu. In his early short stories he depicted the patriotic upsurge that was sweeping the land in the first decade of the present century. *Soz-e-Watan*, a collection of such stories published by Premchand in 1907, attracted the attention of the British government. In 1914, when Premchand switched over to Hindi, he had already established his reputation as a fiction writer in Urdu. Premchand was the first Hindi author to introduce realism in his writings. He pioneered the new art form - fiction with a social purpose. He wrote of the life around him and made his readers aware of the problems of the urban middle-class and the country's villages and their problems. He supplemented Gandhiji's work in the political and social fields by adopting his revolutionary ideas as themes for his literary writings.

Premchand was a prolific writer. He has left behind a dozen novels and nearly 250 short stories. *Sevasadan* was his first novel. He believes in the principle: 'hate the sin and not the sinner.' His best known novels are *Sevasadan*, *Rangamanch*, *Ghaban*, *Nirmala* and *Godan*. Three of his novels have been made into films.

Besides being a great novelist, Premchand was also a social reformer and thinker. His greatness lies in the fact that his writings embody social purpose and social criticism rather than mere entertainment. Literature according to him is a powerful means of educating public opinion. He believed in social evolution and his ideal was equal opportunities for all.

Premchand died in 1936 and has since been studied both in India and abroad as one of the greatest writers of the century.

20.1 Text – Godan

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Premchand, the veteran Hindustani writer, raised his voice and cautioned us, as early as 1904 against the tide of Western civilisation which, foolishly imitated by the intelligentsia of the land, was tending the deterioration of moral standards in Indian social life, and leading to a lamentable hybridisation of culture. The position of woman in the family and in society early attracted his attention and forms the central theme of all his novels that appeared before 1920 and *Ghaban* and *Nirmala* later. As an important secondary thread, it exists in almost all the others. His attitude, as reflected in his books and which was in line with the ancient Indian ideal of self-denial, self-sacrifice and self-control-ideals which placed woman on a higher pedestal than man-remained consistent throughout his life; there was no appreciable modification. That way Premchand was a conservative writer. But in his last novel, *Godan*, his views on the various aspects of this problem were crystallised and are brought out with great artistry.

Miss Malati, an England-returned doctor, is a social butterfly. She is vociferous and demands equality with man in regard to votes and the right of courtship. Chance brings her into contact with the philosopher Professor Mehta, who may be said to be the mouthpiece of Premchand, and to express the author's views. She falls in love with him and ultimately forgets all about her ideals. But Mehta does not love her; his outlook on life is different; he envies Mr. Khanna, an industrialist and banker who sucks the blood of the poor labourers another prototype of John Sewak in *Rangabhumi*, because of Mrs. Govindi Khanna, who is ten times more sensible and practical and honest than her greedy husband. She is the ideal woman of Premchand's conception and has few faults, although for these qualities she has once to leave her house, the real cause being Malati whom Khanna loves, in spite of the fact that she merely flirts with him.

But Malati, or Mehta, or Khanna, or Rai Sahib form only the second important theme of the novel: they all belong to the middle classes, which formed the central theme of Premchand's pre-1920 novels, that is, till the time Gandhiji came on to the Indian stage and Premchand resigned his job to participate in the Non-cooperation Movement of 1921. From now onwards the central theme of all his novels was, primarily, the peasant. *Premasram*, *Rangabhumi*, *Kayakalp*, *Karmabhumi* and *Godan* are all agrarian novels, wherein everything else revolves round the life of the peasant. In *Premasram* or in *Gosha-i-Afiat* (Urdu), it is his struggle against the Taluqdar or the hereditary landlord; in *Rangabhumi* or in *Chaugan-i-Hasti* (Urdu), the struggle is against the pseudo-nationalist industrialists; in *Karmabhumi* or in *Maidan-I-Amal* (Urdu), it also envelops the Harijans and the labour class in the fight for the vindication of their rights. The shame-faced and ruthless exploitation of the peasant by the moneylender is the theme of *Godan*.

The last of his agrarian epics, *Godan*, is also the last of Premchand's novels, published in the year of his death, 1936. And it is his best. For its characters are more chiseled, polished and realistic, the plot more coherent, although herein, as in most of his novels, the two main themes run parallel to each other and touch only at a few points and that too only at the surface. The ideas are more systematically arranged and the dull monotony of long speeches and harangues is broken by the periodic criticisms and interruptions by Pandit Onkar Nath, the editor of the *Bijli*, and in the speech of Mr. Mehta on women's demand for equality with man. Premchand's art is seen here at its best. Unlike far too many of his novels, wherein the characters die unnatural deaths, by epidemics, suicide, murder or drowning and far too many improbable happenings and coincidences take place, in *Godan*, these defects cannot be pointed out.

Besides, the language herein used is unparalleled in homeliness, vivacious simplicity, spontaneity and suggestion. There is the excellence of style and narration. The novel is quick with the rhythm of life. Those messages wherein the author expresses his own philosophical or metaphysical reflections are superb, because, although they are polished and finished to a great degree, the language used is very simple. Rural and homely words come to him without the least effort.

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In all his novels that preceded it, idealism almost always swayed him. Herein realism and its twin-brother, pessimism, are predominant. In all his novels before *Godan*, he created idealist heroes, Premshankar in *Premasram*, Sur Das in *Rangabhumi*, Chakradhar in *Kayakalp* and Amarkant in *Karmabhumi*, all of whom bear the indelible imprint of Gandhi and Tolstoy. Valiant fighters against tyranny, inspired by the highest and noblest ideals of love and service of the down-trodden masses whom they organize for mass-scale satyagraha, they always pursue, undeterred by the sacrifices they are called upon to make, the path of Truth.

Perhaps the only idealist character in *Godan* is Prof. Mehta, who is sagacious, but verges on eccentricity, and he figures only in a minor theme in the story. Save one very isolated strike in Mr. Khanna's mill, there are no strikes, let alone mass movements. One wonders if Premchand, in his last days, lost faith in the efficacy of non-violent struggle. And if he did not lose his faith, he at least came to entertain some doubts about the same.

Unlike all other agrarian novels, *Godan* does not end in a compromise, in the triumph of the peasant. As a matter of fact, herein Premchand refrains from suggesting any solution to any problem, an idea so dear to his heart. He had absolutely no faith in votes for the peasant, in Councils, in elections and in popular ministries (they had not come into existence then, and Premchand had before him only the 1919 experiment.) They could not ameliorate the lot of the peasant. He makes Tanakha say that democracy is the rule by the big bankers and traders. The futility of rural reconstructions, a fad started in those days, is reflected in what Malati, after her conversion and dedication to a life of service, achieves. She analyses the problem of rural indebtedness as being due to fragmentation of land and the extravagance of the peasant on social functions; But she suggests no real solution. She merely employs Gobar as a mali and gives him a rather privileged position in her family; it is more or less by way of charity.

When we first meet Gobar, we find him a rebellious soul. We hope that, like all other characters of Premchand, which are dynamic and never static, changing with the changing environments and always developing the traits talent in them. Gobar would grow into, perhaps, a Socialist leader and would organize people for a struggle against moneylenders and the system which grinds down the peasant into a paste. Our hopes are, however, belied. Gobar becomes a part of the system which victimises the peasants and against which Gobar was to raise voice. Instead, he now hates the village and prefers to be a poor servile labourer in the town where, in the first instance, he carves out a place for himself. He earns some money and lends it to others at exorbitant rates, which, if the moneylender charged from Hori, perturbed Gobar. In a way he becomes a cog in the machine which is responsible for Hori's ruination and ends in his death. But could Gobar help it? Perhaps not, for, as Premchand says, in the society as it is constituted today, either one is an exploiter or is exploited. There can be no third alternative. The only solution of the problem, Premchand said, was a thorough shake-up of the present system. And till that comes the peasant's fate would be the fate of Hori.

Hori's is the most realistic characterisation in Premchand's works. It is indigenous to the Indian soil. Hori is not merely an individual; he is the representative of a class, whose virtues and failings he shares. If you know Hori intimately, as you actually do from *Godan*, you know almost everything important about the peasant in India, for the U. P. peasant is not much different from, say, the peasant from South India, as also about the class or stratum he comes from. Indeed, Hori is the class.

It is significant that *Godan* is a romance in ugly names. Hori, Gobar, Jheengur, Dhaniya, Paniya, Jhuniya, Nokhe Ram, Magru Shah and Chuhiya-all bring to our mind their proximity with the soil.

To Hori, ideas count for little. For him feelings and instinct are the only real things. Realism is the backbone of his life. He does not believe in Gobar's reasoning, which may all be very sound, but cannot be put into practice, because Hori's ancestors did not act that way.

Gobar resents Hori's kowtowing before the Rai Sahib, when he enjoys no concession and pays almost the same taxes as others do. But Hori knows that his mere visits to the Rai Sahib raise him in the estimation his fellow-peasants. Indeed, without any teachings of Dale Carnegie, he is the master of the engineering of the human mind. He is clever that way; he sympathises with Bhola, in the latter's difficulties in re-marrying, and promises to help him—all this because he has an eye on one of Bhola's cows, an objective wherein he ultimately succeeds. By speaking highly of middle-aged Dhaniya, he tickles her vanity, so that she may give hay free of charge to Bhola without any fuss. All this is instinctive.

Gobar says that God has made every one of us equal. Hori differs. He believes that all those who are born poor would not have earned good by their actions in their previous life while those who were born rich must have.

The Past is Hori's only argument; it is his only sheet-anchor. He is a slave to custom. He believes in things, he acts, he behaves exactly in the same way as did his forefathers and does so because they did so. He does not have anything, not even a rupee, to offer at the altar of the idol at the annual "Katha" and feels remorseful, not because he is poor but because he could not offer anything, his mite at the altar of God, whom he truly fears.

The brahmin is another agency which the peasant can never defy Pandit Data Din is a moneylender with all the privileges that a high-caste birth has given him, for as Hori says: "The last pie that is the Brahmins due shall break through our very bones."

Hori knows, and Dhaniya has an argument with him, that the Council of Five may be wrong. Nevertheless, its orders must be obeyed: "In Council of Five resides God." And he obeys its orders because its orders had always had the seal of sanctity which was respected by his forefathers. And if he disobeyed, the family's izzat was at stake. So when the Council actually fines him Rs. 100, almost his entire produce of the season, for giving shelter to Jhuniya, a widow whose hand had been accepted by Gobar in camera, and who had no other place to go to with her five months old burden, knowing that he is already under heavy debt, he borrows money to pay the fine. Besides, his children are starving. And he also knows that those who have fined him are fornicators themselves. Still, Hori cannot, must not, defy the Council. It had the seal of sanctity and custom.

Hori shares the vices of his class, too. He beats his wife, whenever he feels like it. Nevertheless, he is faithful to her, although he would not lose an opportunity to cut a few vulgar jokes with Dulari Sahuyayin, a woman moneylender, whom he jestingly addresses as "Bhabi" or sister-in-law.

Hard-pressed by circumstances, he "sells" away his daughter, Rupa, to an aged widower. His house is already mortgaged; Data Din demands his money back, while Hori has none. His land, which is more than peasant's life, is in danger of being taken away. Although Gobar says there is nothing basically wrong so long as the money taken from the son-in-law is returned, Hori feels remorseful and this event hastens his end.

The policeman to Hori is death incarnate. His very sight freezes Hori's blood. But he is not a coward. When he sees that his landlord life is in danger and is sure of the latter's implicit approval, he simply jumps at the "Pathan," jeopardising his own life.

The supreme ambition of Hori is a cow. And he does bring one although it proves to be his undoing. When the entire village comes to see it and admires it and only Hira does not come to see the cow, Hori is pained. He is even restless and sends an emissary for him to come and have a look at it little knowing that Hira is jealous and harbours sinister designs on the animal. He poisons the cow and, because of the crime, leaves home. By doing this, however, he has sealed the fate of Hori, for the death of the cow is only the signal for calamities after calamities. Hori has seen Hira approaching the cow in the dark with his own eyes. He does not report to the police, and when police does come he swears by his son that he has not seen Hira near the cow. To his already heavy debts he adds more by borrowing more money to bribe the police, so that they may not

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search the house of Hira, because Hira's izzat is his own izzat. During Hira's absence, Hori first tills and cultivates Hira's fields and then is own, for he asks who else would help Paniya if he did not. As a result whereas there is plenty in Paniya's house, Hori's own children starve.

Hira is the real cause of all Hori's difficulties. When, however, he comes back, a day before Hori's death, there is absolutely no difference in Hori's love for Hira. Hori does not see in him the source of all his troubles, but only as a child as when left by their parents. The intervening 30 years melt away. He says: "Why weep. To err is human. Where have you been all the time?"

But all these good and noble qualities are of no avail. In spite of them, indeed because of them, Hori is subjected to a system which provides him with scarcely enough for a bare living. He works harder and ever harder. At the opening of the book, we find his tender-aged children working at midday in the hottest month of the year. He lives under conditions of forced and convict labour. Life for him is no feast; it is not work even. It is a dull heavy tiresome burden. It is a battle which he never wins. And yet he works, because he must work, because the peasant has always worked. He is a true "Karma Yogi."

On the one hand, he is buffeted by the inclement forces of Nature. On the other, there is the system which reduces him to a blind mechanical force, gradually exhausting itself out. He sweats and toils, so that the fruit of his sweat and toil may be enjoyed by others. He fights others' battles, others who would stop at nothing short of devouring him. There is not one agency, but there are many which grind him down. The bureaucracy, the aristocracy and the guardians of religion all conspire "to eat him up," his exploitation being their common bond.

First, there is the landlord, Rai Sahib. He is a friend. He has retained all the faults of the East and has grafted on those of the West. During the Congress movement of Civil Disobedience, he courted imprisonment. He puts on khaddar and claims to be a nationalist. He has literary gifts too and writes occasional skits. At heart, he says, he is a Socialist, believing in the nobility of manual labour and recognising the inherent injustice of the present system. But that is theory; in practice he is not a whit different from other brutish landlords. When the labourers refuse to give "begar," he is wild with rage. When the mercenary editor of the Bijli voices the grievances of the peasants, he shuts the editor's mouth with subscription for a hundred copies. He raises 500 rupees from the poor peasants to be spent on drinks, though the party is in connection with "Dhanush Yagy." Again, when Hori is fined by the Council of Five he feels that injustice has been done to Hori. He asks the Council to disgorge the money but....the money goes not to Hori but to the exchequer of Rai Sahib! There are also the petty officials and the pseudo-nationalist industrialists who suck the peasant's blood. But, in cruelty, the moneylender is supreme. He is shrewd and clever and would never see the peasant die, or give up work, or even the village, for if the peasant goes, the moneylender loses the hen that lays the golden egg. He just keeps him alive.

Hori says there are over half a dozen moneylenders to every one peasant. There is patwari Pateshwari Shah, there is Jhinguri Shah; there is Nokhe Ram; there is Magru Shah; there is Dulari Sahuyayin, with her mask of feminine kindness; and there is Data Din, with the sanction of religion behind him. There are so many of them, for, as Premchand says, money lending is by far the easiest and the most profitable business.

The system works this way:

Hori took 30 rupees from Dulari. After three years it became 100 rupees. Then a promissory note was written. After another two years it became 150 rupees. From Magru Shah he borrowed 60 rupees; this has been twice paid over, and yet the loan stands at the same figure.

How cruel the system is shown vividly in a farcical drama staged by the villagers. The peasant comes, falls at the feet of the Thakur and weeps. The Thakur, after much hesitation, consents to

lend him ten rupees. The promissory note is written and it is signed by the peasant. The Thakur then gives him five rupees. The peasant is taken aback. He says: "But they are only five, master."

"They are not five; they are ten. Go home and count them again"

"No, master, they are actually five."

"One rupee as your nazrana," says the moneylender.

"Yes, master."

"One rupee for the draft."

"Yes, master."

"One rupee for the 'Government paper.'"

"Yes, master."

"One rupee as the dasturi?"

"Yes, master."

"And five cash. Does it make ten or not?"

"Then, master, keep these five, too, with you for me," says the peasant.

"What a fool you are."

"No, master. One rupee as nazar to the Senior Thakurani; one rupee for her pan beeda. One rupee as nazar to the Junior Thakurani and another for her pan-beeda. The balance, one rupee, for your last rites."

Premchand was so moved by the suffering of the peasant that in his last days he lost his faith in the existence of God, for to believe in God also implies the belief in His kindness and fatherliness.

Premchand portrays another, perhaps more hideous and sinister picture of this system. Mr. Khanna has established a Sugar Mill near Hori's village. The entire produce of the village, therefore, is sent to it. There is a sort of fraternity between the moneylenders and Mr. Khanna's agents. Jhunguri Shah looks to the transactions "so that his clients may not be cheated." When Hori's turn for receiving the money comes, it is Jhinguri Shah who receives the money and, out of the 120 rupees that he receives, he deducts 95 and pays him 25, which also is snatched away by Nokhe Ram, who accosts Hori as soon as he goes out of the premises. As a result, Hori comes home empty-handed, where is abject poverty. Premchand's description of poverty brings tears to the readers' eyes.

On the way home, Hori meets Giridhar who is tipsy with toddy. He says to Hori: "Jhinguria has taken all, Hori Kaka. He hasn't left a piece with me-the brute. I wept, I entreated, but that tyrant would have no pity."

Sobha put in: "But you are drunk with toddy and still you say that he has not left you anything."

Giridhar replies, pointing to his stomach; "it is evening now. Honestly, not a drop of water has gone down my throat. I hid a one-anna pice in my mouth, which I spent on today. I said to myself: 'Man, you have sweated the whole year through. Have the fun of toddy one day.' But, to tell you the truth, I am not drunk. How could one be drunk with a stuff worth one anna...It is so very good, Kaka, the account is cleared. I borrowed 20 and have paid 160. Is there a limit?"

Indeed there is none. Listen to what Gobar finds, when he returns from the city:

One portion of the house was about to collapse. On Hori's doorstep there was only one bullock and this one too was half dead. Hori's wasn't an individual case. The entire village had the same sorry tale to tell....There was not one man whose condition was above pity. It looked as if in their bodies there was not life, but grief making them dance like puppets. They went about, they worked, they were ground down only because they were fated to be so. There was no hope for

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them in life; they had no ambition. It was as if the very source of their life had dried up; all its verdure was gone. It was the harvesting season, but there was no corn. Unhappiness was writ large upon every face. A major portion of the produce had been sold away, while it had not yet gone beyond the winnowing place, to the moneylenders and the petty officials. That which was left belonged to others....The future of the peasant is dark; he sees no way out; all his senses are dead and dulled; before his house, there are heaps of refuse and waste which stinks, but his sense of smell is dead. His eyes are without a beam. At dusk, jackals roam about his house. None, however, takes notice of it, or feels sorry about it...Whatsoever is placed before them, and howsoever, they eat-just as the engine eats coal. What a shame that even their oxen do not put their mouth into the manger, unless there is gram flour. But they have just to fill the stomach. Taste is immaterial. Indeed, their palates do not know what taste is. They, these peasants, therefore, would be dishonest for half a pice, strike anybody for a handful of grain. And so deep is their degeneration that they cannot differentiate between self-respect and shame.*

One is led to ask what is the peasant's ambition. When Sobha asks Hori if ever they will be free from the moneylenders clutches, Hori says:

There is no hope in this life. We ask neither for a kingdom nor for a throne, not even for comfort. We want to have coarse meals and coarse clothes, and to live with honour intact. But even that is denied to us.

For Hori, his life is a living death. Premchand says:

After a struggle lasting for thirty years, to-day Hori has lost his battle. His defeat is final. He has been, as it were, made to stand at the city gates. Whosoever enters it, spits at his face and he cries out to them: 'Brethren, I deserve your pity. I never knew what the June heat or what the winter chill or rain was. Dissect this body and see if there is life in it. See how hard it has been kicked to pieces and trampled under foot. Ask it: 'Have you ever known what comfort is? Have you ever enjoyed shade?'

And in spite of all this, what he gets is mere insults. Still he lives-impotent man, greedy, mean...

Hori's end comes soon, sooner than one could have expected. He is heavily under debt. To earn his bread and to pay the interest on the loans, he has been forced by circumstances to take loans and these are ever piling up, he makes ropes by night and works on double shift as a labourer on the road, for now only that is left to him. After days of semi- starvation, one day he collapses on the roadside, to be brought home to die. There is no money in the house to send for the doctor. And now again, the moneylender comes this time in the shape of the heartless brahmin, with the sanction and authority of religion and custom behind him. Pandit Data Din says: "The end is come. Let Hori give away a cow with his dying hand to seek his salvation." But there is no cow in the house, nor is there money for it. There are only 20 annas in the house, the previous night's earnings. Dhaniya brings it, puts it into the hand of the brahmin and says: "Maharaj, there is no cow in the house, not even a she-calf. And there is neither money, save these 20 annas, which is all that is left in the house. This is his gaudan." She faints: Hori dies. The curtain drops: The novel ends.

Self-Assessment

1. Fill in the blanks:

- (i) Premchand died in and has since been studied both in India and abroad as one of the greatest writers of the century.
- (ii) Premchand was the pen name adopted by the Hindi writer who was born on 31 July 1880 at Lamati near Varanasi.
- (iii) He leads an inconsistent life with his wife, and his three children.

20.2 Summary

Notes

- *Godan*, a story of stark realism, is Premchand's most outstanding work. It is his last completed novel which brings out the realistic interpretation of Indian village society. This is a story of people, hungry and semi starved, yet hopeful and optimistic in the truest spirit of the age it represent. The dominating shadow of the original concept looms over the English. The Hindi word, or rather the concept, *Godan*, is so culture specific that there is really no English equivalent to it: *daan* is not just charity, nor donation. Neither can it be translated merely as "gift". The English title passes off because the original Hindi title immediately registers with the reader. But then, why would a reader who knows Hindi go to this translated text. Hopefully, the original title on the cover may intrigue even a non-Hindi reader who would then wish to comprehend the concept!
- Both, Vasudha Dalmia and Roadarmel present the literary and the social context of the novel in their introductions. Dalmia offers a critique of what she calls the two major narrative frames of the novel, the economic and social codes of Awadh on the one hand and the colonial and the nationalist politics on the other, through which different characters live the story of unremitting suffering. While Dalmia perceives the novel as "eminently political" and progressive, Roadarmel discusses Premchand's depiction of "changes of heart" as the most potent force for change in society. Quoting Premchand himself, Roadarmel pinpoints the interface of the didactic intentions with the author's literary sensibility: "Idealism has to be there," says Premchand in 1934 "even though it should not militate against realism and naturalness."
- With the protagonist Hori in the centre, the novel *Godan* tells the epic story of a wide range of characters situated in a complex social reality, rural as well as urban, filtered through a progressive consciousness and yet committed to an authentic portrayal. It is rightly said that a classic literary work gains in meanings and relevance as time passes. This is amply demonstrated by the new Introduction to the novel. Vasudha Dalmia makes a very pertinent point when she discerns how Premchand presented in his fiction an understanding of the social reality decades before academic scholarship could "squarely face it." She suggests the use of some essays from the volumes of Subaltern Studies published in the early eighties for a greater comprehension of *Godan* through a political and social history of Awadh. Similarly, the Bakhtinian term "parodic stylization" applied to some of Premchand's masterly strokes in the novel gives added meaning to the double-edged tone of the author in describing the so-called authority figures in the society, such as Pandit Nokharam, Jhinguri Singh or Brahmin Datadin.
- The 2002 Introduction indicates the complexity of thematic issues emerging through the narrative of *Godan*, thanks perhaps to the sophisticated and advanced critical tools and knowledge accessible to the contemporary reader. Dalmia identifies the immense tension between the dharma of Hori and the social and political pulls away from it, and describes the rebellion (*vidroh*) of Gobar and Dhanias as progressive strains within the novel. She shows how the novel unravels both, helplessness of major characters in the face of social practice and notions of piety upheld by most people around.
- Roadarmel's Introduction of 1968 addresses the readers of the West in establishing the significance of the novel in Hindi literature. "Novels in English dealing with India" he says "usually spell out the unfamiliar cultural details for the Western reader"... this statement can indeed be contested today in the light of any significant Indian novel written in English after Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. But Roadarmel demonstrates extraordinary postcolonial sensitivity when he says "One of the attractions of novels written first in an Indian language is that one can explore the situation from within the local context, not feeling that the author

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is catering to the English readers, that he is dealing not with the curious or the exotic but with matters of concern to those within the culture." To the translator of *Godan* then, thankfully, the distinct cultural specificity of the text is important. He does not give any explanatory notes in the text, nor does he give any footnotes. He does all this consciously and deliberately, so that he may not intrude or disturb. Exercising his choices as translator, he works out his own strategies and does well in involving the reader in the reasons for the choices he makes.

- Roadarmel has done some fiction editing in the process of translating the novel if only, as he declares, to take care of the "chronological and other inconsistencies" in the novel. Since the objective of the translation is to make the same joy available to the English reader as that of the Hindi reader, generally Roadarmel has attempted to remain as close to original text as he could. But he does point out the cause for deviations and the problems of idiom and style in having to move from Hindi to English. Dalmia speaks of the languages of heteroglossia intersecting each other in *Godan* which is what makes the novel difficult to translate. In fact she gives examples of how Roadarmel could not escape some of the pitfalls created thus for the translators, even though there is no denying the durability of his translation of the novel.
- The acid test for the success of a translated text is its readability which, I believe, depends on how autonomous it is. It has to become another original without compromising the spirit. *The Gift of a Cow* is not parasitic on *Godan*, nor is it merely its shadow; the spirit of *Godan* vibrates in the form of *The Gift of a Cow*.
- Premchand's "*Godan*" produces the rustic, simplistic and heart-rending lives of the peasants. Far, from exaggeration, "*Godan*" is "a novel of stark reality". It deals with the dreams, despairs and day-to day events of Hori, the protagonist of the novel, and his family. Through the peasants, Premchand has portrayed the pathetic life of the rural arena. Hori is an embodiment of peasant-virtue, simplicity and truth. He leads an inconsistent life with his wife Dhania, and his three children. Their unstable financial situation always tends to lend them frustration and despair. A tension-free life is not theirs. If they spend a quarter of their lives in starvation, they spend the rest paying unwarranted loans. The money-lenders take full advantage of their poverty and therefore take unreasonable interest from them. Premchand writes: "A loan was an unwelcome guest, once in the house, dug himself into permanent fixture." The money-lenders also exploit the ignorance and gullibility of the peasants. The village-folk in the higher strata of society, who are financially sounder, take advantage of the village-peasants. In the novel, we find, we find how Dulari mounts a small amount of money into a hundred rupees within a small fraction of time.
- The zamindars are no exception in this regard. They make maximum use of the tenants and extract manual labour from them. Hori, already old, and fatigued from poverty has to do strenuous work in order to make both ends meet. The cow he eventually gets hold of is mercilessly killed by his cruel brother Heera.
- Their ambitions and dreams are also made apparent by the novelist. While some of them love their soil, the younger generation opts for city life. For them, material prospects hold more water than sentimental values. Hori therefore does not approve with Gobar to shift to the city. For Gobar, material prospects hold more water than sentimental values. Therefore Hori does not embrace the idea of moving to the city. A typical peasant, his land is everything to him.. He regards the cattle also as a member of the family. Isolated life does not appeal to them and they long to thrive and integrate with the community. This becomes apparent when Hori is willing to pay the fine imposed by the village for admitting Jhunia. Hori does not want to be treated as an outcaste. He tells Dhania that he wants to live with society and not outside society.

- The lack of education of the peasants can be considered a major factor in their backwardness. Superstitions are prevalent. We have a humorous account of how news spreads in the village of Dhanias over-powering the inspector. After the incident, people flock around Hori's hut to have a Darshan of Dhanias. They undergo all the rites, to protect the newly arrived cow from the evil eye. They cannot fling away their false pride even in the face of dire poverty. Even though, Sona's bridegroom does not demand any dowry, they pay it as it a matter of prestige in society. Again, the caste-system very much exists. We find Heera admonishing Punia for quarrelling with a low caste man.
- Women are not portrayed as equal to men. We find Damri exclaiming to Hori how his son ran away leaving his wife with another woman. Subsequently, his wife gets married to another man. Damri gets revolted only with the infidelity of women and not men thereby practicing double standards. The husbands ill treat their wives after drinking. Dhanias talks of Hori's ill-treatment and quips how it would have been if it were the other way around. Heera also abuses his wife. Though Gobar is affectionate towards his wife in the beginning, gradually their relationship deteriorates. "Early married life throbs with love and desire; like the dawn the span of life is suffused with a roseate glow. The afternoon of life dissolves illusion into its stinging rays, but brings face to face with reality."
- Some of the scenes will always be memorable. Like, for instance, when Rupa sucks on a raw mango in starvation. The handing over of the child-like Rupa to the elderly man in marriage. The deserting of the aged parents by Jhunias and Gobar, who bore all pains and social stigma for them. The economical system came as a blessing, but Jhenguri Singh makes maximum use of it to manipulate people. The most heart-rending scene is the death of Hori or more precisely his last moments. His being religious and magnanimous, the family does not possess the adequate means even to complete his final rites. The novel thus ends in a tragedy.

20.3 Key-Words

1. Superstitions : Superstition is a belief in supernatural causality: that one event leads to the cause of another without any physical process linking the two events, such as astrology, omens, witchcraft, etc., that contradicts natural science
2. Manipulate : To manage or influence skillfully, especially in an unfair manner

20.4 Review Questions

1. Describe the Life of a poor farmer Hori and his struggle to keep alive in the milieu of British Raj.
2. Give a brief introduction to the Novel *Godan*.

Answers: Self-Assessment

1. (i) 1936 (ii) Dhanpatrai (iii) Dhanias.

20.5 Further Readings



Books

1. Premchand Rachnavali (collected works of Premchand) Vol. 20, Delhi, Janwani Prakashan 1996: 377-425.
2. *Godan* (The Gift of a Cow) (1936) English Translation by Gordon c. Roadarmel (2007, 1968, New Delhi).

Unit 21: Premchand: Godan: Detailed Study of the Text

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Objectives

After reading this Unit students will be able to:

- Know about Premchand who is a renowned writer of Hindi Literature.
- Discuss Godan.

Introduction

Premchand was a renowned Indian writer of Hindi literature. He was born at Lamhi near Benaras on July 31 in 1880. His real name was Dhanpat Rai and Premchand was his penname. Premchand has received a great deal of critical attention since his death. Only a few of the books published are, however, critical in a real sense. A large number were originally written as M.A. and Ph.D. dissertations. They present a mass of evidence to substantiate the writer's thesis but usually shy away from analysis and comment. Of the others, even the best confine themselves to a discussion of his political and social ideas, basing it on the axiomatic truth that he was a "progressive" thinker.

Premchand was keenly interested in the social and political questions of his time and it is not possible to do justice to his work without viewing it in its social context. Premchand's heroes, in their existential quest, are looking for some kind of order and coherence which can give meaning to life. In spite of his involvement with contemporary affairs and trends of thought, the concept of this meaning is derived from the age-old Indian tradition. And the quest for meaning makes Premchand not merely an artist but also a moralist. Premchand avoided the use of highly Sanskritized Hindi and rather wrote in a dialect understood by the common people. Some of his famous works include short stories such as *Shatranj Ke Khiladi*, *Panch Parmeshwar*, *Nashaa* and *Atmranan*. And his famous novels were *Gaban*, *Godan* and *Pratigya*.

Premchand's utopian dreams are merely a manifestation of his strong faith in man. He was doing the same thing that philosophers and sages like Gandhi were doing all around the world at that time, using his creative imagination to project the vision of a perfect society in which men, transcending their selfishness and greed and forgetting the distinctions of caste and creed, could live like brothers and sisters. He was no armchair philosopher or an ideal dreamer. Poverty and want were living realities to him because he was nurtured in their midst and had experienced them himself. But his faith in men led him to strive ceaselessly to impress on his upper-class countrymen and criminality of the economic and social system which they upheld. He did bring into existence the Hindu-Urdu social-political novel, molding the attitudes of younger writers who acknowledged their indebtedness to him and some of whom chose to call themselves progressive.

Literature for him implied a vigorous involvement with ideas and issues, rather than an escapist withdrawal into the realms of fantasy and romantic love. He evolved a style which is simple, lucid and subtle, a finely tempered instrument which can with equal ease capture the raciness and vigor of the villager's idiom and the urbanity and elegance of that of the elite. The recurrent figure in Premchand's novels is the idealistic young man who is called upon to choose between his own self advancement and the claims of the community and the nation. Some of these young men turn out to be lifeless and wooden like the virtuous heroes of other great novelist's like Tolstoy and George Elliot. Such fictional heroes from his works include Amrit Rai, Pratap Chandra, Vinaya Singh, Prem Shankar and Shankhdar. Premchand also composed some outstanding works which are masterpieces in their own right and include such heroes- stories like Boori Kaki, Qafan and Shtranj Ke Khiladi, and novels like Seva Sadan, Rangabhumi and Godan. But to form a true estimate of his genius it is necessary to consider the totality of his output, which constitutes one of the most varied, rich, and comprehensive renderings of life ever achieved by a writer of fiction. Premchand was keenly aware of the indifferent status of the creative writer in the Indian society. There was not likely to be much confusion about his place if he had composed works of learning. Premchand was never influenced by caste, money or such other social evils. He is one of the first Indian writers who refused to follow this path, who was fiercely independent in his attitude and absolutely uncompromising in his principles. His resignation from government service was in its way an example of his courage to stand up against oppression. Thus great as Premchand is as a novelist, short-story writer, essayist and moralist, he is equally great as a humanist, a humanitarian and a man. An estimate of his worth as a creative writer which ignores his distinction as a human being runs the risk of being partial and inadequate.

21.1 Text – Godan

'That damned cow came and ruined everything'.

– Godan

India at the beginning of the 1930s was a country in flux. The nationalist euphoria and idealism of the early 1920s – born of the Khilafat movement, Gandhi's Rowlatt Satyagraha and the Indian National Congress Party's Non-Cooperation campaigns – had given way to nascent ideological orthodoxies and political opportunism. The violence and social upheaval of the 1947 Partition and the ambivalent victories of independence were still on the historical horizon. The decade began under the ominous burden of a world wide economic depression; and ended with the definitive parting of ways between the Muslim League and the Indian National Congress (INC), symbolised in Jinnah's observance of the 'Day of Deliverance' (of Muslims from the alleged tyranny of the Hindu-dominated INC) in December 1939. By its close, euphoria and optimism had, for many, turned into bitterness and cynicism. If the 1930s were to be given a name, perhaps the most fitting would be the 'age of disillusionment'.

Notes

The renowned North Indian writer Premchand¹ penned his last complete novel *Godan* (The Gift Of a Cow) right in the middle of the intellectual and moral turmoil of the 1930s. Published in 1936, it is considered by many to be Premchand's finest achievement, if not in fact the finest novel ever written in Hindi.²

As a writer, Premchand had his hand on the pulse of many trends and movements, and he was particularly adept at translating his observations into a lively, accessible stream of prose—one of the many factors that make his fiction simultaneously tangible, rich and evocative. But if *Godan* can perhaps be seen as Premchand's Swansong, it is by no means merely the grand culmination of his previous works—especially his morally didactic and overtly ideological early novels. *Godan* is different. Premchand was acutely aware of the changing moods of the 1930s, and as a result, *Godan* is a novel of weary disillusionment. At the heart of *Godan* is a continual and relentless lamentation over the prevalence of injustice in everyday life and the frustrating absence of any meaningful way to offer resistance, seek redress, or find justice. The 'great struggles' of nationalism, and the Gandhian projects of self-sufficiency and moral redemption, dominant themes in Premchand's earlier works, now seemed to him too abstract and self-absorbed to have any widespread impact on the sufferings of the Indian masses.³ The mantra of 'blame the British' had also, by the 1930s, begun to appear to Premchand too convenient and contrived to provide a satisfying explanation for the outrages of everyday life that eroded the lives and hopes of the majority of his fellow Indians. And other proffered remedies for India's malaise looked ever more barren. The retreat to a putatively moral and pure past as recommended by the cultural nationalists, had revealed itself to be little more than an elitist and communal platform for promoting

1. Premchand (1880–1936) is the pen-name of Dhanpat Rai. The name change became necessary after the publication of his first collection of stories *Soz-e-vatan* (1910) incurred the ire of the authorities. The stories were written under the name of Nawab Rai, but since the district officer had demanded that he not publish anything else without first showing it to the local officer in charge, the name change to Premchand was one efficient way around the request. On his life and times, see, among others, Madan Gopal, *Munshi Premchand: A Literary Biography* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1964); and Amrit Rai, *Premchand: Kalam ka Sipahi* (Allahabad: Hamsa Prakashana, 1962).
2. Citations from the works of Premchand in Hindi are all taken (unless otherwise indicated) from the collected works edition *Premchand Racanavali*, Ramvilas Sharma (ed.) (Delhi: Janavani Prakashan, 1996), 20 vols. Hereafter this will be cited as *Prem. Rac.* followed by the volume and page number. Volume 6 contains *Godan*, so all references in the text refer to that volume. Other useful collections of Premchand's works are *Mansarovar* (Allahabad: Sarasvati Press, 1956), 8 vols., which comprises short works of fiction; and *Vividh Prasang* (Allahabad: Hans Prakashan, 1962), 3 vols., which comprises many essential essays and editorials. There is an English translation of *Godan* available by Gordon C. Roadarmel under the title *The Gift Of a Cow* (Bloomington: Indian University Press, 1968). This translation has recently been re-issued (2002) as a second edition with a new preface by Vasudha Dalmia. Throughout the text, I have given two page numbers for each quotation from *Godan*: the first refers to the Hindi text, and the second to the English translation. Though all translations here are my own, readers of the English translation should be able, I hope, to locate the appropriate passages if they wish to pursue their interests further.
3. Among Premchand's other novels, those that deal with the themes of social reform or with the Gandhian vision of a reconstructed India are *Sevasadan* (The Abode Of Service) (1918), *Prem. Rac.* 3, which deals with the rehabilitation of prostitutes and other 'fallen' women; and *Karmabhumi* (The Field Of Action) (1932), *Prem. Rac.* 5, which is Premchand's last attempt to engage Gandhian ideals seriously (in the novel, through programs of uplift and respectability for the dalit community of Chamars). Many of Premchand's contemporaries also used their literary works to promote social reform and Gandhian ideals, among them Pandey Becan Sharma (pen-name 'Ugra') (1900–1969) in works such as *Buddhua ki Beti* (Buddhua's Daughter) (1928), which dealt with caste injustices, and *Sharabi* (The Alcoholic) (1930), which promoted abstention from alcohol as the path to moral rejuvenation; and Rishabhcaran Jain (1912–1986), in works such as *Dilli ka Vyabhicar* (An Adultery in Delhi) (1928) and *Vesyaputra* (The Prostitute's Son) (1929), both of which addressed issues such as the treatment of Hindu widows or the plight of 'morally compromised' women.

conservative Hindu interests.⁴ Alternatively, those who advocated revolutionary violence had much to offer in terms of fiery and sloganistic rhetoric but little to offer in terms of constructive, positive, and material results.⁵ Even those we conventionally think of as society's 'subalterns' – the toiling peasant, the agricultural labourers, the industrial wage-earners, increasingly came across to Premchand as active perpetrators of injustice rather than merely its innocent victims.⁶

However the disillusionment that permeated the 1930s should not be confused with hopelessness or apathy. Many individuals, movements, and organisations continued to devote themselves to building a more progressive and egalitarian society in advance of the coming independence. Premchand may have become disillusioned, but he never stopped writing; and in that sense never gave up hope that a better world and a better India were still possible. Indeed, the Hindi literary world was generally one of the major sites in this period for attempts to recreate the electricity of early nationalist politics, making it a vibrant component of what Francesca Orsini has called the 'Hindi public sphere'.⁷ Yet even here, disillusionment was never quite expunged. As the new Hindi literature became more and more a vehicle for Hindi-region nationalism, other cultural, religious, and linguistic nationalisms (most notably Tamil) were moved to protest this perceived bid for 'Hindi hegemony'.

4. The ideas of the cultural nationalists, which in many ways dominated the Hindi literary market in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, had an influence on Premchand's earlier writings. The roots of this 'school' of thought can be found, for instance, in the writings of Bharatendu Harisandra, on whom see Vasudha Dalmia, *The Nationalization Of Hindu Traditions: Bharatendu Harisandra and Nineteenth-Century Banaras* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997); and Sudhir Chandra, *The Oppressive Present: Literature and Social Consciousness in Colonial India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp.117–42. At the time that Premchand began his literary career, many writers still espoused the ideas of cultural nationalism, for instance Lajjaram Sharma Mehta (1863–1931), in works such as *Hindu Grhasth (A Hindu Household)* (1901), *Adarsh Hindu (The Invisible Hindu)* (1914) and *Swatantra Rambha aur Partantra Lakshmi (Independent Rambha and Dependent Lakshmi)* (1915).
5. Premchand's novel *Premashram (Sanctuary Of Love)* (1922), Prem. Rac. 2, combines turgid Marxist ideological rhetoric – at times even the peasants talk like committed Bolsheviks – with Gandhian plans of action. Similarly, *Rangabhumi (The Battlefield)* (1925), Prem. Rac. 3, details the plight of the exploited labouring masses, in this case through the tale of a blind beggar who is literally killed by the march of industrial 'progress'. In general, although radical Leftist politics had only a marginal influence on formal politics, it had immense influence in the literary world – Hindi literature was no exception. Jainendra Kumar, for instance, who was a contemporary and friend of Premchand, had explored revolutionary themes in his famous novel *Sunita (Sunita)* (1935), but the revolutionary aspects of the novel are at times awkward and forced, as if they were merely part of a passing and somewhat contrived fad. More committed to the project of literature and revolutionary propaganda was Yashpal (1903–1976), especially in his controversial novel *Dada-Kamred (Comrade Dada)* (1941), which in essence re-works and rewrites Jainendra Kumar's character Sunita into a more hardcore revolutionary figure (the main female character here is Shaila). Ajneya's (Sachchidanand Hiranand Vatsyayan) novel *Shekhar: Ek Jivani (Shekhar: A Life)* (1941), is written in (auto)biographical style and puts the revolutionary terrorist character at centre stage as a somewhat ambivalent 'hero'.
6. The term 'subaltern' is drawn, of course, from the writings of what has been termed the 'subaltern school', whose views found collective expression in the series of volumes published as *Subaltern Studies*, originally under the editorship of Ranajit Guha. For early theoretical underpinnings, see Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects Of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983). For critical reactions, see Vinayak Chaturvedi (ed.), *Mapping Subaltern Studies and the Postcolonial* (London: Verso, 2000); and David Ludden (ed.), *Reading Subaltern Studies: Critical History, Contested Meaning and the Globalization Of South Asia* (London: Anthem Press, 2002).
7. Francesca Orsini, *The Hindi Public Sphere 1920–1940: Language and Literature in the Age Of Nationalism* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002).

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Nevertheless, even a more sanguine reading of the politics of the 1930s would surely see Premchand's disillusionment as a powerful voice of dissent. To the extent that one could argue that Premchand was not necessarily anti-nationalist, his project remained in the mid-1930s to rescue the ethical self from the ravages of conformist nationalism, or at the very least to advocate an ethical nationalism where the individual remained consistently responsible for his or her actions and their consequences. Premchand may have written poignantly of India's masses, but certainly by the mid-1930s, he had no use or tolerance for mass-based ideologies that dissolved the responsible self into the unreflective nationalist crowd.

Understanding the many sources of the palpable sense of injustice that saturated the everyday lives of so many 'ordinary' Indians in the 1930s is the key to understanding Premchand's masterpiece. Here I propose to look at several thematic realms of injustice—economic, rural/urban, gendered, religious, and political—in the novel, with a view to showing that Premchand's *Godan* is actually something of an antinationalist dirge—one, moreover, that held that the problems confronting colonial India were to a large degree internal, 'indigenous', and self-inflicted.

On the other hand, I am conscious of the need to balance this bleak interpretation of Premchand's politics with another that recognises the complexity of the novel as a commentary on the human condition, for Premchand was too passionate and committed a thinker merely to leave his audience with the bitter taste of pointless toil and endless disillusionment. If the sources of injustice were internal for India, then so too must be the solutions. Through the character of Hori, Premchand makes clear his belief that giving up the fight for justice (even in the face of what seem to be cosmically-cursed odds) would be the worst injustice of all.

The Outrage of Everyday Life

In *Godan*, Premchand embarks on a project of ideological iconoclasm. The long eloquent polemic of the novel is driven by the realisation that all of the grand ideologies of the day that claimed to offer cures to India's ailments or answers to her many questions, have failed. More than that, they have failed not because of the overwhelming dominance and hegemony of colonial power, but rather because they lacked any sense of ethical and moral consistency from within. Premchand was not merely attacking these ideologies as an outside observer; in many cases he was going through a painful process of self-reflection and re-evaluating many of the ideologies that had informed his earlier works. At the time of writing *Godan*, for instance, Premchand had become involved with the Progressive Writers' Association (in early 1936 he was elected its president). But while Premchand may have still believed that literature could be an important political instrument—one of the central tenets of the Progressive Writers' Movement—by the mid-1930s the aesthetic confines of 'socialist realism' as a school of thought could not adequately express his political views or creative impulses. Indeed, Premchand was now moving toward the idea of writing popular and hence marketable literature, struggling to find a way to reconcile artistic integrity with mass marketability.⁸ With *Godan*, Premchand finally bids farewell to pre-packaged ideological frameworks and focuses his literary craft on the more intricate and complex process of cultivating self-awakening and self-awareness.

Thus no proponent of any of the grand ideologies that have purported to offer schematic answers to the troubles of India—Marxist, feminist, Gandhian, nationalist, subalternist—can find true solace or vindication in this narrative. In Premchand's world of disillusionment, all grand schemes of morality are opportunistic. Yet Premchand is too conscientious a writer to merely leave the ideological landscape full of shattered ruins. His answer to the collapse of all these grand schemes is to offer a possible alternative in the form of the reconstruction of the internal architecture of the individual. Premchand's *Godan* is a novel about the death of ideology and the rebirth of the self.

8. On this and related ventures, see Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, 'Writing and Money Making: Munshi Premchand in the Film Industry, 1934–35', in *Contemporary India*, Vol.1, no.1 (Jan.–Mar. 2002), pp.87–98.

Synopsis

Notes

I will begin with a brief outline of the main narrative elements of the novel. At the centre of the story is Hori Ram, a farmer in Belari village in Awadh (now Uttar Pradesh), who struggles to get by in a small household with his wife Dhaniya, their son Gobar, and their two daughters Sona and Rupa. Like many farmers of the period, Hori longs not so much for material wealth as for social respectability; he dreams of owning a cow, not only for the economic bounty it would provide, but also for the respectable status it would confer on his family. By chance, he is given the opportunity to buy a cow from a widowed milkman named Bhola, who agrees to give the cow to Hori at a good price if Hori helps him find a suitable wife. Hori is overjoyed, but things turn sour quickly when Hori's younger brother Hira, overcome with jealousy at the prospect of Hori's new respectability and enhanced status, sneaks into Hori's house one night and poisons the cow, which subsequently dies. Hori suspects Hira from the start, but prefers to keep his suspicions within the family to protect the family's name; his wife Dhaniya, though, is outraged and publicly denounces Hira. An investigation of sorts follows – really just a formalistic orchestration of motions designed to elicit bribes for the police inspector – with Hori's attempts to cover for Hira undone once again by Dhaniya's exposure of the corruption of the inspector and the entire village leadership. In the meantime, Hori's son Gobar has fallen for Bhola's widowed daughter Jhuniya, and made her pregnant. Bhola is humiliated; Gobar flees; and Jhuniya takes refuge with Hori and Dhaniya. The village leaders see Gobar's actions as an affront to the moral fabric of the village, and levy a heavy fine on Hori.

As Hori sinks further and further into debt, many of the village leaders take advantage of his precarious situation for their own profit; to make matters worse, the two bullocks he used to plough his fields are taken away by Bhola as 'compensation' for the cow (for which Bhola has never been paid). Gobar meanwhile has found his way to Lucknow where he has managed to achieve a certain amount of economic security. He returns to the village, denounces the hypocrisy of the village leaders at a festival (which he has set up at his own expense), chides his own father and mother publicly for their behaviour, and then sets out once again for the city, this time taking his wife Jhuniya and their newborn son Mangal with him. Hori's situation becomes increasingly desperate, and when his own daughters Sona and Rupa reach marriageable age, Hori's repeated attempts to salvage any sort of respectability all but collapse. He gives his daughter Rupa to a much-older farmer in exchange for 200 rupees; takes a job as a day laborer in a road construction project – back-breaking, poorly-paid work during the oppressive heat of summer; and at night he and Dhaniya make ropes in order to earn whatever extra money they can. Hori literally works himself to death, and one day he suffers sunstroke. As he is dying, Dhaniya rushes to be by his side. Hira, who has returned to the village, advises Dhaniya to make a gift of a cow (Godan) to a Brahmin in order to ensure peace for Hori after he passes. In a gut-wrenching scene of genuine pathos, Dhaniya takes the twenty annas she has earned making ropes and places them into the hands of her dead husband. As she does this, she says to Datadin, one of the village leaders (and a Brahmin): 'Maharaj, in the house there is neither cow nor calf nor money. These few coins here, these are his Godan' (Hindi text p.328/ English text p.437). Dhaniya falls to the ground, unconscious, and the novel comes to its tragic end.

There is also a subplot that takes place in Lucknow and involves a number of separate characters, mostly linked by the pivotal figure of Rai Sahib, a zamindar who circulates with equal ease in both the rural and the urban worlds. In the city we find Mehta, a professor of philosophy; Khanna, a bank manager and owner/operator of the sugar mill; Malati, a foreign-trained doctor and the model of the modern, 'liberated' woman; and Onkarnath, a newspaper editor, among others. The interactions between all of these characters, the ideologies they espouse, and the events they set in motion will now be discussed in the context of a thematic exploration of the relentless acts of injustice and the palpable sense of outrage that make up the fictional universe of Godan.

21.2 Economic Injustice

By the time he wrote *Godan*, Premchand had already established a sizeable archive of trenchant writings about various forms of economic injustice and exploitation. At times, the influence of Marxism seemed to compel him to denounce capitalism as a viable economic system and to embrace the rise of the Soviet Union, then under Stalinist rule. Apparently blind to the horrible injustices being inflicted on the Soviet people during Stalin's rule, Premchand often wrote that the Soviet system, and not 'capitalist civilization', would be the best future for India.⁹ But Premchand by the 1930s was no longer prepared to embrace any one particular explanation or ideology, preferring instead to find a path that allowed for individual exceptions or for some type of understanding in the grey area between extremes. In an editorial article of 1933, for example, on relations between capitalists and farmers, Premchand had this to say: 'We are not saying that the capitalist has no place in our social life, nor that society does not obtain some benefit from him; but it is of utmost importance that the legal protections which the capitalists have procured for the tyranny over their own tenants be somewhat reduced'.¹⁰ The same approach can be seen in *Godan*, where capitalism as a system is often criticised in part but never dismissed as an absolute evil. Hori's son Gobar, for instance, goes to the city as a poor peasant and ends up doing quite well for himself—economically and socially—through his entrepreneurial skills.

One of the many merits of Premchand's fiction is his ability to portray the lives of ordinary or marginalised Indians with a realism that is both sensitive and stark. Premchand remained sympathetic to the plight of India's poor throughout his life, and his empathy with the ways in which economic deprivation and chronic poverty erode the essence of human dignity is omnipresent in his fiction and nonfiction writings.¹¹ Thus in *Godan*, we see that Hori's actions are driven by the 'impulsiveness that comes from poverty' (13/18) while his wife Dhaniya is made prematurely old by the 'anxieties of hunger' and by living a life that 'never finds joy'—only an 'ongoing infirmity that remains cruelly indifferent to her sense of self-respect' (11/16). Hori's sister-in-law Punni, who is married to Hira, is described as someone for whom 'deprivation and powerlessness have dried up any character she once had' (33/44), leaving only a hardened shell.

Yet Premchand has also distanced himself from his earlier works where 'the poor' were nothing but innocent victims. In *Godan*, Premchand refuses to accept poverty as a convenient justification for committing acts of injustice, nor does he portray marginalised and impoverished individuals

9. See, among many others, Premchand's articles 'Mahajani Sabhyata' (Capitalist Civilisation), in *Hans* (Sept. 1936); 'Soviyat Rus ki Unnati' (The Progress Of Soviet Russia) (1932), *Prem. Rac.* 8: 192; 'Rus ka Naitik Utthan' (Russia's Political Awakening) (1934), *Prem. Rac.* 9: 59-60; and 'Rus Men bhi Punjivad' (Capitalism in Russia Too) (1934), *Prem. Rac.* 9: 97-8.

10. 'Mahajan aur Kisan' (The Capitalist and the Peasant) (1933), *Prem. Rac.* 8: 365.

11. In Premchand's short story 'Vidhvans' (Destruction) (1921), *Prem. Rac.* 12: 302-5, for example, a poor Gond woman named Bhungi manages to subsist by parching grains in her oven for other villagers. The Brahmin who runs the village, however, Pandit Udaybhan, continually exploits her by demanding free labour and service, and one day, when she is 'blessed' with enough business to have food security for a week, Pandit Udaybhan sends two servants with large amounts of grain which must be parched immediately—for free—causing her to lose her other business. She cannot finish the task in time and so Pandit Udaybhan comes and smashes her oven to pieces as punishment for being 'lazy'. An argument ensues, after which Pandit Udaybhan has his servants set fire to the broken oven to ensure it cannot be rebuilt; Bhungi, in despair, throws herself on the flames—an economic sati of sorts. The fire rages out of control and ultimately consumes Pandit Udaybhan's house. See also 'Sadgati' (Deliverance) (1930), *Prem. Rac.* 14: 404-10, in which the character Dukhi literally works himself to death (cf. Hori in *Godan*), after which his body is dragged away and left to be devoured by animals.

and communities as being morally superior to wealthier elites.¹² There is a strong sense of sarcasm and satire when Premchand speaks of Hori's tendency to deceive moneylenders and merchants: 'Even if he had several rupees at home, he would swear before the moneylender that he didn't have even a paisa. And it was perfectly valid by his code of ethics to increase the weight of jute by adding water to it, or of cotton by adding the seeds to it' (15/20).¹³ Also, peasant life is often portrayed as a realm bereft of any sense of mutual trust: as soon as Hori turns his head for just a moment, for example, thieves make off with his potatoes, forcing him to take on yet another debt to make ends meet. And though Hori and other marginal farmers bemoan the continual injustices of indebtedness, as soon as any of them comes into even a small amount of money – ten or twenty rupees even – they immediately set themselves up as moneylenders to exploit their fellow villagers.¹⁴

It would seem that there is little 'subaltern' unity here. In fact, Hori admits as much to Gobar: 'We can't even stand the sight of each other. There is no unity here' (27/36). The goal of the subaltern classes, at least in the world of Godan, is apparently not to dismantle the structures of injustice that pit oppressor against oppressed, but rather to join the ranks of, or at least to emulate, the very groups responsible for their subordination.

Yet Gobar defies the deterministic explanations from his father. Although at one point he chides a local landowner, Jhinguri Singh, that 'it isn't knowledge [ilam] that counts in the world, but honesty [iman]' (196/260), Gobar is also something of a capitalist entrepreneur. Thus the 'traditional' rural economy of India, so often trumpeted by Gandhi and his followers as the blueprint for India's future, is here shown to be just as exploitative as modern capitalism. In contrast to Gobar's entrepreneurial success and new-found independence and self-respect, Hori and Jhinguri Singh (who has also used his transport service to make as many people indebted to him as possible) proclaim that what counts in economic relations is not honesty and trust but 'authority and pressure'. Indeed there is a strong sense in Godan that structural economic injustice is inherent in the pre-colonial, or non-colonial world of the traditional economy. As the Rai Sahib protests righteously, the system 'forces' him to extort tenants and pay bribes; that is the way it has 'always been'.

Gobar appears to have been somewhat successful in the city. Yet Premchand makes it clear that this does not mean that the urban capitalist economy is the answer to India's economic ills. Gobar may represent the 'good' capitalist, but there are others who clearly show the pejorative tendencies of capitalist economic relations. When a strike breaks out among workers at the sugar mill in town owned and operated by Khanna, the latter comes out against the strike and defends his stance with some interesting logic: while he had earlier 'been arrested' to prove he was a good nationalist, now this was business and the shareholders (who are also 'good' nationalists for investing in

12. Over time, Premchand gradually moves away from moral sympathy with abstract groups and classes and towards moral sympathy with 'awakened' individuals—a point that is, as I argue below, central to an understanding of Godan. While many a zamindar character is portrayed as harsh and selfish, in stories like 'Updesh' (The Lesson) (1917), Prem. Rac. 12: 33–47, one role model of a 'good' enlightened zamindar is presented (albeit in heavily moralistic, Tolstoyan and Gandhian fashion). Similarly, in Premchand's famous short story 'Kafan' (The Shroud) (1936), Prem Rac. 15: 401–7 (published in Urdu as 'Jamiya' in 1935), the two central untouchable characters, poor as they are, are portrayed individually as lazy and unprincipled.

13. One could see in this also the type of 'resistance from below' as interpreted by James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms Of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985). It is unlikely Premchand would have seen it this way.

14. On a side note, in my own fieldwork in rural Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and Karnataka (1995–6, 1998), I witnessed the same phenomenon over and over again. There were at the time a handful of local non-governmental organisations trying to establish alternatives (such as rotating credit societies), but their reception by local villagers was often lukewarm. Premchand spent considerable literary energy attacking various exploitative aspects of the 'traditional' system of moneylending. His short story 'Tagada' (Demands) (1932), Prem. Rac. 15: 106–12, for instance, details the way in which a 'typical' debt-collector spends his time continually pilfering from his many debtors, and the pointless but avoidable suffering and hardship that this engenders.

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'indigenous' businesses) demand their returns (267/351). Moreover Khanna admits that much of his success was based on the exploitation of others and on dishonesty and cheating; and he has no problem taking advantage of the strike to lower workers' wages and to worsen their working conditions. This, according to Premchand, is the true face of economic nationalism. For their part, the workers do not come across solely as heroes or victims: like the peasants in the villages, they are unable to agree upon or unite for anything, and are more than happy to take advantage of each other to gain a better position at the mill after the strike is over. In the end, violence breaks out and the mill is simply burnt down – a stark and poignant symbol of the failure of the Gandhian vision and of the promise of subaltern unity.

21.3 Political Injustice

Much of the intellectual discussion of political ideas takes place among the characters in the urban subplot of the novel. In many ways, the very format of the discussion can be taken as the first level of Premchand's critique. Mehta and Khanna are intellectuals who talk at length of politics but never feel obliged to translate ideas into actions or to bring their actions into accord with their ideals. Here Premchand seems to be making an indirect attack on the elite politicians of the time by associating them with hypocrisy and narcissism, and by targeting the staleness of political and intellectual discourse. Of the character Tankha, Premchand states: 'when Congress had power he supported the Congress candidate, and when communal parties had power, then he campaigned for the Hindu Sabha' (90/116). Another character declares: 'I no longer have faith in this democracy', and goes on to explain why chaotic India will always need an absolute ruler – 'whether Indian or British doesn't matter' (91/117). Yet the novel is not in the least an attack on democracy. Democracy is not to blame, Premchand demonstrates, but the self-serving opportunism and lack of ethics among the nationalist political elite that is at fault for ruining and pilfering the democratic promise.¹⁵

The character of Rai Sahib is a case in point. He is described as a 'nationalist who maintains good relations with government [British] officials' (18/23). And when he is awarded the title of 'Raja' from the provincial governor, he is filled ironically with 'pride and patriotism' (288/384). Yet we are told that during the Civil Disobedience Movement the Rai Sahib put himself at the head of the local agitation, was arrested and went to jail, like a good nationalist. To be sure, while in jail he continued to cheat and exploit the peasants on his zamindari lands, but the peasants could not complain lest they were seen as 'anti-national'. Likewise, when Rai Sahib hears that a fine has been levied against Hori in his zamindari village of Belari he becomes furious and – being the good nationalist that he is – orders the money to be returned. The village leaders, however, have already pocketed and spent the money from the fine, so they think of a way to avoid Rai Sahib's request.¹⁶ One of them, Pateshwari, decides to run a story in the local nationalist paper run by Onkarnath (a paper that is funded, it turns out, largely by ads selling foreign products) denouncing the exploitative actions of the Rai Sahib. The latter hits back by visiting Onkarnath and adding one hundred new subscribers to the cash-starved paper – an action that is simultaneously nationalist and philanthropic. Onkarnath is trapped: the ethics of journalism require him to run the story, but the ethics of nationalism require him not to. The fact that such a choice is created at all shows the emptiness of nationalist rhetoric and action, particularly at the local level.

15. A point foreshadowed in an earlier story of Premchand's entitled 'Cakma' (Deception) (1922), Prem. Rac. 12: 366–71.

16. As would be expected, Premchand also wrote extensively about issues of Panchayat justice. In 'Panch-Parameshwar' (The God Of the Panchayat) (1916), Prem. Rac. 11: 394–403, a friendship is initially torn apart when one of the friends, who is on the Panchayat, does not automatically rule in favour of the other in a case brought before the Panchayat. The friendship is renewed when, in a later case, the judgment is rendered in favour of the friend (but on the merits of the case only). The point is that justice is supposed to be impartial, and not based, as it is 'traditionally' practised, on connections.

As with economics, there seems to be an abstract 'system' or machine in Premchand's world that generates political injustice, but for which no one is prepared to claim or accept responsibility. Institutions to fight injustice are there—the British government has set up a court system—but local 'resistance' has corrupted the ability of the courts to render justice or for marginalised individuals and communities to seek it (226-7/300-1).¹⁷ Within the law enforcement system 'looting is rampant [carom taraf lut hai]' (319/424).¹⁸ Similarly, when it is suggested that the British administration set up a loan program for poor farmers to get out of debt, village leaders begin to plot various ways to ensure that the program does not succeed—all in the name of some abstract and vague understanding of tradition and custom. Political injustice seems to occur in the world of Godan because, with very few exceptions, everyone is pursuing acts of self-interest at the expense of others' well-being; there is a total absence of civic spirit. As Rai Sahib points out: 'We give gifts and perform acts of charity. . .only to make our fellow citizens [barabar] appear lower than ourselves. Our gifts and acts of charity are simply selfish, purely selfish' (18/24).

21.4 Village Injustice

There are at least three levels of interaction within the village where Premchand explores the roots of injustice: within the family; within the caste community; and within the village itself. Contrary to the domestic bliss of traditional values being promoted by cultural nationalists at the time, Premchand portrays the family as a zone of nearly continual conflict and unjust action.¹⁹ The members of Rai Sahib's extended family are forever trying to steal each other's lands and possessions; at one point even Rai Sahib's own son double-crosses him. When Bhola's daughter Jhuniya goes off with Gobar, Bhola denounces his own daughter as a 'witch' and adds: 'if I saw her begging and sifting through refuse, it would soothe my heart' (144/190). As for Gobar, at one point he comes close to renouncing his mother for her behaviour, creating a scene in which the 'the mother in her was like a house that had been torched and reduced to ashes' (211/280). And of course, the cow is the poisoned by Hori's own brother, Hira. Moreover domestic violence is rampant in the novel: at one point Hori beats Dhaniya in front of the whole village, and even Gobar, the defiant, ethically-awakened rebel, descends to beating Jhuniya. 'At home, there is a Mahabharata war continually raging', complains Bhola (28/38). The romanticised, culturally-nationalist image of the Indian domestic household as a haven of familial warmth is here effectively demolished by Premchand.

Caste politics fare no better. Just as the extortionate landlords keep the peasants and tenants in a precarious situation, so too, in the world of Godan, do members of the same caste find ways to extort, punish, or oppress one another. When Dhaniya decides to take pity on Jhuniya and accept her into the household, Hori reminds her that 'our salvation lies entirely in the hands of our caste community' (121/159)—and in the event Hori's biradari behaves with predictable malice and excommunicates his entire family. Gobar, too, must face the wrath of his caste for his liaison with

17. In Premchand's story 'Nasha' (Intoxication) (1934), Prem. Rac. 15: 232-37, the narrator, an elite nationalist reformer who criticises, among other things, the exploitation of the zamindari system, finds himself at one point in the third class section of a train, crammed in with 'the rest of India' (the non-elite). Between the 'boorish' behaviour of the non-elites, and the fact that other educated nationalists in the compartment are praising the merits of British judicial equality, the narrator explodes and begins to beat a villager whose bag keeps bumping his face. He is denounced by the 'educated' and by the villagers in the compartment, and in that moment he realises he has been 'intoxicated' with traditional ideas of status and power (instead of the true equality of civil interaction).

18. The corruption and incompetence of local police is another common target of attack in Premchand's fiction. See, among other stories, 'Darogaji' (The Police Inspector) (1928), Prem. Rac. 14: 113-19.

19. Premchand has explored the needless violence and injustice that often stems from marriage and the subsequent forced dislocation of family members in India in other works as well (perhaps inspired by his own personal experience with a disastrous first marriage). His novel *Nirmala* is particularly important here. See also the short stories 'Bade Ghar ki Beti' (The Daughter-in-Law) (1910), Prem. Rac. 11: 106-13; and 'Ghar Jamai' ('The Son-in-Law') (1929), Prem. Rac. 14: 281-9.

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Jhuniya, knowing that every time his 'brothers' see them together they will 'cackle' at him. Yet Gobar also hints at possible means of rebellion against caste tyranny – to leave and start somewhere else, where one is not known. 'Aren't there other villages in the world', he asks? Premchand seems to be implying that the many injustices that follow from the dominant principle of hierarchy – as both within and between castes – are, to a considerable extent, self-inflicted.

The harmony of the traditional, naturally cooperative village was a central pillar in Gandhi's vision of India's moral past and its morally reconstituted future.²⁰ Premchand's break with the relevance of that vision is perhaps most starkly expressed in *Godan*. In one of many passages in which he puts satire to powerful use, he describes the 'vision' of village justice from the perspective of one of the village leaders, Lala Pateshwari:

It was his supreme duty [param dharma] to look after the well-being of the entire village. He had no faith in compromise or in mutual conciliation, as these were only a sign of weakness [nirjivita]. He was a devotee of conflict, for it was a sign of life. He was always trying to stir up some excitement for this 'life', and as a result disputes of one kind or another were always erupting (247/330).

It would be one thing if Lala Pateshwari were an isolated individual with an idiosyncratic vision of the way village life should be. But that is not the case – conflict really does seem to be the common mode of interaction in village life, and the injustices and difficulties generated by such conflict are endlessly compounded. Jhinguri Singh is continually trying to get Hori in a tight spot so he can take his cow. When first his family and then the entire village turn against Bhola, he turns to Nokheram, another village leader, for assistance. Nokheram, however, like the other 'traditional' village leaders, has no interest in helping unless money is involved, and tells Bhola: 'Who shows any regard for justice and righteousness here?' (244/324). When Hori, who has already been forced to take out a loan when other villagers steal his potatoes, discovers the wife or daughter (Hori isn't sure which) of one of the village elders stealing his peas, he asks: 'Why were these people's intentions so insincere [khoti]?' (113/147). Similarly, when Gobar returns from the city and sees the village from a new perspective, he says he can only see 'everyone trying to dominate everyone else' and 'slavery to no end' (321/427). Lives are continually ruined by 'village justice', which Premchand interprets as a kind of totalitarian rule based on fear: 'society would see to it that those who violate its traditions [maryada] cannot be left to sleep in peace' (120/156).

Finally, lest the reader begins to think that the city represents a welcome respite from the subaltern authoritarianism of the village – especially since Gobar's flight to the city gives him new insight into, and new power to undermine, the closed and exploitative society of the village – Premchand describes Lucknow society in equally unforgiving terms. In the city's industrial quarters, unemployed workers are given small pittances to partake in 'gladiator' -type games that are both exploitative and humiliating; still, every day a large crowd gathers to enjoy the spectacle. The city leaves its inhabitants vulnerable to exploitation just as does the village.

Premchand seems to be suggesting that if there is a utopia waiting for India, it will not be found in any physical space – whether the 'modern' city or the 'traditional' village – but rather will need to be created from the actions of awakened individuals, wherever they may be residing.

21.5 Gender Injustice

Premchand's earlier works often, if unwittingly, portrayed a male-centred world, and when he finally turned his energies toward putting women at centre-stage, as with his novel *Nirmala*

20. During Premchand's period as a dedicated Gandhian, he put these ideas into literary form in stories such as 'Lag-Dant' (Hostility) (1921), *Prem. Rac.* 12: 275–80. In this story, a long-standing village feud is resolved effortlessly with Gandhian methods and ideas. That possibility is resolutely rejected in *Godan*.

(1927),²¹ Premchand often focused on their 'plight'. That is, women were portrayed either as paragons of virtue in the face of suffering and adversity, or as rather one-dimensional victims of social forces and outmoded traditions deserving of pity but needing help to change their situation.²² In *Godan*, however, the world of women is portrayed with all its simultaneous grit and glory. Just as there is no trace of subaltern unity either in the village or the city, in *Godan* there is no trace of feminist solidarity or domestic virtue; women are just as likely as men to exploit others for their own benefit or bring the lives of others – male and female – to bitter ruin.²³ For instance one of the most ruthless moneylenders in the village – Dulari – is a woman. When she tries to take advantage of Hori's desperation by agreeing to arrange a marriage for one of his daughters for the outrageous price of two hundred rupees plus extortionate interest, she is denounced by Dhaniya as an absolute 'witch' (curail) (237/314–5). And while domestic violence against women is portrayed as a frequent occurrence, there are also many instances where women in the village physically beat and humiliate the men. When Damri, a local cane-weaver, becomes involved in a dispute with Hira's wife Punni and ends up giving her a shove, Punni becomes enraged – 'A mere basket-weaver pushing her? What an insult!' – and begins to beat him mercilessly with her sandal. Premchand then adds an interesting comment here about the overriding nexus between class and power: 'Damri, having pushed her, had to suffer the insult: he had no other recourse but to stand there and be beaten' (33/44).

Meanwhile, the urban characters offer up revealing musings about the 'proper' role of women in society. At the heart of these discussions is Malati, the foreign-trained medical practitioner who represents the new modern woman who believes in, and struggles for, equal rights between the genders.²⁴ Mehta is entranced by Malati, but in spite of all his intellectual talk about various social issues, when it comes to women he is the epitome of patriarchy and sometimes directly, sometimes obliquely, offers various trenchant criticisms of Malati's liberated independence: that a woman's essence is always and only to be a mother; and that the spread of Western values is responsible for

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21. Prem. Rac. 4. An English translation by Alok Rai is available as Premchand, Nirmala (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999). For a full-length study of the depiction of women in Premchand's fiction, see Gita Lal, *Premchand ka Nari Citran* (Delhi: Hindi Sahitya Samsar, 1965).
22. There is an ambivalence in Premchand's works about how women can achieve 'empowerment'. In the historical short story 'Sati' (Sati) (1927), Prem. Rac. 13: 363–71, for instance, Cinta Devi becomes a sati for her 'dead' husband, Ratan Singh, who is in fact still alive but has cowardly deserted a battle against Maratha forces. A husband who has lost his 'manliness' is as good as dead, so Cinta Devi upholds her devotion by throwing herself on a pyre which in fact has no body. Ratan Singh is so impressed by his wife's 'power' that he then follows her onto the pyre as a male sati. Whether power that stems from devotion to traditional subservient roles is 'empowerment' is debatable. Premchand has another later story by the same title 'Sati' published in 1932 (Prem Rac. 15: 40–6) with a very different approach. Yet in other stories, such as 'Nairashya' (Despair) (1924), Prem. Rac. 13: 68–75, the injustices against women that stem from the 'social preference' for male children are explored, exposed, and condemned.
23. In one of Premchand's early stories, 'Garib ki Hay' (Cry Of the Poor) (1911), Prem. Rac. 11: 174–83, for instance, a Brahmin widow named Munga holds a dharna (a traditional form of resistance involving a fast unto death against a person who is the target of a grievance) against a local notable named Munshi Ramsevak, whom she accuses of cheating her out of a sum of money. Munshi Ramsevak's wife Nagin, who is happy to benefit from Munshi Ramsevak's acts of deceit and exploitation, shows neither sympathy nor compassion for Munga, whose action she detests. Eventually Munga dies on Munshi Ramsevak's doorstep; as a result, Nagin is driven mad and subsequently dies, while Munshi Ramsevak is ostracised from the village. Munga's 'power' stems not from the fact that she is a woman, but from the fact that she is a Brahmin and a widow.
24. As we shall see, Malati has a personal 'ethical' awakening. In another of Premchand's short stories that centres around a similarly 'liberated' modern woman and written around the time of *Godan*, 'Miss Padma' (Miss Padma) (1936), Prem. Rac. 15: 429–34, however, liberation, modernity, and independence bring only misfortune and unhappiness for the central female character.

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the decline of the spirit of devotion, self-sacrifice, and submission that have 'traditionally' made Indian women 'superior' to their Western counterparts. Khanna, too, blames 'slavish attachment to the West' (219/290) for the ruin of the traditional Indian household.

But unlike in earlier works, where the authorial Premchand might have agreed with such opinions, here the attempt to blame the West for the ruin of Indian women is rendered hollow; both Khanna and Mehta are portrayed as using the West as a convenient target to cover up their own shortcomings and weaknesses. Nor is Malati championed as an emblem of India's modern future. Khanna's wife Govindi, who reviles Malati for bewitching men and leading them astray, says of Malati: 'In my opinion she is even worse than the prostitutes, since she does her hunting under cover' (178/236). And when Malati thinks she is being treated with less than appropriate deference by one of Rai Sahib's servants, she hotly rebukes the girl, adding:

Men take such pleasure in these slutty servant-girls [laumdi], who, whether they have any skills or not, run around here and there tending to their every desire and praising their fate that they have a man to order them to do some task or other. They are goddesses – powerful and glorious ones. I thought at least you lacked this one male quality [to Mehta], but inside, aside from all your culture, you're a barbarian like all the rest (84/108–9).²⁵

Mehta attributes Malati's reaction to feminine 'jealousy', but the reality is that this is another example of Premchand's portrayal of the lack of consistency among practitioners of all grand ideologies: for Malati, gender equality is meant for the upper classes and respectable castes, not for servants.

A further example of Premchand's wry take on the gender issue is provided by Bhola's wife Nohri, who has been scheming to find ways to aggrandise her power in the village. As her schemes and alliances yield success, she starts to insult Bhola's lack of 'manliness', and pour shame on other village leaders who cross her path. For a time, at least, as Premchand describes her, she becomes 'queen of the village' (246/327).

Bhola did not want to be dependent on her. There was no greater humiliation than to live off the earnings of a woman. He earned all of three rupees a month, but he couldn't even lay his hands on that sum – Nohri would take it and squander it. He couldn't even get a half-paise of tobacco to smoke, while Nohri chewed two annas worth of pan a day (246/328).

Note the interesting role reversal here: as Bhola's fortunes dwindle and his masculinity is disempowered, and as Nohri's fortunes rise and she is newly empowered, her attitude towards Bhola becomes not one of equality but of dominance.

Although there is a considerable amount of satire and irony involved here, and eventually Nohri 'falls' from her exalted position, the implication is that a matriarchal household would probably be no more just and free from conflict than a patriarchal one. And just as Indian men (such as Mehta and Khanna) are often depicted as harbouring expectations that Indian women will fulfil their proper 'womanly' roles, it is also clear that the women of Belari village expect their men to fulfil their proper 'manly' roles – and are prepared to humiliate them publicly, as Nohri does to Bhola, when they fail. Premchand has masterfully undermined the simplistic view that gender justice of any sort can be found in any one grand ideological scheme – Feminism, traditionalism, culturalism, and modernism are all here found lacking.

21.6 Religious Injustice

Premchand's various expositions in *Godan* on the ways in which religion is often used to mask or compound various acts of injustice all share a common desire to separate religion as it is from

25. There is a double meaning here that is hard to capture in English. The Hindi word 'laumdi' can mean both a servant-girl and/or a (sexually) promiscuous woman.

religion as it should be. Characters from various religions show a tendency to corrupt spiritual teachings to avoid or excuse personal complicity in the commission of acts of injustice or to find a way to personally benefit from religious status without having to accept the concomitant responsibilities and austerities.²⁶ Thus Mirza Khurshid is a Muslim who shows a complete lack of charitable concern for the poor. Premchand adds: 'He had twice made the hajj to Mecca, but he drank heavily' (62/82). Khanna points out to Rai Sahib at one point: 'You proudly invoke the names of Buddha and Shiva and then go around killing animals' (90/116).²⁷ The various Brahmins who are supposed to act as spiritual and political leaders in the village are shown to be holy on the outside and corrupt on the inside, lusting at alternate moments for money or for vulnerable, low-caste women.²⁸ Perhaps the only character who embarks upon a spiritual journey and remain religiously 'consistent' in terms of linking teachings with actions is Hori. True, at times Hori seems excessively attached to religious traditions – even to those that deprive him of status, freedom, or dignity. Yet, to Premchand's credit, he does not show Hori to be the stereotypical Hindu fatalist who meekly accepts whatever comes his way. Rather, Hori undergoes a bhakti-style type of spiritual transformation, reflecting at one point:

Why should he be a slave [gulami] to tradition? Why should he give up his spiritual merit just because of tradition? If people laughed, then let them laugh. He didn't care. He wanted nothing but for God to keep him from doing wrong (175/232).²⁹

Through Hori, Premchand seems to suggest that traditional religious acts and devotions are not inherently evil, but only retain value and meaning if they are carried out as self-willed acts and if they allow for a direct relationship between divine power and human conscience.

One of the more interesting sections of the novel relates to the interplay of religion and injustice; it is the sexual relationship of Datadin's son Matadin, a Brahmin, with Siliya, a Chamar (dalit) girl

26. Cf. Premchand's story 'Babaki ka Bhog' (The Pleasure Of the Holy Man) (1926), Prem. Rac. 13: 351-3, in which a 'holy man' (sadhu) comes to the house of a poor farmer asking for food. The sadhu simply cannot take his food without the luxurious taste of ghee; to please the sadhu, the farmer's family obtains the ghee, but as a result of the expense have nothing left to eat themselves. Far from the austerities associated with 'holy men', the sadhu happily rubs his full stomach while the poor family goes hungry. Premchand's biting satire can be seen in the last line of the story: when the hungry farmer lies down to sleep, he thinks to himself – 'And he is better than me! [mujhse to vahi acche]'.

27. Though *Godan* would appear from its title to be more concerned with the fate of Hori's poor cow, the poisoning of the cow is more background for action between human characters. Nevertheless, Premchand's writings reveal a strong sympathy for the plight and suffering of animals at the hands of their human counterparts; at times, the bond between animal and human is depicted as being stronger than that between people. In 'Do Bailo ki Katha' (A Tale Of Two Bullocks) (1931), Prem. Rac. 14: 528-37, two bullocks appear as central characters with emotions, feelings and personalities (sadly, at a time when it would have been far stranger and controversial to do the same for untouchables). In other stories such as 'Pus ki Rat' (A Night During (the Month Of) Pus) (1930), Prem. Rac. 14: 350-5, and 'Dudh ka Dam' (The Price Of Milk) (1934), Prem. Rac. 15: 283-90, characters who are despised, cast-out, or otherwise mistreated find friendship and comfort (and a lack of concern for social barriers and exploitative social norms) from companion dogs. Considering the status of dogs in India at the time, this is quite a powerful statement.

28. Or, as in the series of humorous stories regarding Moteram Shastri, lusting after various sweets. See 'Satyagraha' (Satyagraha) (1923), Prem. Rac. 12: 455-65; 'Manushya ka Paramdharma' (The Highest Moral Duty Of Man) (1920), Prem. Rac. 12: 195-8; 'Moteramji Shastri' (Mr. Moteram Shastri) (1928), Prem. Rac. 14: 19-23; 'Moteramji Shastri ka Nairashya' (Moteram Shastri's Despair) (1928), Prem. Rac. 14: 77-82; and 'Sampadak Moteramji Shastri' (Editor Moteram Shastri) (1928), Prem. Rac. 14: 119-25.

29. In highlighting the theme of individual liberation in *Godan*, Premchand uses the word 'gulami' (slavery) frequently and strategically to emphasise the multifaceted nature of mental and physical enslavement. The word is used here to show Hori's sudden awareness that uncritical acceptance of tradition is slavery; the same word is also used in Gobar's observation of village life as 'slavery to no end' and in Mehta's claim that the downfall of the Indian woman has occurred due to her 'enslavement' to Western values.

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from the village. The relationship of course violates all the 'rules' of caste, and Siliya, not surprisingly, is out-casted from her community, her own mother exclaiming: 'Why don't you go drown yourself in a handful of water?' (230/305). As with Jhuniya, Siliya soon finds herself seeking refuge with Dhaniya. Matadin, meanwhile, attempts to keep himself 'pure' and above suspicion by strictly observing all the Brahmanic food rules, a strategy whose inherent absurdity is not lost on Premchand: 'Maintaining proper food habits provides a shield protecting us from unrighteousness [adharmā]' (168/222).³⁰ The Chamars, though, are quite aware of this 'shield', and also know exactly what to do to pierce the ritual armour. In a disturbing scene wrought with frustration, violence, and outrage, several members of the Chamar community overpower and detain Matadin and force a bone down his throat, ending his protective state of caste purity. Matadin is able to return to the caste fold by 'spending several hundred rupees' and by consuming cow's dung and cow's urine, and yet he realises the hollowness of the ritual 'rehabilitation': aside from literally being able to buy back his caste status, the reality is that he is still treated as a Chamar, since many people now refuse to take water from him or let him touch their cooking utensils. After the death of Ramu, Matadin and Siliya's newborn child, Matadin is 'reborn' a Chamar and takes up residence with Siliya. As with Hori, Matadin's behavior is another example that shows that the only authentic spirituality is chosen from within; rituals are only external and superficial, and caste is ultimately just a state of mind.³¹ Premchand also spends a considerable amount of time exploring the relationship between dharma and justice.³² When Matadin makes his decision to move in with Siliya, he declares: 'I want to live as a Chamar, not as a Brahmin. Whoever keeps to his dharma is a Brahmin; whoever turns away from his dharma is a Chamar' (316/419). The statement seems somewhat ambivalent at first, but in the context of Premchand's extended critique of religious injustice, it makes perfect sense.³³ Since dharma has become associated with injustice, turning away from one's dharma is ironically to turn away from injustice. There is also an implication that the Chamars have more justice than the Brahmins! Earlier in the novel, when Bhola comes to Hori's house seeking redress for the loss of the ill-fated and now deceased cow, he declares that he must take away Hori's bullocks as just compensation. Hori is shocked and says to Bhola: 'If you take these two bullocks, then I'll be ruined. But if your dharma says so, then go ahead and take them' (142/189). Bhola duly takes the bullocks. When Datadin subsequently hears of this, he declares it to be utterly 'inhuman'; yet when Hori explains to Datadin (and to Lala Pateshwari) that it was a matter of dharma, Datadin opines reverently: 'When it's a matter of dharma, then what can anyone say?' (146/193). Here dharma

30. Here it is food, but in the story 'Sabhyata ka Rahasya' (The Secret Of Civilisation) (1925), Prem. Rac. 13: 166-71, it is the rituals of 'cultured' or 'civilised' behaviour among elites. Whether religious or social, Premchand had little tolerance for rituals that hid or shielded one from culpability.

31. One of Premchand's most powerful stories about the state of mind produced by caste prejudice and injustice can be found in his story 'Thakur ka Kuan' (The Thakur's Well) (1932), Prem Rac. 15: 54-6. In this story Gangi, an untouchable woman, desperately needs water but, being an untouchable, is not allowed even to approach near the Thakur's well. She sneaks to the well at night, but when she tries to get the water, the Thakur's door suddenly opens. She is not caught, but it is the fear – the continual and oppressive fear – that Premchand evokes so strongly here. As he describes Gangi's reaction to the sound of the opening door: 'The jaws of a tiger could not have been more frightening to her' (p.56).

32. Justice is of course a theme throughout much of Premchand's fiction. Other stories that explore directly the relationship between religious and legal justice are, for instance, 'Iswariya Nyaya' (Divine Justice) (1916), Prem. Rac. 11: 403-17; and 'Dharma Sankat' (A Crisis Of Dharma) (1913), Prem. Rac. 11: 268-74.

33. Another of Premchand's stories that brings many of the themes presented here together is 'Brahm ka Swang' (The Brahmin Farce) (1920), Prem. Rac. 12: 198-204. In this story, full of Gandhian influence, a Brahmin husband and wife 'duel' in their attempts to break down caste barriers. The satirical message is that what is understood as caste equality by the upper castes is really only caste inequality, just less of it.

has been invoked to justify an inhumane and unjust act that will leave Hori in ruin; religion has become corrupted.

In the event, Gobar finally goes to Bhola's place and gets his bullocks back – but not before promising Bhola that he will be fairly compensated for his loss. Gobar's honesty, and his appeal to fair economic transactions, would appear to offer a better hope for justice than a hopelessly corrupted concept of dharma. Or perhaps Gobar's actions and words offer the possibility of a more meaningful and more tangible type of dharma – one that does not discriminate by caste or class, and one that is equally at home in the temple or the marketplace.

21.7 The End of Nationalism and the Origins of the Awakened Self

The hollowness, hypocrisy, and opportunism that have undermined the grand ideologies competing to draw the map of India's utopian and independent future help explain the palpable sense of disillusionment in *Godan*. It is in this respect that I suggest that Premchand's novel may be the finest Indian literary work that sets out to capture the mood of its time.

By the mid-1930s, the pessimism and disillusionment that was adrift in the political air began to settle into Premchand's prose. All this frustration, pessimism, and disillusionment find their voice in *Godan*. Although no longer a cultural nationalist (having watched cultural nationalism decay into cultural chauvinism and then blind communalism), Premchand remains too much of a Marxist to go in for the elite politics of most nationalist leaders, and too much of a Gandhian to go in for the violence advocated by the Marxists. Nationalism, which had once called to him powerfully, now seemed a hollow and spent force, smothered by orthodoxy.³⁴ Also, Premchand began to perceive that nationalism could never provide an adequate or fulfilling answer for the injustices of imperialism because the injustices that saturated the worlds of most 'ordinary' Indians – the people who provide the inspiration for his fictional world in *Godan* – were not imposed from the outside but cultivated from within.³⁵ In 1934, for instance, Premchand could write despairingly: 'we merely shout "nation! nation!" but our hearts are still plunged into the darkness of caste distinctions'.³⁶ With no ideology holding sway over him, with no simplistic remedies to provide a cure for the many social ailments he saw around him, Premchand wrote *Godan* to describe everyday life and its diurnal struggles not as others imagined it could, or should, be, but merely as it was.³⁷ Lacking the ideological filter or political melodrama of his earlier works, *Godan* brings to life the local history of late-colonial India with a complexity that vastly transcends the once-dominant master narrative of heroic nationalism. The book offers an unflinchingly honest and uncompromising testament to the gritty, brutal, and often inhumane existence of India's subalterns.

34. Some of Premchand's stories that deal with his earlier optimism regarding the promise of nationalism are: 'Duniya ka Sabse Anmol Ratan' (The Most Priceless Jewel in the World) (1908), Prem. Rac. 11: 18–24; and 'Samar Yatra' (A Pilgrimage to Battle) (1930), Prem. Rac. 14: 341–50.

35. Perhaps the greatest story explaining why Gandhian nationalism would never work is also Premchand's shortest: 'Rashtra ka Sevak' (Servant Of the Nation) (1930), Prem. Rac. 14: 403–4, is roughly half a page in length. In the course of a short dialogue between father and daughter, the father, the 'servant of the nation', extols caste equality, until her daughter says she wants to marry one of the lower caste men. Suddenly the 'servant of nation' cannot even bear to look at her, and turns away in disgust.

36. Quoted in Govind Narain, *Premchand: Novelist and Thinker* (Delhi: Pragati Publications, 1999), p.133.

37. Indar Nath Madan, *Premchand: An Interpretation* (Lahore: Minerva Bookshop, 1946), argues that the excessive attempt by Premchand to fit ideology and 'message' into his fiction greatly reduced its quality and literary potential: 'The main reason why he could not, in spite of his undoubted talents, create an immortal character lies in his wrong conception of the function of art' (p.98). For Madan, Hori is Premchand's first and only 'immortal character'.

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Yet in spite of his disillusionment, Premchand struggled, to the end, not only to propose possible solutions to his country's problems, but also to put them into action in his own life. Premchand's struggle to find a unified language shared by both Hindus and Muslims, for instance, and to resist the communalisation of Hindi and Urdu, remained a central part of his literary craft right to the end of his life. Premchand also endeavoured to make Hindi more accessible to the ordinary, non-elite reader by bringing together the inspiration of socialist realism with the reforms of the Hindi language (through its de-Sanskritisation). Though Premchand himself after about 1910 switched from Urdu to Hindi as his main public medium of expression, he continued to write in the first instance in Urdu, afterwards translating his own first drafts into Hindi or at times striving for a means of expression that borrowed from both. The project for a unified 'Hindustani' language failed in the end, but Premchand clung stubbornly to his belief in its potential, and unlike so many others, he practised what he preached, consistently and productively³⁸—even in the face of outspoken criticism from his fellow Hindi writers (who mistrusted his praise of Urdu) and from Urdu writers who continued to treat him as an outsider.³⁹

Of course, Premchand was certainly not the first author to become first enamoured with, and then disillusioned by, utopian ideologies and specifically by the failure of nationalism. In fact, in its tone, import, and intent, *Godan* is very reminiscent of Rabindranath Tagore's *The Home and the World* (*Ghare-Baire*) of 1915, which is constructed around the nationalist upsurge generated by the partition of Bengal in 1905, and the ensuing Swadeshi Movement. But Tagore's nationalist 'hero', Sandip, is shown to be hypocrite, a fraud, and an opportunist who leads individuals and communities to ruin and to violence, and Tagore's decision to keep that action focused on Indian characters and not on the British colonial administration forces the reader to the conclusion—as does Premchand's *Godan*—that much of the violence and injustice that emerged out of the nationalist agitation in India in the early twentieth century was generated from within.⁴⁰

Also like Tagore, Premchand was too gifted a writer and too passionate an activist merely to write a novel of persistent complaint; he could never resist the temptation to provide answers, and at least in *Godan*, his efforts are put to impressively good and complex ends. Ideologies may have failed, Premchand suggests, but that merely shifts the burden onto the individual self. Premchand shows a keen interest in the (re)construction of the self in *Godan*, and yet, again like Tagore, he is no longer able to embrace the Gandhian project of the reconstructed moral self, a project that seems too deeply embedded in the rituals and trappings of conservative elitist traditions. In *Godan*, Premchand offers a glimpse of the reconstructed awakened self in a form that puts the burden of responsibility on the individual; it is a humanist project, but one that does not, as 'classical'

38. Harish Trivedi, 'The Progress Of Hindi, Part 2: Hindi and the Nation', in Sheldon Pollock (ed.), *Literary Cultures in History: Reconstructions from South Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), pp.967-71.

39. Muhammad Sadiq, *A History Of Urdu Literature* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2nd ed., 1995), p.439. Premchand's experience can be compared with that of the main character, Pravin, in his short story 'Lekhak' (The Writer) (1931), *Prem. Rac.* 14: 538-45. Pravin is a poor struggling writer, surrounded by various characters who do not understand the power and beauty of the literary craft. Premchand is careful to find a non-communal balance: there are unflattering portrayals of Hindus and Muslims in equal measure. In the end, Pravin realises that he is a lamp (*dipak*) and that 'literary service is complete sacrifice [*sahitya-seva puri tapasya hai*]'—carefully chosen words that imply that the principled writer is like an ethical ascetic. On the Hindustani issue, see Premchand's essay 'Urdu, Hindi, aur Hindustani' (*Urdu, Hindi, and Hindustani*) (1935), *Prem. Rac.* 7: 447-54.

40. On Tagore's critique of nationalism, see Manju Radhakrishnan and Debasmita Roychowdhury, "'Nationalism is a Great Menace': Tagore and Nationalism", in Patrick Colm Hogan and Lalita Pandit (eds), *Rabindranath Tagore: Universality and Tradition* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2003): pp.29-40; and Ashis Nandy, *The Illegitimacy Of Nationalism: Rabindranath Tagore and the Politics Of Self* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994).

humanism does, exclude the possibility that spirituality can play a constructive role.⁴¹ Grand ideologies, such as nationalism, or forms of spirituality that are excessively ritualised or politicised, are shown to constrain the self from its full potential. The moments of awakening and self-awareness among many characters in the novel come precisely at the moment where they shed their ideological shells. Matadin, as we have seen, discovers the possibility of an authentic self by casting off the identity given to him from birth, an identity that required only external conformity, and creating an identity anew from his own personal, ethical, and spiritual choices. Malati has a similar moment of awakening when she unravels herself from the preconceived ideological grip of Feminism and nationalism and devotes herself—as an individual act of choice—to serving the people with her medical training. Dhaniya's decision to provide refuge first to Jhuniya and then to Siliya is transformed from one motivated by shame and external pressure to one of individual conscientious choice.

And then there is Hori. As we have already seen, Hori, too, has his own moment of individual enlightenment, but he also does something more than merely introspect. Perhaps more than any other character in the novel, Hori continually strives—even in the face of overwhelming adversity—to renovate the cultural, social, and political architecture of his world in ways that would render them simultaneously meaningful, relevant, and just. Hori is not interested in the language of revolutionary destruction, class conflict, or social levelling. Instead, he strives for the one thing he finds lacking nearly everywhere he looks: respect, both self and mutual. Hori seeks this respect not in the rhetoric of any grand ideology but rather in the face-to-face interactions of civil society. His search for meaning is an all-consuming project, and in the end it quite literally costs him his life. And yet we should not read Hori's death as a pathetic example of futility, or of a life lived in vain; rather, Hori's passing is itself a final act of rebellion. In Hori's mind, anyone—regardless of ritual or social status—should be entitled to a dignified life and a dignified death. To fight for anything less would render existence meaningless. The moment of Hori's passing thus becomes not a definitive ending but merely another milestone in an ongoing struggle for justice and meaning. Hori's last Godan is not an act of failure but an act of open-ended defiance against all that is corrupt and unjust. In many ways, Premchand's own Godan was no different.

41. In hindsight, many of Premchand's earlier stories also emphasise the responsibility of the self and glimpses of the difficulties that self-awakening will necessarily create on the way to enlightened liberation. In 'Sirf ek Avaz' (Only One Voice) (1913), Prem. Rac. 11: 286-91, Thakur Darshan Singh decides to embark upon a life that embraces caste equality from untouchable to Brahmin, citing the exemplary resolve and suffering of the Christian missionaries who do not let caste stand in the way of their work and wondering why Indians are not doing the same. No one in the village joins him. In 'Mantra' (Mantra) (1926), Prem. Rac. 13: 261-72, the main character is a Brahmin who has a moment of self-awakening about what 'true' Hinduism teaches, and dedicates himself to working among untouchables to end caste oppression. Again, his struggle is an individual one; no one follows him. By contrast, the main character in 'Donom Taraf Se' (From Both Sides) (1911), Prem. Rac. 11: 134-44, Pandit Shyamsarup, a lawyer in Patna, is able to use his own example of working for the uplift of untouchables to inspire at least one other person to follow suit. In the story 'Jurmana' (The Penalty) (est. 1935), Prem. Rac. 15: 464-7, the Inspector of Sanitation is 'awakened' by the repulsiveness of his own actions—in this case, abusing his authority and withholding pay from Alarakkhi, a sweeper woman under his supervision, when she refuses his amorous advances. Alarakkhi thinks she will be fired, but the inspector, converted to a more humanistic sense of self, for the first time pays Alarakkhi her full wages. In the anti-communal story 'Mandir aur Masjid' (The Temple and the Mosque) (1925), Prem. Rac. 13: 171-9, Premchand shows individuals from both Islam and Hinduism distancing themselves from the group mentality of the crowd (arguably, the basis for communalism) and choosing instead to interact with and view others as individuals rather than faceless members of a group. For those who cling blindly to such group identities, these actions are unsettling and disconcerting.

21.8 Summary

- Premchand's "Godan" produces the rustic, simplistic and heart-rending lives of the peasants. Far, from exaggeration, "Godan" is "a novel of stark reality". It deals with the dreams, despairs and day-to day events of Hori, the protagonist of the novel, and his family. Through the peasants, Premchand has portrayed the pathetic life of the rural arena. Hori is an embodiment of peasant-virtue, simplicity and truth. He leads an inconsistent life with his wife Dhania, and his three children. Their unstable financial situation always tends to lend them frustration and despair. A tension-free life is not theirs. If they spend a quarter of their lives in starvation, they spend the rest paying unwarranted loans. The money-lenders take full advantage of their poverty and therefore take unreasonable interest from them. Premchand writes: "A loan was an unwelcome guest, once in the house, dug himself into permanent fixture." The money-lenders also exploit the ignorance and gullibility of the peasants. The village-folk in the higher strata of society, who are financially sounder, take advantage of the village-peasants. In the novel, we find, we find how Dulari mounts a small amount of money into a hundred rupees within a small fraction of time.
- The zamindars are no exception in this regard. They make maximum use of the tenants and extract manual labour from them. Hori, already old, and fatigued from poverty has to do strenuous work in order to make both ends meet. The cow he eventually gets hold of is mercilessly killed by his cruel brother Heera.
- Their ambitions and dreams are also made apparent by the novelist. While some of them love their soil, the younger generation opts for city life. For them, material prospects hold more water than sentimental values. Hori therefore does not approve with Gobar to shift to the city. For Gobar, material prospects hold more water than sentimental values. Therefore Hori does not embrace the idea of moving to the city. A typical peasant, his land is everything to him.. He regards the cattle also as a member of the family. Isolated life does not appeal to them and they long to thrive and integrate with the community. This becomes apparent when Hori is willing to pay the fine imposed by the village for admitting Jhunia. Hori does not want to be treated as an outcaste. He tells Dhania that he wants to live with society and not outside society.
- The lack of education of the peasants can be considered a major factor in their backwardness. Superstitions are prevalent. We have a humorous account of how news spreads in the village of Dhania's over-powering the inspector. After the incident, people flock around Hori's hut to have a Darshan of Dhania. They undergo all the rites , to protect the newly arrived cow from the evil eye. They cannot fling away their false pride even in the face of dire poverty. Eventhough, Sona's bridegroom does not demand any dowry, they pay it as it a matter of prestige in society. Again, the caste-system very much exists . We find Heera admonishing Punia for quarrelling with a low caste man.
- Women are not portrayed as equal to men. We find Damri exclaiming to Hori how his son ran away leaving his wife with another woman. Subsequently, his wife gets married to another man. Damri gets revolted only with the infidelity of women and not men thereby practicing double standards. The husbands ill treat their wives after drinking. Dhania talks of Hori's ill-treatment and quips how it would have been if it were the other way around. Heera also abuses his wife. Though Gobar is affectionate towards his wife in the beginning, gradually their relationship deteriorates. "Early married life throbs with love and desire; like the dawn the span of life is suffused with a roseate glow. The afternoon of life dissolves illusion into its stinging rays, but brings face to face with reality."
- Some of the scenes will always be memorable. Like, for instance, when Rupa sucks on a raw mango in starvation. The handing over of the child-like Rupa to the elderly man in marriage.

The deserting of the aged parents by Jhunia and Gobar, who bore all pains and social stigma for them. The economical system came as a blessing, but Jhenguri Singh makes maximum use of it to manipulate people. The most heart-rending scene is the death of Hori or more precisely his last moments. His being religious and magnanimous, the family does not possess the adequate means even to complete his final rites. The novel thus ends in a tragedy.

Self-Assessment

1. Choose the correct options:

- (i) Premchand's "Godan" produces the rustic, simplistic and heart-rending lives of the
 (a) student (b) poor (c) peasants (d) None of these
- (ii) The deserting of the aged parents by and Gobar, who bore all pains and social stigma for them.
 (a) Heera (b) Jhunia (c) Punia (d) None of these
- (iii) Heera admonishing for quarrelling with a low caste man.
 (a) Jhunia (b) Gobar (c) Punia (d) None of these
- (iv) After the incident, people flock around Hori's hut to have a Darshan of
 (a) Heera (b) Punia (c) Dhania (d) None of these

21.9 Key-Words

- Escapist : Indulging in or characterized by escapism.
- Magnanimous : Very generous or forgiving, esp. toward a rival or someone less powerful than oneself.

21.10 Review Questions

- Write a short note on the role of Dhania.
- Why did Jhunia and Gobar bear all pains and social stigma?
- Write a brief note on Godan.
- Discuss Premchand as a renowned writer.

Answers: Self-Assessment

- (i) (b) (ii) (b) (iii) (c) (iv) (c)

21.11 Further Readings



- Premchand Pachnavali (collected works of Premchand) Vol. 20, Delhi, Janwani Prakashan 1996: 377-425.
- Godan (The Gift of a Cow) (1936) English translations by Gordon c. Roadarmel (2007, 1968, New Delhi).

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Unit 22: Premchand: Godan – Plot Construction and Characterisation

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- Objectives
- Introduction
- 22.1 Plot Construction of Godan
- 22.2 Characterisation of Godan
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- 22.5 Review Questions
- 22.6 Further Readings

Objectives

After reading this Unit students will be able to:

- Introduce the Plot of the novel Godan.
- Discuss Characterization of Godan.

Introduction

The Indian novelist and short-story writer Premchand was the first major novelist in Hindi and Urdu. His writings describe in realistic detail the political and social struggles in India of the early 20th century.

Premchand, whose real name was Dhanpatrai Srivastava, was born in the small village of Lamhi a few miles from Benares. His immediate forebears were village accountants in Lamhi. His intimate acquaintance with village life began here and continued when, as a schoolteacher and subdeputy inspector of schools, he traveled extensively for 21 years through Uttar Pradesh State.

Premchand's early writing was all done in Urdu, but from 1915 he found that writing Hindi was more profitable. Hindi, using the Sanskrit-based script and borrowing heavily from Sanskrit vocabulary, was strongly promoted by the Hindu reform group called the Arya Samaj, and within a few years Hindi publications numerically outstripped those written in Urdu.

Premchand's early work in Urdu reveals the strong influence of Persian literature, particularly in the short stories. These were usually romantic love stories in which, the course of love not being smooth, various unusual devices are used to bring lovers together again. In these romantic stories and novels, however, also appear evidences of patriotic fervor and descriptions of Indian and foreign heroes who died bravely for their countries. Premchand's first collection of short stories, Soz-e-Vatan, brought him to the attention of the government. The British collector of Hamirpur District called them seditious and ordered that all copies be burned and that the author submit future writing for inspection. Fortunately, a few copies survived, and Premchand, in order to evade censorship, changed his name from Dhanpatrai to Premchand..

In 1920 Premchand resigned from a government high school and became a staunch supporter of Mohandas Gandhi, whose influence strongly marked Premchand's work from 1920 to 1932. With realistic settings and events, Premchand contrived idealistic endings for his stories. His characters change from pro-British to pro-Indian or from villainous landlord to Gandhi-like social servant in midstream; the frequent conversions tend to make the stories repetitious and the characters interesting only up to the point of conversion.

Premchand's last and greatest novel, *Godan*, and his most famous story, *Kafan* (The Shroud), both deal with village life. However, whatever the setting, his late work shows a new mastery. The characters appear to have taken over their own world. The claims of social, moral, and political tenets are secondary to the claims of artistry. Premchand died from a gastric ulcer. One son, Amrtra, was a noted Hindi writer, and the other, Sripatrai, a talented painter.

22.1 Plot Construction of Godan

Godan has been described as an epic novel on the peasant life. Almost all classes of people and all aspects of peasant life have been vividly depicted in *Godan*. Contemporary urban life also finds vivid and detailed delineation through a parallel plot based on urban milieu. Thus *Godan* involves intertwining of two distinct threads into one whole. The plot based on rural life is the more prominent of the two while that based on urban life is secondary. To put the whole perspective in just one sentence, *Godan* represents a vibrant and lively portrayal of contemporary Indian life which reflected the true faces of India's rural and urban milieu. Premchand's art of novel writing touches its acme in this novel.

The main plot of *Godan* (gifting a cow) is centred in a village 'Belari' in Avadh. Hori, a poor peasant of the village leads a quiet life with his wife Dhania, their son Gobar and their two daughters Sona and Rupa. He has two brothers Shobha and Hira, who are not only lethargic by nature but are also jealous by temperament. Hori entertains no hostility towards anybody, nor is he jealous of any one. He toils hard to earn his meagre living from his land and cares a lot to maintain and enhance his family prestige. Despite the partition of the family property among the three brothers, he still fondly cares for the well-being of his brothers. Sometimes Hori would go to Kusumadeva wrote his *Drishtantashataka* (or *Drishtantakalika*), a collection of hundred proverbs in which certain wisdom is stated in the first line and then illustrated with an example in the second line.



Did u know? *Godan* (Hindi), is the most outstanding of Premchand's pay his regards to Amarpal Singh, the zamindar of his village.

Once while coming back to the village, he happens to see the beautiful cow of Bhola. Seeing the cow, his heart yearns to possess it. He contacts Bhola and through clever persuasion manages to get the cow. While bringing the cow, his son Gobar falls in love with Bhola's daughter Jhunia. The ownership of the cow sends Hori, Gobar and Dhania into ecstatic joy. The whole village gathers there to have a look at the cow and to congratulate him. His brother Hira and his spouse Punia, however, turn green with jealousy continues to grow in Hira's heart, so much so that one day he seizes an opportunity to poison the cow. Dhania raises hue and cry but Hori sides with his brother during the police enquiry and manages to save his skin. The geniality, simplicity and large-heartedness of Hori are fully reflected in this incident.

Although Hori's financial condition continues to deteriorate day by day, he does not waver from his righteous path. From a farmer he turns into a labourer and joins the menial service of Datadin to eke out an existence by toiling relentlessly on the latter's farm along with his family. His son, Gobar, escapes to Lucknow with Bhola's daughter Jhunia. The debts on Hori continue to mount and he gets fully entangled in the clutches of the money-lenders. Even when pushed into such a tight spot, he does not abandon his large heartedness and geniality. The entire family, his son, his brother, his sister-in-law and his daughter-in-law grows sore and unhappy with his behaviour. Once while toiling on the far in scorching heat, he gets a heat-stroke and falls seriously ill. Owing to his utter indigence, however, he gets no medical treatment. Perceiving Hori's approaching end, his brother, Hira tells Dhania; "Bhabhi, steel you heart and arrange for *Godan*, for Dada (Hori) is about to depart". But Dhania has no money to arrange for a cow and she tells Datadin "Maharaj, I have neither a cow, nor a calf, nor money! I have only twenty annas (Rs.1.25) received from the sale of cord. That is all I have and that is the *Godan* for my husband!"

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Thus ends the tragic tale of the peasant here and this marks the end of the plot centered round the village. Premchand so deeply identifies himself with rural ethos and depicts the rural life with such touching poignancy that the novel makes all the villages of north India and their environs come alive before one's mind's eyes.

In the plot set in the urban-life, Premchand has divided his characters into seven broad categories. Repressed, exploited and aggrieved classes of the society for this purpose.

Godan's plot is a complex one and its characterisation is comprehensively vivid. The episodes of the novel are close to reality. Premchand frankly exposes the human frailty of his characters. He freely expounds the weakness of even his naive protagonist Hori. He makes no effort to mute the love-affair between Gobar and Jhunia. In fact, he exposes it uninhibitedly, with a sense of subdued admiration. He delineates the inner conflict of Dr. Malati and Professor Mehta on a rather psychological plane.

In Short, Godan represents a superb achievement of the Hindi novel. The objective of the novel is clear. The novelist wants to focus on the orthodox and superstitious ways that throw the Indian society into their clutches. A society so rigidly stuck in the mire of false prestige and hollow norms cannot be reformed by superficial reformist approach and slogans. What is needed for a social transformation is a gigantic movement. Only then can the society be liberated from the deadly hold of the standard-bearers of feudalism, capitalism and sham religion. Godan offers the formula of collective awakening of the oppressed while in service.

22.2 Characterisation of Godan

Hori

Hori is a peasant who is married to Dhania and has two daughters and a son. He is an uprighteous man and struggles throughout his life to preserve his uprighteousness. He has two younger brothers and he considers his obligation as the eldest brother to help them and save them from problems, sacrificing his own family. He bribes the police officers who come to the village enquiring the death of his cow. Thus, he saves the police from entering his brother, Hira's house for a search. He is a man who is bound to the community and considers the verdict of the panchayat as final. He is penalized for the death of the cow and accepts. He feels orphaned to be out of the community and hence accepts the penalty levied by the panchayat when Gobar brings home a low caste girl. Similarly, he allows Bhola to take his oxen away as he is neither able to pay the cost of it nor willing to send Jhunia away from his house. They have accepted her as their daughter-in-law and her child as their grandchild. He is kind and generous. He does not hesitate to give shelter to Seliya, a cobbler's daughter who is exploited by Matadin, a Brahmin, and is shirked by her own people.

Dhania

Dhania is Hori's wife, devoted to him and always supportive to him. She is bold and fiery and cannot tolerate injustice. She raises her voice against injustice, against the wishes of Hori and irritates him. She is vexed when Hori puts up with a lot of oppression from the money lenders and the Brahmin Priest. Hori, though beats at times for disobeying him, knows that her arguments are correct. She makes him see the truth and the reality of facts. Unlike him, she is not lost in rigmarole of cliches and ideals. She stands by what she thinks is correct and her dharma, rather than the traditional principles of the community. She knowingly accepts into her household, a low caste girl, as her daughter-in-law. She does not blame only Jhunia for placing them in an embarrassing position. She knows that her son, Gobar, is equally responsible. She is a kind and loving mother and sacrifices much for the sake of her children. She has a generous heart; she takes care of Hira's children when occasion demands, she willingly accommodates and shelters the pregnant Seliya, the cobbler's daughter. Dhania has never known a life of peace and comfort, as throughout the novel we see her struggling along with her husband for a livelihood. She emerges as a powerful woman, who irrespective of caste or creed helps the needy.

Gobar

Gobar is the only son of Dhania and Hori. Born into a poor family, he aspires for a life of comfort. Though initially a simpleton like his father, he gets exposure in the city, Lucknow, and learns to be practical and worldly wise. He impregnates Jhunia, Bhola's daughter, and lacking courage to face the wrath of the villagers, runs away to the city, leaving Jhunia at his parents' doorstep. His insensible hasty behaviour creates trouble to Hori, who pays the penalty. Gobar works for Mirza Kursheed, but gradually starts his own business. He also lends money to other people. When he comes to the village dressed as a gentleman with pump shoes, on a short visit, he is unrecognized with difficulty. He becomes the centre of attraction in the village, the other young men are tempted to go to the city seeing him. He promises to get them jobs. When he comes to know that Datadin is exploiting his father, he advises his father to come out of the shackles of traditional bindings. He organises a function and with his friends enacts a skit to expose and satirize the mean mentality of the village money lenders and the Brahmin priest. He threatens to drag the priest to court and has a fight with his father on this issue. He realizes that Hori is too simple, God fearing and cannot go against his dharma. Angrily, he leaves the village with his wife Jhunia and returns to the city. His weakness for liquor and short tempered nature affects his relation with Jhunia. He realizes his mistake only when his devoted wife nurses him during his illness. He works in the sugar factory and later becomes the chowkidar at Malathi's house.

Datadin

Datadin is the village Brahmin Priest and a greedy moneylender. It is ironic that this man with low moral standards goes about the village policing the wrongs of the other villagers. He penalizes Hori for accepting and sheltering a low caste girl, Jhunia, as their daughter-in-law. He is a hypocrite and is blind to the fact that his own son Matadin is having an affair with Seliya, a cobbler's daughter. He invites pundits from Varanasi to perform the purifying rituals of his defiled son so that he is brought into the main stream of Brahminism. He does not pity Hori's poverty, rather takes advantage of his goodness and exploits him.

Matadin

Matadin is the son of the Brahmin priest Datadin. He is young and has an affair with Seliya, a low caste woman who works on the farm for him. The villagers know about it. Seliya does not have entrance to his house. Her parents and relatives hopefully wait for her to be accepted by him. Finally, they decide to punish him and beat him and put a piece of bone into his mouth, a taboo, for the Brahmin. Seliya comes to his help and saves him. Matadin becomes an outcast in his own house. His father performs purifying rituals to bring him back to the mainstream of Brahminism. He spends a lot of money on the rituals and pundits from Kashi are called in. Matadin's malarial fever which had taken him to death's mouth has made him realize his mistake in exploiting Seliya. When Matadin comes to know that he has a son from Seliya, he longs to see the child and goes on sly in her absence. He is repentant and sends her two rupees through Hori. He realises that he is bound by duty to Seliya and his son. He removes his holy thread and thus liberates himself from the shackles of Brahminism. Now, he is free to live courageously with Seliya as his wife.

Bhola

Bhola is a cowherd of the neighbouring village. He is a widower and has two married sons and a young widowed daughter, Jhunia. Bhola agrees to give Hori a cow on loan and in turn Hori promises to find a companion for him to remarry. Bhola is very upset when his daughter elopes with Hori's son Gobar. He comes to Hori's house on vengeance and claims money for the dead cow. Hori does not have Rs.80, the cost of the cow. Bhola threatens to take his oxen away, that would reduce Hori to a labourer. When Hori pleads with him, Bhola suggests that they should throw Jhunia, their daughter-in-law, and his own daughter out of the house as she had hurt his

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feelings. This is not acceptable to Dhania, Hori's wife. It is unbelievable that being Jhuniah's father, instead of being contended that Hori and his wife have accepted this girl who became pregnant without her marriage being sanctified, he would like to see her sent away with her infant. He heartlessly takes away Hori's oxen and renders him totally helpless.

The urban society is represented by Malati devi (Doctor), Mr. Mehta (Lecturer and philosopher), Mr. Khanna (Banker), Rai Sahib (Zamindar), Mr Tankha (Broker) and Mr. Mirza (social worker).

Rai Sahib

Rai sahib has won the local elections twice. He wanted to marry his daughter off to a rich zamindar to again win in the election and claim the property of his in-laws. Thus, he married his daughter off to another rich, widow and rake zamindar. He claimed and won the zamindari of his in-laws. He won the election and became the municipal minister. But when he planned to get his son married to the daughter of Raja Suryankant for his family's prestige, his son refused that. He is in love with Saroj, the younger sister of Malati devi. They both married and went away to London. His son claimed and won the entire property Rai sahib won from in-laws leaving Rai sahib in huge debt. His daughter got divorced. This eventually left Rai sahib too dissatisfied despite all his efforts.

Miss Malati

Miss Malati is a beautiful lady intelligent doctor who is educated in Europe. She is one of the three daughters of Mr. Kaul. She is the centre of attraction in the parties and is flirtatious. Mr. Khanna flirts with her and she is envied and disliked by Govindi. Malati in turn falls in love with Mr. Mehta because of his ideology, his simplicity and intelligence. On a trip to the village of Hori, she explores herself. She starts serving the poor and gets involved in many social activities. After seeing the change in Malati, Mr. Mehta falls in love with Malati. But though Malati loves Mr. Mehta, she refuses his marriage proposal. She now wants to serve the poor and does not want to marry. Mr. Mehta and Malati keep serving the poor and needy people together. Malati devi is the only character shown as contended at the end of the novel because of her commitment to charitable deeds.

Mr. Mehta

Mr Mehta is a scholar and lectures philosophy in a college. He is also authoring a book on Philosophy which he dedicates to Malati. Malati and Govindi are two characters who are influenced by him. Govindi finds solace talking to him as he appreciates her concept of womanhood. Malati loses her ego and understands the true meaning of life through him. She learns to serve the poor. He needs the guidance of Malati as he has mismanaged his funds and income in overgenerously serving the poor. Though he is interested in marrying Malati, the two mutually agree to remain as friends under the same roof.

Mr. Khanna

Mr. Khanna is an industrialist and owns a sugar factory. Though married and father of three children, he disrespects his wife Govindi for her traditional values. He flirts with Malati. He is unable to recognize the virtues in his wife. Govindi is fed up of his behaviour and this goads her to leave home. He exploits the labour class. It is only when his sugar factory is destroyed in a fire accident and Govindi stands by him encouraging him to set it up once again, he realises his mistake. Mr. Khanna eventually starts loving his wife.

Govindi

Govindi is Mr. Khanna's wife, the rich industrialist, and is epitomized as an ideal Hindu wife. She is virtuous and very tolerant with her husband and children. Unfortunately, Mr. Khanna is

disinterested in her as he finds fault with her traditional values. He takes interest in Miss Malati and flirts with her. Govindi is desperately dejected and decides to abandon him and his house. But it is Mr. Mehta, who has always been appreciative of her ideals, who advises her to return back to the children. She is a moral support to her husband when his sugar factory gets destroyed in fire. It is she who encourages him to set it up again.

Self- Assessment

1. Fill in the blanks:

- (i) In 1920 Premchand resigned from a government high school and became a staunch supporter of
- (ii) The main plot of Godan is gifting the
- (iii) Hori a poor peasant of the village leads a quiet life with his wife Dhaniala, their son Gobar and two daughters
- (iv) The Plot set in

22.3 Summary

- Godan has been described as an epic novel on the peasant life. Almost all classes of people and all aspects of peasant life have been vividly depicted in Godan. Contemporary urban life also finds vivid and detailed delineation through a parallel plot based on urban milieu. Thus Godan involves intertwining of two distinct threads into one whole. The plot based on rural life is the more prominent of the two while that based on urban life is secondary.
- The main plot of Godan (gifting a cow) is centred in a village 'Belari' in Avadh. Hori, a poor peasant of the village leads a quiet life with his wife Dhaniala, their son Gobar and their two daughters Sona and Rupa.
- Godan (Hindi), is the most outstanding of Premchand's pay his regards to Amarpal Singh, the zamindar of his village.
- Once while coming back to the village, he happens to see the beautiful cow of Bhola. Seeing the cow, his heart yearns to possess it. He contacts Bhola and through clever persuasion manages to get the cow. While bringing the cow, his son Gobar falls in love with Bhola's daughter Jhuniala. The ownership of the cow sends Hori, Gobar and Dhaniala into ecstatic joy.
- In the plot set in the urban-life, Premchand has divided his characters into seven broad categories. Repressed, exploited and aggrieved classes of the society for this purpose.
- Godan's plot is a complex one and its characterisation is comprehensively vivid. The episodes of the novel are close to reality. Premchand frankly exposes the human frailty of his characters. He freely expounds the weakness of even his naive protagonist Hori. He makes no effort to mute the love-affair between Gobar and Jhuniala. In fact, he exposes it uninhibitedly, with a sense of subdued admiration. He delineates the inner conflict of Dr. Malati and Professor Mehta on a rather psychological plane.
- **Hori** is a peasant who is married to Dhaniala and has two daughters and a son. He is an uprighteous man and struggles throughout his life to preserve his uprighteousness.
- **Dhaniala** is Hori's wife, devoted to him and always supportive to him. She is bold and fiery and cannot tolerate injustice.
- **Gobar** is the only son of Dhaniala and Hori. Born into a poor family, he aspires for a life of comfort. Though initially a simpleton like his father, he gets exposure in the city, Lucknow, and learns to be practical and worldly wise. He impregnates Jhuniala, Bhola's daughter, and lacking courage to face the wrath of the villagers, runs away to the city, leaving Jhuniala at his parents doorstep.
- **Datadin** is the village Brahmin Priest and a greedy moneylender.

Notes

- **Matadin** is the son of the brahmin priest Datadin. He is young and has an affair with Seliya, a low caste woman who works on the farm for him. The villagers know about it. Seliya does not have entrance to his house.
- **Bhola** is a cowherd of the neighbouring village. He is a widower and has two married sons and a young widowed daughter, Jhunia. Bhola agrees to give Hori a cow on loan and in turn Hori promises to find a companion for him to remarry.
- **Rai sahib** has won the local elections twice. He wanted to marry his daughter off to a rich zamindar to again win in the election and claim the property of his in-laws.
- **Miss Malati** is a beautiful lady intelligent doctor who is educated in Europe. She is one of the three daughters of Mr. Kaul.
- **Mr Mehta** is a scholar and lectures philosophy in a college. He is also authoring a book on Philosophy which he dedicates to Malati.
- **Mr. Khanna** is an industrialist and owns a sugar factory. Though married and father of three children, he disrespects his wife Govindi for her traditional values. He flirts with Malati.
- **Govindi** is Mr. Khanna's wife, the rich industrialist, and is epitomized as an ideal Hindu wife.

22.4 Key-Words

1. Realistic : Tending to or expressing an awareness of things as they really are.
2. Contemporary : A person or thing living or existing at the same time as another.
3. Meager : Lacking in quantity or quality

22.5 Review Questions

1. The plot set in urban life. Do you agree? Discuss.
2. What is the main plot of Godan ? Explain.
3. Discuss the plot and characterization of Godan.

Answers: Self-Assessment

1. (i) Mohandas Gandhi (ii) Cow
(iii) Sona and Rupa (iv) Urban life

22.6 Further Readings



Books

1. Premchand Pachnavali (collected works of Premchand) Vol. 20, Delhi, Janwani Prakashan 1996: 377-425.
2. Godan (The Gift of a Cow) (1936) English translations by Gordon c. Roadarmel (2007, 1968, New Delhi).

Unit 23: Premchand: Godan -Theme

Notes

CONTENTS

Objectives

Introduction

23.1 Godan – Analysis

23.2 Themes

23.3 Summary

23.4 Key-Words

23.5 Review Questions

23.6 Further Readings

Objectives

After reading this Unit students will be able to:

- Understand Godan as an Agrarian Novel.
- Discuss the theme of the novel of Godan.

Introduction

Godan are all agrarian novels, wherein everything else revolves round the life of the peasant. In Premasram or in Gosha-i-Afiat (Urdu), it is his struggle against the Taluqdar or the hereditary landlord; in Rangabhumi or in Chaugan-i-Hasti (Urdu), the struggle is against the pseudo-nationalist industrialists; in Karmabhumi or in Maidan-I-Amal (Urdu), it also envelops the Harijans and the labour class in the fight for the vindication of their rights. The shame-faced and ruthless exploitation of the peasant by the moneylender is the theme of Godan.

The last of his agrarian epics, Godan, is also the last of Premchand's novels, published in the year of his death, 1936. And it is his best. For its characters are more Chiseled, polished and realistic, the plot more coherent, although herein, as in most of his novels, the two main themes run parallel to each other and touch only at a few points and that too only at the surface. The ideas are more systematically arranged and the dull monotony of long speeches and harangues is broken by the periodic criticisms and interruptions by Pandit Onkar Nath, the editor of the Bijli, and in the speech of Mr. Mehta on women's demand for equality with man. Premchand's art is seen here at its best. Unlike far too many of his novels, wherein the characters die unnatural deaths, by epidemics, suicide, murder or drowning and far too many improbable happenings and coincidences take place, in Godan, these defects cannot be pointed out.

23.1 Godan – Analysis

Godan, a story of stark realism, is Premchand's most outstanding novel. The realism, artistry and tenderness with which he has created the characters here, particularly that of Hori, are unparalleled and unsurpassed in the whole fiction of India. Hori is an immortal character symbolic of the peasantry of this country.

Godan, which means "the gift of a cow", is a novel that takes you through the lives of Hori and his wife Dhania. A peasant by profession, Hori pays for carrying a noble and pure heart inside him.

Page after page you get the same sinking feeling that Hori gets when his spirit is crushed every waking moment by the machinery comprising of the Zamindari system, the police, the money lenders, the religious zealots, the caste system and prestige.

Notes

Godan starts with Hori procuring a cow from Bhola. Already under a debt of 200 rupees, Hori takes a loan of 80 rupees to buy this cow. Possessing a cow is a symbol of prestige in rural India. Additionally, it allows him to sell the milk for a few annas a day. The cow is poisoned by Hori's jealous brother and the cow dies. And hence dies his source of milk for his family. Yet, Hori does not want his brother to get arrested. For this, he has to bribe the police inspector. Hori takes a loan of 50 rupees for this.

Hori's son Gobar flirts with a girl from another village. The girl gets pregnant and Gobar runs away. Hori's wife Dhania gives shelter to the pregnant girl (since her parents disown her). This is considered a blotch on Hori's village by the Panchayat. Out comes another 300 rupees (loaned) to uphold the honour of the village. He also loses his only pair of bullocks as a punishment.

No bullocks means no ploughing hence no crop and no food to eat. Having two daughters to look after, Hori suffers under the rising debt and diminishing stocks of grain.

One by one, everyone fleeces Hori. His only son, on whom all his hopes rested, refuses to help him out. The son settles down with the girl in the city and refuses to even look at his mother before leaving. The novel brings out the havoc that the political and administration system of the villages wreaks on the poor.

Hori represents that section of rural India which is trampled every day. That section which is made to pay for every sin and desire of the babus. Interspersed within the story is a beautiful love-hate relationship between Mr. Mehta, a philosopher, and Miss Malti, a doctor. Miss Malti is of the modern school of thought. A Feminist. Believes in equal opportunity for men and women. Believes that women should not be housewives.

Mr. Mehta belongs to the traditional school of thought. The debates between these two make for an interesting read. Mr. Mehta says that women are far more superior than men. By asking for equal rights, they were in fact asking for lowering their position in society. He also says that qualities like love, sacrifice etc are qualities that come naturally to women and hence they should be in positions where they can give out such attributes to others.

Walking into the war-zone, along with men, lowers the status of women and goes against nature since nature has made women for higher things in life. Coming back to Hori, his entire life is a struggle. Struggle to make ends meet. Struggle to keep up his prestige. Struggle to provide for his children.

The strong relationship between Hori and his wife keeps him going till the end. Till the end, when Dhania pleadingly asks Datadin, a money lender, to take 3 rupees from her and help save Hori from dying. That one scene has left a scar in my mind.

That one scene brought out tears. That one scene made me reach out to Hori and pay off his debt. A classic of peasant India, the book is much more than what I have written over here. Hope, Struggle and Optimism - You see all this in starved, half-naked souls waiting for their much coveted God to help them out. A heart-wrenching masterpiece is what this book is. And I am in love with it.

My meek attempt at a review of this book is akin to holding a candle to the sun and expecting to shed some light on the sun. Godan, which means "the gift of a cow", is a novel that takes you through the lives of Hori and his wife Dhania. A peasant by profession, Hori pays for carrying a noble and pure heart inside him.

23.2 Themes

The novel has several themes:

1. Problems due to caste segregation: People of different vocation and their respective castes represent the village. Datadin, the Brahmin priest represents the uppermost caste; he exploits

the lower caste villagers with his various religious sanctions. Hori [peasant], Bhola [cowherd], Selia [a cobbler's daughter] represent the various hierarchies of lower castes in the caste system that existed in India.

2. Exploitation of the lower class – Premchand has drawn a realistic picture of the poor peasants exploited by the village zamindar and the greedy moneylenders. The zamindars collected the revenue and imposed fine. Here, Rai Saheb fined Hori for the death of the cow, though he did not kill it. The peasants are unable to pay the debts in time and it gets multiplied with the passage of time. They are caught in a debt trap and they suffer, like Hori, until their end. The author is advocating the need to end the feudal system that existed in the country.
3. Exploitation of Women – the women characters Dhaniya, Jhunia, Seliya and Rupa are exploited by the men they love and are dedicated to.
4. Problems due to industrialization – growth of capitalistic greedy industrialist who exploit the labour class. Migration of youngsters from the villages to cities, conflicts and tensions in cities are some of the problems.
5. Interpersonal relationships, Love, and marriage – Premchand as a progressive writer envisages a modern India where love and intercaste marriages would thrive. We have the intercaste marriages of Gobar and Jhunia, Matadin and Seliya and that of the educated pair, Rudra Pratap and Saroj. The marital relationship of Mr. Khanna and his wife is strained as he lacks love and respect for her. Mr. Mehta and Miss Malathi have serious thought provoking discussions on the issues of love, the institution of marriage, the relation of man and woman and womanhood. They represent the voice of modern India and mutually decide to live as friends serving society in their respective capacities.
6. Political scenario of the period – the country was fighting for its liberation from colonial powers. It was the period for the growth and development of different parties and ideologies.. Premchand, through the novel, expresses his stand as a socialist. Socialism is a panacea for all kinds of discrimination and exploitation.

The narrative represents the average Indian farmer's existence under colonial rule, with the protagonist facing cultural and feudal exploitation. It shows how the life of these characters takes shape.

The act of donating a cow in charity, or *Godan*, is considered to be an important Hindu ritual, as it helps in absolving one of sin, and incurring divine blessings. It is nevertheless, not essential. The word *dharma* has been used 34 times in the novel in different context and by different Characters. The word connotes as religion, moral principles and values, conscience and duty. It means differently to each character.

Self-Assessment

1. Write True or False against the following statements:

- (i) Hori's son Gobar flirts with a girl from another village.
- (ii) No horses means no Plough.
- (iii) Hori represents the section of Rural India.
- (iv) Miss Malti is of the modern school of thought.
- (v) Mr. Mehta says that men are far more superior than women.

23.3 Summary

- Godan, which means "the gift of a cow", is a novel that takes you through the lives of Hori and his wife Dhanika. A peasant by profession, Hori pays for carrying a noble and pure heart inside him.

Notes

- Godan starts with Hori procuring a cow from Bhola. Already under a debt of 200 rupees, Hori takes a loan of 80 rupees to buy this cow. Possessing a cow is a symbol of prestige in rural India. Additionally, it allows him to sell the milk for a few annas a day. The cow is poisoned by Hori's jealous brother and the cow dies. And hence dies his source of milk for his family. Yet, Hori does not want his brother to get arrested. For this, he has to bribe the police inspector. Hori takes a loan of 50 rupees for this.
- The narrative represents the average Indian farmer's existence under colonial rule, with the protagonist facing cultural and feudal exploitation. It shows how the life of these characters takes shape.
- The act of donating a cow in charity, or *Godan*, is considered to be an important Hindu ritual, as it helps in absolving one of sin, and incurring divine blessings. It is nevertheless, not essential. The word *dharma* has been used 34 times in the novel in different context and by different Characters. The word connotes as religion, moral principles and values, conscience and duty. It means differently to each character.

23.4 Key-Words

1. Interruptions : To break the continuity or uniformity of , to hinder or stop the action or discourse of (someone) by breaking in on.
2. Zealots : A person who is fanatical and uncompromising in pursuit of their religious, political, or other ideals.

23.5 Review Questions

1. Godan is a story of stark realism. Discuss.
2. What is the theme of the novel Godan?

Answers: Self-Assessment

1. (i) True (ii) False (iii) True (iv) True (v) False

23.6 Further Readings



1. Premchand Pachnavali (collected works of Premchand) Vol. 20, Delhi, Janwani Prakashan 1996: 377-425.
2. Godan (The Gift of a Cow) (1936) English translations by Gordon c. Roadarmel (2007, 1968, New Delhi).

Unit 24: Girish Karnard: Nagmandla – Introduction to the Text

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Objectives

Introduction

24.1 Introduction to Nagmandla

24.2 Summary

24.3 Key-Words

24.4 Review Questions

24.5 Further Readings

Objectives

After reading this Unit students will be able to:

- Know the life and works of Girish Karnard.
- Introduce Nagmandla.

Introduction

Girish Karnad was born in Matheran, Maharashtra, into a Konkani-speaking brahmin family. As a youngster, Karnad was an ardent admirer of Yakshagana and the theater in his village. He earned his Bachelors of Arts degree from Karnataka College Dharwad, in 1958. Upon graduation Karnad went to England and studied at Lincoln and Magdalen colleges in Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar (1960-63), earning his Master of Arts degree in philosophy, political science and economics.

After working with the Oxford University Press for seven years (1963-70), he resigned to freelance. He has served as Director of the Film and Television Institute of India (1974-1975) and Chairman of the Sangeet Natak Akademi, the National Academy of the Performing Arts (1988-93). During 1987-88, he was at the University of Chicago as Visiting Professor and Fulbright Playwright-in-Residence. It was during his tenure at Chicago that Nagmandala had its world premiere at the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis based on an English translation of the Kannada original that Karnad himself did. Most recently, he served as Director of the Nehru Centre and as Minister of Culture, in the Indian High Commission, London (2000-03).

Karnad is most famous as a playwright. His plays, written in Kannada, have been widely translated into English and all major Indian languages. Karnad's plays are written neither in English, in which he dreamed of earning international literary fame, nor in his mother tongue Konkani. Instead they are composed in his adopted language Kannada. When Karnad started writing plays, Kannada literature was highly influenced by the renaissance in Western literature. Writers would choose a subject which looked entirely alien to manifestation of native soil.

In a situation like that Karnad found a new approach like drawing historical and mythological sources to tackle contemporary themes. His first play, "Yayati" (1961), ridicules the ironies of life through characters in Mahabharata and became an instant success, immediately translated and staged in several other Indian languages. "Tughlaq" (1964), his best loved play, established Karnad as one of the most promising playwrights in the country. Karnad himself has translated all his plays into English. A large number of his kannada plays have been translated by Dr. Bhargavi P Rao.

He has played the role of Karadi, the sootradhar (narrator), for several stories in the popular audiobook series for kids, Karadi Tales. He has also been the voice of APJ Abdul Kalam, President of India, in the audiobook of Kalam's autobiography by Charkha Audiobooks Wings of Fire.

24.1 Introduction to Nagmandla

Nagamandala is a critically acclaimed Kannada movie released in 1997. The story of the film was adapted from a play of the same name written by well-known writer Girish Karnad. The movie was directed by award winning director T.S. Nagabharana, who is deemed to be one of the ace directors in Kannada film industry. Music was scored by C. Aswath and Srihari L. Khoday produced the movie.

The film touches one of the most sensitive issues of marital life. In folk style and form, the film throws open a question as to who is the husband - the person who marries an innocent girl and indulges in self pleasures or the person who gives the real and complete experience of life.

The film stars Prakash Rai, Vijayalakshmi (kannada), Mandya Ramesh, and B. Jayashri in prominent roles. The film is centered on three people, Appanna (Prakash Rai), his wife Rani (Vijayalakshmi) and Naga, a King Cobra, who can assume the form of a human being (Prakash Rai).

The strong points of the movie remain the amazing acting by the leading cast and an authentic portrayal and command on story by the director. The director has made some change to the original play in the climax.

Nagamandala is a folktale transformed into the metaphor of the married woman. It is a Chinese box story with two folktales transformed into one fabric where myth and superstition, fact and fantasy, instinct and reason, the particular and the general blend to produce a drama with universal evocations. The predicament of Rani as opposed to the name is deplorable than that of a maid. The name 'Rani' ridicules at the Indian ideal of womanhood as the Rani or Lakshmi of the household. As Virginia Woolf asserts in *A Room of One's Own*, "Imaginatively, she's of the highest importance, practically insignificant. She pervades poetry from cover to cover, is all but absent from history."

The woman is portrayed as dependant in all three phases of her life-as a daughter (Rani's dependence on her parents), as a wife (Rani's reliance on Appanna) and, as a mother (Kurudavva's handicap without Kappanna). In Indian society, the woman is said to be complete only after marriage. However, paradoxically she neither belongs to this world or that: her parental home or her husband's abode. For the woman, the home is said be an expression of her freedom: it is her domain. However, Rani is imprisoned in her own house by her spouse in a routine manner that baffles others with the door locked from the outside. She does not shut the door behind her like Nora does in "A Doll's House", but God opens a door for her in the form of a King Cobra. The king cobra gets seduced by the love potion provided by Kurudavva to Rani to lure, pathetically, her own husband who turns a blind eye to her. The snake assumes the form of a loving Appanna in contrast to the atrocious husband at day. The climax is reached when Rani becomes pregnant and Appanna questions her chastity. Her innocence is proved by virtue of the snake ordeal that the village elders put before her, and she is eventually proclaimed a goddess incarnate.

Appanna literally means "any man" and points to the metaphor of man in general, his chauvinistic stance and towering dominance to the extent of suppressing a woman's individuality. Rani endeavours to discover her individuality by seeking refuge in dreams, fairy tales and fantasies to escape the sordid reality of her existence. At an age where the typical fantasy would be a Sultan or prince coming on horseback, Rani's flight of the imagination transports her to a seventh heaven where her parents wait for her. So much for her aversion to the institution of marriage. Critics show her body as a site of "confinement, violence, regulation and communication of the victimized gender-self". And they also point out how she later uses the same body to rebel, to subvert and to negotiate her space in society. Appanna poses her as an adulterous woman whereas he himself has an illicit relationship with a concubine. He and his hypocritical society questions Rani's chastity and side-steps the validity of Appanna's principles. This is just a miniscule cross-section of the patriarchal society that we live in. In Indian myth, a miracle has been mandatory to establish the purity of a woman, while a man's mere word is taken for the truth; whether it be Sita, Shakuntala or Rani in this instance.

The author also remarks of the identity of tales in general, about their reality of being and their continuance only on being passed on. The objectivity leads us to perceive the story as a concept

with its own existence and identity; and to emphasize its individuality it is personified in the form of a woman. V. Rangan says "A story is born and grows; it has life. Each story has an independent existence, and a distinctive character. All story tellers are ancient mariners cursed of keep the story alive." The Story seems to echo that in order to live, a story has to be "told" and "re-told". i.e. the story has no role without the listener or perceiver. And cannot help thinking that whether the author is stressing the reader's role in constructing meaning or phenomenology. The reader-response theory questions the endurance of the author's viewpoint that has no existence without the reader's perception. Being "told" and "re-told" is nothing but "interpretation" and "re-interpretation". Therefore, any literary piece is only an object without the reader breathing meaning into it. So for the story to survive, it must be ultimately "passed on". The backdrop of the flames emphasizes the idea of 'passing on'.

Otherwise, the flames in the story were attributed with 'not having' the qualities of 'passing on'. However, this is what they were precisely doing at the outset. Therefore, 'passing on' has wider ramifications here, than merely physically transmitting.

Again the playwright is a man, and the story is personified as a woman. So does Man create Woman? However the playwright echoes that the story has an autonomous existence and lives by virtue of interpretation and re-interpretation. Likewise, a woman has her own existence and lives by virtue of meaningful procreation. Thus, the gist of the framework of the story runs parallel to the theme of the main story. As Rani's role gets inverted at the end of the story and Appanna turns into a mere "instrument to prove her divinity", likewise roles get reversed as the playwright (a man who tells stories) "listens" to the Story (a woman).

Self -Assessment

1. Tick the correct statements

- (i) Appanna poses her as an adulterous woman whereas he himself has an illicit relationship with a concubine.
- (ii) Nagamandala is a folktale transformed into the metaphor of the married woman.
- (iii) Rani's flight of the imagination transports her to a seventh heaven where her parents wait for her.
- (iv) Nagamandala is a critically acclaimed Kannada movie released in 1997
- (v) The name 'Rani' ridicules at the Indian ideal of womanhood as the Rani or Lakshmi of the household.

24.2 Summary

- Karnad is most famous as a playwright. His plays, written in Kannada, have been widely translated into English and all major Indian languages. Karnad's plays are written neither in English, in which he dreamed of earning international literary fame, nor in his mother tongue Konkani. Instead they are composed in his adopted language Kannada.
- Nagamandala is a critically acclaimed Kannada movie released in 1997. The story of the film was adapted from a play of the same name written by well-known writer Girish Karnad.
- The film touches one of the most sensitive issues of marital life. In folk style and form, the film throws open a question as to who is the husband - the person who marries an innocent girl and indulges in self pleasures or the person who gives the real and complete experience of life.
- The strong points of the movie remain the amazing acting by the leading cast and an authentic portrayal and command on story by the director. The director has made some change to the original play in the climax.
- Nagamandala is a folktale transformed into the metaphor of the married woman. It is a Chinese box story with two folktales transformed into one fabric where myth and superstition, fact and fantasy, instinct and reason, the particular and the general blend to produce a drama with universal evocations. The predicament of Rani as opposed to the name is deplorable than that of a maid.

Notes

- The author also remarks of the identity of tales in general, about their reality of being and their continuance only on being passed on. The objectivity leads us to perceive the story as a concept with its own existence and identity; and to emphasize its individuality it is personified in the form of a woman.
- The Story seems to echo that in order to live, a story has to be "told" and "re-told ".i.e. the story has no role without the listener or perceiver. And cannot help thinking that whether the author is stressing the reader's role in constructing meaning or phenomenology. The reader-response theory questions the endurance of the author's viewpoint that has no existence without the reader's perception. Being "told" and "re-told" is nothing but "interpretation" and "re-interpretation".
- Thus, the gist of the framework of the story runs parallel to the theme of the main story. As Rani's role gets inverted at the end of the story and Appanna turns into a mere "instrument to prove her divinity", likewise roles get reversed as the playwright (a man who tells stories) "listens" to the Story (a woman).

24.3 Key-Words

1. Phenomenology : Phenomenology is commonly understood in either of two ways: as a disciplinary field in philosophy, or as a movement in the history of philosophy. Literally, phenomenology is the study of "phenomena": appearances of things, or things as they appear in our experience, or the ways we experience things, thus the meanings things have in our experience.
2. Perception : Perception is the identification and interpretation of sensory information in order to represent and understand the environment. All perception involves signals in the nervous system, which in turn result from physical stimulation of the sense organs. For example, vision involves light striking the retinas of the eyes, smell is mediated by odor molecules and hearing involves pressure waves. Perception is not the passive receipt of these signals, but can be shaped by learning, memory and expectation.

24.4 Review Questions

1. Write briefly about Girish Karnard.
2. Briefly introduce Nagmandla written by Girish Karnard.
3. The golden rule is that there are no final truths. Discuss with reference to Nagmandla.
4. Karnad successfully uses the myth to reveal the absurdity of life in Nagmandla. This brings him closer to the modern Brechtian drama. Discuss.

Answers: Self-Assessment

1. (i) True (ii) True (iii) True (iv) True

24.5 Further Readings



1. Karnad, Girish. Two Plays by Girish Karnad. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004.
2. Rangan, V. "Myth and Romance in Nagamandala or their Subversion? " Girish Karnad's Plays: Performance and Critical Perspectives. Ed. Tutun Mukherjee. Delhi: Pencraft International, 2006.201.
3. Seeta, B.T. "Quest in Hayavadana and Nagamandala." Girish Karnad's Plays: Performance and Critical Perspectives. Ed. Tutun Mukherjee. Delhi: Pencraft International, 2006. 98.

Unit 25: Girish Karnad: Nagmandla

Detailed Study of the Text

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Objectives

Introduction

25.1 Girish Karnad Nagmandla

25.2 Summary

25.3 Key-Words

25.4 Review Questions

25.5 Further Readings

Objectives

After reading this Unit students will be able to:

- Introduce Karnad.
- Discuss Nagmandla.

Introduction

Girish Karnad has emerged as the most significant playwright of post-independence Indian literature, according to the Indian critic P. Dhanavel (2000:11).¹ The critic emphasizes Karnad's humanism, derived mainly from his profound concern for the "oppressed" and the "downtrodden", his compulsive return to and reinterpretation of the mythical past and oral tradition, and his "determined demystification of the dominant beliefs and practices".

25.1 Girish Karnad: Nagmandla

Girish Karnad's play *Nāgmandla* is consciously anchored in the ancient theory and tradition of Indian theatre. The play thus reflects Karnad's respect for technical elements of theatrical art and also for the Indian tradition of storytelling, even though he innovates and experiments by sharing twentieth century views. In *Nāgmandla*, the author brings his drama into line with the changes occurring in Indian society and mentality. The article analyzes his technique of using different narrative levels and shows how in *Nāgmandla* the superimposed stories lead to an exemplification of his vision of theatre as a unifying, total experience. It is shown how the overall structure of the interrelated stories and plots, the triangular relationships, and the triple ending can be visualized graphically as a Mandala. The article ends by focusing on and discussing the three endings of the play, which have been the cause of surprise and controversy. It concludes that, though the last ending is not within the orthodoxy of Indian epic texts, the play must be studied and interpreted not only by keeping elements of Hindu philosophy as points of reference, but also by taking into account the cultural context of the Indian woman of today who seeks to fulfil her needs and aspirations.

Other Indian critics, in their analysis of contemporary Indian theatre, focus on its ambivalent relationship both to its classical and colonial past, and to the contemporary problems of Indian

¹ Girish Karnad was born in Matheran, near Bombay, in 1938 and grew up in Sirsi (Karnataka). He writes his plays in Kannada and he himself translates them into English.

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society. Aparna Dharwadker specifies that Karnad “employs traditional Indian narrative materials and modes of performance successfully to create a radically modern urban theatre” (in Karnad 1995:355).² Indeed, Karnad has felt challenged by the tension that exists nowadays between these two realities in India, the traditional and the modern, and has thrived in developing a credible style of social realism.

Karnad shows a great interest in the theatre as representation as well as in the incorporation of stories which come from popular wisdom. His interest in storytelling contributes to the success of his plays in Indian villages, as he proudly admits (Karnad 1995: 368). Karnad looks for subjects in traditional Indian folklore, is attentive to the innovations brought about by the European playwrights of the first half of the twentieth century, and uses magical-surrealistic conventions to delve into the situation of the Indian men and women of today, consciously giving expression to the concerns of people.³

Speaking of his own work, in the introduction to *Three plays; Nāgmandla, Hayavadana, Tughlaq*, the playwright tells us how the cultural tensions which remained dissembled up to the moment of India’s independence visibly surfaced afterwards and required authors to deal with those tensions openly (1999:3).⁴ In each of his plays the tension caused by the drama’s major conflict progressively disappears, and in the case of *Nāgmandla* different levels of knowledge are superimposed and different theatrical techniques are used, which permit us to discover, or at least surmise, the possibility of transcending the conflict to achieve wholeness.

Karnad says that to create his plays he holds up a mirror in which the present society can be reflected. However, he also incorporates elements of the collective tradition of storytelling (in Mendoca 2003:4). As he explains in the Introduction to *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 these values, of making them literally stand on their head. The various conventions – the chorus, the masks, the seemingly unrelated comic episodes, the mixing the human and nonhuman world – permit the simultaneous presentation of alternative points of view, of alternative attitudes to the central problem. (1999:14).

As a playwright, he thus combines conventional and subversive modes, as is clear in *Nāgmandla*.⁵ This play is labelled as “story theatre”, that is, theatre whose action is based on folk stories. Karnad found his source of inspiration for this play in stories that he heard from the poet and academic A.K. Ramanujan. Karnad explains that this type of story is told by women while they feed children in the kitchen, but that very often these stories serve as a parallel system of communication among the women in the family (Nāga:16-17). Consequently, the purpose of this analysis is to discover the meaning conveyed by the protagonist of the story and to study the way in which the author structures the play and presents and solves the conflicts. I then propose to show that the folk stories reveal the perception a woman can have of her own reality and that, in this sense, these stories counterbalance the classical texts and serve as means of escaping the orthodoxy of Indian epic stories.

Focusing on the four different stories which make up the play *Nāgmandla*, we see that they are on four narrative levels. The frame story contains three other stories, each one of them inside the previous story. On the first narrative level, the frame story tells of an author whose plays were so

2. In a recent publication of Girish Karnad’s *Collected Plays*, Dharwadker states that Karnad belongs to the “formative generation” of Indian playwrights who “collectively reshaped Indian theatre as a major national institution in the later twentieth century” (2005:vii)

3. In this respect, Veena Noble Dass says that Karnad has been influenced by Brecht, Anouilh, Camus, Sartre and to a considerable extent, Pinter (1990:71)

4. In subsequent references the play *Nāgmandla* will be referred to as *Nāga*.

5. *Nāgmandla* means “snake circle”

boring that the audience often went to sleep. For this “crime” the Author is condemned to death unless he manages to remain awake for one entire night before the end of that month. The night of this theatrical performance is precisely his last chance. We hear his repeated laments: “I may be dead within the next few hours” (Nâga: 22).

The second and third narrative levels contain magical elements. The second is formed by the gossip-type tales that a group of personified flames tell each other when they gather at night, after their work has ended. The Flames choose to go to the same ruined temple where the Author is bewailing his plight. When he sees them arrive, he hides behind a column from where he closely follows their stories. On the third narrative level, there is the tale told by one of the Flames who wants to be forgiven for arriving late. Her singularised tale is about a woman who knew a beautiful story but refused to tell it and share it with other people. One day, that story taking advantage of the fact that the woman was sleeping with her mouth open, escapes and is transformed into a young lady. And the song that accompanies it turns into her beautiful sari. The story thus personified on the fourth narrative level relates the life of Rani, the main character of *Nâgmandla*. The need for the story to escape illustrates the paradoxical nature of oral tradition, according to Karnad. Stories are autonomous and independent of the person who tells them, although they live by being told and shared (Nâga: 17).

The moment when the main story, Rani’s begins is interestingly complex from the point of view of structure, because there is interaction between the narrator of this story, the personified story, and the narrators of the previous stories, the unfortunate Author and the Flames. The Author-narrator of the first level, who has been listening to the second and third narrative levels, establishes a dialogue with the Story-narrator of third level and he suggests a name for the main masculine character in the central story, Appana, which means “any man”. Furthermore, they reach an agreement by which the Author promises to retell the story, thus keeping it alive, if it is interesting enough to keep him awake for the whole night, which would amount to saving his life.



Did u know?

The plot of this central story, Rani’s story, can be summarized as follows: young Rani, recently married to Appana, is locked inside the house by her husband. He treats her as if she were a mere servant, and meanwhile he keeps and uses a concubine.

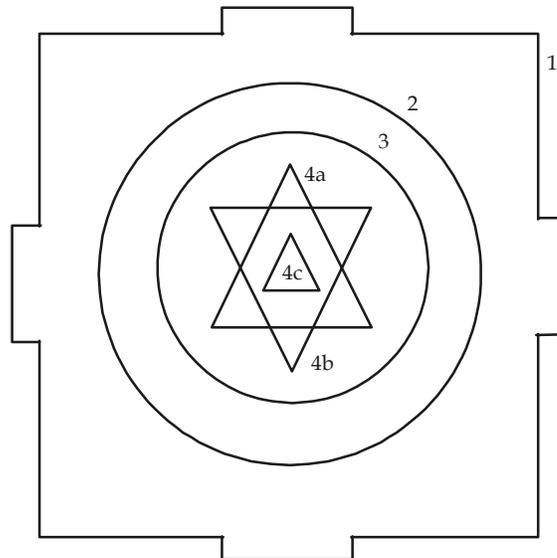
An old blind woman, who is always carried around by her son Kappana, tries to help Rani by giving up that plan at the last moment, however, and pours the potion on the ant hill which happens to be the dwelling place of a King Cobra. The Cobra (a Nâga) then falls in love with Rani.⁶ He enters the house through the drain in the bathroom at night and once inside takes on the appearance of Appana, the husband. Despite the disorientation and wonder that this new situation causes in Rani, their relationship is fruitful and results in Rani getting pregnant. As soon as Appana discovers her pregnancy, he informs the elders of the village in order that they may determine her guilt or innocence, since he and she had never had sexual intercourse. Rani proves her “innocence” by undertaking the Snake Ordeal, that is, by holding the King Cobra in her hand. Surprisingly, the Cobra, instead of biting her, “slides up her shoulder and spreads its hood like an umbrella over her head” (Nâga: 58). The onlookers are awestruck, Rani is considered a goddess, and Appana can do nothing but accept her as his life.

⁶ The *Nâgas* in Indian mythology are considered deities, half human and half snake, and are carriers of fertility, especially in the south of India.

Notes

In Hindu tradition the intersection of two triangles, one pointing upwards and another one pointing downwards, indicates the union of the male and female principles, that is, the union between Shiva (the Supreme Consciousness) and Shakti (the Creative Force), Finally, a third triangle can be visualized, inside the other two, to represent the three endings that the play offers.

Furthermore, by taking into account the setting and structure of the play as well as the different narrative levels and the symbolism in each one of the stories, we can comprehend the whole play as a complete mandala in graphic form. A mandala, we remember, imposes order over chaos and leads, by means of concentric geometric figures, to a centre and resolution (Cirilot 1962:192).



Graphic representation of the play Nâgmandla

1. Square, Base of the ruined temple
2. First circle, Ring of the Flames
3. Second circle. Acoustic wave of the song
4. (a) Upward triangle: Kurudavva-Rani-Appana
 (b) Downward triangle: Appana-Rani-Cobra
 (c) Inner triangle: The triple ending of the play

This graphic mandala represents the four different narrative levels of the play, starting from the outside. The outer square represents the base of the ruined temple. The first circle stands for the Flames of the second narrative level who form a “circle of fire”. In that circle, there is another one that represents the acoustic wave of the song, materialized in a sari wrapped around the beautiful woman who is the personification of the Story of the third narrative level. Finally, in the centre we see the three triangles previously described. The square, the circles, and the triangles are geometric figures which complement each other and lead to the required balance of the centrifugal and centripetal forces of a mandala. Furthermore, if we imagine this mandala as three dimensional, then we can see that, as the performance progresses, Karnad is symbolically reconstructing the ruined Indian temple.



Notes

The characters of this main story, which, as mentioned above, develops on a fourth narrative level, appear in two groups of three interrelated individuals that can be visualized geometrically as two intertwined triangles: one formed by the three protagonists, Rani-Appana-Nâga, and the other by Rani, Kurudavva (the old blind woman), and her son Kappana.

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The sacred level (the temple) and the artistic level (the theatre) are one more identified following the Hindu tradition. The Indian theatre has a divine origin according to the *Natya Shastra*, one of the earliest treatises on theatre in the world.⁷ There is said that it was Brahma who wrote the fifth *Veda*, *Natyaveda*, or sacred book of dramatic art.⁸ The *Natya Shastra* also makes explicit that the drama contains the three worlds (the celestial, the terrestrial, and the infernal) and thus integrates the supernatural, the human, and the subhuman. The mandala evokes the complexity of the cosmos and interweaves the three worlds, just as the theatre does.

Nâgmandla is unconventional in that it offers three endings. The question may persist as to whether this decision responds to differences in points of view, or whether it reflects a more serious aim or purpose planned by Karnad from the beginning. In this connection, Shubhangi S. Raykar has called attention of Karnad's conscientiousness. He says, "Usually the idea of a play incubates in his mind for a long time and it is only when the total action of the play is clearly before his mind's eye, that he starts writing a play" (1990:46).

The first of the three endings goes along with what one would expect in a fairy tale or folktale. Rani, after having succeeded spectacularly in demonstrating her innocence, is considered a goddess.⁹ Appana automatically considers her his wife and forgets about his concubine, who voluntarily becomes Rani's servant. This ending is found to be loose, however, as the Author-narrator points out. Obviously, Appana knows that the child his wife is expect is not his, since he has never had any sexual relationship with Rani. Though Appana has his doubts, he can do nothing and, in fact, as Dhanavel says, "Appana begins to suspect his own sanity", when the elders convince him that Rani is the "Mother goddess" (2000:24). The spectator or reader has access to his thoughts expressed in these lines: "What am I to do? Is the whole world against me? Have I sinned so much that even Nature should laugh at me?Let any miracle declare her a goddess. But I know!" (Nâga:60). And furthermore, the Cobra cannot be ignored. On the Story-narrator's part, she wonders about Rani's thoughts. Now, after being intimate with her husband, Rani has to know that the man with whom she used to have intercourse was not her husband.

The second ending takes into account both Appana's suspicion and the state of mind of the Cobra who, after recognizing his love for Rani in another soliloquy, is ready to sacrifice himself. He

⁷ The *Natya Shastra*, written by Bharata Muni around the 2nd century B.C., is the earliest and most elaborate treatise on Indian theatre. In it, various traditions in dance, mime, and drama were consolidated and codified.

⁸ According to legend, God Indra, with the rest of the gods, approached Brahma, the Creator of the Universe, and begged for a mode of recreation accessible to all classes of society. Brahma acceded to this request and decided to compose of speech, song, mime and sentiment and thus created *Natyaveda*, the holy book of dramaturgy. He asked Indra to pass the book on to those of the gods who are skilful, leant, free from stage fright, and given to hard work. As Indra pleaded the gods' inability to enact a play, Brahma looked to Bharata and revealed to him the fifth *Veda*.

⁹ This situation reminds us of the stories of Sita and Savitri, but it offers a very different point of view. Sita, wife of king Rama in the epic Ramayana, is a powerful symbol of female purity, fidelity, and endurance in Hindu culture. Savitri, whose story appears in the *Mahabharata*, symbolizes conjugal love that defies death and the gods.

Notes

hides in Rani's abundant hair and dies. The Flames, this time, do not seem to be pleased with an ending which involves the death of the Cobra. Therefore, Rani and Appana reappear on the stage to perform a third ending, which at first seems to be a repetition of the second one. However, this time when the Cobra falls from Rani's hair he is alive. Appana immediately thinks about killing the snake, but Rani devises a way to save the Cobra. She lets him hide in her hair again, though she tells Appana that he has escaped. It ends with these words spoken by Rani: "This hair is the symbol of my wedded bliss. Live in there happily, for ever" (Nâga: 64).

Sometimes academics and critics do not wish to accept interpretations which run counter to religious or social conventions. Indian culture, says Manchi Sarat Babu, consider marriage to be "the supreme boon of a woman" because it offers her "salvation through her service to her husband". For that woman "chastity is superior and preferable to life" (1997:37). Therefore, the third ending of *Nâgmandla* may not be acceptable within the orthodox Indian tradition. Accordingly, Karnad can be seen as an author who presents the character of the married woman from within an unconventional perspective. His point is that Indian society at large is "dreadfully puritanical" and that most Indian men are "embarrassed by women who are not closely related to them". As a consequence "most Indian playwright just don't know what to do with their female characters" (Karnad 1995:359). In fact, Satyadev Dubey believes Karnad to be "the only playwright in the history of Indian theatre to have treated adultery as normal and treated adulterous women sympathetically" (Karnad 1995:358). Yet, Karnad repeatedly turns the situations and manipulates language brilliantly so as to create ambiguity and a space of freedom for himself and the readers and spectators.¹⁰ We recall here how Federico Garcia Lorca, whom Karnad admires for his capacity to develop extraordinarily powerful feminine characters, claims that the theatre should be "a rostrum where men are free to expose old equivocal standards of conduct, the explain with living examples the eternal norms of the heart and feelings of man" (1982 (1960): 59).¹¹ Furthermore, A.K. Ramanujan reminds us that by using folklore, the author and his public can think more freely. He says: "Tales speak of what cannot usually be spoken. Ordinary decencies are violated. Incest, cannibalism, pitiless revenge are explicit motifs i this fantasy world, which helps us face ourselves, envisage shameless wish fulfillments, and sometimes 'by indirection find directions out'" (Ramanujan 1989:258).

Still, the second ending, in which the cobra dies, is chosen as the most satisfactory ending by some critics. Those critics, among them K.M. Chandar, probably do not want to diverge from the canonical texts which, in the words of Karnad himself, have "glamorized the devoted wives, the Sitas and the Savitris" (1995:359). If the Cobra disappears, the possible destabilizing element for the new home is eliminated and the value of the *akam* and the *puram*, in Chandar's opinion, would be restored to their respective places. This critic mentions the need for an equilibrium between the *akam*, which according to A.K. Ramanujan, means "interior, heart, self, house, household", and the *puram*, which means "exterior, outer parts of the body, other, the yard outside the house, people outside the household" (1989:256). Consequently, the moment when Appana gives up searching for the values of the *akam* outside the house, Rani should do the same. In this latter case, we could assume that Rani embodies the ideal wife, patient faithful, and ready to submit and sacrifice herself. As regards this second ending, if we limit the role of the Cobra to the sexual sphere, and interpret the fact that he hides in the "long dark serpentine tresses" as a symbol of fertility, the way Chander and Dhanavel do, then the ending could be convincing (Chander 1999:79; Dhanavel

10 Karnad tells us in the introduction to the play: "The position of Rani in the story of *Nâgmandla*, for instance, can be seen as metaphor for the situation of a young girl in the bosom of a joint family where she sees her husband only in two unconnected roles— as a stranger during the day and as a lover at night"(Nâga:17).

11 Girish Karnad expressed his admiration for Lorca in this sense during a conversation I had with him at the University of Mysore, India, on 23 July 2005.

2000:28). However, the role and symbolism of the Cobra in his relationship with Rani can be interpreted as going further, confirming that Karnad has defied the orthodoxy of Indian epic stories.

In the Indian cultural context, specifically in Kundalini-Yoga, the snake is the image of vital energy of the cosmos. Ajit Mookerjee says: “The Sanskrit word Kundalini means ‘coiled up’. The coiled Kundalini is the female energy existing in latent form, not only in every human being but in every atom of the universe” (2001:9). Thus, the process of development in human beings consists in moving up this energy, coiled at the base of the spine, so that the seven centres of energy and consciousness (chakras) can be progressively opened. The initial state of this energy is described in this way in the *Yoga Kundalini Upanishad* 1.82: “The divine power, /Kundalini, shines/like the stem of a young lotus; /like a snake, coiled round upon herself/she holds her tail in her mouth/ and lies resting half asleep/at the base of the body” (Mookerjee 2001:10).¹²

In the case of Rani the spectator or reader can believe that, after her sexual awakening, her vital energy moves up. Her satisfactory emotional relationship with the Cobra culminates with the awakening of her consciousness (when the sixth *chakra*, the *ajña* or third eye of Shiva is opened). This moment when the individual is capable of discovering his or her true essence is symbolically represented by her placing and keeping the Cobra in her hair.¹³ Rani, by taking this step and declaring “Live in there happily, for ever” (Nāga:64), explicitly accepts not only the existence but also the significance of her relationship with the Cobra.¹⁴ Thus, from the philosophical and mythological point of view, there is reason to say that the Cobra causes Rani’s integration at different levels, the physical, the emotional, the spiritual, and the intellectual, and that he has given her the chance to choose and achieve liberation.

As has been mentioned above, in the *Natya Shastra* it is specified that drama has a role of integration of the three worlds. Likewise, throughout his play Girish Karnad manifests a unifying purpose. The setting, scheme, structure, and symbols of the play, all contribute to the author’s aim. The setting is a temple, the Hindu temple being a mandala, a representation of the whole universe, of the cosmos. The four stories of *Nāgmandla* are interconnected and the plot of the main one moves towards the liberation and fulfilment of Rani, the new Indian woman, through her relationship with the Cobra. The complete circles and the complementary intertwined triangles, which in this case are part of the mandala, are symbols that in themselves represent unity. Here all of them help the layered structure of the drama to give graphic form to the essential universal pattern of the mandala.

Self -Assessment

1. Choose the correct option:

- (i) Appana which means
 (a) own (b) any woman (c) any man (d) None of these
- (ii) Rani is locked inside the house by
 (a) King cobra (b) Kappana (c) Appana (d) None of these

12 As Mookerjee explains, “The human body is divided into zones which involve the sacral plexus, the solar plexus, the cardiac plexus, the laryngeal plexus, the region of the pineal gland and the cerebral cortex” (2001:73).

13 In *The Child and the Serpent*, we read that according to the *Visnu Purana* (1.5. 26-48), “the hairs of Brahma’s head became serpents. These were called serpents because they glided (sarpana), and snakes (ahi) because they departed (hina).... But hair has deeper unconscious connections. It seems to represent life and vitality itself” (Sahi 1980:161).

14 For more information on the awakening of consciousness see Chapter 4, “Transformation of Energy” (Mookerjee 2001: 59-70).

Notes

- (iii) Upward triangle means
- | | |
|----------------------------|------------------------|
| (a) Kuruda Vva-Rani-Appana | (b) Ring of the flames |
| (c) Appana Rani-Cobra | (d) None of these |
- (iv) The cobra falls in love with
- | | |
|------------|-------------------|
| (a) Appana | (b) Rani |
| (c) Shiva | (d) None of these |

25.2 Summary

- Girish Karnad has emerged as the most significant playwright of post-independence Indian literature, according to the Indian critic P. Dhanavel (2000:11).¹ The critic emphasizes Karnad’s humanism, derived mainly from his profound concern for the “oppressed” and the “downtrodden”, his compulsive return to and reinterpretation of the mythical past and oral tradition, and his “determined demystification of the dominant beliefs and practices” (2000:16).
- Girish Karnad’s play *Nâgmandla* is consciously anchored in the ancient theory and tradition of Indian theatre. The play thus reflects Karnad’s respect for technical elements of theatrical art and also for the Indian tradition of storytelling, even though he innovates and experiments by sharing twentieth century views. In *Nâgmandla*, the author brings his drama into line with the changes occurring in Indian society and mentality.
- Karnad shows a great interest in the theatre as representation as well as in the incorporation of stories which come from popular wisdom. His interest in storytelling contributes to the success of his plays in Indian villages, as he proudly admits (Karnad 1995: 368). Karnad looks for subjects in traditional Indian folklore, is attentive to the innovations brought about by the European playwrights of the first half of the twentieth century, and uses magical-surrealistic conventions to delve into the situation of the Indian men and women of today, consciously giving expression to the concerns of people.³
- As a playwright, he thus combines conventional and subversive modes, as is clear in *Nâgmandla*.⁵ This play is labelled as “story theatre”, that is, theatre whose action is based on folk stories. Karnad found his source of inspiration for this play in stories that he heard from the poet and academic A.K. Ramanujan.
- Focusing on the four different stories which make up the play *Nâgmandla*, we see that they are on four narrative levels. The frame story contains three other stories, each one of them inside the previous story. On the first narrative level, the frame story tells of an author whose plays were so boring that the audience often went to sleep.
- The second and third narrative levels contain magical elements. The second is formed by the gossip-type tales that a group of personified flames tell each other when they gather at night, after their work has ended. The Flames choose to go to the same ruined temple where the Author is bewailing his plight. When he sees them arrive, he hides behind a column from where he closely follows their stories.

25.3 Key-Words

1. Sacred level : The temple
2. Artistic level : The theatre
3. Nagmandla : Snake Circle
4. Appana : Any man

25.4 Review Questions

Notes

1. Explore the theme of Love and Marriage in the play Nagmandla. Discuss with reference to Rani-Appanna and Rani-Naga relationship in the play.
2. Discuss the use of metamorphosis and shape shifting in Naga Mandala. How far do you think has Karnad been able to use the device successfully in Naga Mandala?
3. Girish Karnad successfully mixes the mythical, folk and modern sources and style in the play Naga Mandala. Elucidate.
4. The riddles of life are inexplicable and inescapable. The only way to cope with them is to reconcile with the enigma that they present. Discuss with examples.

Answers: Self-Assessment

1. (i) (c) (ii) (c) (iii) (a) (iv) (b)

25.5 Further Readings



1. Karnad, Girish. Two Plays by Girish Karnad. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004.
2. Rangan, V. "Myth and Romance in Nagamandala or their Subversion?" Girish Karnad's Plays: Performance and Critical Perspectives. Ed. Tutun Mukherjee. Delhi: Pencraft International, 2006.201.
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Unit 26: Girish Karnad: Nagmandla – Plot Construction and Characterisation

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Objectives

After reading this Unit students will be able to:

- Analyse characterisation.
- Discuss plot construction.

Introduction

Girish Karnad is known for his versatile genius. It is his greatness that he is one of the greatest dramatists of Indo-Anglian literature. His greatness is hidden in quality in place of quantity. He has only five or six plays to his credit. The best of them are 'Yayati', 'Tughlaq' and 'Hayavadana'. Karnad is a film producer, an actor, and a TV artiste and above all a dramatist. Certainly, his 'Tughlaq' has been popular far and wide. It is true that Girish Karnad wept when he realized that he would not be a poet, but be only a dramatist. Karnad was deeply influenced by Ibsen, Shaw and Shakespeare. Girish Karnad was highly influenced by trends in Kannada literature and he took legend, history and myth for the plots of his plays.

Nagmandla is an elaborate and spectacular ritual of serpent worship at present found in Tulunadu, especially in Mangalore and Udupi districts. Nagmandla is also called hudiseve, mandlabhoga or mandlaseve by the Baidyas. But Nagmandla is a term generally used by all to denote this form of worship.

The term Nagmandla is a compound of two words: naga and mandala. Naga means serpent and mandala implies decorative pictorial drawings on the floor. The decorative drawing in this context means the drawing of the figure of serpent god in a prescribed form. Nagmandla depicts the divine union of male and female snakes.

Noted play writer Girish Karnad wrote a play titled Nagmandla in 1987-88. Like the ritual this also revolves around the union of a snake. However, here the union was not with another snake. Instead it was the union of a snake in the form of a human with another human. The play is based on two folk-tales that Karnad heard from his mentor A.K Ramanujan. The above paper will take a direction towards the idea of snake in the play and its various connected concepts to the Indian culture.

26.1 Nagmandla by Girish Karnad

The play Nagmandla revolves around the character Rani. Rani is a young bride who is neglected by her indifferent and unfaithful husband, Appanna. Appanna spends most of his time with his concubine and comes home only for lunch. Rani is one of those typical wives who want to win her husband's affection at any cost. In an attempt to do so, she decides to drug her husband with a love root, which she mixes in the curry. That curry is spilled on the nearby anthill and Naga, the King Cobra drinks it.

Naga, who can take the form of a human being, is enchanted with her and begins to visit her every night in the form of her husband. This changes Rani's life completely as she starts to experience the good things in life though she never knows that the person with her is not her husband but the Naga.

One of these days, she gets pregnant and breaks the news to Appanna. He immediately accuses her for adultery and says that he has not fathered the child. The issue is referred to the village Panchayat. She is then asked to prove her fidelity by putting her hand in the snake burrow and taking a vow that she has not committed adultery. It is a popular belief that if any person lies holding the snake in their hand, they will be instantly killed by the snake God.

She does place her hand in the snake burrow and vows that she has never touched any male other than her husband and the Naga in the burrow. She is declared chaste by the village Panchayat. Later, Appanna accepts Rani and starts a new life together. Karnad gives a binary ending i.e. one where the snake is been killed by the villagers and another ending is of Rani after realizing everything helps the snake to live in her hair thereafter. This sort of a happy and a sad ending to the play is been given by Karnad which is been kept open for the readers to select and interpret.

26.2 Cultural Code of Naga in Nagmandla

Cultural code works on the principle of shared world view. It exploits information that persists in one culture and uses it to the best of its ability. By using appropriate cultural codes a lot of decoding is made easier for the readers.

It throws light on the beliefs and superstitions that exist in that particular culture. For example, in that culture the snake is regarded as a sacred species. It is also feared by many and there is a saying that if one talks of the snake, the snake tends to appear immediately. The Snake primarily represents rebirth, death and mortality, due to its casting of its skin and being symbolically "reborn".

The best use of cultural code would be the snake ordeal that Rani performs in order to prove herself not guilty. Traditionally in that culture it is believed that to prove oneself not guilty one would either have to hold red hot bars of iron in the hand and plead innocence or perform the snake ordeal. Here Rani takes ordeal where she has to put her hand into the termite hill and pull out the snake. After which she has to prove her statement by promising in the snake's name. It is a belief in that society that if that person has said the truth then the snake would bless that person, if not, it would bite the person which eventually led to the death of the person.

In Rani's case the snake blesses her. Immediately the society divinizes her for her supreme powers and capacity and expresses guilt in putting her through the ordeal.

The play has made use of the snake effectively to bring out many messages. Unless and until the snake was personified, given a human form, the play would not have been able to get the message

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across. The snake here through its games and acts has given the rigid hero a new way of life. It has thrown light on the new relationship pattern and the importance of a wife and her love in a man's life. It is through the snake which is worshiped for fertility that Rani conceived and it is this point on her life that brought a complete change. Snake led to effected lives of many and redefined many relations especially of Rani and Appana. To conclude, people especially the devotees, strongly believes that the ultimate results of Nagmandla is nagamangala i.e. prosperity of the village, prosperity of the town and bless for all living beings.

Self -Assessment

1. Fill in the blanks:

- (i) Karnad has only five plays to his credit. The best of them are yayati, Tughlaq and
- (ii) Nagmandala is an elaborate ritual of serpent worship at present found in
- (iii) The term Nagmandla is a compound of two words: Naga and
- (iv) Nagmandla-published in

26.3 Summary

- Rani is a young bride who is neglected by her indifferent and unfaithful husband, Appanna. Appanna spends most of his time with his concubine and comes home only for lunch. Rani is one of those typical wives who want to win her husband's affection at any cost. In an attempt to do so, she decides to drug her husband with a love root, which she mixes in the milk. That milk is spilled on the nearby anthill and Naga, the King Cobra drinks it.
- Naga, who can take the form of a human being, is enchanted with her and begins to visit her every night in the form of her husband. This changes Rani's life completely as she starts to experience the good things in life though she never knows that the person with her is not her husband but the Naga.
- One of these days, she gets pregnant and breaks the news to Appanna. He immediately accuses her for adultery and says that he has not fathered the child. The issue is referred to the village Panchayat. She is then asked to prove her fidelity by putting her hand in the snake burrow and taking a vow that she has not committed adultery. It is a popular belief that if any person lies holding the snake in their hand, they will be instantly killed by the snake God.
- She does place her hand in the snake burrow and vows that she has never touched any male other than her husband and the Naga in the burrow. She is declared chaste by the village Panchayat. However, her husband is not ready to accept that she is pregnant with his child and decides to find out the truth by spying on the house at night. Appanna is shocked to see the Naga visiting Rani in his form, spending time with her and then leaving the house.
- Appanna gets furious with the Naga and indulges in a fight with him. Both of them fight vigorously. Eventually, the Naga dies in the fight. After this incident, Appanna realizes his mistake and he accepts Rani along with the child she is carrying.

26.4 Key-Words

- 1. Mandala : The decorative pictorial drawing of the figure of serpent god.
- 2. Naga : Serpent.

26.5 Review Questions

Notes

1. The characters in Girish Karnad's Naga Mandala lack dimension and dynamism. Do you agree?
2. The story of Rani is the story of every wife, that of Kurudavva every mother's story. Discuss the vents of their lives bringing out their universality and common appeal.
3. Naga, the King Cobra is a symbol of male strength, lover's adoration and an anti chauvinist male. Discuss giving examples from the play.

Answers: Self-Assessment

1. (i) Hayavadana (ii) Tulunadu
(iii) Mandala (iv) 1987-88

26.6 Further Readings



Books

1. Karnad, Girish. Two Plays by Girish Karnad. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004.
2. Rangan, V. "Myth and Romance in Nagmandla or their Subversion?" Girish Karnad's Plays: Performance and Critical Perspectives. Ed. Tutun Mukherjee. Delhi: Pencraft International, 2006.201.
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Unit 27: Girish Karnad: Nagmandla – Themes

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Objectives

After reading this Unit students will be able to:

- Examine the view of Karnad towards the marital relationship between Rani and Appanna.
- Discuss the themes of Nagmandla.

Introduction

The present unit purports to examine the view of Girish Karnad towards the marital relationship between Rani and Appanna in Naga-Mandala. The conjugal relationship between Rani and Appanna is lop-sided and imbalanced where the latter ignores the existence of the former as human being. The position of Rani is analogous to that of slave and animals. She is subjected to various forms of deprivation, violence and torture, and left with no choice and voice. The playwright fuses energy in Rani to enable her to subvert the patriarchal value system which helps Appanna subjugate her on various planes of life. He strikes a balance in their relationship by deconstructing the patriarchal value system. Towards the end, Rani enjoys the status analogous to that of her husband. Appanna also changes his attitude towards Rani by appreciating her beauty and acknowledging her existence as human being. With this Rani finds a dignified position in the conjugal life with voice and choice. Moreover, the play accommodates lover and concubine within the fold of marriage. Now both the husband and wife live happily with their differences and choices. The way the marital relationship fructifies exemplifies the vision of the playwright--the vision of co-existence. As a humanist, the playwright underscores the human virtues such as love, trust, tolerance, mutual understanding for harmonious and healthy human relationships.

Girish Karnad's deep-rooted humanitarian zeal impels him to give voice to the silenced majority through his plays. His plays are filled with the deprived, dispossessed and down-trodden who are subjected by patriarchy or upper class hierarchy. Deprived of decent and dignified life as human beings, their position is analogous to that of slaves and animals in the contemporary democratic and civilized world where the constitutional bodies like Human Rights Commission operate on various levels with a view to ensure justice to those who are meted out injustice. Karnad not only underscores their subservient and sub-human plight and position but also fuses in them energy enough to protest against the life-denying system and to shift their position to the level of their counterparts.

In the dramatic world of Karnad, women, within and without wedlock, are subjected to various forms of deprivation, humiliation, violence and torture in almost every walk of life in one way or the other. The playwright not only exposes the arbitrariness of the system where women are

considered as a second sex, other, but also questions the way women are socialized to internalize the reigning hegemonic ideology and degrade their own position to perpetuate the on-going subordination and subjugation. Patriarchal hegemony deprives them of due chances to realize their innate powers and potentialities as human beings: A Gender equality still remains a myth--the discussion of the relationship between man and woman have been prescribed by man not by woman. Man who is ruled by the mastery-motive has imposed her limits on her. She accepts it because of biosocial reasons).

27.1 Nagmandla – Themes

In Naga-Mandala, the playwright foregrounds the recurring problems of women in the present-day Indian rural society. The play registers a strong protest against the patriarchal social order for its myriad forms of deprivation, violence and oppression of women in the contemporary Indian society. In the play, Rani, a native and submissive girl, falls prey to the unjust social order through the institution of marriage which impedes all the channels that can provide her with opportunities to have self-discovery, self-growth and self-actualization as a human being. The patriarchal order uses marriage as a coercive tool to exploit and oppress women on various planes---physical, emotional, intellectual, sexual and social. Rani's father arranges her marriage with a parentless young boy with plenty of wealth, but the choice of Rani is grossly overlooked taking for granted that she is incapable of taking decision. Alike many Indian fathers he looks at the marriage from a materialistic perspective, thereby overlooking all other aspects of healthy and meaningful marital life: Her fond father found her a suitable husband. The young man was rich and his parents were both dead (Naga-Mandala). Here the word is used ironically. Appanna is not a human being, rather he is a wild beast or a reptiles in the guise of man, but under the umbrella cover of patriarchy he oppresses Rani, thereby ignoring her existence as a human being.

A patriarchal social set up, like ours, firmly asserts men's superiority over women and is based not on mutuality but on oppression. The image of woman was created by man. It is what "he wants her to be inferior and he never wants her to be an equal, a co-sharer of all the privileges he is enjoying. It is generally assumed that the biological factor plays an important role in the ascription of male or female too, but the societal forces also play an equally important part in the division of gender. Simon de Beauvoir's assertion that "One is not born a woman, but rather, becomes a woman" is quite sound and appears equally applicable in case of man. One is not born a man, but rather becomes one under the impact of the existing socio-cultural and economic forces. In this play, Appanna is not born a man, but becomes one under the male-hegemonic social system.

Rani in Nagmandla is a creation of patriarchal social order which ignores the existence of women as human beings. In the tight noose of traditional marriage, Rani finds it very hard to have healthy marital and social interaction and articulate her grievances and grudges, as Appanna keeps her locked up like a caged bird. Rani longs to have flight and freedom from the cruel clutches of Appanna. On the sexual plane, she is neglected; on the physical she is bullied and beaten; on the emotional she is crushed; on the intellectual she is hushed up, and on the social she is almost excommunicated. As a result, she is left with no voice and choice as a dignified member of human society. Marriage is not only an honourable career and one less tiring than many others: it alone permits a woman to keep her social dignity intact and at the same time to find sexual fulfillment as lived one and mother. But here, in a patriarchal society Rani is always subordinated and treated as a second sex by Appanna.

As a young girl, Rani has preferences and proclivities; desires and dreams, needs and necessities, but she has to suppress all of them in the face of stiff and strong hegemonic system. The prime factor behind her silence and submission is that she has been counseled and conditioned to be cordial and co-operative; shy and submissive, timid and tolerant in her marital life. As a result,

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she fails to gather courage and confidence to question the exploitative and oppressive system. In a patriarchal social order, 'masculinity' is associated with superiority; whereas 'femininity' is linked with inferiority," and while "masculinity implies strength, action, self-assertion and domination, femininity implies weakness, passivity, docility, obedience and self-negation.

Appanna's bestial instincts come to the fore the very first day of the marriage when he goes out to meet his mistress locking up Rani in the house with the words: be back tomorrow at noon. Keep my lunch ready. I shall eat and go. Neither does he tell her why and where he goes to nor does she gather courage to question his nocturnal visits. In patriarchal order, women are not supposed to question man's indiscretions; rather they are subjected to harsh interrogation and severe chastisement if they try to deviate even slightly from the prescribed rules and roles. The lock signifies the entire patriarchal discourse of chastity which is used to contain and confine woman's urges. This solitary confinement of Rani by Appanna in the house symbolizes the chastity belt of the Middle Ages, the reduction of women's talents to housework and the exclusion of women from enlightenment and enjoyment.

In a patriarchal social system, husband is supposed to provide security and safety to wife, but in the play, it is the husband who engenders sense of insecurity and fear in his wife. Rani feels frightened being alone in the house haunted by the feelings of fear and insecurity, but Appanna, instead of providing her any emotional succor and support, threateningly interrogates her: what is there to be scared of? Just keep to yourself. No one will bother you. Locked up in the empty and isolated house, Rani finds no one to share her pains and privations. Rani tells Kurudavva: you are the first person I have seen since coming here. I am bored to death. There is no one to talk to. Rani is impatient to vent her anxiety and agony, but Appanna hushes her up with the harsh words: Look, I don't like idle chatter. Do as you are told, you understand? In the conventional marriage, husband enjoys all privileges to give orders, not to be dictated; whereas wife is forced to go by his all and sundry wishes and whims, desires and dictates. Rani, alike other Indian wives, suffers from an acute sense of loss and lassitude within wedlock. Being helpless, she suppresses her urges---sexual, social and psychological.

In Indian society, a woman is not supposed to claim freedom and individuality. In such a situation, repression of individuality is inevitable. In tradition-bound societies like India, the women happen to be the worst sufferers as the social norms and moral codes have been so framed as to be particularly disadvantageous to them. In the twentieth century, psychological theories make the point that repression of the natural urges puts tremendous impact on the psyche of an individual. One has to repress his or her natural instincts, under the duress of socio-cultural codes and mores, to conform to the socially sanctioned roles, but the repressed desires get fulfillment through dreams, hallucinations and myths. Peter Barry holds the view:

The underlying assumption is that when some wish, fear, memory, or desire is difficult to face we may try to cope with it by repressing it, that is, eliminating it from the conscious mind. But this doesn't make it go away: it remains alive in the unconscious, like radioactive matter buried beneath the ocean, and constantly seeks a way back into the conscious mind, always succeeding eventually.

Rani, as a victim of severe repression and alienation, seeks refuge in the world of dreams and hallucinations. She fantasizes that she is being carried away by an eagle far from the world of Appanna. She asks the eagle: Where are you taking me?. The eagle answers . Beyond the seven seas and the seven isles. On the seventh island is magic garden. And in that garden stands the tree of emeralds. Under that tree, your parents wait for you. Then Rani asks him again: Do they? Then please, please take me to them. While dreaming she falls asleep and moans: But the make-believe world does not last long; very soon she confronts the harsh realities of life, on waking up, to find her in the locked house of the monstrous Appanna. Rani's dreams reveal the inner working of her psyche; they are articulation of the innermost desires suppressed in her consciousness. The eagle

symbolizes flight and freedom which represents Rani's yearning for release from the cruel clutches of Appanna. She yearns to fly away from the dark and dreadful world of Appanna, but to no avail. Rani, being aggrieved and upset, dreams that she is in the comfortable company of her parents: Then Rani's parents embrace her and cry. They kiss her and embrace her. Don't worry, Don't be worry, they promise her. We don't let you go away again ever. But the parents, in reality, do not come to her rescue, holding the view that she would be happy with her husband or it would be an act of encroachment on the territory of the husband. In her imagination she finds the stag with golden antlers comes to the door. He explains, as I am a prince. It is evident that she has cherished a desire that a prince would come and make her real Rani, but Appanna, in the form of monster, has taken her away and reduced her to the position of a maid to look after his physical needs. Then she alone in the house at night imagines: the demon locks her up in his castle. The demon is none other than Appanna who locks her up in the house. Rani only duty is to cook food for him. He locks her up in the house and brings home a watchdog and a mongoose to ensure her complete alienation from the society.

At this critical juncture in Rani's life, Kurudavva, a blind and aged woman, comes to her rescue, but her help is limited in time and space. Kurudavva offers her magical roots as remedy to win back her husband from the clutches of his mistress. But the magical potion turns into a disaster-like situation as Appanna consumes it; he falls on the floor and becomes unconscious. On the insistence of Kurudavva, Rani tries the bigger root to woo her husband, but the curry turns red--blood red. Frightened Rani stealthily rushes out and pours it into the anthill, but this gesture of Rani infuriates Appanna. In fury, he slaps her hard and she collapses to the floor. It is Rani who feels herself nothing without Appanna. That is why, she does not give him the blood coloured curry even though it is believed to have power enough to win over Appanna's love and attention. Rani, like the Indian wives, is concerned about the safety of her husband: Suppose something happens to my husband? What will my fate be? Forgive me god. This is evil. I was about to commit a crime. Father, mother how could your daughter agree to such a heinous act. No tradition-bound Indian woman likes to see her husband die before her death and wants to become a widow. Born and brought up in the man-made system, she is averse even to the idea of death of her husband while she remains alive because she knows that the life of a widow is not only vulnerable but also painful.

Ironically enough, the magical potion succeeds in wooing Naga living in the anthill. Now Naga visits her at night through the drain in bathroom and puts on the guise of Appanna. Naga gradually succeeds in breaking her frigidity and removing her feelings of fear and insecurity with the help of honeyed words. Rani tells Naga: don't feel afraid anymore, with you beside me. He praises her long tresses and talks a lot about her parents, besides listening to her intently. Gradually, Rani falls in love with Naga and waits for him impatiently when the evening approaches, and when he does not come for fifteen days, she spends her nights crying wailing, pining for him. Naga coaxes her into sexual union, and resultantly she becomes pregnant, but this turn of events invites anger, insults and beatings from Appanna. At this critical juncture, Naga also expresses his helplessness: sorry, but it cannot be done and does not like to be exposed publicly. But it is Naga who brings about radical changes in Rani. Now she becomes bold and assertive. When Naga expresses his helplessness to save her from the chastity test, Rani comes out with reactionary words:

I was stupid, ignorant girl when you brought me here. But now I am a woman, a wife, and I am going to be a mother. I am not a parrot. Not a cat or sparrow. Why don't you take it on trust that I have a mind and explain this charade to me? Why do you play these games? Why do you change like a chameleon from day to night? Even if I understood a little, a tiny bit---but I could bear it. But now---sometimes I feel my head is going to burst!

When Rani reveals her pregnancy to Appanna, he beats her up accusing her of adultery with the indecorous ugly words: Aren't you ashamed to admit it you harlot? I locked you in, and yet you

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managed to find a lover! Tell me who it is, who did you do with your sari off. But Rani who has not committed any crime swears to him about her innocence: swear to you I have not done anything wrong. Women are sexually oppressed. It is reflected in the concept of chastity, a patriarchal value. It is one of the most powerful, yet invisible cultural fetters that have enslaved women for ages. Extra-marital enjoyment for women is a taboo in this ultra-modern age. But Appanna reports the matter to the village elders who pass orders that she must undergo chastity test either by putting red hot iron on her palm or putting hands into the hole of cobra. With great fear and trepidation Rani puts her hands into the hole of cobra and vows: Since coming to this village. I have held by this hand, only two. My husband. And this Cobra. The Cobra instead of stinging her ways its hood gently for a while, then becomes docile and moves over her shoulder like a garland. At this the villagers, who were determined to declare her a whore a minute ago, exclaim: A Miracle! A Miracle! She is not a woman! She is a Divine Being. The villagers fall at her feet. The crowd surges forward to prostrate itself before her. They elevate her to the status of a goddess: Appanna your wife is not an ordinary human. She is goddess incarnate. Don't grieve that you judged wrongly and treated her badly. The transformation of Rani and her emerging identity is a direct outcome of the emotional support and succor that she receives from Naga.

In the end, Appanna changes his behaviour and attitude towards Rani, may be under the pressure of the village community or because of the pricks of his conscience. He falls at her feet and says: Forgive me. I am a sinner. I was blind. Now he realizes the beauty of her long tresses and dignity as a human being. When the dead Naga falls from her hair, Appanna says: Your long hair saved us from the deadly Cobra. When Rani expresses her wish that the cobra has to be ritually cremated, the fire should be lit by our son and every year on this day, our son would perform the ritual to commemorate its death, Appanna agrees: Any wish of your will be carried out. Now Rani plays an active role in the familial affairs. She is fully confident of her role and status, and assertive of her thoughts and decisions. In the alternate end to the play, Rani's acceptance of Naga as her lover within wedlock presents a much more bold and rebellious character of the protagonist. She invites Naga Get in (to my hair). Are you safely in there? Good. Now stay there. And lie still. You don't know how heavy you are. Let me get used to you, will you?

Thus, Rani moves from the marginalized position to the central one in the arduous journey of her marital life. Though the journey is fraught with pains and privations, she occupies the central position in the familial affairs by collecting courage and confidence and by disconcerting the male ego and his inflated sense of power over women. Though Rani emerges a completely changed woman with modern outlook, entirely in harmony with her desires and decisions and true to her wishes and instincts, she does not reject the world of Appanna. The fact remains that the non-human world and the human world form a part and parcel of each others existence.

A Reluctant Master

Girish Karnad says that, though the English writers and the thought of writing in English influenced him, it was unknowingly that he became a playwright and started writing in Kannada. 'Yakshagana', the traditional folk theatre of Karnataka, influenced him. Karnad's plays, *Yayathi*, *Hayavadana*, *Tughlag*, and *Nagamandala* certainly reveal this influence.

Two Folktales and a Play

The play *Naga Mandala* is based on two folk-tales of Kannada. It was first staged at the University of Chicago. Karnad says:

The energy for the folk-theatre comes from the fact that although it seems to uphold traditional values, it also has the means of questioning these values. The various conventions- the chorus, the music, the seemingly unrelated comic interludes, the mixing of human and non human worlds permit a simultaneous presentation of alternative points of view.

Bed Time Stories For Living in Day Time!

Old women in the family usually narrate the folktales, either when the children are being fed in the evenings or when they are put to bed in the night. Though they are narrated to children, stories serve as a parallel system of communication among the women in the family.

A Two Acts Play with a Prologue

The play Nagamandala is divided into prologue and two acts.

The Problem Starts With the Audience!

In the prologue, we find a ruined temple with a broken idol. A man comes to the temple and says that he was a playwright earlier, who with his plays had made many audiences to sleep. They cursed him to death!

A mendicant had advised him that if he could keep awake at least one whole night he would not die. That day was the last day of the month, and he kept himself awake in order to overcome the curse of death. He then swore to himself that if he could survive that night without sleep, he would have nothing more to do with story writing.

After sometime, he heard some voices and then saw some flames.

Flames With Speaking Tongues

Karnad says that the writer had heard that in some remote villages, the flames had the ability to speak. These flames talk to each other with female voices.

Flame 1 says that her master was a miser and hence had put the lights off early and due to this she could come to the temple early.

Flame 2 says that she came from a family, whose master was a 'lustful man'. He needed the light to feast on his wife's body.

Flame 3 says that, hereafter she could come early because her master and wife were free now to enjoy worldly pleasures. The master's mother had died and now both of them were free to enjoy.

All these flames are not mere flames, but they represent the society. The play deals with the loose morals that are being practiced in society. Further, humans in the present day do not give any importance to religious values.

A Different Story to Tell

Flame 4 has a different story to tell. The lady in her house was doubtful about her husband and she had a story and a song inside her mouth, which she kept for herself. She did not reveal it to anybody. One day, while she was snoring, the story and the song jumped out of her mouth. This story became a lady and the song took the form of a saree. When the woman woke up, she saw a young lady, coming outside her husband's room. It is reported that these were some hallucinations in the mind of the woman. This story and song tell a new story.

Breaking Vows

The writer-character, in spite of his vow not to indulge in any more story telling, promises that he would pass the story to others.

The Story of Rani and Appanna

The story deals with the life of Rani and Appanna. They are not given any name in the beginning and hence they represent the whole humankind. Rani is so called because she is the queen of the long tresses, which, when tied into a knot, resembled a 'cobra.'

Appanna and Rani are married, apparently Rani being a child bride. After gaining puberty, she is bought to her husband's house. Appanna is not a faithful husband. He spends his time with his concubine and comes to his house only to have his lunch. He speaks to Rani only in "syllables." He says:

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APPANNA: Look, I don't like idle chatter. Do as you are told, you understand?

Rani leads a secluded life and then Kurudavva saves her. It is only she who understands Rani's real problem. Kurudavva gives two small roots to Rani and asks her to mix it in Appanna's food. It is believed that, by taking the root, Appanna will not go and visit with the concubine again. She says:

KURUDAVVA: Once he gets even the smell of yours he won't go after that concubine.

The first root has no effect on Appanna. Rani takes a bigger root, and when she mixes it in the curry it becomes bloody red. She actually curses herself for trying to give this to Appanna. She says:

RANI: Suppose it harms my husband, what will happen to me?

She spills it on a nearby anthill. A snake living in the anthill instantly falls in love with Rani.

The snake in the myth is believed to be a symbol of fertility. The snake takes the shape of Appanna and has sexual communion with Rani. It is through the snake that Rani understands the meaning and passion of love in marital life. When the real Appanna finds that she is pregnant, he calls her a "whore." Appanna asks:

APPANNA: Don't you feel ashamed to admit that you are pregnant, you whore?

Rani is asked by the village leaders to perform the ordeal of holding the hot iron rod to demonstrate that she is a chaste woman and faithful to her husband. The snake advises her to perform the ordeal of holding the snake instead. Rani follows this advice, and holds the snake, which spreads its hood on her head and sways it gently and hangs like a garland around her neck. The elders on the village judicial committee proclaim her to be a 'goddess.'

Elder 2 says that she is not a woman but she is a goddess.

In the end, Rani gets her husband back and enjoys a happy life. Naga, the snake, who has brought about such a happy consummation of married love, wants to have a final look at Rani. He makes the final visit when they are fast asleep. Naga then presses Rani's hair to his body, ties a noose and strangles himself to death. When Rani combs her hair later, a dead cobra falls to the ground. It is cremated and her son lit the funeral pyre. Once again, the snake appears and Rani allows it to live in her tresses forever.

Supernatural Elements

Like in most folktales, supernatural elements play the vital role in Nagamandala. Traditional beliefs help generate supernatural elements. There is always some magical power in specific roots, according to traditional belief. Kurudavva gives Rani the magical roots but the root is consumed by a king cobra which results in very interesting twists and turns in the play. Another belief is that the cobra has divine power and it can assume any form it desires. In the play, Naga takes the form of Appanna. It is by the form of Appanna that Rani becomes pregnant. So, in some sense, Rani has nothing to do with this "unlawful" sexual communion. It is with his supernatural powers, Naga saves Rani from her pitiable and dangerous plight prove her chastity.

The story of Appanna also has certain interesting touches. It is believed that some witch or fairy enchanted him away from his lawful wife. Once again, the act of the unfaithful husband is explained away through the use of some mysterious fairy. The identity of the woman who entices Appanna away is unknown and it remains a mystery. Are these anecdotal explanations intended to justify that we as human beings are simply pawns in the hands of the divine, or that these events are inevitably caused by Karma?

Complexity of Human Life

Girish Karnad uses a magical folktale to reveal the complexity of human life. In particular, he uses the folktale in the Indian context to reveal the social and individual relations.

Man-Woman intimate relationships, the question of chastity being imposed on married women while their husbands have a merry-go-round with other women outside their wedlock, married women's earnest desire for the love of their husbands in spite of the shortcomings of their husbands, the throbbing of secret love that Naga demonstrates by his killing himself on the passionate and warm body of Rani, and, above all, the result of the sexual communion being a male child, the "son" lighting funeral pyre and so many other potent and hidden meanings, make this play a very complex play. The village judicial system also comes to be portrayed with ease, and with this the process of deification in Indian society also gets revealed. Demonstration of unusual power and tolerance is sure ground and an essential step toward deification.

We Wonder - The Audience Is Alive, and Not Dead!

In the backdrop of a folktale, which includes flames, snake, avatars, performance of impressive ordeals, cremation of the dead snake, and the background chorus, Nagamandala comes alive with numerous symbols, hidden meanings, and explicit and implicit lessons, even as the play bewitches the captive audience, scene by scene. The play started with a curse of dead or non-responsive audience, but we complete reading the play certainly as active and live audience! At the end of it all, we still wonder whether it is the magic, characters, events, conversations, or simply the ambience that takes us far from our mundane life even for a few hours. A master piece, indeed, from a reluctant Master.

Girish Karnad: Nagmandla-Themes

Galaxy Identity Crisis in Girish Karnad's Nagmandla.

Nagamandala is a folktale transformed into the metaphor of the married woman. It is a Chinese box story with two folktales transformed into one fabric where myth and superstition, fact and fantasy, instinct and reason, the particular and the general blend to produce a drama with universal evocations. The predicament of Rani as opposed to the name is deplorable than that of a maid. The name 'Rani' ridicules at the Indian ideal of womanhood as the Rani or Lakshmi of the household. As Virginia Woolf asserts in "A Room of One's Own": "Imaginatively, she's of the highest importance, practically insignificant. She pervades poetry from cover to cover, is all but absent from history."

The woman is portrayed as dependant in all three phases of her life-as a daughter (Rani's dependence on her parents), as a wife (Rani's reliance on Appanna) and, as a mother (Kurudavva's handicap without Kappanna). In Indian society, the woman is said to be complete only after marriage. However, paradoxically she neither belongs to this world or that: her parental home or her husband's abode. For the woman, the home is said to be an expression of her freedom: it is her domain. However, Rani is imprisoned in her own house by her spouse in a routine manner that baffles others with the door locked from the outside. She does not shut the door behind her like Nora does in "A Doll's House", but God opens a door for her in the form of a King Cobra. The king cobra gets seduced by the love potion provided by Kurudavva to Rani to lure, pathetically, her own husband who turns a blind eye to her. The snake assumes the form of a loving Appanna in contrast to the atrocious husband at day. The climax is reached when Rani becomes pregnant and Appanna questions her chastity. Her innocence is proved by virtue of the snake ordeal that the village elders put before her, and she is eventually proclaimed a goddess incarnate.

'Appanna' literally means "any man" and points to the metaphor of man in general, his chauvinistic stance and towering dominance to the extent of suppressing a woman's individuality. Rani endeavours to discover her individuality by seeking refuge in dreams, fairy tales and fantasies to escape the sordid reality of her existence. At an age where the typical fantasy would be a Sultan or prince coming on horseback, Rani's flight of the imagination transports her to a seventh heaven where her parents wait for her. So much for her aversion to the institution of marriage. Critics show her body as a site of "confinement, violence, regulation and communication of the victimized gender-self". And they also point out how she later uses the same body to rebel, to subvert and to

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negotiate her space in society. Appanna poses her as an adulterous woman whereas he himself has an illicit relationship with a concubine. He and his hypocritical society questions Rani's chastity and side-steps the validity of Appanna's principles. This is just a miniscule cross-section of the patriarchal society that we live in. In Indian myth, a miracle has been mandatory to establish the purity of a woman, while a man's mere word is taken for the truth; whether it be Sita, Shakuntala or Rani in this instance.

The author also remarks of the identity of tales in general, about their reality of being and their continuance only on being passed on. The objectivity leads us to perceive the story as a concept with its own existence and identity; and to emphasize its individuality it is personified in the form of a woman. V. Rangan says "A story is born and grows; it has life. Each story has an independent existence, and a distinctive character. All story tellers are ancient mariners cursed of keep the story alive." The Story seems to echo that in order to live, a story has to be "told" and "re-told" i.e. the story has no role without the listener or perceiver. And one cannot help thinking whether the author is stressing the reader's role in constructing meaning or phenomenology. The reader-response theory questions the endurance of the author's viewpoint that has no existence without the reader's perception. Being "told" and "re-told" is nothing but "interpretation" and "re-interpretation". Therefore, any literary piece is only an object without the reader breathing meaning into it. So for the story to survive, it must be ultimately "passed on". The backdrop of the flames emphasizes the idea of 'passing on'.

Otherwise, the flames in the story were attributed with 'not having' the qualities of 'passing on'. However, this is what they were precisely doing at the outset. Therefore, 'passing on' has wider ramifications here, than merely physically transmitting.

Again the playwright is a man, and the story is personified as a woman. So does Man create Woman? However the playwright echoes that the story has an autonomous existence and lives by virtue of interpretation and re-interpretation. Likewise, a woman has her own existence and lives by virtue of meaningful procreation. Thus, the gist of the framework of the story runs parallel to the theme of the main story. As Rani's role gets inverted at the end of the story and Appanna turns into a mere "instrument to prove her divinity"; likewise roles get reversed as the playwright (a man who tells stories) "listens" to the Story (a woman).

Appanna as a Split Personality

The playwright gets to the heart of the matter when he asserts at the outset that "The idol is broken so that the presiding deity of the temple cannot be identified". Appanna is the king of his castle, a supreme egoist. He is the prototype of Indian masculinity that asserts itself by arresting the spouse's selfhood within the four walls of the house. Appanna literally cages his wife in his dwelling as she is subject to unmerited abuses and thwarted intentions. Naga or snake with all its phallic connotations, typifies the sexual side of Appanna. It is other side of Appanna which he himself cannot bring to accept for this would require the relegation of his ego, his perspective of masculinity.

Submitting to his sexual impulses, for him, is being submissive to his wife. Therefore, though these two aspects are completely disjoint, they are two sides of the same coin .Heads and tails; heads-the ego and tails -the snake following its instincts. That Naga is Appanna is indubitable from the very outset, the beginning of Naga's entrance.

Naga: You didn't. I am saying. Did it hurt...the beating this morning.

Naga: Locked up in the house all day. You must be missing your parents.

How does Naga revisit these facts? This offers ample proof that Naga is none other than Appanna, as Rani cannot and has no scope for communication with outsiders. Naga is Appanna minus his inhibitions. At night, he stoops to the limit of coaxing Rani for his own instinctual needs.

Coaxing truly: Now smile. Just a bit look, I'll send you to them only if you smile now.

He renders himself loving and soothing at night. Paradoxically, he sets a watch-dog against his own self at night. This symbolically represents the guard he sets against his own instinct, that proves to be futile. Therefore the tussle with himself, he gets defeated without accepting defeat, and... "the scars remain". The husband who inflicts injury at day turns out to be the pharmakon at night. The spouse, who is the master at day, becomes submissive to his wife at night against his own will. B. T. Seetha states that instinct as a creative force reigns supreme in the plays of Karnad. "In spite of the reasoning it is the instinct that seems to win."

No, let's say that the husband decides on the day visits. And the wife on the night visits. I won't come at night if you don't want me to.

However, in the sub-conscious mind – the knowledge remains; the knowledge of the duality, the dissociative disorder.

Naga (seriously): I am afraid that is how it is going to be. Like that during the day. Like this at night. Don't ask me why.

He does not want to face questions as to the existence of his duality as it is something that he would prefer to deny than accept. A mirror to his split is too much for him to digest. The shielding of himself from the mirror connotes this fact. For Rani, this is a decisive point-the mirror stands for crucial point of self-realization that Appanna's exclusive interest in her is purely sexual. This is why she retreats and refrains from making love to him when she sees his reflection in the mirror. She comprehends that there is no element of love in his attraction for her. As for Naga, even while being Naga, we can find behavioural patterns of Appanna manifesting itself; like while asking Rani to adhere to unquestioning obedience

Naga:[..] When I come and go at night, don't go out of the room, don't look out of the window- whatever. And don't ask me why.

Rani likens herself to the whale but does not know why. She thinks herself to be a creature without any rational power only with basic instincts. She is not even attributed with the power to think and is caged like an animal. In short she does not possess any persona, any identity. Her singularity is defined in terms of her husband's whims and fancies. There are various references to animals to exemplify the pre-dominance of the instincts or impulses.

The death of the dog implies the death of his will-power and therefore infuriates Appanna. The dog that was initially brought for human-intruders proves to be futile. On the death of the dog, he buys a mongoose as a guard. Is a 'mongoose', a guard for human intruders? Certainly not! Therefore, it is for the snake or Appanna's sexual self that he sets a watchdog at the beginning itself. The mongoose is evidence enough. It says that the mongoose had given a tougher fight and because the mongoose had given a tougher fight, there was no sign of him for the next several days and when he does arrive, [...] his body was covered with wounds that had only partly healed.

Consciously, Naga is not aware of Appanna and Appanna refuses to acknowledge Naga. Perhaps self-awareness does not creep in at the climax when it most obvious to us.

Climax (She turns away. Naga takes a step to go. They both freeze. The lights change sharply from night to mid-day. In a flash, Naga becomes Appanna. Pushes her to the floor and kicks her.

Here the patriarchal hierarchy is explicit in expressionistic terms. For Appanna, the fact that his wife has committed adultery is more acceptable to his conscious mind than the fact that he himself is Naga. For outsiders, the snake ordeal is a test to prove the chastity of Rani. However, in reality, the test is for Appanna himself to ascertain whether he himself is Naga. When the test ultimately does prove positive, the truth dawns...Appanna = Naga. Therefore he had submitted to Rani. Therefore, she has triumphed over him and therefore is elevated to the status of a goddess. Hence, a more domesticated, humble Naga.

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My love has stitched my lips. Pulled out my fangs. Torn out my sac of poison [...] yes, this King Cobra is now no better than a grass snake.

The pride diminishes. Note the references to 'fangs', 'sac of poison' and 'Cobra' that point to full self-realization.

The playwright has proposed three endings:

1. In the first, they live happily ever after. Both Naga and Appanna fuse into one on self-realisation
2. Naga suicides. For one of the two selves to survive coherently the other must suicide-an emotional suicide.
3. Both Naga and Appanna co-exist. History repeats.

Finally, some critics question the identity of the play itself; that is, Nagamandala as a folk-play. Jose George asserts that there is indeed a marginal difference between the 'real' lore of the folk and the lore that is represented and constructed as folklore. He utilizes the term 'fake lore' to address the latter. He defines folk lore as that which represents the life of the people in close communion with nature, and that which is orally transmitted. Fake lore, on the other hand, is represented as folk lore by outsiders for a specific purpose. Therefore while folklore is the signifier of a signified, fake lore is the signifier of a signifier of a signified, "it is a fake drama in representation". It reminds one of Plato's Theory of Ideas as something twice removed from reality. However Karnad himself counters this when he says, "Drama is not for me a means of self-expression. Drama can be production of meaning also. The story has an autonomous existence...."

The story therefore while it lives by virtue of interpretation, has a 'creative individuality' of its own.

Self -Assessment

1. Fill in the blanks:

- (i) In Nag-Mandala there is the marital relationship between Rani and
- (ii) In Indian society, a woman is not supposed to claim freedom and
- (iii) Rani is a victim of severe repression and
- (iv) The eagle answers-beyond the seven seas and the seven

27.2 Summary

- The present unit purports to examine the view of Girish Karnad towards the marital relationship between Rani and Appanna in Naga-Mandala. The conjugal relationship between Rani and Appanna is lop-sided and imbalanced where the latter ignores the existence of the former as human being. The position of Rani is analogous to that of slave and animals. She is subjected to various forms of deprivation, violence and torture, and left with no choice and voice. The playwright fuses energy in Rani to enable her to subvert the patriarchal value system which helps Appanna subjugate her on various planes of life.
- Girish Karnad's deep-rooted humanitarian zeal impels him to give voice to the silenced majority through his plays. His plays are filled with the deprived, dispossessed and down-trodden who are subjected by patriarchy or upper class hierarchy.
- In Indian society, a woman is not supposed to claim freedom and individuality. In such a situation, repression of individuality is inevitable. In tradition-bound societies like India, the women happen to be the worst sufferers as the social norms and moral codes have been so framed as to be particularly disadvantageous to them. In the twentieth century, psychological theories make the point that repression of the natural urges puts tremendous impact on the psyche of an individual.

- Rani, as a victim of severe repression and alienation, seeks refuge in the world of dreams and hallucinations. She fantasizes that she is being carried away by an eagle far from the world of Appanna.
- Girish Karnad uses a magical folktale to reveal the complexity of human life. In particular, he uses the folktale in the Indian context to reveal the social and individual relations.
- Man-Woman intimate relationships, the question of chastity being imposed on married women while their husbands have a merry-go-round with other women outside their wedlock, married women's earnest desire for the love of their husbands in spite of the shortcomings of their husbands, the throbbing of secret love that Naga demonstrates by his killing himself on the passionate and warm body of Rani, and, above all, the result of the sexual communion being a male child, the "son" lighting funeral pyre and so many other potent and hidden meanings, make this play a very complex play.
- In the backdrop of a folktale, which includes flames, snake, avatars, performance of impressive ordeals, cremation of the dead snake, and the background chorus, Nagamandala comes alive with numerous symbols, hidden meanings, and explicit and implicit lessons, even as the play bewitches the captive audience, scene by scene.
- Nagamandala is a folktale transformed into the metaphor of the married woman. It is a Chinese box story with two folktales transformed into one fabric where myth and superstition, fact and fantasy, instinct and reason, the particular and the general blend to produce a drama with universal evocations. The predicament of Rani as opposed to the name is deplorable than that of a maid.
- The woman is portrayed as dependant in all three phases of her life-as a daughter (Rani's dependence on her parents), as a wife (Rani's reliance on Appanna) and, as a mother (Kurudavva's handicap without Kappanna). In Indian society, the woman is said to be complete only after marriage. However, paradoxically she neither belongs to this world or that: her parental home or her husband's abode. For the woman, the home is said be an expression of her freedom: it is her domain.
- 'Appanna' literally means "any man" and points to the metaphor of man in general, his chauvinistic stance and towering dominance to the extent of suppressing a woman's individuality. Rani endeavours to discover her individuality by seeking refuge in dreams, fairy tales and fantasies to escape the sordid reality of her existence.
- The author also remarks of the identity of tales in general, about their reality of being and their continuance only on being passed on. The objectivity leads us to perceive the story as a concept with its own existence and identity; and to emphasize its individuality it is personified in the form of a woman.
- The playwright gets to the heart of the matter when he asserts at the outset that "The idol is broken so that the presiding deity of the temple cannot be identified". Appanna is the king of his castle, a supreme egoist. He is the prototype of Indian masculinity that asserts itself by arresting the spouse's selfhood within the four walls of the house.

27.3 Key-Words

1. Nocturnal : Active at night, having flowers that open at night and close by day.
2. Self-negation : To deny the existence, evidence, or truth of.

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27.4 Review Questions

1. What role is assigned to the Elders in the play Nagmandla? How far are they able to dispense justice?
2. Kurudavva represents a woman in three stages, daughter, wife and mother. Discuss her role in the play.

Answers: Self-Assessment

1. (i) Appana (ii) Individuality
(iii) Alienation (iv) Isles

27.5 Further Readings



1. Karnad, Girish. Two Plays by Girish Karnad. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004.
2. Rangan, V. "Myth and Romance in Nagmandla or their Subversion? " Girish Karnad's Plays: Performance and Critical Perspectives. Ed. Tutun Mukherjee. Delhi: Pencraft International, 2006.201.
3. Seeta, B.T. "Quest in Hayavadana and Nagmandla." Girish Karnad's Plays: Performance and Critical Perspectives. Ed. Tutun Mukherjee. Delhi: Pencraft International, 2006. 98.

Unit 28: Mahesh Dattani: Final Solution – Introduction to the Text

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Objectives

After reading this Unit students will be able to:

- Know about Mahesh Dattani.
- Discuss the play Final Solution.

Introduction

Mahesh Dattani is a well known English playwright, actor and director of India. He is the first playwright in English to be awarded the Sahitya Akademi award. He is an Indian director, actor and writer. He wrote such plays as Final Solutions, Dance Like a Man, Bravely Fought the Queen, On a Muggy Night in Mumbai, Tara and 30 days in September.

He is the first playwright in English to be awarded the Sahitya Akademi award. His plays have been directed by eminent directors like Arvind Gaur, Alyque Padamsee and Lillete Dubey.

Mahesh Dattani was born in Bangalore. He went to Baldwin Boys High School and then went on to join St. Joseph's College, Bangalore. Mahesh is a graduate in History, Economics and Political Science. He is a post graduate in Marketing and Advertising Management. Mahesh Dattani, prior to his stint with the world of theater, used to work as a copywriter in an advertising firm. In 1986, he wrote his first full-length play, Where There's a Will, and from 1995, he has been working full-time in theatre. He has also worked with his father in the family business. He first shot into news with his debut film Mango Souffle. He also made the movie Morning Raaga.

He is described as 'one of India's best and most serious contemporary playwrights writing in English' by Alexander Viets in the International Herald Tribune.

Prior to his stint with the world of theater Mahesh used to work as a copywriter in an advertising firm. He has also worked with his father in the family business. In 1984 he founded his playgroup 'Playpen' and in 1986 he wrote his first play 'Where There's A Will'. Since then he has written many plays such as Tara, Night Queen, Final Solutions and Dance Like A Man. All the plays of Mahesh Dattani are based on the social issues. Apart from theater Mahesh Dattani is also active in the field of film making. His films have been appreciated all over the world. One of his film 'Dance Like A Man' has won the award for the best picture in English awarded by the National Panorama.

Besides being a playwright and a director, Mahesh Dattani adorns the mantle of a teacher with equal ease. He teaches theater courses at the summer session programmes of the Portland University,

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Oregon, USA. He also imparts training in the field of acting, directing and play writing at his own theater studio in Bangalore.

28.1 Final Solution: Mahesh Dattani

Mahesh Dattani's *Final Solutions* was first performed on 10 July 1993 against the backdrop of demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992. It was the time when the spectre of Partition appeared to have returned, hungering for even more corpses. It seemed to be India's fate to live, if at all, with a gash in its soul.

Dattani's powerful and subtle play shows the problem of Hindu-Muslim relations as not inherently insoluble. It suggests that the real problem could well be with the limitations of prevailing discourses about those relations. Each discourse affords a generalized and one-dimensional view of the problem and is unable to address its specific complexity. If discursive boundaries could be ignored in an effort to comprehend the complexity of the problem, solutions might not be really far away. Reaching beyond politics and the social sciences, the play thus performs the quintessential act of literature in identifying the problem as simultaneously historical and psychological, cultural and economic, collective and personal, cognitive and affective. It retrieves repressed histories and scrutinizes unexamined psychological motivations, makes taste and greed cross paths, notices the contamination of the religious with the economic (and vice versa), unseparates the collective and the personal, and affirms -through Bobby's transgressive final act- the power of visceral judgement and "pure" action.

Significantly, the play's theatrical negotiation of the complexity of its subject is equally complex. The conventionally linear narrative is overwritten with multiple temporalities and spaces, represented mainly by a split-level stage and an action that takes place in the 1940s as well as the 1990s. Reading the entry made in her diary nearly four decades ago on 31 March 1948, the old Hardika mumbles, "Yes, things have not changed that much". Both giving and denying the illusion of continuity, the multiple temporalities and spaces converge in the character of Daksha/Hardika and underline the deeply problematic genealogy of subjectivity. In thus locating the problem of inter-community relations in the genealogies of subjectivity, the play charts the arduous trajectory of the project of self-understanding before finally affirming the role of subjective agency in history.

The stage is so designed as to give the impression of being "dominated by a horseshoe- or crescent-shaped ramp". The implied evocation of powerful elemental forces through this particular spatial arrangement is reinforced by the suggestion of primitive tribal passions as the Mob/Chorus comes to occupy the ramp. The "crouched" position of the Mob/Chorus has a hint of leonine ferocity even as its black costumes (specifically explained as not alluding to any religious identity) suggest obscure ancient passions. The doubling up of the self-same five persons as both the Mob and the Chorus undoes the convenient distinction between the unthinking mob and the thoughtful commentator. What further complicates the seemingly marginal role of these faceless people in history (who yet command political action) is the changeability of their identities. The same five persons become the Muslim and the Hindu Mob by turns, by holding in front of them the respective masks of identity. The masks of identity turn out, paradoxically, to be masking deeper identities, those which a violent politics of identities would gladly inter. When Bobby advances to pick up the idol of Krishna, the Mob raises the Hindu and the Muslim masks together, affirming a transcendence of separatist self-identification as well as a deeper convergence of identities.

The shifting of roles between the Mob and the Chorus as also between the Hindu and the Muslim Mob manages to effectively foreground identity as a fluid strategy -or play- of subject positions. In fact, Hardika's crisis of identity (symbolized by the split between her past and present selves, Daksha and Hardika) arises from her failure to negotiate between two opposite subject positions, each of which is unable to recognize the other. The split comes out simultaneously as both sharp

and invisible in the scene in which Ramnik Gandhi opens the door to let in Javed and Bobby. Hardika and Daksha alternately utter a series of questions and exclamations:

HARDIKA. Why did he do it?

DAKSHA. Oh God! Why do I have to suffer?

HARDIKA. Didn't he have any feelings for me?

DAKSHA. I just wanted them to be my friends!

HARDIKA. How could he let these people into my house?

DAKSHA. Oh! I hate this world!

HARDIKA. They killed his grandfather!

The alternating utterances emphasize the absolute change that Daksha has undergone. The girl who suffered because she was denied contact with her Muslim friend Zarine and her family has grown to be an old intolerant woman who cannot suffer the presence of two Muslim boys who have sought refuge in her house from a bloodthirsty Hindu mob. The change from the former to the present self comes under blazing spotlight in a remarkable juxtaposition in which Daksha sobs and begs to be let out whereas Hardika berates her son for letting the two boys in. The one who was once young and open to the world has now become old and closed to the world.

Her emotional intransigence reflects an identity which is partial and frozen because it would not recognize the past. And it would not do so because it does not know what really happened in history. The moment she discovers what really happened, her emotional intransigence ends and she begins to keenly await the return of the two boys whom she had once wanted to be immediately turned out of her house. "Do you think . . . do you think those boys will ever come back?" she asks Ramnik as the play ends.

The wearing of Hindu or Muslim masks by the Mob, which translates instantly into "frenetic" reflexes, is an instance of the mask(ed) identity territorializing the entire being, almost taking it by force of violence. The distinction between them and us emerges then with a savage primordial force. Indeed, it has no logic but asserts itself as the logic, with its attendant off-the-cuff ethical formulation: "They who are wrong. Since we are right". The intransigence vis-à-vis the other is born of a circle of darkness that the self weaves not only around but also within itself. Hardika's long years of confinement, during which she has fed on resentment and hatred of the other community, is thus a form of exile from the self also. And it finds its parallel in Javed's exile from home which is motivated by a sense of profound grievance on behalf of his community. Hardika will breach the wall of inner darkness by understanding history; Javed will do so through disillusionment. Having glimpsed the other in the self, both will then be ready to recognize in the other a self in its own right, an other that is not a threat or nuisance to the self.

And yet, significantly, the passage to light happens to lie, in the case of each, through the conscious agency of another. Hardika sees light, which ends her (self-) confinement, with the help of her son Ramnik who tells her what had really happened over forty years ago. Javed sees light with the help of Bobby who notices his friend wavering on the edge and decides to prevent his relapse into old blind hatred.

Ramnik on his part understands the necessity of resolving the self-other dialectic, but even he requires shock treatment to shed his self-delusion. He knows that not all people in the other community are demons even as he understands that there are demons in his own community also. But the knowledge has not yet touched him to the core to shatter his vestigial inhibitions. It is Javed who would give him the shock treatment:

You don't hate me for what I do or who I am. You hate me because I showed you that you are not as liberal as you think you are.

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Javed's words make him realize that his smug liberality is only a cover for complicity, an evasion of the sense of guilt. Indeed his failure to speak the truth to his mother can be seen as pointing to a deeper block: the inability to squarely confront the truth in its genesis. Until now he had been pacifying his troubled conscience by merely virtuously responding to the urge to protect and help Javed and Bobby. He had not really come to terms with his conscience in which the memories of injustice done to a happy Muslim family lie buried: the shop he has inherited from his father was actually snatched from the rightful ownership of Daksha's friend Zarine's father through vile stratagem soon after the Partition. Daksha never came to know of this; she only thought that Zarine's father, after his shop was destroyed in an accidental fire, had expected some help from her father-in-law, which had been refused. And she had rationalized the withdrawal and hostile silence of Zarine's family as an instance of resentment and arrogance. The memories of her father's alleged lynching by a Muslim mob in Hussainabad during the violence of Partition had reinforced the rationalization.

Deprived of the luxury of indulging her taste for Noorjahan's songs by listening to Zarine's collection of gramophone records at her house, she feels deeply hurt. Little does she realize that her deprivation is the consequence of her innocent taste crossing the path of her father-in-law's and husband's greed to possess the shop that Zarine's father owns. And those men, in turn, do not seem to comprehend either what they are doing: they hide, probably even from themselves, their real economic motives behind a screen of hatred of the other community. They do not understand that no rationalization can transform acts of vandalism and theft into acts of divine justice. The sins of the fathers are finally visited upon the son as Ramnik carries the burden of guilt and suffers quietly for years before Javed redeems him through painful self-knowledge. Redeemed, he has at last the courage to free also his old mother of her own burden of hatred and resentment. Looking back, one can now better understand Ramnik's hostility towards his mother for keeping back the complete truth and pretending not to know everything. He had transferred his own repression of truth to her and had been evading a confrontation with his own guilt by holding her guilty. Freed, when he announces the truth to her, he does it without any trace of hostility and without expecting her to be in possession of the complete truth. Rather, the few words he speaks to her are laced with earnest consolation ("You have to live with this shame only for a few years now").

The subterranean overflow between the personal and the collective strains the relationship between Aruna and Smita and between Smita and Bobby also. Smita challenges her mother's emotional investment in the security of religious identity and asks her to see the arrival of the two boys as an opportunity to leave behind a life lived in pettiness and false security. She refuses to be stifled any longer, but does it with tactful politeness. At the same time, she tells her father that she did not share her real feelings with him before because that would have pushed her mother into greater isolation. Smita has the strength and clarity of mind to see collective religious identities for what they are and she can also articulate her urge to be free from their oppressive hold. Listening to her, Bobby realizes he has been less well equipped in this regard. The finest uncomplication of the relationship takes place, thus, in the case of Smita and Bobby only. Smita is very clear, of course after having given it sufficient thought, that she does not wish to carry on her relationship with Bobby and that her decision to do so follows personal reasons. It is, hence, a freely made choice:

I am sure that if we wanted to, we could have made it happen, despite all odds. It is wonderful to know that the choice is yours to make.

Through Smita's free and happy choice, Dattani avoids the temptation of vulgar secularism and affirms the subjective agency of rational humanist individualism with full force. Subsequently however, in Bobby's transgressive final act the limitations of even this kind of agency are exceeded in so far as the act grounds agency in the far more fertile soil of phenomenology of relationships.

In picking up the idol of Krishna and placing it on his palm, Bobby is responding decisively yet viscerally to the ringing of the bell of prayer. The sound of the bell has left Javed stiff: he is battling

with powerful feelings of resentment, humiliation and hatred. Bobby's entire effort to bring him out of his past will fail if he slips back into those feelings. Whatever progress has been made so far in the action of the play has been through reason and argument. Bobby's act is ostensibly sacrilegious, yet it is profoundly and luminously spiritual too. He reaches out with his whole being to a Hindu embodiment of Godhead and leaves his everlasting touch on God's body. The Hindu God does not mind a Muslim's touch, he proclaims. The Chorus supports his act with its "[we] are not idol breakers". Indeed, there is a profound and innocent reverence in his gesture. He has communicated what no argument in language could. It is a strange replay of what Krishna does to Arjuna in the Mahabharata (and the battle lines are not drawn, but to be erased). When language falters and reason fails, communication finds deeper resources in order to happen. Sheer gesture might be such a resource: the body, the common ground of humanity, can discover itself as a treasure, as it does in Bobby's case. To make the night memorable for everyone.

Self -Assessment

1. Fill in the blanks:

- (i) Mahesh Dattani is the First Playwright in English to be awarded the
- (ii) Dattani's debut film was
- (iii) Final solutions was first performed in
- (iv) Ramnik Gandhi opens the door to let in Javed and

28.2 Summary

- Mahesh Dattani was born in Bangalore. He went to Baldwin Boys High School and then went on to join St. Joseph's College, Bangalore. Mahesh is a graduate in History, Economics and Political Science. He is a post graduate in Marketing and Advertising Management. Mahesh Dattani, prior to his stint with the world of theater, used to work as a copywriter in an advertising firm. In 1986, he wrote his first full-length play, *Where There's a Will*, and from 1995, he has been working full-time in theatre. He has also worked with his father in the family business.
- Prior to his stint with the world of theater Mahesh used to work as a copywriter in an advertising firm. He has also worked with his father in the family business. In 1984 he founded his playgroup 'Playpen' and in 1986 he wrote his first play.
- Besides being a playwright and a director, Mahesh Dattani adorns the mantle of a teacher with equal ease. He teaches theater courses at the summer session programmes of the Portland University, Oregon, USA. He also imparts training in the field of acting, directing and play writing at his own theater studio in Bangalore.
- Mahesh Dattani's *Final Solutions* was first performed on 10 July 1993 against the backdrop of demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992.
- Dattani's powerful and subtle play shows the problem of Hindu-Muslim relations as not inherently insoluble. It suggests that the real problem could well be with the limitations of prevailing discourses about those relations. Each discourse affords a generalized and one-dimensional view of the problem and is unable to address its specific complexity.
- Significantly, the play's theatrical negotiation of the complexity of its subject is equally complex. The conventionally linear narrative is overwritten with multiple temporalities and spaces, represented mainly by a split-level stage and an action that takes place in the 1940s as well as the 1990s.
- The stage is so designed as to give the impression of being "dominated by a horseshoe- or crescent-shaped ramp". The implied evocation of powerful elemental forces through this

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particular spatial arrangement is reinforced by the suggestion of primitive tribal passions as the Mob/Chorus comes to occupy the ramp.

- The alternating utterances emphasize the absolute change that Daksha has undergone. The girl who suffered because she was denied contact with her Muslim friend Zarine and her family has grown to be an old intolerant woman who cannot suffer the presence of two Muslim boys who have sought refuge in her house from a bloodthirsty Hindu mob.

28.3 Key-Words

1. Rascism : The belief that all members of each race possess characteristics or abilities specific to the race, prejudice or discrimination directed against someone of a different race based on such a belief.
2. Horses hoe : It is a fabricated product, normally made of metal.

28.4 Review Questions

1. Briefly introduce the life and works of Mahesh Dattani.
2. Discuss Final Solution.

Answers: Self-Assessment

1. (i) Sahitya Akademi award (ii) Mango Souffle
(iii) 1993 (iv) Bobby

28.5 Further Readings



Books

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Unit 29: Mahesh Dattani: Final Solution – Detailed Study

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Objectives

After reading this Unit students will be able to:

- Know the life and works of Mahesh Dattani.
- Make critical appreciation of the Play Final Solutions.

Introduction

Mahesh Dattani is considered as one of the best Indian playwrights and he writes his pieces in English. He is an actor, playwright and director.

After graduation, he worked for a brief period as a copywriter for an advertising firm. In 1986, he wrote his first play, 'Where There is a Will'.

After his first play, Mahesh Dattani began to concentrate on his writing and wrote more dramas like Final Solutions, Night Queen, Dance Like a Man, Tara, and Thirty Days. From 1995, he started working exclusively in theatre.

All his plays address social issues, not the very obvious ones, but the deep-seated prejudices and problems that the society is usually conditioned to turn away from. His plays deal with gender identity, gender discrimination, and communal tensions. The play 'Tara' deals with gender discrimination, '30 Days in September' tackles the issue of child abuse head on, and 'Final Solutions' is about the lingering echoes of the partition.

It was Alyque Padamsee who first spotted and encouraged Mahesh Dattani's talent and gave him the confidence to venture into a career in theatre. Dattani formed his own theatre group, Playpen, in 1984. He is the only English playwright to be awarded the Sahitya Academy Award. He got this award in 1998. He also writes plays for BBC Radio and he was also one of the 21 playwrights chosen by BBC to write plays to commemorate Chaucer's 600th anniversary in 2000.

Mahesh Dattani's Play 'Dance Like a Man' was made into a film in 2003, directed by Pamela Rooks and starring Shobana, Arif Zakaria and Anoushka Shankar. This movie won the award for Best Picture in English at the National Panorama.

Mahesh Dattani himself directed Mango Soufflé in 2002. He also wrote and directed Morning Raga in 2004. Starring Shabana Azmi, this movie is about a Carnatic singer whose life has been traumatized by the loss of her son and her best friend in an accident. It earned Dattani an award for Best Artistic Contribution at the Cairo Film Festival.

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Mahesh Dattani is one India most successful playwrights and his plays are known for addressing issues that society tries to hide or turn its face away from. Besides being a busy playwright and director, he also conducts Summer Theatre Courses at the University of Oregon, USA. He also has his own theatre studio in Bangalore where he offers courses in acting, directing and writing.

29.1 Detailed Study – Final Solution

"Final Solutions" has a powerful contemporary resonance as it addresses an issue of utmost concern to our society, i.e. the issue of communalism. The play presents different shades of the communalist attitude prevalent among Hindus and Muslims in its attempt to underline the stereotypes and clichés influencing the collective sensibility of one community against another. What distinguishes this work from other plays written on the subject is that it is neither sentimental in its appeal nor simplified in its approach.

It advances the objective candour of a social scientist while presenting a mosaic of diverse attitudes towards religious identity that often plunges the country into inhuman strife. Yet the issue is not moralised, as the demons of communal hatred are located not out in the street but deep within us.

The play moves from the partition to the present day communal riots. It probes into the religious bigotry by examining the attitudes of three generations of a middle-class Gujarati business family, Hardika, the grandmother, is obsessed with her father's murder during the partition turmoil and the betrayal by a Muslim friend, Zarine. Her son, Ramnik Gandhi, is haunted by the knowledge his fortunes were founded on a shop of Zarine's father, which was burnt down by his kinsmen.

Hardika's daughter-in-law, Aruna, lives by the strict code of the Hindu Samskar and the granddaughter, Smita, cannot allow herself a relationship with a Muslim boy. The pulls and counter-pulls of the family are exposed when two Muslim boys, Babban and Javed, seek shelter in their house on being chased by a baying Hindu mob.

Babban is a moderate while Javed is an aggressive youth. After a nightlong exchange of judgements and retorts between the characters, tolerance and forgetfulness emerge as the only possible solution of the crisis. Thus, the play becomes a timely reminder of the conflicts raging not only in India but in other parts of the world.

Mahesh Dattani's 'Final Solutions' is that rare look at a socio-political problem that defies all final solutions....Arvind Gaur's competent direction... intense, topical and artistically mounted, Asmita's 'Final Solutions' brought back memories of Habib Tanvir's rendition of 'Jis Lahore nahi Dekhya' and Saeed Mirza's 'Naseem.

'Final Solutions' touches us, and the bitter realities of our lives so closely that it becomes a difficult play to handle for the Indian Director. The past begins to determine the outlook of the present and thus the earlier contradictions re-emerge.

No concrete solutions are provided in the play to the problem of communalism but it raises questions on secularism and pseudo secularism. It forces us to look at ourselves in relation to the attitudes that persist in the society.

Since it is an experiment in time and space and relates to memory, it is a play, which involves a lot of introspection on the part of the characters in the play and thus induces similar introspection in the viewers. I have attempted to experiment with the chorus. It has been used in a style, which I would like to call 'realistic stylisation'. The chorus represents the conflicts of the characters. Thus the chorus in a sense is the psycho-physical representation of the characters and also provides the audience with the visual images of the characters' conflicts. There is no stereotyped use of the characterisation of the chorus because communalism has no face, it is an attitude and thus it becomes an image of the characters. The sets and properties used in the play are simple. This has been done to accentuate the internal conflicts and the subtext of the play. Theatre for 'Asmita' and

me is a method of reflection, understanding and debating the contemporary socio-political issues through the process of the play. We hope the play will also have a lasting impact on the audience.

29.2 Critical Appreciation

India gained Independence, people were jubilant; however, the moment of jubilation was associated with a horrible and ghastly experience of bloodshed that history has rarely witnessed. People, who had been living together for centuries, became blood thirsty and bitter enemies of one another, in the name of religion. The barbaric cruelty against the fellow human beings arouse communal sentiments, the venom of which is still not completely washed. Many people were rendered homeless, children became orphans, people lost their loved ones and there appeared a horrible number of raped and widowed women:

"Millions of people had to flee leaving everything behind, Muslim from India and Hindus and Sikhs from Pakistan. Two great rivers of humanity flowing in opposite direction along the pitifully inadequate roads and railways. Jamming and clashing, colliding head on leaving their dead and dying littering the landscape."

The shocking events and the miseries of the migrants did not end here. The sad and dismal memories of their past haunted them. Instead of fraternity, communal hatred and bias lurked in their minds. India's secularism, could not wash this hatred, anguish and insecurity. Many strange issues confronted the country - looking after the newly acquired land, rehabilitation of the refugees, decline in political and human values, assassination of Mahatma Gandhi, rise of regionalism and the linguistic problems threatened and challenged the national unity and integrity. Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri writes:

"For the Indian, the most important battle for the establishment of a distinctive identity within a territorial location lay in the partitioning of India. National identities were conceived and took shape in accordance with the ideologues that formulated these on the basis of religions (and later, linguistic, ethnic, caste), identities. The gruesome rioting and communal/religious disharmony that took seed in 1947 has continued to throw up countless such incidents in independent to secular India. Such incidents and communal violence in India between Hindus and Muslims was underscored emphatically by the brutal bloodshed in Gujarat in 2002. These were some of the issues that Dattani had actually dramatized in the form of Final Solutions earlier, dealing with the recurring rhetoric of hatred, aggression, the monetary and political exploitation of communal riots, in chauvinism and parochial mindset of the fundamentalists, in the context of the India of the 1940s interspersed with the contemporary India. In confronting and negotiating responses to the post-Babri Masjid demolition and the post Godhra Hindu Muslim communal violence in Gujarat, through varied discursive frames of history and theatre, Dattani subsequently explored issues of identity, memory, suffering and loss... within the larger political context through the various productions of this play (Final Solutions)."



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Mahesh Dattani won the Sahitya Akademi award for Final Solutions in 1998. The theme of the play is to highlight human weaknesses, selfishness, avarice and opportunism. Woven into the play are the issues of class and communities and the clashes between traditional and modern life style and value systems. The problem of minorities is not confined to only Hindus and Muslims, it eats the peace of any minority community among the majority.

Final Solutions has taken the issues of the majority communities in different contexts and situations. It talks of the problems of cultural hegemony, how Hindus had to suffer at the hands of Muslim

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majority like the characters of Hardika/Daksha in Hussainabad. And how Muslims like Javed suffer in the set up of the majority Hindu community. This all resulted in communal riots and culminated in disruption of the normal social life, and thus hampered the progress of the nation. The mob in the play is symbolic of our own hatred and paranoia. Each member of the mob is an individual, yet they meet into one seething whole as the politicians play on their fears. In this play, the chorus continuously sings sometimes under the mask of Hindus and sometimes under that of Muslims revealing their feelings of fear and hatred for one another. When the Chariot leading the procession is broken and the Pujari is killed the Hindus masks sing:

"How dare they!

They broke our Chariot and felled our Gods!

This is our land!

How dare they?"

The mob/chorus comprising five men and ten masks on sticks (five Hindu and five Muslim masks) is the omnipresent factor throughout the play. Now Muslim in masks sing:

They hunt us down!

They're afraid of us!

They beat us up!

We are few!

But we are strong!

In Act II, the mob/chorus squats haphazardly, and Hindu masks sing:

"Of what use is the curfew? (The chorus 3). When there is unrest in our minds! Have we to let them insult us? To close our eyes while they stab us".

The scenes of the play take place inside and outside Ramnik Gandhi's house where Ramnik has given two Muslim boys shelter from the violent mob outside. The mob is in the form of a chorus, changing its guise into Muslims and Hindus through masks and songs. Inside, a Hindu family is sharply divided over giving shelter to the unknown Muslim youths in the midst of communal frenzy and violence. Even after fifty years of Independence, people have not been able to forget their enmity and bias against each other, i.e. Muslims against Hindus and Hindu against Muslims.

In the play, two young men, Javed and Babban, are hired to disrupt social harmony while others like Hardika's parents - in-laws have secretly burnt the shop of their Muslim friend, with the selfish end of buying it at reduced price.

Final Solutions is based on the apparently friendly relations between Muslims and Hindus and the simmering currents of hatred beneath. The family unit comprises members of different age groups, symbolic of past and present, stretching the plot to over a period of half a century. Young people like Smita, Bobby and Javed, present the future and Ramnik and Aruna, the present while Hardika, the grand mother of Smita, is sometimes presented in Daksha (Past) a fifteen year old newly married young girl, writing her diary and then as her grandmother in her late sixties (present) teaching her children and revealing the family's past. Major events are presented through her eyes.

The play, Final Solutions, is also the story of a young baffled boy Javed, who becomes a victim and a terrorist and is exploited by politicians in the name of 'Jahad'. He is trained for the terrorist activities and sabotaging. He is sent to a Hindu 'Mohalla' where a 'Rath Yatra' is taking place. Javed is so over-whelmed with the fervour of 'Jehad' that he throws the first stone on the 'Rath' causing chaos, ending up in the killing of the 'Pujari' and crashing down of the 'Rath'. Bobby a close friend of Javed, saves him from the violent mob and gets him shelter in Ramnik Gandhi's house, where causes of Hindus and Muslims hatred are being discussed and strange secrets of terror, greed, avarice and communal hatred are being revealed.

The details of stage given in the play help the audience to experience the shifts in time, Dattani keeps shuffling the frames:-

"Within the confines of the ramp is a structure suggesting the house of Gandhi's with just wooden blocks for furniture. However upstage perhaps as an elevation is a detailed kitchen and a Pooja room. On another level is a room with the roll top desk and an oil lamp converted to an electric one, suggesting that the period is late 1940's. This belongs to the young Daksha, who is in fact the grandmother, also sometimes seen as a girl of fifteen.... Hardika should be positioned and lit in such way that entire action of the play is seen through her eyes".

When the curtain rises, we find Daksha, the newly wed bride, going through her diary dated March 31, 1948. Considering her diary as her sole friend in the new environment of her in-laws, she is sharing her secrets, experiences and views with her diary. The diary begins with the shattered dreams of a young girl who wanted to be a singer like Noor Jahan, but who has been married and confined to four walls of her in-laws house. This suggests how most of us have to live a life of unfulfilled desires. This is a very lengthy monologue of Daksha but is written in the style of a spoken dialogue. She is narrating the horrible incidents of the Partition, which are still haunting her mind ever after one year.

"We... gained independence... My father had fought for that hour. He said he was happy we were rid of the Britishers... He said that before leaving, they had let loose the dogs. I hated to think that he was talking about my friends' fathers... But that night in Hussainabad in our ancestor's house... When I heard then outside--- I knew that they were thinking the same of us. And I knew that I was thinking the same, like my father".

The young girl immediately changes into the old Hardika:

"I opened my diary again. And I wrote. A dozen pages before. A dozen pages now. A young girl's childish scribble. And an old woman's shaky scrawl. Yes, things have not changed much".

After fifty year of marriage, Hardika is advising Aruna her daughter-in-law: "Be careful I said. The dogs have been let loose". There seems to be no change even after so much education and development. It is sad that over after fifty years of Independence, the same things are happening, the whole story is presented in a series of scenes and memories, dialogues, images and sudden shifts in time.

Hardika's wounds caused by the killing of her father in communal frenzy during Partition become fresh again. She is terrorized when she finds two Muslims boys in her house. She does not like her son Ramnik giving them shelter from the mob outside. When she is alone with the boys, she asks them to leave India and go to Pakistan for good, as she still doubts the commitment of Muslims to the nation.

Hardika : Have you ever thought of going to Pakistan?

Bobby : No

Hardika : Why not?

Javed : I prefer Dubai

Hardika : There you can live the way you want without blaming other people for your failure like we did many year ago.

Her problems have no meaning for Bobby and Javed and their problems have no meaning for her. Hardika and Javed are easily excited and are kept in dark about the reality of the things. The death of Hardika's father at the hands of Muslims is of no concern for Bobby and Javed, and Javed's sister's safety has no meaning for Hardika. Their experiences are their own. Each of them is trapped in his/her own experiences.

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Hardika and Javed both have the bitter tastes of the minority community. Hardika's father was murdered because they were member of the minority Hindu community in Pakistan during Partition and Javed has become a terrorist because he is from the minority Muslim community in India. Javed explains to Ramnik his reasons for involving himself in terrorism and acts of sabotage on the Hindu procession (Rath Yatra).

"Anyone sitting at home, sipping tea and reading the newspapers will say that it is obvious that a minority would never start a riot, we are too afraid that it had to be politically motivated.

The selfish and petty politicians still play with the emotions of the young people like Javed and Babban, instigate them to create violence and use them for their own ends. Dattani has conveyed the same message in *Final Solutions*, where Bobby and Javed long to be amongst the majority section of the society. Javed tells Ramnik:

Javed : It must feel good

Ramnik : What?

Javed : Being in the majority

Ramnik : Yes, I never thought of it.

Javed : After feeling good you are in the majority?

Ramnik : No, about being the majority.

Javed : But Sir, it is in your every move. You must know. You can offer milk to us. You can have an angry mob outside your door. You can play in civilized host. Because you know you have peace hidden inside your armpit.

Javed, who became a victim of their plans, narrates his horrible experience:

It is a terrible feeling. Being disillusioned. (Pause) Don't we all have anger and frustration? Am I so unique? Now that I am alone... I hate myself. It was different when I used to attend the meetings. I was swayed by what now appears to me as cheap sentiment. They always talked about motherland and fighting to save our faith and how we should get four of theirs for every one of ours".

Javed explains how when he was following the Hindu 'Rath' someone at first put a stone in his hand and then a knife. Javed hit the procession hard. In the words of Babban, who was a witness to this all.

'... He was possessed!... He was insane.. I clung to him putting my arm around his waist trying to hold him back. I was dragged by his force... I pushed him aside just as the chariot began to keel over; we escaped in the panic and confusion'

Visualizing Javed under the spell at that time, Bobby says:

Why did Javed threw stone and climbed the Rath and hit the Pujari, because he was told that the Hindus were taking the procession of their Gods prodding them... to wipe us out of existence..."

However, there is a hidden human heart in Javed. Screaming with pleasure, Javed, in the Carnival, moves on the giant wheel. But soon his joy ride is over as the pujari looked at the knife in his hand, begs him for mercy. His frenzy is over and he wishes to be a normal human being. He is not able to kill the pujari. Explaining this Javed tells Bobby:

"I moved to the Chariot, pushing people away... I was in the carnival... screaming with pleasure. And I came crashing down, down. I wanted to get off but I could not! The pujari backed away, his last words were his god's name. He looked up at the knife... He begged for mercy but I couldn't hear him at all! There were screams all around and I was screaming too, but no longer with joy as fear came faster and faster confusing me! I got nauseous and cried. Whey am I here? What am I doing.

This is a brilliant piece of Dattani's dialogue, what Javed felt at that time can be experienced through it. It provides a vivid picture of human psychology. Javed's frenzy and change of mind at that particular movement, pujari's imploring for mercy and the mob's tumultuousness.

Bobby seems to be wise enough to understand both Aruna and Javed's view points well. He reads out Javed's feelings to Ramnik and tries to convince Aruna that God is not biased by picking up the idol and grasp it in his hands: "you can not remove my smell with sandel paste and attars and fragrant flowers because it belongs to human being who believes, tolerates, and respects what other human beings believe that is the strongest fragrance in the world" by doing so, Bobby at the same time hurts the sentiments of Aruna, a Hindu woman, when, infact, the Muslim religion does not allow any women to ever enter their Mosques, showing open disrespect towards women; however, hurting Aruna's feelings can be a small offence on Bobby's part when Aruna, perturbed over this action cries "Oh! Is there nothing left that is sacred in this world". He tries to calm her by the logic of fraternity and forgiveness: "The tragedy is that there is too much that is sacred. But if we understand and believe in one another nothing can be destroyed... And if you are willing to forget. I'm willing to tolerate". Later on Aruna herself admits to god's oneness. Through dialogues and reflections like these, Dattani makes a strong plea for humanism, love and understanding.

Smita, Aruna's daughter, is a young college student. She is content with whatever her mother has taught her at home, she follows her directions and obeys her by performing all the rituals, till she meets Bobby, a Muslim boy and for a short while, falls in love with him. When she comes to know that Bobby is engaged to Tasneem, she is disappointed, her own experience forces her to introspect and question the rituals she has been blindly performing. Aruna, the mother, is shocked at the queer behavior of her daughter, she declares that she respects all the religions:

"Please try to understand. We have nothing against you. It is only that we have our own customs and - And... we are equal... All religion is one. Only the ways to God are many."

But Smita is ignorant of the rituals in Muslim religion so she ridicules her mother for not allowing the Muslim boys to be fed along with them or to let them fill water from the holy pitcher. And she shouts at her, "... you have to admit you are wrong". When Aruan asks her, 'Does being a Hindu stifle you? Smita bluntly replies. "No living with one does... Because you know they don't believe in all the things that you feel are true. Doesn't that make your belief that much more weak? Do two young boys make you so insecure? Come on mummy. This is a time for strength! I am so glad that these two dropped in. We have never spoken about what makes us too different from each other. We would have gone on living our lives with our petty similarities?"

Aruna feels hurt and asks her daughter not to be so cruel "you can stop being so cruel... . Smita replies, "I am not sorry. I said it... I am glad". She feels elated in saying so in the presence of two Muslim boys because she is having an inferiority complex. Here, her religious education seems to be shallow because she has not been advised on the necessity of the rituals. On the other hand, Bobby is so impressed with the fact that Smita enjoys more freedom with her mother than he does:

I never could express my feelings as well as you do. May be my religion oppressed me for more. For Javed, religion is more stifling as Bobby says, "Javed finds the whole world stifling". Ramnik, who is not able to understand Javed and Babban's indulgence in acts of violence and sabotage, tries to teach the Muslim boys a lesson and gives them a good piece of his mind. And through this discourse, comes to light the hard facts of their lives. In the end, he praises the boys for their courage in fighting and questioning things.

Dattani is trying to show, probably how fundamentalism is born out of fear of marginality. He endeavors to show that it may turn towards closures and how closures do not facilitate or permit authentic debate.

Bobby has changed his name to Bobby from Babban simply because he does not like to expose his identity as a minority member. Ramnik, who seems to be quite liberal, intelligent and understanding stands exposed for his hypocrisy in the end. Ramnik knows it very well that his father and his grandfather had burnt the shops of their Muslim friends. He suffers from the complex and is

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willing to compensate by offering them jobs. But it never occurs to him that killing of Hardika's father could have happened to revenge. He praises Bobby for helping Javed, in doing away with his false pride and faith in his religion. Ramnik tells Bobby. "You are brave. Not every one can get off. For some of us, it is not ever possible to escape".

This goes on in Ramnik's mind and he wants to make penitence for it. No one in the house is familiar with this truth. The question raised by the young Muslim boys forces Ramnik to confess and lose his mind. In the end he tells Hardika that her husband had burnt his Muslim friend's shop because Ramnik knows that she had only few year to live now so they would not have to suffer long for it. Ramnik tells Hardika:

"I just can't enter that shop any more... I didn't have to face to tell anyone. For me there is no getting off. No escape. It is their shop. It is the same burnt shop we bought from them, at half its value. And we burnt it. You husband. My father. And his father. They had burnt it in the name of communal hatred... You have to live with the shame only for a few years now".

Ramnik finds it hard to keep all the secrets burning in his mind. His agony is with him only since he does not want his wife, Aruna, to suffer from the agony of this sin. That is why Aruna is busy with her daily rituals as usual, even after a fight with Smita over the rituals. She is shocked by the rude behavior of her daughter who is not willing to change her ways. She is very proud of her ancestral past and Ramnik does not want to shelter it. When she wants to know about Ramnik's anxiety, he simply says, "there are things, that are better left unsaid". He desperately wishes the boys to accept a job so that he can liberate himself from his pain and also absolve himself from a feeling of guilt.

In the character of Javed, Dattani has portrayed the pathetic life of a terrorist who is never at peace with himself or with others. Javed has an outrageous nature; his emotions are his revulsions make him a puppet in the hands of politicians. He used to be like a hero in his school; good in studies and cricket; 'smart and cocksure'. A minor incident changes his life and old fanatic Hindu man picks up the letter kept in his house by Javed, with the help of a cloth and also wiped the gate touched by Javed and that leads him to terrorism. The incident irritates and agitates him and the next day he threw pieces of cow meat in the backyard of the old man. Suddenly, his friends stopped talking to him, "And for Javed he was - in his own eyes no longer the neighbourhood hero" (FS Act III, 201). Such persons easily catch the eyes of selfish men who lure them towards more and more repulsive acts. Even his parents disown him. Smita tells her father: "They threw him out. He did not leave them, His father threw him out".

Still Javed has a warm heart. Such allegations about him make him sob and remorseful. Babban, a sincere friend of his, is always there to bring him back to normal life. But it is very difficult to rebuild the image of such persons in the society. When Bobby tells Ramnik, "He did not do it for money... They did not hire him. He volunteered". Ramnik says, "Doesn't that make him even more repulsive". Javed's own parents do not understand him let alone the outsiders. Hardika does not like him, though she does not have any complaints against any of the two yet for Javed she says, "I don't like the one called Javed, I hated him". It is a tragedy that people like Javed who once fall victim to terrorism cannot lead a normal life. Society refuses to accept them. And often they end their lives either in a fight or become target of police firing or commit suicide. In the 21st century they are rather prepared to die with their target like the suicide bombers. Javed tells Ramnik that no one from the police would come to arrest him and that he becomes a victim of mob's fury only because the trouble shooters along with him were not paid for overtime.

"May be they are not paid over time.... And they attacked us! They are not very systematic. Next time they should have a sound of introductions so that we don't end up killing each other. At least not unintentionally".

Abandoned by the family, discarded by the society, he resorts to violence. Smita again tells her father about them.

They hire him! They hire such people and... those parties. They hire him! That is how he makes a living. They bring him and many more to the city to create riots. To... to throw the first stone". They too, like others long for love and care. Javed loves his sister Tasneem very much. And he does not want Smita to come in the way of her love for Bobby. "To me, my sister's happiness means more than anything else". K. Satchinand comments on the problems of communalism.

"Communalism being the worst form of materialism divorced from being anything that is sacred and oriented towards worldly wealth and power, can truly be combated by a higher form of the sacred that combines the secular ideal of human equality, democratic awareness, identification with the suffering alleviation of by poverty to resistance to a deep inner inquiry and belief in the holiness of all forms of life, those who turn religion as mean to attain state, power and world status are indeed the most irreligious of all, for they profane the most hollowed on usurp even the last refuge of the spirit from a world where the best lack all the conviction and the worst are full of passionate intensity by joining the ignorant armies that class might".

Dattani very successfully seeks to dismantle this assumption and to recover and reclaim the lives of the people on the margins. Laying his hopes on the youth like Smita and Babban, Dattani finds the Final Solutions with them only. This play is a critique of violence. It is not overtly didactic but does make a forceful appeal for love and broader understanding, transcending the divides has rightly proved that the demons of communal hatred may not be out on the street, out they may be lurking inside us. They need to be exorcised.

Self -Assessment

1. Fill in the blanks:

- (i) Dattani started working in theatre from
- (ii) Babban is a moderate while Javed is an
- (iii) The Final Solutions is the story of a young baffled boy
- (iv) Bobby has changed his name from

29.3 Summary

- Mahesh Dattani is considered as one of the best Indian playwrights and he writes his pieces in English. He is an actor, playwright and director.
- After his first play, Mahesh Dattani began to concentrate on his writing and wrote more dramas like Final Solutions, Night Queen, Dance Like a Man, Tara, and Thirty Days. From 1995, he started working exclusively in theatre.
- "Final Solutions" has a powerful contemporary resonance as it addresses an issue of utmost concern to our society, i.e. the issue of communalism. The play presents different shades of the communalist attitude prevalent among Hindus and Muslims in its attempt to underline the stereotypes and clichés influencing the collective sensibility of one community against another.
- The play moves from the partition to the present day communal riots. It probes into the religious bigotry by examining the attitudes of three generations of a middle-class Gujrati business family, Hardika, the grandmother, is obsessed with her father's murder during the partition turmoil and the betrayal by a Muslim friend, Zarine. Her son, Ramnik Gandhi, is haunted by the knowledge his fortunes were founded on a shop of Zarine's father, which was burnt down by his kinsmen.
- 'Final Solutions' touches us, and the bitter realities of our lives so closely that it becomes a difficult play to handle for the Indian Director. The past begins to determine the outlook of the present and thus the earlier contradictions re-emerge.

Notes

- Mahesh Dattani won the Sahitya Akademi award for *Final Solutions* in 1998. The theme of the play is to highlight human weaknesses, selfishness, avarice and opportunism. Woven into the play are the issues of class and communities and the clashes between traditional and modern life style and value systems. The problem of minorities is not confined to only Hindus and Muslims, it eats the peace of any minority community among the majority.
- The play, *Final Solutions*, is also the story of a young baffled boy Javed, who becomes a victim and a terrorist and is exploited by politicians in the name of 'Jihad'. He is trained for the terrorist activities and sabotaging. He is sent to a Hindu 'Mohalla' where a 'Rath Yatra' is taking place. Javed is so over-whelmed with the fervour of 'Jehad' that he throws the first stone on the 'Rath' causing chaos, ending up in the killing of the 'Pujari' and crashing down of the 'Rath'. Bobby a close friend of Javed, saves him from the violent mob and gets him sehltler in Ramnik Gandhi's house, where causes of Hindus and Muslims hatred are being discussed and strange secrets of terror, greed, avarice and communal hatred are being revealed.
- The details of stage given in the play help the audience to experience the shifts in time, Dattani keeps shuffling the frames.

29.4 Key-Words

1. Gender discrimination : The unjust or prejudicial treatment of different categories of people, especially on the grounds of race, age, or sex.
2. Prejudices : Pre-conceived opinion not based on reason or experience bias.

29.5 Review Questions

1. Discuss the role of Javed Ramnik.
2. Briefly discribe the play *Final Solution*. What does Dattani try to provide by this play.

Answers: Self-Assessment

1. (i) 1995 (ii) Aggressive youth
(iii) Javed (iv) Babban

29.6 Further Readings



Books

1. Manohar Malgonker, *A Bend in The Ganges* (Delhi : Oriental Paperback, 1994) 355.
2. Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri. *Contemporary Indian Writer in English: Mahesh Dattani* (Delhi : Foundation Books, 2005), 77-78.
3. Mahesh Dattani. *Collected Plays* (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2000), 168. Subsequent reference are incorporated in the text-with an abbreviation, FS Satchinand K. *Indian Literature: Position and Preposition* (Delhi: Pencraft Internat.

Unit 30: Mahesh Dattani: Final Solution – Plot Construction

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Objectives

After reading this Unit students will be able to:

- Introduce Mahesh Dattani as the best known Indian playwright.
- Discuss the Plot Construction.

Introduction

One of the best known Indian playwrights writing in English, Mahesh Dattani is also a stage director, screen writer and film maker. His published works include Final Solutions and Other Plays, Tara and Collected Works published by Penguin India in two volumes.

In 1998 Mahesh Dattani won the prestigious central Sahitya Akademi Award for his book Final Solutions and Other Plays, the highest award for a literary work in the country. Mahesh is the first playwright writing in English to receive this award.

Today his plays are produced in all the major cities of India. His works have been produced in cities outside the country as well including London, Leicester, New York, Washington DC, Sydney, Colombo and Dubai. Most of his plays have been translated and performed in Hindi, Gujarati and Kannada.

30.1 Final Solution

Ramnik, the father carries with him the burden of the guilt of his father's black deeds, transferring some of the resentment to his mother. Hardika, Aruna, his Wife and Smita, his daughter both hit on at each other for no apparent reason. The entire family is of course, putted again the back deep of a root. Tom City Zarine and the other guests from the post make an entry in the dramatic device that Dattani uses to show his time-shifts-Daksha, the young Hardika whose voice will resonate through the play inter weaving the post with present. The play now assumes a wholly different perspective even as the familial tensions continue within the home and are set off by communal tensions outside. The outside (Babban and Javed) is in a sense allowed entry, after severe resistance from within (Aruna and Hardika) and then begins the extortion of the fragile familial ties. Several scenes establish the bond between Aruna and Smita, with Ramnik, the father often being made to feel isolated. But with the instruction of Babban and Javed, Smita reveals her true sensibility and fees herself of the 'stifling' prejudices of her mother, at the same time trying to be fair to her.

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Ramnrik, too has never revealed the guilt of the post of his mother, saving her the weight of the burden than he has had to carry all alone.

The mob/chorus comprising five men and ten marks on stick five Hindu and five Muslim marks, is the omnipresent factor through out the play, crunching on the horseshoe shaped sump that dominates the space of the stage which is otherwise split up 4 into multilevel sets. The marks lie significantly strewn all over the ramp, to be worn when required. Dattani carefully uses the same five men in black to double for any given religious group when they assume the role of the mob, which they do in a stylized fashion. The living area is not furnished except for the realistic level that functions as the kitchen and the Pooja-room and another period room suggesting the 1940s where Hardika/Daksha are to revisit the past. The play infect begins with such a visit through the opening scene where Daksha sets beginning the process of recording lived history. Criss-crossing a whole gamut of memories that are to construct the character that she is to become- Hardika "After forty years - I opened my diary again. And I wrote. A dozen pages before. A dozen pages now. A young girl is childish scribble. An old women's shaky scrawl. Yes, things have not changed that much," Things have indeed not changed much. The space of the stage is thick with ominous cries that reverberate and the same hatred and intolerance for the other still sends the air stones had come crashing down on Daksha's records sheltering Shamshad Begum, Noorjahan, Suraiya, "Those beautiful voices. Cracked..." like her friendship with Zarina. Forty years hence, her son Ramnik attempts to sight a few wrongs taking in Babban and Javed and protecting them against the fury of the mob and meanwhile, the audience witnesses the dialogic rational of both the sides "should we swallowed up? Till they can not recognize us? Should we melt into anonymity so they can not hound us? Lose ourselves in a shapeless man? Should we? Can we? "What must we do? To become acceptable? Must we lose our identity? ...oh what a curse it is to be losing in number!" "Why did they stay? This is not their land. They have got what they wanted. So why stay? They stay to spy on us. Their hearts belong there. But they live on our land." and soon. Until the distinctive identities vanish in the ambiguity of the mask less mob asking for blood, a threat to all parties. The work of Frantz Fanon, the influential thinker on the effects of racism and colonization may be found relevant here. In his analysis of the struggle of the Algerian population against their French put forward the idea of photogenic. Where he explore how mechanisms of othering influence the self. How does phobia the irrational fear of the other, grip one's mind? The inclination is to detach oneself from the other. Such a distancing is achieved through objectification reducing the other to on object upon which it is easy to inflict violence. At many places in the play Dattani would have us inflict pain on the other would be to look written oneself and recognize the fear for it is and hence resist the need to displace it. In the play Javed gives voice to the individual participating in such riots. "To short and scream like a child on the giant wheel in the carnival. The first screams one of pleasure of sensing an unusual freedom. And them - it becomes nightmarish as your world is way below and suddenly you come crashing down and you want to get off. But you can not. You don't want it any more. It is the same feeling over and over again. You scream with pain and horror but there is no one listening to you. Everyone is alone in their own cycles of joy and terror. The feelings come faster and faster and they confuse you with the blur created by them speed. You get nauseers and you cry to yourself why I am here? What am I doing here? The joyride gets our and you get off. And are never sure again". At this point we could also consider the forcibility of competing versions of history and the tensions between different communities. While the hatred is all too real it is also true that brutality and compassion co-exist and give resonance to one another. The riots saw people a faulting each other. But they also jeopardized their own safety to save the others. With in these inteve and remove pressures of clashing cultures are embedded pressures of a different kind. Time and spaces merge and intermingle, as histories are relived.

The mercenary gains that one party derives from the communal riots of the past is the baggage of guilt that Rammik has caused for long, this is revealed to a crushed Hardika, who seemed secure

in her hatred of the other party, sheltering her sense of being in the right. It also explains the reasons for Ramnik's extreme tolerance. The smug and often parsimonious Aruna is shaken out of her complacency through Smita's outburst. Stagnant against her rigid and restrictive practices that have for long choked her. Dattani here manages to intricately interweave the individual strands of family identity into the larger picture. "It stifles me! Yes! I can see so clearly how wrong you are. You accuse me of running away from my religion. Would you have listened to me if I told you were wrong? Again, do two young boys make you so insecure? Come on, Mummy. This is a time for strength. I am so glad these two dripped in. We would have never spoken about what makes us so different from each other. We would have gone on living our lives with our pretty similarities. The diminutive Smita suddenly gains stature and individual identity. Unafraid to speak up for what she thinks is right maintaining that she had kept her silence only to remain non-partisan, to both her parents. So does the initially unassertive Bobby (Babban). Who hides behind a name that conceals the identity into which he was born, and with which he has always been uncomfortable. Playing the role of a peace fest between Ramnik and Javed.

Dattani does explore some existential angst here what, this? A sandalwood garland? When my father died I used to put fresh flowers everyday for a whole month-(takes a final look at his picture) so then's it. That is how the world will remember me. Until my son locks me up in a trunk – "Now you are provoking me! How dare you blame your violence on other people? It is in you! You have violence in your mind. Your life is based on violence. Your faith is based-(He stops but it is too late) (Act Two) "Why did they stay"? "This is not their land". Their hearts belong there. Print they live on our land". "Drive them out". "Kill the sons of swine"! (Act one) The title of Dattani's play on communal violence and tensions in contemporary when India itself calls to attention. The apparent evolutionarily of this situation. Dattani interestingly sticks to the plural-'solutions' which implicitly undermines the poor quality of the meaning of the first word- 'final'. Are there any solutions for a cycle of violence. Which has continued in some form on the other even since most of us can remember? Is any final solution horrible at all? When each community section clan of our society has its own solution to the crisis?

It is indeed this very search for the final solution. Which in many ways perpetuates the cycle of violence and hatred. The other interesting thing about idea that there are as many solutions as there are realities to choose from. Each one however turns out to be temporary. Final solution was actually commissioned before the destruction of Babri Masjid in 1992, but was performed only the following year in 1993. Written and performed only in a period of high tension and violence in India! We look back at this much more than 10 years later in 2007. Reeling from the aftermath of the Gujarat carnage and the smaller ripples of violence since all can ask is 'What has changed in more than a decade? Has anything changed at all? And the answer answers our question in the very fast scene ... "Things have not changed that much" says Hardika reading her diary written 40 years before thinking back on the roots that exploded in 1947. When her father was killed. (Act one) Dattani places history as an active character in his play. Opening with the main figure of the Hardika as a young girl- then known as Daksha, the first scene shows us the wetting of history. Past and present are fused on stage through the figure of Daksha and Hardika. The play opens in fact with the young Daksha writing in her diary. This simple act, of a young girl creating a diary in order to use the fountain pen discarded by her father-in-law operates at various levels of representation unveiling the construction of history the manipulation that all written texts including allegedly personal ones go through. There is no need to be that honest... (Act one) Daksha's diary establishes the history of division the serve of 'us and them'. The link between personal experience and political belief/social hatred. A communal riot is invoked in the very first scene of the play a riot in which Daksha's father was killed a riot which firmly creates for Daksha the them "that night in Hussainabad In our ancestral house... When I heard then outside... I knew that they were thinking the same of us". (Act one) History is present transcending the action of the play. Sometimes repeating itself directly through statement made by Daksha/Hardika some times indirectly through

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situations of violence which have been enacted before and are all to frightening fanubor. History is also evoked and used by almost every character on stage as a justification/rationale/excuse for each fresh out break of violence. This justification may be overt by political overt by personal or thinly disguised between the two.

Dattani's characters also each have their own justification their own rationale for their actions. Daksha (now the grandmother) hates Muslims because her father was killed a communal riot and because her overtones of friendship to Zarine a young Muslim girl were rejected after other communal riots that razed Zarine's father's shop, and which incidentally was bought by Daksha's father-in-law. Javed, the young Muslim fundamentalist and member of a gang has long nursed resentment against the world because of the otherness and the deionization of his community and religious identity by the dominant community. Ramnik Gandhi, Daksha/Hardika is son is trying to atone for the sins committed by his father and grandfather and therefore is a conscious secularist. His wife, Aruna is an ordinary devout Hindu Woman/Wife/Mother/Daughter-in-law, implacably sure of her place in the home, in society. Secure in her unquestioning faith and sense of right and wrong.

There are also two other characters- Bobby (Babban) and Smita (Ramnik and Aruna's daughter) who are oppressed by their own sense of history, and seem desperate to escape from its clutches, to leave behind the baggage of social, religious and communal identities that seem to dog them in all their relationships and actions. As each character in vokes history as an objective witness to justify their own sense of oppression and victimization, it is this very sense of an objective past that Dattani undermines.

As has already been stated, in the act of re-writing her diary Daksha proves that history is constructed, and that the present is implicated in the ways in which we imagine our past. Reading from the diary written 40 years ago. Daksha/Hardika tells us about the riots in which her father was killed, how and her mother took refuge from the flying stones in the Pooja room, and how her faith in God represented by the idol of Krishna was suddenly gone never to return. And as punishment for this loss of faith a stone thrown by the mob smashed all her gramophone records. Which she loved most. It was Daksha's youth her culture represented through the records of Noor Jehan. Suraiya and Shamshad Begum that was smashed that night. And as Hardika remember we realize that 40 years on indeed things have not changed that much as the play has opened in the midst of another riot, and a curfew is on in the small town of Amargaon where the Gandhi's live. The set design of the play emphasizes Dattani's contention that the family unit represents society. The living space of the Gandhi family is shown through a barebones presentation with just wooden blocks for furniture (Act one). The only detailed sets are the kitchen and Pooja room. This is significant as really it is lonely through food habits and tattoos that we all draw the lines that separate us from each other.

There is a close relationship between food habits and religious beliefs and the obvious other men of different communities is manifested through differences in what/how we and they eat. We also make sharp distinctions where food and food related utensils etc are concerned. Which perhaps serve to emphasis reparation in a uniquely distinctive and deferred manner? Taboos are most clearly expressed in our relatives through these two particularized spaces in Dattani's sets the room for worship and the space where food is prepared.

The sets also position the family signified by the home in relation to society which is represented through the Mob/Chows (five men and ten marks on sticks) who more or less encircle the Gandhi home. The representation of the younger Hardika (Daksha) takes place on another level thus ensuring in front of us and can not be forgotten. As the play opens and the riot is established the two young men sought by the mob are sieved as member of the other community'.

'Naturally' this immediately makes them a threat as the aggression of the Mob heightens to a dangerous pitch. In times of tension even ordinary object take on meaning become symbols of a

religious identity and markers of other men as Bobby and Javed are revealed through a handkerchief knotted to go over a men's head in lieu of a cap on other head covering. It can be argued that anyone may wear a handkerchief over their heads. However as the text establishes once the poison of communalism is in the air no rationalizing is possible. Ramnik Gandhi the secularist tries to assert a commonality in a conversation with his daughter's friend's father. "...You must visit us when you are in amargaon. Yes... Mr. Noor Ahmad, Mr. Noor Ahmad, I'm Ramnik Gandhi. I... (Distinctly speaking it crt) Ramnik Gandhi (making a joke of it). No relation to the father of the Nation of course. It is a common surname....Why even in your own community...tells? (Act one) In this phone conversation he also makes it clear that despite not being overtly linked to the 'Mob' outside the idea of separation and difference is deeply internalised with in most of us. A door separates the Gandhi family from the Mob outside and when Javed and Bobby knock on the Gandhi door seeking refuge Gandhi does save their lives and lets them in. Again however the action of the text undercuts the overt meanings of the secularist. As Ramnik lets the outsiders in his mother is thrown back into the post and all the injustices ever done to her are re-invoked. "Why did he do it? Oh G Why do I have to suffer? Did not he have any feelings for me? I just wanted them to be my friends. How could he let these people into my house? Oh I hate this world! They killed his grandfather. (Act one) Aruna, unable to effectively stand up to her husband asserts her unquestioning belief in right/wrong if the men were being chased to be killed they must have done something wrong. This is a comfortable perspective from the center of society born of an assurance of security in being part of a dominant position is threatened that Aruna faces the insecurity of suddenly being de-centered of being part of a minority instead that this faith is Shaken. Rammik clearly acts of a personal motivation-his sense of guilt is the driving force behind his conscious and structured liberalism which becomes opponent when he blurts out to Aruna. "I have to protect them'. I need to protect them"! I need to protect them" [Act one] The subtext is clear - the home/family/society/Nateori are firmly Hindu, the two young men literarily and metaphorically the outsiders, the transgressors. The daughter, Smita is immediately sent inside to her room by her father, the tolerant insider who alone has the power to save the two men from the intolerant outside. The construction of the other is emphasized also by the obvious image of the sexual threats posed by the 'other'- when Smita comes out of her room and greets the two by name, her entire family against is aghast. Ramnik despite his tolerant image is extremely uncomfortable by with the ideas of his daughter knowing the socially personally - Aruna : You-you know them? Smita : I know why they are. Ramnik : Why didn't tell us? Smita : I was too confused. Hardika : Where did you meet them? In college? Smita (unsure) well yes Ramnik: when done that mean Aruna: Stop her studies! From now on she can stay at home! Ramnik: Where did you meet them? Smita: I told you. Hardika: But they are not from here. What were they doing in your college? Bobby: It's all right. Let me tell you. Smita (angrily) No! Ramnik (sternly) For God's sake! Tell us how you know these boys! (Act two) Ramnik only calms down when Smita tells him that she knows the two because Javed is her friend Tasneem's brother and the Bobby is Tasneem's fiance. As Smita says "Bobby comes to college quite often to meet Tasneem. She ... they used to go out quite often... there is no harm in that. They are getting married any way. Ramnik No, there is no harm in that. (Act two) Where is there no harm? In Bobby going out with Tasneem because they are engaged? Or because he is involved with somebody from his own community and therefore safe? The question remains unanswered.

Ramnik is a progressive secularist- not only does he save Javed and Bobby from the mob. He also forces his wife Aruna to serve them water a gesture she makes only when convinced that they would not actually drink it. After they do the contaminated glasses are picked up gingerly and kept separately from the other glasses in the kitchen. Ramnik also resents the alliance that Javed and Bobby built up in his home against him. Ramnik do not get so defensive 1st man (taken aback) I.... I am not being deteratives. All I said was we are not thirsty. Ramnik: How dare you suddenly join forces? in my house. 1st man : I do not understand Ramnik you have finished college while

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your friend has dripped out of school. You made that destination very clear. 1st man only because we were being clubbed together unreasonably. But why do you feel I am being....? Ramnik: you resented being clubbed together. 1st man: well I am not a college dropout. (Pause) well- yes I resented it. Ramnik: yet when you were uncertain.... about there cepts on you would receive. You clubbed yourself together unreasonably. You spoke for the two of you. (Act one) Actually Ramnik also is conscious of the difference as is his wife the distinction between them however is that Aruna articulates this clearly from her security of being part of the dominant group while Ramnik tries to snappers his prejudice. It emerges however as it becomes clear that there is a very thin live between tolerance and prejudice. When one is conscious of a divide. When Ramnik speaks of 'the trouble' he immediately refers to the Muslim families that live in their galli. "They've never bothered us, until now". Later, when he is told that Javed is looking for a job, he offers him one in his stop "You can handle these bohra and men and women who usually pen by our showroom you can stand outside and call them in; His guilt of the past surface directly. When he blurts out - "It will be give my pleasure to give that you. That shop is use to be... [Pause] take the tube. Please [Act Two] Ramnik's actions and deed arise directly from the guilt he feels about the action commuted by his father and the grandfather. It was his family that has caused zarine is fathers shop to be burnt in scoots after which they bought it a friction of its coats.

The 'emotive' cause of those particular roots in there clearly demonstrated to be at least party ceremony. Still not considering Javed is a simple a young man seeing him representative of those wavered by his ancestress Ramnik peewees that he is communal. In some ways as those on the other side ways of the door. And then he fund it only to easy to room the line between 'Tolerance' and fanaticism rerouting to the easy same start-ups that are circulated by there seeking to destroy. When it is discovered that Javed is one of those who were bought to be argon to Participate in the violence. In fact, to create the riots, Ramnik crosses that line between understanding and allocating flame. Ramnik; why do you destructs? Javed: Do you trust us? Ramnik: i don't go around throwing stones Javed: But you do something more violent, you provoke: You make me through stones Everetime I take to you, my fight rises: Ramnik (angry), now you are provoking me? How done your flame your violence to other people? It is in you? You have violence in your mind. Your faith is based... (He stops but it is too late) [Act two] Ramnik moves in single sentences, a single thought, from seeing the problem of violence as something could as solved by human understanding and compression, to an enidelluable, in hart truant in a whole community... anins allocable problem. Javed shows Ramnik that Ramnik is not as liberal as he would like to think of himself. As Daksha was shown by zarine that Daksha was not an in no sent as she thought of her self As long as we are silent as long we a accept that the majority does the mirrors a for our by tolerating then we participate in violence. Aruna tells the two men that they should be grateful that the grand her gave them shelter and Daksha felt that zarine should be grateful that she wanted to be Zarine's friend. But friend ship and tolerance can not be bargained on asked for. Javed has a strong belief in himself and his own faith it is the belief that has laid him on the paths of violence, it is his refusal to be apologetic for who an what he is that makes him demand acceptance , if it is not given to him. He does realize that his faith is taken advantage of by those who will profit by the riots, and he also realizes that when it comes to violence, we are all equally guilty.

Ramnik: you men that won't arrest you? Javed: Arrest me? When they have been the other way all along? How do you think we got into the street? In their vans. They will arrest me. Don't worry. To please people like you and a few innocent Muslim to people everyone. Ramnik: may be I should through you to the mole. Javed.... may be they aren't being paid over not. And they attacked us? They are not very systematic. Next time they should have a round of introduction so we don't killing each other? At least not unmentionably: Ha: you want to through me to the mole? I am a part of it. You have been protecting me from people like me. I'm no different from them. [Act three] An Unexpected Alliance in the play is that between Javed and Arena- they are both individual. Who have a strong belief? In their faith, in the thing of the shop their identities and

their ideas a three slave's family forced to realize the partition of the other, they are also forced to articulate to respect and tolerance.

When smita clears her difference from her mother, and tells her that she does not shame her blue for her faith, Aruna is shattered even when so more Ramnik also his daughter why she his not articulated her feeling before, and smita tells him because it word have been a victory for him ever Arena suddenly, Aruna realizes the portion of an outsider. Smita; How easy it world have been to us for us to your forces and made her feel she was in the wrong. How easy to just push her over because you will have me telling her exidity what you wanted to tell her yourself to 'Arena' when would you have done? Shut yourself from us we would not have let you off so easily. We would've harmed you we wouldn't have let you forget that the spirit of liberalism now in your blood and you were the oddity... you were the out sides. What would wappents you them? How weak and fused traded would you feet you do get what i men don't you. Mummy? [Act Three]

It is this different prospective that makes Aruna actually change her stance on the 'Outsiders'. She remains silent when Smita asks her to help with the felling of the water, or else 'they' will help. In this tacit stretching of the taboos. Aruna is changed but not crushed - she remains stead fast to her faith. But changes with the times 'they' an help with the general water but 'not God's vessel' [Act Three] it is only Javed. The other believes who is able to recognize and accept Aruna's portion. In fact, he tells her so - 'you said the same thing to her. What I told Babban. You told her - you said you wouldn't listen to her criticism because she was not proud of her.... What did you call it? Inheritance, I said religion. Same thing. I suppose [pause] we are not very different. You and me. We both feel pride. "[Act Three] when Smita hands him the 'God's Vessel' to prove it wouldn't fly off into the heaven when he touched it. Javed recoils and refuses to 'fool around' with it. Finally allowing the 'other' religion the respect they demanded for their own. Javed and aruna make an unexpected alliance in this text, offering one possible 'final solution'. But how this is the live between respecting religion and denying another's faith? Bobby and smita are another such pair - they are similar is that they both reject their communal identities - smita because she feels stifled 'and bobby because he feels ashamed. This puts each of them in a weaker portion vis-à-vis the 'other - Javed and Aruna. This however, is another 'final solution' - to deny any context to attempt to live on your own terms, to reject the past and any other social framework of identity and self formation. How possible is this solution?

Smita rejects the possibility of relationship between her and bobby - "it was just one evening - a conversation that got a little personal. Nothing more". [Act Three] When bobby asks her if that was a personal decision or one of convenience, Smita's reply is that it was entirely personal "it is wonderful to know that the choice in yours to mala". [Act Three] This may be a truly 'humanist' solution. But the entire text has consistently subverted the idea of a distinction between the personal and the public and decision that is based on 'personal' consideration is shown to be at least partly motivated by 'the political' and vice versa.

These are not airtight categories as Dattani repeatedly reminds us, through the actions of Hardika, Javed and even Ramnik Gandhi. What then is the 'final solution'? Is one even possible? Would it be better for us to stop trying to find the final answer and just try to make our own peace with ourselves and those around us? Is it possible to atom for the past? Can the personal be separated from the public? Is Aruna's and Javed's faith the answer? Or does the solution lie in the rejection of bobby and smita? In the last scene, bobby picks up the idol of Krishna from the pooja room in the Gandhi home and holds it in his hand. He defies Aruna's cries and the anger of the Mob and arrests his faith in 'humanity'. Bobby : See Javed : He doesn't humiliate you. He doesn't cringe from my touch. He welcomes the warmth of my hand. He feels me. And he welcomes it! I hold him who is sacred to them but, I do not commit sacrilege. [to Aruna] you can bathe him day and night, you can splash holy waters on him but you can not remove my touch from his form. You can not remove my smell with sandal paste and attars and fragrant flowers because it belongs to

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a human being who believes, and tolerates, and respects what other human being behave that is the strongest fragrance in the world! [Act Three] But this final solution may remain just another possibility.

The very last scene, after Bobby and Javed leave the Gandhi home, changed for ever, is still a bleak one. Ramnik finally tells his mother of the crime committed by his father - how they burnt the shop in the name of communal hatred. Because they wanted the shop. And when Hardika asks if the boys will come back - Ramnik's answer is what remains with us - "if you call them they will come. But then again - if it's too late - they may not." [Act Three] As John McRae in 'An introduction to the plays of Mahesh Dattani' puts it "This is theatre at the cutting edge. Holding the mirror up to the secretary it depicts, showing... the form and pressure of time". (Final Solution and other plays).

This play deals with anti-fanaticism concerns - not only religious fanaticism but fanaticism in all walks of life. And appropriately enough, Dattani demonstrates this by showing the various ways in which most people. Overtly or covertly are party to acts of fanaticism and are responsible for a good deal of the conflicts that exist written society - be it at the macrocosmic level of the nation - state or even the microcosmic one of the family. Thus we have the fanaticism of the Hindus and the Muslims in Amargaon clashing during the 'Rath yatra' the fanaticism of daksna in law that present her friendship with Zarine from progressing (Dattani shatters the of toned with that music friend the barriers between people).

The fanaticism of the older Daksha lie Hardika, Which is a rice chatting response to her Confinement, The fanaticism of Hardika daughter in law Arena who is the archetypal pious Hindu women and of course, the fanaticism of Javed that people him into journeying forces with those who talked always talked about the mother land and fighting to save our faith" contrasted with such fanaticism is the doubtful pacifism of Bobby, the shake liberalism Ramnik and the escapism of Smita Arising from share evidence. Such fanaticism is not only self-limiting for each of these individual but so also the primary cause for the barriers that are constructed between them and the longer world in this context if Daksha, Hardika Writing in her diary (Even though free fly) can diary seen as attempt to can front and negotiable with the reality faced by her, The play final solution can be meta thematically to imply the next- not even this dramatic script by Dattani - can preside any final solution/s to the audience. Prophase the solution lie of each with us - we all need to come to tern with our people preludes and find of our solution and Bobby did. The play can only serve an as awaking. In making the mob/ chairs when that does not have a singular identity but an easily inter changeable. One who you are depend on which face you put your Hindu Make or your Muslim mark, In making Daksha and Hardika merge into each other. Dattani Seek to show that through from may change; paramercia, hatred and fear prevail. All through play the mob/ chairs Remains on stage charted on still lie sad portion. The fires who compose their mob on chairs wear a make which is atop a stick held before them. There are five Hindu and five Muslim makes the play right feels, ideally they should be wearing black. They do not belong to any religion but become Hindu or Muslim depending upon the make they done. The symbolic velvets the makes, the sticks, the black cloth, are what blamers refers to as the 'paraphernalia of ritual as slogans songs expire guests faster felling common identity sympathy written and ritual activity, such peripheries 'acquires' a sentimental liking the common feeling about the movement, there uses serves as a constant solving and reinforcement about these mutual feeling 'such paraphernalia gerents a serves of self importance and provide one of the mean by which people who parts apache in such a dramas see themselves an playing and certain role more then the defamation of rules and emotional epode.

Thus in act I when the chars. Wearing their Hindu make say that "the procession had proud through that lines/ Every year/ for forty year? and that "for forty years our chariot has moved through their mohallas". The procession and the chariot bearing the idols of the Gods are the

symbolic paraphernalia used by the activists of Hinduism to reinforce their authority, the coercive authority of a power hungry 'majority' as Javed (and surely he is only a representative of his community, perceives it. Again, the 'bell' used by a neighbor for prayers in the incident narrated by Bobby that changed Javed life and transformed him from a have to a rebel out caste, the prayer bell used by Aruna towards the end of the play, the vessel that Aruna has earmarked for filling water to bathe the Gods - all these objects have an ingrained value to their possessors.

Thus Dattani underlines that though the power of a movement is ultimately the power of its collective of activists, the creation of that power is accomplished in no small measure by the use of ritual devices. But Dattani does not aim to be only descriptive on perspective. For he reveals how fragile are these 'paraphernalia' how easily they can be crushed and thus under mine the so-called power of the mighty. Because, the procession through forty years old can be easily disrupted - the chariots and the idols can be broken.

The bell that is like a signal of sacredness sent out by Javed's Hindu neighbor can be easily made perform by the meat and bones the own by Javed into his backyard. The poojari singing the bell loses his life to a knife wound. Smita offers the water vessel for the Gods to Javed - challenging her mother's contention (and this when she is an obedient daughter) that outsiders contaminate the purity of the water used for such a holy purpose. And of course Bobby is daring move at the end when he picks up the Hindu idol to prove. Yours God! My flesh is holding does not mind. He does not burn me to the ashes! He does not cry out from the heavens saying. He was been contaminated. A little later, he continues.... I hold him who is sacred to them, but I do not commit sacrilege (to Aruna) you can bathe him day and night, you can splash holy waters on Him but you can not remove my touch from his form. You can not remove my smell with fragrant flowers because it belongs to a human being who believes, and tolerates, and respects what other human beings believe. That is the strongest fragrance in the world. One of the most surviving way in which Dattani subverts the kind of rustic elements that are used by a body/an organization to garner legitimacy as well as to built loyalties is the way he contests the commemoration of Independence day. Dattani choruses the path of demy deification and so Daksha wants with cold and devastating clarity in her dairy. May be I should talk about more important things. Like last year in August a most terrible thing happened to our country. We - (trying hard to read her hand writing) -gained independence. You should have seen it. Everyone was awake wanting for midnight - like children on the last day of school, wanting for the last bell of the last class before vacation. And then rushing out and screaming and shouting and fighting". Not only this Daksha consider it 'a most terrible thing. Through Javed's long narrative. Dattani carefully details the haws and whys of recruitment into a movement that sought to vanquish the Hindu night, by erasing? Its symbolic devices of power. Most political organizations indulge in the common practice of a ritual evocation of an emotional response within its initiates, to socialize them to the values and expectations that constitute the culture of organization. When Bobby tells Javed that it was only too evident to anyone that the people whom Javed had joined forces with were hired hood lumps. Javed unravels the process that snared him and blinded him to this fact. He says : "It is so clear, isn't it? Anyone sitting at home, sipping tea and reading the newspapers, a minority would never start a riot, we are too afraid, that it had to be politically motivated. Try telling it to a thousand devotees swayed by their own religious forever. United of their fantasies of persecution, constantly reassuring themselves that this is their land by taking out procession (looking at Bobby). Anyone could tell not what he has his delusion as well.

Delusions of valour and heroism. Of finding, a cause to give purpose to his existence 'The time has come' somebody would say 'This is jehad - the holy war! It is written! 'Yes! I would say 'I am ready. I am prepared". He speaks about his sense of belonging induced by the corentry liquor he consumes with his comrades and about how after sunset. Javed's experience is not exceptional as 'in the vans I was with several other youths like me'. It is this collective experience in fact, this

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bonding with the other youth who have undergone the same process of initiation as himself that keeps Javed attached to his group. Ritual far from always creating solidarity by reinforcing shared values, often produces solidarity in the absence of any commonality of beliefs.

The provocative speeches that Javed, like his fellow recruits, is privy to, serve precisely this purpose of legitimizing the conceptual principals of the organization through its emotional impact. Javed - It was different when I used to attend their meetings. I was swayed by what now appears to me as cheap sentiment. They always talked about motherland and fighting to save our faith and how we should get four of theirs for everyone of ours. By showing how Javed, the rebel-fanatic is created, Dattani unpeels the manipulative power of ritual activities that engineer such constructions. Dattani also emphasizes that ritual binds people together, often by common action rather than common thought. Javed : I felt a stone in my hand. Bobby : They were giving him stones! Javed : I hit them hard with stones! Bobby : I couldn't stop him! No one could. More people joined in throwing stones. Javed : And then I felt something else in my hand. Bobby : Oh no! He couldn't. Javed : I had power. To retrace this arguments. Dattani asserts that while rituals can engender solidity, they can also be a handicap if an individual wishes to break free. In an almost poetic-turn of phrase. Javed describes this phenomenon. I had permission to do exactly what I had been asked not to do all my life! Raise my voice in protest. To shout and scream in protest, to shout and scream like a child on the giant wheel in a carnival. The first screams are of pleasure of sensing an unusual freedom. And then - it becomes nightmarish as your world is way below you and you are moving away from it - and suddenly you come crashing down and you want to get off. But you can't. You don't want it anymore. It is the same feeling repeated over and over again. You screen with pain and horror but there own cycles of joy and terror. The feelings come faster and faster till they confuse you with the blur created by their speed. You get nauseated and you cry to yourself 'why am I here? What am I doing here? The joy ride gets over and you get off. And you are never sure again. [Pause] It is a terrible feeling being disillusioned. [Pause] Don't we all have anger and frustration? Am I so unique? Now that I am alone, I hate myself. When Javed finds the knife thrust into his hand during the rath yatra procession. Thrust with murderous intent, he experiences that 'terrible feeling' he has described. And he backs off "I got nauseous and cried. 'Why am I here? What am I doing here? Get Me Off! Want to Get Off! I was so close to him I could - I could have. I could.... I let go of the knife. (The Mob/Chorus stops humming). The knife fell to the ground. The joy ride was over. (Pause) I couldn't hear noises anymore. I watched men fighting, distorted faces not making a round. And I watched someone pickup the knife and piece the poojari. I watched while people removed a part of the chariot as planned. The poojari fell to the ground. The carnival continued. What would be regarded as an act be betrayal or even cowardice on the part of Javed, is commended by Ramnik who observes. You are brave. Not everyone can get off. For some of us it is not even possible to escape. For Ramnik, Javed appears to be lucky as he can not himself escape from the sins of his forefathers whose crimes arising from communal hatred haunt and torture him. In her essay, 'Final Solution' Angelia Multani speaks of the set design of the play as emphasizing Dattani's contention that the family unit recusants society".

Multani comments on the significance of the fact that only the kitchen and the pooja room are detailed as against the rest of the living space as- It is largely through food habits and taboos that we all draw the lines that separate us from each other.

There is a close relationship between food habits and religious belief and the obvious 'otherness' of different communities is manifested through differences in what/how we and they eat. We also make sharp distinctions where food and food related utensils are concerned, which perhaps serves to emphasize separation in a uniquely distinctive and defined manner. Taboos are most clearly expressed in our realities through these two particularized spaces in Dattani's sets - the room for worship and the space where the food is prepared. The sets also portion the family, signified by the home, in relation to society which is represented through the Mob/Chorus [five men and ten

masks on sticks]. Which more or less encircle the Gandhi home? The representation of the younger Hardika [Daksha] takes place on another level, thus ensuring that the past always remains in front of us and can not be forgotten. The play 'Final Solution' begins with the silent introspective conversation of Daksha with her diary. Reflecting on the whole gamut of memories, examining the various course of events, she concludes, things have not changed that much". with the recollections of independence, the memory flashes how a stone hit her gramophone table and the entire collection of records broken "Shamshad Begum, Noor Jehan, Suraiya...." In the present, her consciousness is broken with the interruption of the sound of the members of chorus pouring out their aggression hatred and prejudice. Swayed by religious fanaticism and national prejudices, they are wild with contempt and revenge. One of them challenges... "This is our land". The collective voice of their slogans becomes a part of a crescendo. There is chaos in voice, uncertainty of identity and lack of organization in action. Smita, the grand daughter anxiety for the safety of her Muslim friend Tasneem who had been trapped inside the hostel in bombing. Dattani represents two communities through the change of masks.

This device of changing the mask is quite significant. Behind the mask each member of the chorus is a human being and here lies the roots of dramatic tension in the play 'Final Solution'. The mob frenzy of Muslims is vitalized in the second appearance of mob/chorus. Sacrificing their humanity and religious faiths, they make a mockery of God and Goddesses. They have such comments, "Their God now prostrates before us" and ridicules with an indention of vengeance "Doesn't their God have a warranty?" But in collective tone mentions, "We are neither idol makers nor breakers." Ramnik, the son of Hardika in spite of his sympathy for Muslims, is not convinced by the ideology of Hardika. With his liberal and dynamic attitude, he tries to sustain the values of faith and human love beyond communal disharmony. He gives shelter to two Muslim boys Bobby and Javed and protects them from mob fury. Being in panic they are apprehensive of their own security. Two unidentified members of the chorus assault them; snatch their watch with out knowing their real identity and portion. The irrational fury of chorus let them no opportunity to reveal their identity.

One of them doubts "something gives chase and some of their blows strike the two men who cry in pain. Ramnik Gandhi finally opens the gate and gives shelter to all of these two boys. Hardika's conscience suspends and turns back to the past. Chorus even invades the house of Ramnik crying "throw them out, we'll kill them." The irrational and unorganized behavior of the crowd is the external manifestation of prejudice that admits no rational justification of human thought. The gestures, the actions, the dialogues are all well coordinated to express the fury of the mob in the frenzy to kill Bobby and Javed. Ramnik is determined, "I have to protect them! I need to protect them." Dattani maintains the dramatic conflict and minutely records the reactions that are integrated in human pryche time and again, they erupt spontaneously chain of events.

Hence action in the play moves not in isolation but takes within itself the invisible clash of motives that are more true to the real life experiences. Aruna provides water to Javed but holds the glasses with her thumbs and index fingers on the sides. Further she places the glass of Javed separate from other glasses. The chorus from the outside warns them to be aware of their moves and motives, "They will stab you in the back! They'll rape your daughter - throw them out." The hesitation of Aruna coordinates with the thoughts of mob and makes a pattern of religious frenzy.

The play 'Final Solution' is divided in three acts. These three acts of drama mark a gradual development of action towards the solution. First act is the extortion, second is climax and the third is solution. In the second act, the social conflict merges in familial conflict. Smita, the daughter recognizes Javed and Bobby but her recognition of their identities, stirs a greater doubt and contempt in the mind of two. The consistently apprehensive mood of Aruna makes Javed irritates, "Thank you for your protection." Hardika fails to tolerate them in her home. As soon as a stone is hurled, she looks at the stone and shouts at Javed. If Aruna is prejudiced. Javed is also not free

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from prejudice and the idea of being different is rooted in his mind. Even without the interrogative of Hardika Javed replies, "Those are our own people." The young Smita represents the dynamism of new generation and she behaves like the instruments of solution in the play. She is neither rebellious nor apprehensive. The third act in *Final Solution* can be appreciated as turning point in the play. Being disgusted with the apathy of Aruna, Javed admits that he is a professional 'rioter' and he is engaged in riots for the sake of money. Ramnik, who earlier offers him job, now doubts his intentions.

Dattani through the cross examination of Javed and Ramnik tries to reflect on the roots of motive behind the passion for communal violence. Ramnik survives in conflicting situation, his external and internal self divides. Earlier he presents himself liberal minded but he is too governed by the passion for religions fanaticism. He also doubts on Javed and his doubt anguish then the infliction of rioters. He admits, "You would have let the mob kill me. And you wouldn't have minded he had died as well. You don't hate me for what I do or who I am. You hate me because I showed you that you are not as liberal as you think you are."

Dattani treads the ground that the real problem lies in the attitudes. In the present scenario of communal tension Hardika's memory shifts to the past and she recalls her own past how she used to visit the place of Zarina, her friend. Simultaneously Javed's helplessness assumes the proportion of resentment leading to destructive anger. He cries out. "Don't we all have anger and frustration? Am I so unique? Now that I am alone.... I hate myself. It was different when I used to attend the meetings. I was swayed by what now appears to me as cheap sentiments. They always tackled about motherland and fighting to save our faith and how we should get tour of their for everyone of ours." It is not a question of society and community but of the identity of the individual Javed's resentment is that every time, he is caught in suspicion and his best intentions are worst-treated. The different questions asked by chorus are the questions associated eternally with the national identity of the minority who have to take recourse to cornaival to protect their interest. In all vehemence, he interrogates- What must we do? To become more acceptable? Must we lose our identity? Is that what they want? Must we tolerate more? Does our future lie in their hands? Is there anyone more unsure more insecure than us, or what a curse, if is to be less in number."

In *Final Solution*, anger is not an expression of aggression but a method of self-defense. Javed offers his services to Aruna and tries to help her by filling the bucket of water but it was of no avail. Aruna tries to maintain balance with her modesty but her broken and incomplete statements, signify the conflict of her mind how it was different for her to compromise with Javed. In spite of her apparent sympathy she says, "We don't allow anyone to fill our drinking water. No outsider." "We bath our God with it. It has to be pure. It must not be contaminated." Smita is a foil to Aruna and she condemns the prejudice of her mother. She tolerates Javed and Bobby without any fear and doubt. Smita is the voice of true liberatism and irraticates her. She many not be a fundamentalist but is rigid and has no confidence to go beyond accepted ideologies. She is not ready to compromise with her sanskars. She accesses Smita. I shudder to think what will become of your children what kind of sanskar will you give them when you don't have any yourself? It's all very well to have progressive ideas. But are you progressing or are drifting? God knows, I don't want all this violence - for so many generations we have preserved our sanskar because we believe it is the truth.... I shall uphold what I believe is the truth." Smita, is confident that religion is a matter of personal faith and the conflict emerges out of prejudices. To sustain faith in religion. The power of soul is essential.

Dattani through Smita establishes that no religion can serve without the acknowledgment of faith of others. The solution lies in the recognition of similarities and not in identification of differences and discrimination. She exhorts, "We would never have spoken about what makes us so different from each other. We should have gone on living our lives with our petty similarities. The fanaticism of her mother was a burden to the spirit of humanity and compassion. Smita in order to restore the

right spirit of true faith does not even revolt against the monotonous and irrational arguments of her own mother. She challenges. I tolerated your prejudices only because you are my mother. May be, I should have told you earlier, but I am telling you now, I can't bear it! Please don't burden me anymore, I can't take it. The burden of prejudice was unbearable not only for Smita but also for Javed and Bobby. Her enlightening arguments collectively contribute to take the action of the play towards a safe mooring. The issue of religion is associated with national identities, cultural identities and social identities. Smita seeks the solution of the problems in Indian ethics that teaches to respect all modes of religious creeds with an uncompromising spirit of tolerance.

Dattani sustains the identical spirit in Final Solution. Smita's anger shifts to her mother and she commands her, We would've horned you. We wouldn't let you off so easily. We would have hounded you. We wouldn't have let you forget that the spirit of liberalism ran in our blood and that you were the oddity - you were the outsider! What would have happen to you then? How weak and frustrated would you feel? You do get - what mean, don't you mamma? She does not care for her personal sentiments for Bobby for the sake of her friend Tasneem. She puts water pot in the hand of Javed. It was only a method of inculcating a better confidence and faith in Javed.

Dattani establishes that the love for humanity eliminates the dark shadows of prejudice. The solution lies not in external world but within man's own consciousness. She confesses. "I wanted you to fill it. To prove that it is not going to fly off into the heavens with your touch, putting and external curse on our family." She suddenly splashes water on Javed's face and then on Bobby and all of three unite in a single laughter forming a chorus. Smita's vision subsides the fury of Bobby and Javed and encourages Smita to conclude, "may be we should all run away from home like Javed... so we can quickly gulp in some fresh air and go back in." They come back to home from ramp with new enlightenment. Smita propagates that through personal vision. One can sustain one's individual freedom, freedom wherever one may by "but immediately Hardika reacts. You are foolish, to think you can create your freedom." However, Bobby in order to break the ultimate shackles of blind orthodoxy determines to break the web of illusions. Images may be the matter of personal faith but not the ultimate realization of divinity. It is call of humanity that leads towards the realization of God. Bobby conquers his fury and becomes indifferent to the resentment of the mob and panic stricken reactions of Aruna. He proceeds towards the temple, picks up the image of Krishna and comes as a challenge to the fundamentalism of both Javed and Aruna, representing the two distinctive cults.

The comprehensiveness of his vision. Encompasses fear, anxiety, insecurity and uncertainty if human sentiments. He fearlessly declares - See Javed! He doesn't humiliate you. He doesn't cringes from my touch. He welcomes the warmth of my hand. He feels me. And he welcomes it! I told him who is sacred to them, but I don't commit sacrilege. (To Aruna) You can bath him day and night, you can splash holy water on him but can not remove my touch from his farms. You can not remove my smell with sandal paste and Altars and fragrant flowers because it belongs and tolerates and respects what other human beings believe - That is the strongest fragrance in the world. The convention of Bobby is a manifestation of Dattani's own religious tolerance against the venom of communal violence. For Aruna, her own God is sacred but this sacredness depends on personal faith. Dattani presents his own remedy of communal violence through Bobby, "The tragedy is that there is too much that is sacred. But if we understand and believe in one another, nothing can be destroyed. And if you are willing to forget, I am willing to tolerate. It is only the formula of forget and tolerate that can emancipate society that can eclipse stands on the edge of time with the perpetual question if one can really forget the bitterness of communal difference. Leaving the crowd on the ramp. She retires to her room with the desperate realization "and so those boys left. I still am not willing to forget. Days have passed since that night and not one of us has forgotten. One more memory? We don't speak to each other. We move in silence."

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The final revelation of Ramnik that remains hidden throughout the play is very significant from the point of view of dramatic presentation. The crises of resentment, anger and hatred is a continuous process in which no consolation is possible. What Ramnik was doing with Bobby and Javed was also an expression of anger what had already been done by his father. He survives with a sense of guilt that he wanted to compensate by providing jobs to Javed and Bobby. It is their shop. It is the same burnt shop we bought from them, at half its value an we burnt it. Your husband, my father. And his father. They had burnt it in the name of communal hatred. Because we wanted a shop.... I wanted to tell them that they are not the only ones who have destroyed, I just couldn't. I don't think. I have the face to tell anyone. It wasn't false pride or arrogance. It was anger.

In Final Solution, Dattani presents a socio-political issue with the vision of a part asks in the chain of events. Instead of taking the mechanical respond of the characters. He grips the two moil of emotions associated with them. The action is not imposed from outside but emerges from within and it is much assented to fill the higher conditions of drama. The integrated vehemence of passion, provides and additional force to action and the spontaneity of action bring it's nearer to the real life conditions. Each character in the play struggles at two levels personal conventions and the commitments towards society. Smita with her liberalism and Aruna with her fundamentalism frame a suitable concepts to explore the roots of communal violence existing in Indian society. Aruna is not ready to forget and therefore, Smita is not ready to tolerate her. Ramnik, no doubt is a complex character but his life represents evolution to self realization and this realization restores a balance of emotions, an elevation of human pryche where individual consciousness becomes a part of whole. For a social issue. Dattani seeks a philosophical ground. Man eternally can't escapes the burden of his own guild. All social and communal differences are generated out of individual difference and social apathy that has no rational ground.

The use of chorus with mask is suggestive of Dattani's affinity with the native tradition of drama. The change of mask by the members of chorus besides being a part of stage craft has profound relevance to declare divided consciousness of mob, in particular and humanity in general. It is only the mask that changes and behind the masks, there are human characters. It symbolizes that the awareness of communal disharmony and the passion for discrimination is only an external mask that covers the essential humanity that is 'One' and sublime. The characters roasted with hatred and violence appears only in the mask. The generosity of Smita and the realization of Bobby is the only possible, "Final Solution" to save society from the clouds of disharmony and violence.

30.2 Plot Construction

The Final Solution: A Story of Detection is a 2004 novel by Michael Chabon. It is a detective story that in many ways pays homage to the writings of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and other writers of the genre. The story, set in 1944, revolves around an unnamed 89-year-old long-retired detective (who may or may not be Sherlock Holmes but is always called just "the old man"), now interested mostly in beekeeping, and his quest to find a missing parrot, the only friend of a mute Jewish boy. The title of the novella references Doyle's Sherlock Holmes story "The Final Problem," in which Holmes confronts his greatest enemy, Professor Moriarty, at Reichenbach Falls, and the Final Solution, the Nazis' plan for the genocide of the Jewish people.

Self-Assessment

1. Fill in the blanks:

- (i) Dattani won the prestigious Central Sahitya Akademi Award in
- (ii) Ramnik, the father carries with him the burden of the guilt of his father's
- (iii) Babban and Javed is in a sense allowed entry after severe resistance from

30.3 Summary

- Ramnik, the father carries with him the burden of the guilt of his father's black deeds, transferring some of the resentment to his mother. Hardika, Aruna, his Wife and Smita, his daughter both hit on at each other for no apparent reason.
- The mercenary gains that one party derives from the communal riots of the past is the baggage of guilt that Rammik has caused for long, this is revealed to a crushed Hardika, who seemed secure in her hatred of the other party, Sheltering her same of being in the right. It also explains the reasons for Ramnik's extreme tolerance. The smug and often parsimonies Aruna is Shaken out of her compliancy through Smita's out bur. St against her rigid and restrictive practices that have for long choked her. Dattani here manages to intricately interweave the individual strands of family identity into the larger picture. "It stifles me! Yes! I can see so clearly how wrong you are.
- Dattani's characters also each have their own justification their own rationale for their actions. Daksha (now the grandmother) hates Muslims because her father was killed a communal riot and because her overtones of friendship to Zarine a young Muslim girl were rejected after other communal riots that razed Zarine's father's shop, and which incidentally was bought by Daksha's father-in-law.
- The set design of the play emphasizes Dattani's contention that the family unit represents society. The living space of the Gandhi family is shown through a barebones presentation with just wooden blocks for furniture (Act one). The only detailed sets are the kitchen and Pooja room. This is significant as really it is lonely through food habits and tattoos that we all draw the lines that separate us from each other.
- Ramnik is a progressive secularist- not only does he save Javed and Bobby from the mob. He also forces his wife Aruna to serve them water a gestate she makes only when convinced that they would not actually drink it. After they do the contaminated glasses are picked up gingerly and kept separately from the other glasses in the kitchen. Ramnik also resents the alliance that Javed and Bobby built up in his home against him. Ramnik do not get so defensive 1st man (taken aback) I.... I am not being deterrentsives.
- This play deals with anti-fanaticism concerns - not only religious fanaticism but fanaticism in all walks of life. And appropriately enough, Dattani demonstrates this by showing the various ways in which most people. Overtly or covertly are party to acts of fanaticism and are responsible for a good deal of the conflicts that exist written society - be it at the macrocosmic level of the nation - state or even the microcosmic one of the family. Thus we have the fanaticism of the Hindus and the Muslims in Amargaon clashing during the 'Rath yatra' the fanaticism of daksna in law that present her friendship with Zarine from progressing (Dattani shatters the of toned with that music friend the barriers between people).
- Thus Dattani underlines that though the power of a movement is ultimately the power of its collective of activists, the creation of that power is accomplished in no small measure by the use of ritual devices. But Dattani does not aim to be only descriptive on perspective. For he reveals how fragile are there 'paraphernalia' how easily they can be crushed and thus under mine the so-called power of the mighty. Because, the procession through forty years old can be easily disrupted - the chariots and the idols cab be broken.

30.4 Key-Words

1. Extortion : The act or an instance of extorting, illegal use of one's official position or powers to obtain property, funds, or patronage.
2. Inflict : Cause (something unpleasant or painful) to be suffered by someone or something.

Notes

30.5 Review Questions

1. Discuss the role of Aruna and Hardika.
2. Explain the Plot, Construction of Final Solution.

Answers: Self-Assessment

1. (i) 1998 (ii) black deeds
(iii) Aruna and Hardika

30.6 Further Readings



1. Manohar Malgonker, *A Bend in The Ganges* (Delhi : Oriental Paperback, 1994) 355.
2. Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri. *Contemporary Indian Writer in English: Mahesh Dattani* (Delhi : Foundation Books, 2005), 77-78.
3. Mahesh Dattani. *Collected Plays* (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2000), 168. Subsequent reference are incorporated in the text-with an abbreviation, FS Satchinand K. *Indian Literature: Position and Preposition* (Delhi: Pencraft Internat.

Unit 31: Mahesh Dattani: Final Solution – Theme

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Objectives

After reading this Unit students will be able to:

- Analyse Life and Works of Dattani.
- Discuss the theme of the play.

Introduction

'Final Solution,' first performed in Bangalore in 1993 foregrounds the Hindu-Muslim problems. It also tackles the theme of transferred resentments in the context of family relations. Alyque Padamsee says, directing Final Solutions in Mumbai. "As I see it. This is a play about transferred resentment. About looking for a scapegoat to hit out when we feel let down, humiliated. Taking out anger on your wife, children or servants is an old Indian custom- this is above all, a play about a family with its simmering under currents. In 1998, Mahesh Dattani won the Sahitya Akademi award for his Final Solutions and other plays. This is a stage play in three acts. The play was first performed at Guru Nanak Bhawan, Bangalore on 10 July, 1993. The Play upon with Daksha reading from her diary. An oil lamp converted to an electric one suggests that the period is the late 1940s. Daksha is the grandmother of the Gandhi's. Who sometimes is seen as a girl of fifteen on the stage? Daksha thanks that she is "a young girl who does not matter to anyone outside her home". She says, "Last year in August, a terrible thing happened and that was freedom for India". The most whispers : "Freedom! At last freedom!" Daksha close her diary and now Hardika appears on the stage. She feels the things have not changed that much. A period of forty years is not a long period for a nation. But on the stage, the drumbeat grows louder and the Chorus slowly wears the Hindu masks. The words spoken by Chorus show the beginning of disharmony and painful period ahead. As long as the persons are on the stage they are normal but as soon as they are behind the masks, their thirst for blood resist. Whether we are angry with someone or someone is angry with us each out burst takes its toll on both parties. The Chorus with Hindu masks burst with angry words.

31.1 Final Solution – Theme

The central theme and its layered treatment in Final Solutions, the socio-political context of the play's early productions, its long history of performances in English and Hindi-Urdu, and the public attention it has drawn, make this play an immensely rich site to explore theatre's potential

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to serve as a platform for advocating religious pluralism in South Asia. In this thesis, I will examine *Final Solutions* both as a literary work and as a successful piece of theatre in this capacity. Through a detailed analysis of the text, I will first pinpoint the specific aspects of Dattani's play that make it a powerful tool for addressing religious communalism. I will also explore how political theatrical events, such as Advani's *Rath Yatras*, influenced the writing of *Final Solutions*. I will then turn to an examination of its prominent productions, again paying particular attention to how the communal tensions incited by the *Ramjanmabhoomi* campaign impacted them. This examination will also include a discussion of the audience's reactions to these performances.

I will next compare the Hindi-Urdu version of *Final Solutions* with the original English text. Here, I will explore the ramifications of the two languages for the play's effectiveness. I will ask if a play like *Final Solutions* should be written in English, a language not understood by the majority of India's population. Finally, I will compare the medium of theatre to the predominant medium of South Asian popular culture: film. I will consider whether a play like *Final Solutions* can have a social impact in a country dominated by the Hindi-Urdu film industry known as Bollywood. How does the play compare to films dealing with the same theme? I will explore this question by comparing the play to Mani Ratnam's *Bombay* (1995), a film made in response to the Babri Masjid demolition and the Bombay riots. Through my examination of both literary and theatrical aspects of *Final Solutions*, I hope to throw light on the potential of theatre to address the crucial social issue of communal violence in South Asia and contribute to the building of harmony in the region.

The most exciting thing in the book Mahesh Dattani's *Interview* is included which will help researchers, scholars, academicians and teachers to understand dramatic world of Mahesh Dattani. Vishwanath Bite in his well researched article on *Thirty Days in September* analyses the play through different perspectives. Anisha. N. in her insightful article, *Representing the Other in Seven Steps Around the Fire*, examines that Mahesh Dattani's hand touches the heart of the third gender through his vivid portrayal of the hijra community in his play *Seven Steps Around the Fire*. She further says that Dattani explains the term hijra through the words of Uma Rao, a research scholar in Sociology, by taking recourse to the Ramayana and also tries to explore the misery of the marginalized sections of the society. V. B. Chitra & T. Sasikanth Reddy's paper regarding *Sexuality, Alternate Sexualities and Gender in Dattani's Bravely Fought The Queen*, highlight the place of modern Indian theatre that is predominantly urban, manifestly influenced by Western traditions even as it tries to find its own feet, still evolving and searching for a distinctive identity. They state that the drama is part of the larger 'Indian theatre', decidedly influenced by, and drawing inspiration from many of its traditional forms. Kaustav Chakraborty in his article, *The Inconsistent World of Gays: A Psychoanalytical Approach to On a Muggy Night in Mumbai/ Mango Soufflé*, discusses the homosexual bond between the gay characters that seem to be fraudulent, as revealed through Dattani's play *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*. He further says that we stigmatize the gay characters in Mahesh Dattani's plays/movies with polygamous infidelity; we must do it keeping their psychological struggle in mind as well as should not exclusively evaluate their appeal on the sole basis of their sexual behavior. Dipanita Gargava in her well-research article, *Mahesh Dattani's Plays: a Mirror of Contemporary Society*, states that Dattani's plays are reflection of the contemporary society. According to her, Dattani not only deals with common and ordinary people but the common problems of people in realistic terms. In many of his plays, he deals with various issues like homosexuality, gender discrimination, communalism and child sexual abuse. Dattani manages to delve deep into the hearts to recreate characters with authenticity and a sense of liveliness. Anisha Rajan in her article highlights the theme of gender discrimination in Mahesh Dattani's play *Tara*. She says that gender inequality is a form of inequality which is distinct from other forms of economic and social inequalities. It stems not only from pre-existing differences in economic endowments between women and men but also from pre-existing gendered social norms and social perceptions. Through this play Dattani brings out the root of gender discrimination by making the woman, the destroyer of another woman's life.

Theme of Communalism

Mahesh Dattani's 'Final Solution' is a very serious and delicate drama on the well-worn subject of communalism. It is first staged in Bangalore in 1993 focusing on the problem of communal disharmony between the Hindus and Muslims in India, especially during the period of the post-partition riot. Dattani's purpose in depicting the post partition communal violence in India is not to convey the actual events that taken place but to present the psychological fear that inculcated on our mind. The play opens with Daksha reading from her diary. Daksha is the grandmother of Gandhi family. When she closes her diary, Hardika appears on the stage. She feels that nothing changed much before independence and after. In between Hardika is telling her daughter that 'those people are all demons' which didn't like to Ramnik, a liberal minded person. In the communal riot, two muslim boys Javed and Bobby took shelter in Ramnik's house. When the chorus shouts: "Kill the sons of swine", nobody helps the boys. Finally Ramnik opens the door for the boys and protected them. For this protection, chorus calls Ramnik 'a traitor'. Even inside the house, every member of the family was against Ramnik but still he was stubborn with his decision and became a true descendent of Mahatma Gandhi. The play also presents the love that doesn't restrict religion, caste and creed, is evident from Smita's love for Babban, an outsider muslim boy. The love and the violence are two different matters are mixed together where violence is promoted and preferred in communal riot. The playwright at the end of the play wishes to stop this game of hatred and communal tension through the character of Ramnik. Even Ramnik accepts that his father has done the black deed so we should forgive offenders and forget the past. This is the final solution suggested by playwright Mahesh Dattani through the character of Ramnik. Chorus, an important element of drama is well used by Mahesh Dattani in the play 'Final Solution'. Flash back is another important technique adopted by playwright in his play which shows how the past moulds the present and how the present reinterprets the past.

There's no topic which has not handled by Mahesh Dattani in his plays. Therefore Dattani is like William Shakespeare in thematic presentation having universal application. Both used to write plays for performing on the stage. But Dattani's plays represent the contemporary society and its problem in the fashion of Ibsen's realism. Dattani has an array of themes to offer in his plays and the issues he chooses to project are the most topical as well as most controversial one. On the whole, Mahesh Dattani has created vibrant, new theatrical techniques and all kinds of socially touched themes which regards him as- 'a playwright of world stature in the contemporary Indian English Drama'.

Self -Assessment

1. Fill in the blanks:

- (i) Final Solutions highlights the
- (ii) Daksha is the grandmother of the
- (iii) The chorus with Hindu marks burst with

31.2 Summary

- Final Solutions' discusses the Hindu-Muslim problems. In also tackles the theme of transferred resentments in the context of family relations. Alyque Padamsee says, directing Final Solutions in Mumbai.
- The most exciting thing in the book Mahesh Dattani's Interview is included which will help researchers, scholars, academicians and teachers to understand dramatic world of Mahesh Dattani. Vishwanath Bite in his well researched article on Thirty Days in September analyses the play through different perspectives.
- Mahesh Dattani's Plays: a Mirror of Contemporary Society, states that Dattani's plays are reflection of the contemporary society. According to her, Dattani not only deals with common

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and ordinary people but the common problems of people in realistic terms. In many of his plays, he deals with various issues like homosexuality, gender discrimination, communalism and child sexual abuse. Dattani manages to delve deep into the hearts to recreate characters with authenticity and a sense of liveliness.

- Mahesh Dattani's 'Final Solution' is a very serious and delicate drama on the well-worn subject of communalism. It is first staged in Bangalore in 1993 focusing on the problem of communal disharmony between the Hindus and Muslims in India, especially during the period of the post-partition riot.
- The play opens with Daksha reading from her diary. Daksha is the grandmother of Gandhi family. When she closes her diary, Hardika appears on the stage. She feels that nothing changed much before independence and after. In between Hardika is telling her daughter that 'those people are all demons' which didn't like to Ramnik, a liberal minded person. In the communal riot, two muslim boys Javed and Bobby took shelter in Ramnik's house.
- This is the final solution suggested by playwright Mahesh Dattani through the character of Ramnik. Chorus, an important element of drama is well used by Mahesh Dattani in the play 'Final Solution'. Flash back is another important technique adopted by playwright in his play which shows how the past moulds the present and how the present reinterprets the past.

31.3 Key-Words

1. Thematic Presentation : Denoting a vowel or other sound or sequence of sounds that occurs between the root of a word and any inflectional or derivational suffixes.
2. Vibrant : Full of energy and enthusiasm.

31.4 Review Questions

1. Write a short note on the play 'Final Solution'.
2. Discuss the themes of Final Solution by Mahesh Dattani.

Answers: Self-Assessment

1. (i) Hindu, Muslim problems (ii) Gandhi's
(iii) Angry words.

31.5 Further Readings



1. Manohar Malgonker, A Bend in The Ganges (Delhi : Oriental Paperback, 1994) 355.
2. Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri. Contemporary Indian Writer in English: Mahesh Dattani (Delhi : Foundation Books, 2005), 77-78.
3. Mahesh Dattani. Collected Plays (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2000), 168. Subsequent reference are incorporated in the text-with an abbreviation, FS Satchinand K. Indian Literature: Position and Preposition (Delhi: Pencraft Internat.

Unit 32: Mahesh Dattani: Final Solution – Characterisation

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Objectives

After reading this Unit students will be able to:

- Discuss about Mahesh Dattani.
- Make an analysis of various characters in Final Solution.

Introduction

Mahesh Dattani maintains a low profile as a writer, but he is internationally acclaimed as the most outstanding playwright of recent times. The plays of Mahesh Dattani emerged as 'fresh arrival' in the domain of Indian English drama in the last decade of the twentieth century. His plays deal with contemporary issues.

They are plays of today sometimes as actual as to cause controversy, but at the same time they are plays which embody many of the classic concerns of world drama. His major plays are Dance Like a Man, 30 Days in September, Bravely Fought the Queen, Final Solutions, Tara, and On a Muggy Night in Mumbai Dattani's work probes tangled attitudes in contemporary India towards communal differences, consumerism and gender.

Dattani has treated each subject with a deep-seated identification rooted in everyday angst. Such charged emotions spare no one - neither the players and the director, nor the audience. Deep within platitudinous Indian society, his characters seethe and reveal, probe and discern, scathing their families and neighbours, leaving each reader or watcher with a storm within as the aftermath. An essential storm for our evolution as socially sensitive individuals.

Mahesh Dattani does not seek to cut a path through the difficulties his characters encounter in his plays; instead he leads his audience to see just how caught up we all are in the complications and contradictions of our values and assumptions. And by revealing the complexity, he makes the world a richer place for all of us. Where There's A Will is about the rift between the Hindu and the Muslim communities.

32.1 Characterisation

Final Solutions has taken the issues of the majority communities in different contexts and situations. It talks of the problems of cultural hegemony, how Hindus had to suffer at the hands of Muslim majority like the characters of Hardika/Daksha in Hussainabad.

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And how Muslims like Javed suffer in the set up of the majority Hindu community. This all resulted in communal riots and culminated in disruption of the normal social life, and thus hampered the progress of the nation.

The mob in the play is symbolic of our own hatred and paranoia. Each member of the mob is an individual, yet they meet into one seething whole as the politicians play on their fears. In this play, the chorus continuously sings sometimes under the mask of Hindus and sometimes under that of Muslims revealing their feelings of fear and hatred for one another. When the Chariot leading the procession is broken and the Pujari is killed the Hindus masks sing:

The scenes of the play take place inside and outside Ramnik Gandhi's house where Ramnik has given two Muslim boys shelter from the violent mob outside. The mob is in the form of a chorus, changing its guise into Muslims and Hindus through masks and songs. Inside, a Hindu family is sharply divided over giving shelter to the unknown Muslim youths in the midst of communal frenzy and violence. Even after fifty years of Independence, people have not been able to forget their enmity and bias against each other, i.e. Muslims against Hindus and Hindu against Muslims.

In the play, two young men, Javed and Babban, are hired to disrupt social harmony while others like Hardika's parents - in-laws have secretly burnt the shop of their Muslim friend, with the selfish end of buying it at reduced price.

Final Solutions is based on the apparently friendly relations between Muslims and Hindus and the simmering currents of hatred beneath. The family unit comprises members of different age groups, symbolic of past and present, stretching the plot to over a period of half a century. Young people like Smita, Bobby and Javed, present the future and Ramnik and Aruna, the present while Hardika, the grand mother of Smita, is sometimes presented in Daksha (Past) a fifteen year old newly married young girl, writing her diary and then as her grandmother in her late sixties (present) teaching her children and revealing the family's past. Major events are presented through her eyes.

In this play a young baffled boy Javed, who becomes a victim and a terrorist and is exploited by politicians in the name of 'Jihad'. He is trained for the terrorist activities and sabotaging. He is sent to a Hindu 'Mohalla' where a 'Rath Yatra' is taking place. Javed is so over-whelmed with the fervour of 'Jehad' that he throws the first stone on the 'Rath' causing chaos, ending up in the killing of the 'Pujari' and crashing down of the 'Rath'. Bobby a close friend of Javed, saves him from the violent mob and gets him shelter in Ramnik Gandhi's house, where causes of Hindus and Muslims hatred are being discussed and strange secrets of terror, greed, avarice and communal hatred are being revealed.

Daksha is the grandmother of the Gandhi's. Who sometimes is seen as a girl of fifteen on the stage? Daksha thanks that she is "a young girl who does not matter to anyone outside her home". She says, "Last year in August, a terrible thing happened and that was freedom for India". The most whispers : "Freedom! At last freedom!" Daksha close her diary and now Hardika appears on the stage. She feels the things have not changed that much. A period of forty years is not a long period for a nation. But on the stage, the drumbeat grows louder and the Chorus slowly wears the Hindu masks. The words spoken by Chorus show the beginning of disharmony and painful period ahead. As long as the persons are on the stage they are normal but as soon as they are behind the masks, their thirst for blood resist. Whether we are angry with someone or someone is angry with us each out burst takes its toll on both parties. The Chorus with Hindu masks burst with angry words.

Ramnik, the father carries with him the burden of the guilt of his father's black deeds, transferring some of the resentment to his mother. Hardika, Aruna, his Wife and Smita, his daughter both hit on at each other for no apparent reason. The entire family is of course, putted again the back deep of a root. Tom City Zarine and the other guests from the post make an entry in the dramatic device that Dattani uses to show his time-shifts-Daksha, the young Hardika whose voice will resonate through the play inter weaving the post with present.

The play now assumes a wholly different perspective even as the familial tensions continue within the home and are set off by communal tensions outside. The outside (Babban and Javed) is in a sense allowed entry, after severe resistance from within (Aruna and Hardika) and then begins the extortion of the fragile familial ties. Several scenes establish the bond between Aruna and Smita, with Ramnik, the father often being made to feel isolated. But with the instruction of Babban and Javed, Smita reveals her true sensibility and fees herself of the 'stifling' prejudices of her mother, at the same time trying to be fair to her. Ramnik, too has never revealed the guilt of the post of his mother, saving her the weight of the burden than he has had to carry all alone. The mob/chorus comprising five men and ten marks on stick five Hindu and five Muslim marks, is the omnipresent factor through out the play, crunching on the horseshoe shaped sump that dominates the space of the stage which is otherwise split up 4 into multilevel sets. The marks lie significantly strewn all over the ramp, to be worn when required.

Dattani carefully uses the same five men in black to double for any given religious group when they assume the role of the mob, which they do in a stylized fashion. The living area is not furnished except for the realistic level that functions as the kitchen and the Pooja-room and another period room suggesting the 1940s where Hardika/Daksha are to revisit the past.

The play infect begins with such a visit through the opening scene where Daksha sets beginning the process of recording lived history "Dear Dairy today is the first time I have dared to put my thoughts on your pages 31 March 1948". Criss-crossing a whole gamut of memories that are to construct the character that she is to become- Hardika "After forty years - I opened my diary again. And I wrote. A dozen pages before. A dozen pages now. A young girl is childish scribble. An old women's shaky scrawl. Yes, things have not changed that much," Things have indeed not changed much. The space of the stage is thick with ominous cries that reverberate and the same hatred and intolerance for the other still sends the air stones had come crashing down on Daksha's records sheltering Shamshad Begum, Noorjahan, Suraiya, "Those beautiful voices. Cracked..." like her friendship with Zarina. Forty years hence, her son Ramnik attempts to sight a few wrongs taking in Babban and Javed and protecting them against the fury of the mob & meanwhile, the audience witnesses the dialogic rational of both the sides "should we swallowed up?"

"Final Solutions" has a powerful contemporary resonance as it addresses as issue of utmost concern to our society, i.e. the issue of communalism. The play presents different shades of the communalist attitude prevalent among Hindus and Muslims in its attempt to underline the stereotypes and clichés influencing the collective sensibility of one community against another.

What distinguishes this work from other plays written on the subject is that it is neither sentimental in its appeal nor simplified in its approach. It advances the objective candour or a social scientist while presenting a mosaic of diverse attitudes towards religious identity that often plunges the country into inhuman strife. Yet the issue is not moralised, as the demons of communal hatred are located not out on the street but deep within us.

The play moves from the partition to the present day communal riots. It probes into the religious bigotry by examining the attitudes of three generations of a middle-class Gujrati business family,

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Hardika, the grandmother, is obsessed with her father's murder during the partition turmoil and the betrayal by a Muslim friend, Zarine. Her son, Ramnik Gandhi, is haunted by the knowledge his fortunes were founded on a shop of Zarine's father, which was burnt down by his kinsmen. Hardika's daughter-in-law, Aruna, lives by the strict code of the Hindu Samskar and the granddaughter, Smita, cannot allow herself a relationship with a Muslim boy.

The pulls and counter-pulls of the family are exposed when two Muslim boys, Babban and Javed, seek shelter in their house on being chased by a baying Hindu mob. Babban is a moderate while Javed is an aggressive youth. After a nightlong exchange of judgements and retorts between the characters, tolerance and forgetfulness emerge as the only possible solution of the crisis. Thus, the play becomes a timely reminder of the conflicts raging not only in India but in other parts of the world.

Self-Assessment

1. Fill in the blanks:

- (i) Bobby and Javed, present the future with and Aruna.
- (ii) Hardika's daughter-in-law, Aruna, lives by the strict code of the Hindu and the grand-daughter, Smita cannot allow herself a relationship with a Muslim boy.
- (iii) Zarine, her son,, is haunted by the knowledge his fortunes were founded on a shop of Zarine's father, which was burnt down by his kinsmen.
- (iv) Babban is a while Javed is an aggressive youth.

32.2 Summary

- Final Solutions has taken the issues of the majority communities in different contexts and situations. It talks of the problems of cultural hegemony, how Hindus had to suffer at the hands of Muslim majority like the characters of Hardika/Daksha in Hussainabad.
- The scenes of the play take place inside and outside Ramnik Gandhi's house where Ramnik has given two Muslim boys shelter from the violent mob outside. The mob is in the form of a chorus, changing its guise into Muslims and Hindus through masks and songs. Inside, a Hindu family is sharply divided over giving shelter to the unknown Muslim youths in the midst of communal frenzy and violence.
- The play now assumes a wholly different perspective even as the familial tensions continue within the home and are set off by communal tensions outside. The outside (Babban and Javed) is in a sense allowed entry, after severe resistance from within (Aruna and Hardika) and then begins the extortion of the fragile familial ties. Several scenes establish the bond between Aruna and Smita, with Ramnik, the father often being made to feel isolated.
- The play moves from the partition to the present day communal riots. It probes into the religious bigotry by examining the attitudes of three generations of a middle-class Gujrati business family, Hardika, the grandmother, is obsessed with her father's murder during the partition turmoil and the betrayal by a Muslim friend, Zarine.

32.3 Key-Words

- 1. Communal riots : Violent public disorder, engaged in by a significant proportion of the community, and endorsed by a majority of the same community.
- 2. Candour : The quality of being honest and straightforward in attitude and speech.

32.4 Review Questions

Notes

1. Briefly describe the play Final Solution.
2. Discuss the various characters presented in the play 'Final Solution'.

Answers: Self-Assessment

1. (i) Ramnik (ii) Samskar
(iii) Ramnik Gandhi (iv) Moderate

32.5 Further Readings



1. Manohar Malgonker, A Bend in The Ganges (Delhi : Oriental Paperback, 1994) 355.
2. Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri. Contemporary Indian Writer in English: Mahesh Dattani (Delhi : Foundation Books, 2005), 77-78.
3. Mahesh Dattani. Collected Plays (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2000), 168. Subsequent reference are incorporated in the text-with an abbreviation, FS Satchinand K. Indian Literature: Position and Preposition (Delhi: Pencraft Internat.

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