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FOUR YEAR BACHELOR'S DEGREE COURSE

(CBCS in Accordance with NEP 2020)

SEMESTER - VI

INTRODUCTION TO ASIAN LITERATURE

ENGLISH

Padmanath Gohainbaruah School of Humanities

KRISHNA KANTA HANDIQUI STATE OPEN UNIVERSITY

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COURSE INTRODUCTION

The paper entitled 'Introduction to Asian Literature' introduces the learners to some of the representative works of Asian Literature and explores the life and literary contributions of select Asian writers. Some of the leading writers whose texts have been taken up for study in the present course are namely A.K. Ramanujan, Patrick Fernando, Rabindranath Tagore, Sadat Hasan Manto, Ismat Chugtai, Punyakante Wijenaike, Shyam Selvadurai, Khaled Hosseini, Bapsi Sidhwa and Han Kang. While the course highlights some of the major thematic concerns, socio-political discourses, socio-cultural and political aspects presented by these writers, it also provides the scope of further discussion and exploration of other such literary works in the domain of Asian Literature.

The introductory units are entitled "Introduction to Asian Literature" and Unit 1 provides a brief overview of Asian Literature along with its various important contexts and literary influences. Unit 2 provides a comprehensive idea on Asian Literature and highlights its significance. Unit 3 takes up two poems by A.K. Ramanujan titled "Extended Family" and "Small Scale Reflections on a Great House"; Unit 4 takes up Patrick Fernando's poems titled "For a Boy of Eight" and "Smiling at Grief". Unit 5 presents the widely anthologised short story titled "Kabuliwalla" or "The Vendor from Kabul" by Rabindranath Tagore highlighting the fragility of human relationships and the nuances of human emotions. Unit 6 takes up a short story by Sadat Hasan Manto who wrote "Toba Tek Singh" alluding to the tragic plight of migrant families during the Partition of 1945. Unit 7 takes up another short story by Ismat Chughtai titled "Lihaaf" or "The Quilt" which portrays the secret relationship between a lonely woman and her masseuse, narrated from the perspective of a child.

Unit 8 takes up a short story titled "The River" by Punyakante Wijenaike who portrays the life of a young woman who loved her land and the river that spelt home; finally losing her life in an unexpected incident. Unit 9 & 10 takes up Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy,* the background of which is Colombo where the protagonist is witness to riots resulting from the long-term hostility between the Sinhala and Tamils. Unit 11 & 12 takes up a discussion on Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner,* which presents the face of violence and terrorism in Afghanistan and highlights the everyday realities of the minorities as well as the tragic plight of marginalised men, women and children who are at their mercy. Unit 13 presents *Bapsi Sidhwa' sIce Candy Man,* which is set in the pre-partition India in Lahore. The narrative unravels from a child narrator's point of view highlighting various issues of identity and the impact of violence and conflict. The closing unit of the course, Unit 15 is based on Han Kang's major work entitled *The Vegetarian,* a three-part narrative set in Seoul, Korea portraying the contesting convictions of the protagonist in a rigid and traditional Korean society.

After going through these units of the course, the learner will be able to discuss the prescribed works in a detailed manner. While going through a unit, you may also notice some text boxes, which have been included to help you know some of the difficult terms and concepts. You will also read about some relevant ideas and concepts in "LET US KNOW" along with the text. We have kept "CHECK YOUR PROGRESS" questions in each unit which have been designed to self-check your progress of study. It is important to note that the Self Learning Material (SLM) is not an end in itself and the learners are strongly advised to consult the references and other resources recommended for reading

UNIT 1: INTRODUCTION TO ASIAN LITERATURE I

UNIT STRUCTURE

1.1 Learning Objectives
1.2 Introduction
1.3 Brief Overview of Asian Literature
1.4 Various Important Contexts and Literary Influence
1.5 Major Writers and Works
1.6 Let us Sum up
1.7 Further Reading
1.8 Model Questions

1.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

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

- provide a brief overview of Asian Literature
- discuss various important contexts and literary influences
- highlight some of the major writers and their works

1.2 INTRODUCTION

In this unit, the learner shall be introduced to the history of Asian Literature that covers the literature produced from South Asia, Southeast Asia and East Asia. The focus of the unit shall be on how contemporary Asian literature developed and the various historical influences and contexts that shaped the narratives produced from these three different regions of Asia. The unit also mentions the prominent literary figures from Asia who have enriched literature written in English.

1.3 BRIEF OVERVIEW OF ASIAN LITERATURE

Asian literature covers many centuries, weaving together ancient epics, philosophical treatises, and modern narratives that grapple with different subjects throughout the ages such as cultural practices, identity, colonialism, evolving human thought . This vast tradition reflects diverse geographies—from South Asia to Southeast Asia and West Asia to East Asia—while addressing universal themes like displacement, resilience, and the human condition. In the 20th and 21st centuries, writers from these regions have reshaped global canons, blending oral storytelling with experimental forms to challenge Western literary dominance and represent marginalized voices.

East Asian literature harmonises Confucian restraint with avant-garde rebellion, from classical poetry to dystopian futurism. Japan's Yasunari Kawabata, Nobel winner for *Snow Country* (1935–37), captures evanescent beauty in haiku-like prose. China's Mo Yan, 2012 Nobel laureate, unleashes hallucinatory satire in *Red Sorghum* (1986), critiquing

Maoist excesses. South Korea's Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* (2007) explores bodily autonomy through surrealism, and Japan's Haruki Murakami blends magical realism with loneliness in *Kafka on the Shore* (2002). These voices navigate rapid industrialisation, historical atrocities like Hiroshima, and contemporary alienation.

Southeast Asian literature emerges from island nations severly affected by colonialism, war, and authoritarianism, often blends indigenous myths with realism. Pramoedya Ananta Toer's *This Earth of Mankind* (Buruan Quartet, 1950s), from Indonesia, indicts Dutch imperialism through a Javanese lens, its epic scope evoking Joyce. Singaporean Catherine Lim's *The Serpent tooth*(1982) dissects family tensions amid rapid modernisation, while Filipino Nick Joaquin's *The Woman who had Two Navels* (1961) surrealistically probes postcolonial psychology. Vietnamese-American Ocean Vuong's poetry collection *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* (2016) layers queer desire and Vietnam War trauma, bridging diaspora and homeland.

Literature from South Asia, especially in the 20th and 21st centuries revolved around the themes of how colonialism affected their societies, culture, migration and diaspora. Pre-Independent era Indian writers who wrote in the English language include Toru Dutt, Henry Derozio, Rabindranath Tagore, Mahatma Gandhi, R.K.Narayan, Raja Rao and others wrote on diverse themes such as nature, Indianness, philosophy, changing Indian society, etc. Later day writers such Salman Rushdie used magical realism to chronicle India's independence in *Midnight Children (1981)* and went on to win the Booker Prize. There have been prolific voices from Sri Lanka that have enriched the literature of the region. Pre-colonial works feature Buddhist Jataka tales and royal chronicles while the colonial era in Sri Lanka introduced novels. Post-1948 independence and 1983–2009 civil war dominate the more contemporary writings, especially in the works of Patrick Fernando, Yasmine Goonaratne, Michael Ondaatje, Shyam Selvadurai,etc. Works from other South Asian countries such as Pakistani writer Mohsin Hamid, Bangladeshi author Tasleema Nasreen, Afghan writer, Khaled Hosseini are some of the prominent names of the region. Overall it is seen that Asian literature's diverse contexts and influences stem from ancient oral traditions, religious philosophies, colonial encounters, and modern globalisation. These elements shape narratives across South Asia, Southeast Asia, and East Asia, creating hybrid forms that resonate globally.

1.4 VARIOUS IMPORTANT CONTEXTS AND LITERARY INFLUENCE

The history of Asian literature is vast and layered, stretching from ancient oral traditions and classical texts to the dynamic, globally engaged contemporary writings of the present, where South Asia, Southeast Asia, and East Asia contribute some of the most compelling literary voices. While early traditions such as Sanskrit epics, classical Chinese poetry, and indigenous storytelling laid the foundation, contemporary Asian literature reflects a shift toward themes of identity, migration, postcoloniality, memory, and globalisation. In South Asia, writers like Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, and Jhumpa Lahiri have reshaped the literary landscape by blending history with personal narratives, often interrogating colonial legacies and fractured identities. Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* reimagines national

history through magical realism, while Roy's *The God of Small Things* foregrounds caste, gender, and memory, and Lahiri explores diasporic dislocation and belonging. Similarly, contemporary Pakistani and Bangladeshi writers have expanded literary discourse through themes of political unrest, religious identity, and gendered experiences, reflecting the region's complex socio-political realities. In Southeast Asia, literature has increasingly engaged with questions of nationhood, trauma, and cultural hybridity, particularly in postcolonial and post-conflict contexts. Authors such as Pramoedya Ananta Toer from Indonesia and NguyÅn Nh-t Ánh from Vietnam illustrate how storytelling becomes a vehicle for both resistance and reconstruction of national identity; Toer's works, especially the *Buru Quartet,* explore colonial oppression and intellectual awakening, while NguyÅn Nh-t Ánh's fiction captures the emotional landscapes of youth within a rapidly modernising society.There have been various contexts and influences that shaped the literatures of the Asia. Colonialism profoundly reshaped Asian literary landscapes, introducing Western forms like the novel while sparking resistance themes. In India, British rule inspired Rabindranath Tagore's *Gitanjali* (1910), blending Indian poetic mysticism with global humanism; post-independence, Salman Rushdie's *Midnight Children* (1981) allegorised partition trauma. Japan's *Meiji Restoration* (1868) fused classical poetry with realism, yielding Natsume Sôseki's *Kokoro* (1914), which grappled with Westernisation's alienation.

Singaporean and Malaysian writers often grapple with multiculturalism, language politics, and urban modernity, reflecting the pluralistic nature of their societies. East Asian contemporary literature, particularly from China, Japan, and Korea, demonstrates a remarkable interplay between tradition and modernity, often addressing alienation, technological change, and historical trauma. Writers like Haruki Murakami, Mo Yan, and Han Kang have achieved international acclaim for their innovative narrative styles and thematic depth. Murakami's surreal narratives explore loneliness and existential uncertainty in late-capitalist societies, Mo Yan's works draw on folklore and magical realism to critique political history, and Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* probes bodily autonomy and violence within rigid social structures. Across these regions, contemporary Asian literature increasingly transcends national boundaries, often written in or translated into English, allowing it to participate in global literary conversations while retaining distinct cultural textures.Themes of migration, environmental crisis, gender politics, and memory recur across regions, suggesting both shared concerns and localised expressions. Importantly, contemporary writers also challenge dominant narratives by foregrounding marginalised voices, including women, indigenous communities, and LGBTQ+ identities, thereby expanding the scope of what constitutes Asian literature today. Thus, the history of Asian literature is not merely a chronological progression but an evolving dialogue between past and present, where contemporary writings from South Asia, Southeast Asia, and East Asia reconfigure literary traditions to reflect the complexities of modern life in an interconnected yet unequal world.

1.5 MAJOR WRITERS AND THEIR WORKS

Asia's major writers can be divided into a tripartite structure, inclusive of South Asia (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, etc.), Southeast Asia (Indonesia, Philippines, Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia, etc.), and East Asia (China, Japan, Korea, etc.). From each

of these regions, there have been some prominent literary figures whose works have been recognized and appreciated by readers across the world. Some of the canonical writers from South Asia include Rabindranath Tagore, R.K.Narayan, Salman Rushdie, Patrick Fernando,Michael Ondaatje, Arundhati Roy,Amitav Ghosh,Taslima Nasreen, Mohsin Hamid, Khaled Hosseini, Jhumpa Lahiri, Manjushree Thapa, among many others.

Southeast Asia have also enriched the literature produced from this region with their anti-colonial and revolutionary narratives.Prominent writers from Southeast Asia include Pramodya Ananta Toer from Indonesia known for the *Buru Quartret,* Nguyen Phan Qui Mai from Vietnam whose *When Mountain Sing* is a family saga about survival during war and resilience. Malaysian writer,Tan Twang Eng's *The Garden of Evening Mists* is centred around the Second World War using memory as an important motif. Filipino writer, Nick Joaquin is known for his use of surrealism in works such as *The Woman Who Had Two Navels.*Pira Sudham from Thailand who is a Nobel Prize nominee, is known for *Monsoon Country*, a novel revolving around rural life and politics in Thailand.

Narratives and poetic works produced from East Asia are known for its use of Confucian ideas and romanticism which are intertwined with social realism.Chinese writer, Mo Yan's *Red Sorghum* is a major work which uses history, fable and satire.Major writers from Japan include Yasunari Kawabata (*Snow Country*), Haruki Murakami (*Kafka on the Shore*) and Mishima Yukio(*The Sea of Fertility*). Han Kang from South Korea became the first writer from her country to win the International Booker Prize in 2016 for the novel *The Vegetarian*. Choe Nam-Sion is.

1.6 LET US SUM UP

After going through the unit, the learner will gain a comprehensive idea on Asian literature. Alongwith the significance of various important contexts, you will be able to trace the various literary influences. Asian Literature is not only vast and varied but also rooted in ancient oral traditions that are now channelled through these emergent voices and writings. Also you will be able to highlight some of the major writers and their works in the domain of Asian literature.

1.7 FURTHER READING

Evangelista, Susan P. *Asian Literature: A Historical Anthology for College*. Alemar-Phoenix Publishing, 1978.

Pollock, Sheldon.Ed. *Literary Cultures in History: Reconstructions from South Asia*. University of California Press, 2003.

Srikanth, Rajini, and Ming Hyoung Song, Ed.s. *The Cambridge History of Asian American Literature*. Cambridge University Press, 2015.

1.8 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q 1. Analyse the various contexts and influences on Asian literature.

Q 2. Write about the major Asian writers and their works.

Q 3. Write an overview on the Asian literature.

UNIT 2: INTRODUCTION TO ASIAN LITERATURE II

UNIT STRUCTURE

2.1 Learning Objectives
2.2 Introduction
2.3 Identity Assertion
2.4 Context of Conflict
2.5 Let Us Sum Up
2.6 Further Reading
2.7 Model Questions

2.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

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

- gain an insight on several aspects of Asian Literature
- explain the significance of identify assertion
- discuss the issues and aspects of conflict
- gain a comprehensive idea of Asian Literature

2.2 INTRODUCTION

In this unit, the learners shall be learn about how literatures produced in Asia significantly departs from the thematic concerns and subject matter of the Western literature. There Understanding Asian Literature through works like *South Asian Literatures : Beyond Borders, Across Boundaries* is a key to gaining a broad overview on the domain.

It is a work by Namita Gokhale and Malashri Lal and explores the shared literary identity of South Asia that transcends national borders through interconnected languages, cultures, and traditions. The work argues for recognising this regional literary web amid modern political divisions.It posits that a unified South Asian literary identity emerges from shared elements like languages (e.g., Urdu across Pakistan, Punjab, and Uttar Pradesh; Bangla along river shores; Tamil in India and Sri Lanka), food, music, and oral heritage, visible in fiction and social media. It challenges Western pedagogical models that hierarchise oral vs. scripted or English vs. regional languages, emphasising Asia's pluralistic topography where dialects and languages blend across borders.

The work shows how shared elements-food, music, oral heritage-create a unified literary imagination amidst evolving power structures and national identities. For instance, Pakistan's "literary liberation" through writers like Mohsin Hamid and Kamila Shamsie gains nuances from cross-border linguistic flows, while Nepal's epics and Bhutan's Dzongkha blend with English in fluid multilingual contexts.South Asian literature challenges Western binaries of oral versus written or regional versus English, promoting pluralistic narratives like Dalit voices and women's reinterpretations of myths. Gokhale and Lal's work positions it as a dynamic force in postcolonial discourse, influencing global views on borders as porous cultural spaces.

2.3 IDENTITY ASSERTION

Contemporary Asian literature asserts identity through narratives that reclaim agency, challenge colonial legacies, and navigate hybrid cultural spaces, often transcending national borders.Today writers forge distinct identities by reinterpreting even epics like the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata,* blending tradition with modern inequities. Marginalised communities and women's voices in Asia, for instance, assert marginalised subjectivities against historical silencing.

Diasporic authors like Jhumpa Lahiri, Mohsin Hamid, and Kamila Shamsie explore "borderland" identities, where diaspora characters negotiate belonging amid globalisation. Literature resists homogenising forces through linguistic innovation and collective memory that prioritise community over individualism.

In East Asia, Japanese author Haruki Murakami blends existential alienation with pop culture in works like *Kafka on the Shore,* asserting a postmodern Japanese identity that negotiates Western influences without erasure. Similarly, South Asian writers like Arundhati Roy in *The God of Small Things* weave Kerala's matrilineal traditions against caste rigidities, mirroring Murakami's hybridity but grounding it in anticolonial resistance. Chinese literature, post-Cultural Revolution, sees Mo Yan's *Frog* reclaim rural voices suppressed by Maoist uniformity, paralleling Dalit assertions in India that Gokhale and Lal celebrate as vital reinterpretations of epics like the *Mahabharata.* These parallel quests for authenticity underscore Asia's shared postcolonial impulse: literature as a tool to subvert imposed histories, whether British Raj or Japanese imperialism.

Southeast Asia amplifies this through multilingual tapestries akin to South Asia's linguistic flows. Singaporean Cyril Wong's poetry explores queer Chinese-Singaporean identity amid Confucian legacies and colonial English, echoing Pakistan's "literary liberation" via English writers like Kamila Shamsie, whom the essay praises for nuanced post-Partition insights. Filipino writer, Jessica Hagedorn's Dogeaters dissects American cultural imperialism in Manila's underbelly, asserting a mestizo (mixed) Filipina consciousness that resists both Spanish Catholicism and U.S. hegemony-much like Sri Lankan Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy,* which navigates Tamil-Sinhala tensions and queer awakening. Asia's diasporic literature further binds these contexts, with Japanese-American Julie Otsuka's *When the Emperor Was Divine* chronicling internment camp silences, akin to Jhumpa Lahiri's Bengali-American exiles in *The Namesake* that probe "borderland" belongings. Vietnamese-American Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* layers queer immigrant trauma with lyrical Vietnamese folklore, extending South Asia's diaspora explorations in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West,* where magical doors symbolize global migrations. Gokhale and Lal's vision of shared oral heritage-food, music, myths-manifests here as a pan-Asian mnemonic, countering erasure in Vietnamese boat people narratives or Korean "comfort women" testimonies by Han Kang in Human Acts.

2.4 CONTEXT OF CONFLICT

Conflict in Asian literature often stems from historical traumas like colonialism, wars, partitions, and social upheavals, serving as a lens to explore fractured identities, resilience, and cultural hybridity.South Asian works vividly depict Partition's scars, as in Saadat Hasan

Manto's stories of Indo-Pak violence or Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*, where borders sever personal ties yet shared languages like Urdu persist, mirroring the essay's "intricate web." These narratives assert identity amid loss, much like Sri Lankan Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* on civil war atrocities, blending Tamil-Sinhala tensions with global scrutiny

East Asian literature grapples with WWII and Cold War legacies: Japan's *Harp of Burma* portrays kyodatsu (post-defeat despair) through Buddhist redemption, while Han Kang's *Human Acts* dissects the 1980 Gwangju Uprising's collective grief. Chinese Mo Yan's *Red Sorghum* revisits Japanese invasion horrors, paralleling South Asia's Bangladesh Liberation War echoes in *A Golden Age* by Tahmima Anam, where familial bonds fray under conflict.

Southeast Asian texts address colonial hangovers, like Pramoedya Ananta Toer's *This Earth of Mankind* on Dutch Indies oppression, evoking social disintegration and identity erosion akin to Southeast Asia's "collective trauma." In the Philippines, Dogeaters by Jessica Hagedorn exposes Marcos-era class divides, resisting U.S. cultural dominance through mestizo voices.

Across Asia, conflicts-Korean division in Hwang Sok-yong's *The Guest,* Vietnamese boat people in Ocean Vuong's prose-highlight resilience against imperialism, aligning with Gokhale and Lal's pluralistic vision where myths and oral heritage heal rifts. Literature transforms adversity into empathy, challenging binaries and fostering pan-Asian solidarity beyond geopolitical maps.Southeast Asian short stories portray colonial trauma via social disintegration-broken family ties and eroded trust-as in Indonesian tales of Dutch rule or Vietnamese depictions of French Indo-china, where communal bonds collapse under exploitation. Psychological dislocation follows, with characters haunted by shame and alienation; intergenerational transmission appears in narratives where children inherit unspoken wounds, reshaping meaning systems like traditional rituals into symbols of loss.Literature acts as witness and cultural space, negotiating identity beyond victimhood.

2.5 LET US SUMUP

After going through the unit, the learner shall be well acquainted with various significant issues and aspects in Asian Literature. The aspects of identify assertion and the context of conflict have been highlighted to show the impact of historical silencing, marginalisation and a trassmatic past. The unit thus provides you with a comprehensive idea on the relevance of Asian Literature.

2.6 FURTHER READING

Srikanth, Rajini, and Ming Hyoung Song, Ed.s. *The Cambridge History of Asian American Literature*. Cambridge University Press, 2015.

2.7 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q 1. Explain how assertion of identity becomes an central concern in Asian Literature.
Q 2. How is conflict a major theme that is present across literatures from Asia.

UNIT 3: A.K. RAMANUJAN "EXTENDED FAMILY" AND "SMALL SCALE REFLECTIONS ON A GREAT HOUSE"

UNIT STRUCTURE

3.1 Learning Objectives
3.2 Introduction
3.3 A.K. Ramanujan: His Life and Works
3.4 Text of the Poems
3.5 Context of the Poems
3.6 Explanation of the Poems
3.7 Major Themes
3.8 Style and Language
3.9 Let us Sum up
3.10 Further Reading
3.11 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints only)
3.12 Model Questions

3.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

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

- familiarise yourself with the life and works of AK Ramanujan
- situate Ramanujan in the broader context of Indian Anglophone poetry
- examine how Ramanujan is a product of his cultural and intellectual milieu
- acquaint yourself with the themes and literary techniques employed in Extended Family" and "Small Scale Reflections on a Great House"

3.2 INTRODUCTION

A.K. Ramanujan is one of the greatest luminaries in Anglophone Indian letters. He is widely regarded as one of the greatest poets among the second - generation Indian English poets. Keeping august company with poets like Nissim Ezekiel, Adil Jussawalla, Kamala Das and Eunice D'Souza, A.K. Ramanujan added his own fine strokes in the canvas of Indian English poetry. Writing in post Independent India, Ramanujan viewed the changes in Indian culture and society with deep insight. His writings often deal with themes of fragmented identities, Indian ways of life, the contested notion of home, to name only a few. There is a uniquely and easily discernible Indianness in Ramanujan's poetry, especially in the rhythms and cadences. In this unit, you will read, explore and interpret two representative poems of his oeuvre, namely, "Extended Family" and "Small Scale Reflections on a Great House" and be able to place the poems as well as the poet in their historical and intellectual contexts.

3.3 A.K. RAMANUJAN: HIS LIFE AND WORKS

In the canon of Indian English Writing, A.K. Ramanujan is a trailblazer. Poet, scholar, linguist and cultural commentator, A.K. (Attipat Krishnaswami) Ramanujan was born on 16 March, 1929 in Mysore. Son of a renowned astrologer and mathematician, Ramanujan received his schooling in Mysore's Marimallappa's High School and went on to pursue higher education at the Maharaja College of Mysore. In conformity with the times that dictated that sons from upper caste families should pursue science as a respectable career, Ramanujan studied science but upon his father's disapproval and advice, went on to study literature. He received his BA (English Honours) and MA from Maharaja College, affiliated to University of Mysore. After obtaining his MA, Ramanujan had short stints of teaching at various colleges in South India, following which he received a graduate diploma in Linguistics from Deccan University in Pune in 1958. Upon receiving a Fulbright Scholarship, A.K. Ramanujan went on to pursue his Ph.D. in Linguistics from Indiana University, Bloomington.

At the United States, Ramanujan was exposed to the workings, complex structures and possibilities of language. It was also in the States that Ramanujan began to think deeply about what it meant to be an Indian with a complex identity. Ramanujan while teaching at the universities of Michigan, Harvard, Wisconsin, Michigan and Berkeley (California)realised that his Indianness was a matter of negotiating his position as an upper caste Hindu man, as a product of Indian diaspora and as an English poet with Indian sensibilities.

The accumulation of these factors culminated in Ramanujan shaping the South Asian Studies Program at the University of Chicago where he remained a Professor. His work as a central figure in researching into the interrelated areas of South Asian history, language and culture informed his poetic output and led to the writing of incisive essays on South Asianness as well.

In recognition of his commitment to giving shape to and popularising South Asian Studies, Government of India conferred the Padma Shri on him in 1976. In 1983, he was awarded the MacArthur Prize Fellowship. Later, Ramanujan was appointed the William E Colvin Professor at the Department of South Asian Languages and Civilisations, University of Chicago, in recognition of his exemplary work.

A.K. Ramanujan passed away in 1993, due to an unforeseen reaction to administration of anaesthesia prior to a surgery.

A.K. Ramanujan lived an illustrious life, travelling between continents and seeking to understand the cultural complexities and explore the truths of living at a time when identities were continuously in flux. His scholarship and academic positions are a testament to the same.

Academic and poet, A.K. Ramanujan's work traversed many genres and forms. He was an astute literary critic, a sensitive cultural thinker as well as a poet who sought to understand the complex, often funny and amusing, ways of life in the Indian subcontinent. The earliest known work of A.K. Ramanujan was written at the age of twenty when he, like

all poets making false starts and experimenting the possibilities of language, scribbled poems in his diary. One notable example of Ramanujan's juvenilia is "A Poem is Born". Looking at his diary, one can see that it is dated September, 1949.

As a poet, A.K. Ramanujan has several anthologies to his credit. Collections like *The Striders* (1966), *Relations* (1971), *and Second Sight* (1986) bear testament to Ramanujan'spoetic range and versatility. However, the collections also underscore certain enduring themes. One can cull themes like rootedness to culture, the capacious nature of Hinduism as a mode of life as well as its contradictions, familial relationships, to name a very few. However, it should be noted that Ramanujan does not make any didactic as well as political claim through his poetry- if any, they might be purely incidental. His poems are records of his intense emotional experiences.

Ramanujan's poems may seem to be a nostalgic glance at South Asian ways of life fast fading due to the encroachment of modernity. However, such an argument may be incorrect because he often shows the Indian family as a space fraught with conflicts, misunderstandings as well as abuses. Notwithstanding the problems, they show a deep understanding of Tamil society and heritage.

As an academic, Ramanujan penned several monographs and essays in his lifetime. Of particular note are his essays "Is There an Indian Way of Thinking?" (1990) and "Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation". In the first essay, he proposes the idea of context-sensitive thinking which, in Ramanujan's opinion, should involve the exercise of critical faculties in order to formulate an "Indianness" that emerges not out of mindless imitation of Western standards nor out of blind and misinformed glorification of Hindu heritage but out of a carefully devised critical framework that is cognisant of the political, cultural and intellectual contexts of living in India.

In the second essay, Ramanujan showed how Ramayana has evolved through many phases of history and interaction with folk cultures. The essay courted controversy after it was removed from the syllabus of Delhi University in 2006, due to its portrayal of Ram and Sita as siblings. Despite the many the attacks regarding the content of the essay, it is significant because it shows the highly versatile and enduring form of the *Ramayana*.

Ramanujan's edited volumes are also valuable additions to the repository of Indian literature and criticism. Mention may be made *of The Interior Landscape: Love Poems from a Classical Tamil Anthology (1967), A Flowering Tree and Other Oral Tales from India (1997) as well as Folktales from India: Oral Tales from Twenty Indian Languages (1991).*

It is no wonder that the prestigious English language newspaper *The Hindu* praises A.K. Ramanujan in such glowing terms: "It is easy to see why AK Ramanujan's presence in Indian letters is canonical. Culturally sophisticated, intellectually exploratory, never doctrinaire, he is both pathfinder and trailblazer."

LET US KNOW

At this juncture, it is imperative to have a quick look at the critical reception of A.K. Ramanujan, now that a survey of his works has been provided. Bruce King, a perceptive critic of Indian English literature, has offered a critique of Ramanujan in his *Modern Indian Poetry in English* (1987) which is widely considered an authoritative criticism of Indian English writing. King writes, in reference to Ramanujan's collection *The Striders* (1966): " (Ramanujan's) poetry seemed to grow out of Indian experience and sensibilities with all its memories of family, local places, images, beliefs and history, while having a modern stance with scepticism, ironies and sense of living from moment to moment in a changing world in which older values and attitudes are often seen as unrealistic."

King's criticism pertains to the fact that although Ramanujan is rooted in his Tamil culture and heritage, his sensibility is modern. K. Srinivas Iyengar, another noted critic, comments that "He is like one caught in the crossfire between the elemental pulls of his native culture and the aggressive compulsions of the Chicago milieu." It means that he is faced with divided loyalties due to his American residence and its 'modern' sensibility and Indian way of life.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1. What, according to you, are the landmark moments in A.K. Ramanujan's life?
Q2. What was the first written work of A.K. Ramanujan?
Q3. Name the universities where A.K. Ramanujan held teaching positions.
Q4. Name the anthologies where A.K. Ramanujan's poetry is compiled.
Q5. What are the important themes in A.K. Ramanujan's poems?
Q6. Assess the contribution of A.K. Ramanujan as a folklorist.

3.4 TEXT OF THE POEMS

"Small Scale Reflections on a Great House" (1971)

Sometimes I think that nothing
that ever comes into this house
goes out. Things that come in everyday
to lose themselves among other things
lost long ago among
other things lost long ago;

lame wandering cows from nowhere
have been known to be tethered,
given a name, encouraged

to get pregnant in the broad daylight
of the street under the elders'
supervision, the girls hiding

behind windows with holes in them.

Unread library books
usually mature in two weeks
and begin to lay a row

of little eggs in the ledgers
for fines, as silverfish
in the old man's office room

breed dynasties among long legal words
in the succulence
of Victorian parchment.

Neighbours' dishes brought up
with the greasy sweets they made
all night the day before yesterday

for the wedding anniversary of a god,

never leave the house they enter,
like the servants, the phonographs,
the epilepsies in the blood,
sons-in-law who quite forget
their mothers, but stay to check
accounts or teach arithmetic to nieces,

or the women who come as wives
from houses open on one side
to rising suns, on another

to the setting, accustomed
to wait and to yield to monsoons
in the mountains' calendar

beating through the hanging banana leaves
And also anything that goes out
will come back, processed and often
with long bills attached,

like the hooped bales of cotton
shipped off to invisible Manchesters
and brought back milled and folded

for a price, cloth for our days'
middle-class loins, and muslin
for our richer nights. Letters mailed

have a way of finding their way back
with many re-directions to wrong
addresses and red ink-marks

earned in Tiruvalla and Sialkot.
And ideas behave like rumours,
once casually mentioned somewhere
they come back to the door as prodigies

born to prodigal fathers, with eyes
that vaguely look like our own,
like what Uncle said the other day:

that every Plotinus we read
is what some Alexander looted
between the malarial rivers.

A beggar once came with a violin
to croak out a prostitute song
that our voiceless cook sang
all the time in our backyard.

Nothing stays out: daughters
get married to short-lived idiots;
sons who run away come back
in grand children who recite
Sanskrit
to approving old men, or bring
betel nuts for visiting uncles

who keep them gaping with
anecdotes of unseen fathers,
or to bring Ganges water
in a copper pot
for the last of the dying

ancestors' rattle in the throat.
And though many times from everywhere,
recently only twice:
once in nineteen-forty-three
from as far as the Sahara,
half -gnawed by desert foxes,
and lately from somewhere
in the north, a nephew with stripes

on his shoulder was called
an incident on the border
and was brought back in plane
and train and military truck
even before the telegrams reached,
on a perfectly good
chatty afternoon.

"Extended Family"(1986)

Yet like grandfather

I bathe before the village crow

the dry chlorine water
my only Ganges

the naked Chicago bulb
a cousin of the Vedic sun

slap soap on my back
like father

and think
in proverbs

like me
I wipe myself dry

with an unwashed
Sears turkish towel

like mother
I hear faint morning song

(though here it sounds
Japanese)

and three clear strings
nextdoor

through kitchen
clatter

like my little daughter
I play shy

hand over crotch
my body not yet full

of thoughts novels
and children

I hold my peepee
like my little son

play garden hose
in and out
the bathtub

like my grandson
I look up

unborn
at myself

like my great
great-grandson

I am not yet
may never be

my future
dependent

on several
people

yet
to come

3.5 CONTEXT OF THE POEMS

The poems "Small Scale Reflections on a Great House" and "Extended Family" are included in AK Ramanujan's collections titled *Relations* and *The Second Sight* (1986) respectively. The poems in this collection deal mostly with familial relationships, the idea of a past and the search for roots. The poems were written at a time when Indian English poets like Jayanta Mahapatra, Kamala Das, Dilip Chithre, Arun Kolatkar, Eunice D'Souza were experimenting with poetic forms. Free verse was usually the chosen mode of poetry where everyday speech was rendered with cadence and rhythm.

One cannot ignore the predicament of diaspora which forms an important context for these poems. Many intellectuals, thinkers and poets at this time, Ramanujan included, went abroad not only for better career prospects but also because the Indian cultural milieu, swayed by nationalist jingoism, refused to give space to the writer writing in English. It is important to consider this context as we begin interpreting the poems.

3.6 EXPLANATION OF THE POEMS

"Small Scale Reflections on a Great House"

This is a long and expansive poem collected in *Relations* (1971). The poem, like many others in the anthology, explore family relationships. But it is also an ironic commentary of Indian society. The 'great house' here stands not only for the architecture of an ancestral house but also the system of Indian family. The great house is an assortment of people, memories, objects, animals and traditions, norms as well. Basically, it is a microcosm of India, in a sense.

At the outset of the poem, Ramanujan introduces us to a house where "nothing that ever comes… goes out." Here, Ramanujan wants to emphasise the fact that the great house is an accumulative space. It is a trove of objects, people, animals and memories. The great house embraces everything that comes into its enclave. For instance, cows have been known to come unannounced, whelp and become a part of the family.

In addition to cows, Ramanujan depicts the library of the great house. The presence of a library in the great house suggests that the house belongs to a family or community where learning is treasured. It should remind one of Ramanujan's own Tamil family that laid great importance on education. However, the library is positioned as an ornament where books are devoured by silverfish, an insect that burrows into paper. This is a jab at intellectual pretensions of Indians situated in the upper stratum of society. Therefore, not only cows but also insects accumulate and multiply in the embrace of the great house. Ramanujan also seems to critique the bureaucratic system of India where "silverfish… breed dynasties among long legal words in the succulence of Victorian parchment." This should remind us of the practice of "red tapism" rampant in both pre- and post-independent India where columns after columns of files stand in dingy offices in teetering piles. The line points to the inefficiency of the bureaucratic system of India.

Ramanujan writes that in the great house, sweetmeats as well as objects like phonographs-which is a relic from the colonial times-remain forever. This is also a space where generational ailments like epilepsy persist. The great house accommodates sons-in-law who "quite forget their mothers" and wives from far-off, mountainous places. At this point when Ramanujan provides a catalogue of things that remain in the house, he also hints at the colonial economic system: "And also anything that goes out/ will come back, processed and often/with long bills attached", reminding us of the colonial phenomenon of 'economic drain' where raw materials were once taken away and brought back to the Indian subcontinent and sold at very high prices.

Moreover, letters that have been sent often embark on a wayward journey through wrong addresses and come back to the great house, the destination unreached. This is a comment on the inept postal service. The fact that all things come back seems to project, in a sense, an image of the house as a whirlpool that brings in everything into it. The centripetal force of the house underscores, ultimately the idea of return.

The idea of return is where Ramanujan concludes the poem on a poignant note. Up until now, the poem has appeared to be an amusing and ironic commentary on the great house where things accumulate and mix seamlessly with the fabric of life in the great house. However, at the end of the poem, he writes that a nephew of the great house employed with the armed forces who was once called for duty "was brought back in a plane/ and train and military truck/ even before the telegrams reached,/on a perfectly good/chatty afternoons." Here, the idea of return is melancholy. This has the effect of undercutting the irony of the poem. Therefore, the poem begins in a playful manner and ends in a melancholic tone.

"Extended Family"

"Extended Family" is included in *Relations*. The poem begins in media res. i.e., it feels as if the poem begins in the middle of a monologue. The poem begins by showing how the speaker, living in Chicago, is different from his Indian forbears but also similar in many respects.

The speaker says that he is different from his predecessors. While his grandfather bathed in the Ganga, the speaker, or Ramanujan, performs his daily ablutions in the chlorinated water of his bathroom. Instead of the Vedic sun-a clever transferred epithet for Hindu customs or Indianness at large-that illuminated the mornings of his grandfather, the speaker washes himself under the 'naked Chicago bulb.' "Naked Chicago bulb" is important because not only does it give us a clue about the speaker's geographical location but also serves to show the disconnect between nature and human beings in America.

However, there are also similarities. Both grandfather and grandson bathe before 'the village crow'. Given the speaker's geographical location, the village crow could refer to a crow that sits on the speaker's windowsill as he bathes. Another similarity is the way he soaps his back which is reminiscent of his own father. Moreover, like his mother, he wipes himself dry with an unwashed towel.

However, here, the poem warps time as the speaker, an adult male, fuses with his daughter and "play(s) shy", his son playing with a hose and several other unborn grandson and great grandson. Although from this point the poem might appear to be a little complicated, a careful reading might show that Ramanujan underscores the fact that all human beings are same. Moreover, the lines "my future / dependent / on several / people/ yet / to come" shows how human beings are products of their family lineage and how ancestral traces remain in successors, many centuries down the line.

LET US KNOW

Houses, architecture and families are common elements in literatures from the Indian subcontinent, or South Asia, at large. A few of them are Meena Alexander's *House of* a *Thousand Doors,* Michael Ondaatje's *Running in the Family,* Rohinton Mistry's *Family Matters*. Family is the central organizing unit of South Asian society. It gives meaning to lives. A family anchors one to their roots. Architecture reflects the family set up. In India, architecture of ancestral houses shows the influence of both colonial and native styles which, in turn, depicts the hybridised nature of life in post-independent India. That is the reason family and architecture are such overarching concerns in A.K. Ramanujan's poems. Other poems which explore similar, or related themes, are "Love Poem for a Wife" (1971), "Of Mother, Among Other Things" (1966), "Routine Day Sonnet" (1971)

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q7. In which anthologies would one find "Small Scale Reflections on a Great House" and "Extended Family"?
Q8. What does the great house stand for, in "Small Scale Reflections on a Great House"?
Q9. How do you think A.K. Ramanujan compares life in India and America, in "Extended Family"?

3.7 MAJOR THEMES

"Small Scale Reflections on a Great House":

i) Home and Family :

Home and family is the most prominent theme of the poem. The very title of the poem is suggestive of the theme. Although the great house is dilapidated and has seen the depredations of time, it still gives off the warmth of home. The great house accepts everything that comes its way: wandering cows, daughters-in-law from mountains, silverfish which breed their own dynasties within the pages of ancient tomes. Everything blends with the structure of the great house so that a spectator cannot tell one thing from another. Like the structural organisation of the family where the parts come to constitute the whole, so too everything that takes shelter under the roof of the great house become a part of it. The great house exercises a centripetal force in the lives of the members- human or non-human. Since the family is an inescapable aspect of Indian existence, nothing can escape the great house for good. Even raw materials produced come back

to the great house in the form of factory-produced goods. Ramanujan seems to underline the message that family cannot be cast off at whim. A familial affiliation is, in fact, a lifelong affiliation. Although one might depart or seem to do so, one will almost always return, in some way or the other; for instance, the decorated soldier whose mortal remains come back to the great house.

ii) Memory:

Memory becomes an indispensable theme when one discusses the poem. Memory is both personal and cultural as well as historical in the poem. On one level, the fondness, vividness and nostalgia with which Ramanujan narrates the saga of the great house suggests that he is remembering his own familial house he has left behind to pursue a career in academics and the arts in America. By exercising his memory, Ramanujan creates the portrait of a great house which is not only idyllic but also fraught with its own problems. Memory operates on a cultural plane as well. By recounting the tradition of exchanging sweets offered to deities with neighbours, circulating rumours, Ramanujan is recalling the cultural specificities of Indian ways of life. In other words, Ramanujan is foregrounding the cultural heritage of India, complete with its quirks and oddities. At a historical level, the great house is a window to the past. Architectural features and objects like a library fallen into disuse, the phonograph seem to survive as relics of colonial past which cannot be wiped out altogether. In fact, they lend richness to the great house. The fact that "hooped bales of cotton" are "shipped off to invisible Manchesters" brings to mind the exploitative nature of the British raj.

iii)Time:

Time governs the structure of the poem. The saga of the great house is, after all, a saga of time passing. Time has ravaged the great house. The house wears an unkempt look. Yet, when one looks closely at the great house, time seems to be static. Time has not been able to obliterate traditions and bring any significant change, as traditions seem to persist despite the swiftness of time. Unlike the popular assumption that time is linear, in the poem, time is cyclical. Things lost and come back. Things go out and they come back again. Ramanujan's treatment of time is interesting because he challenges the European notion of time as a forward moving phenomenon. Time is a cyclical phenomenon, where nothing is ever lost. It is a continuous process of origin, loss and renewal.

"Extended Family"

i) Cultural Disconnect:

Cultural disconnect or alienation is the core theme of the poem. This theme highlights the problem of estrangement that any member of the Indian diaspora faces. The speaker in the poem is a person who has settled in Chicago, although his roots are in India. Although there is a connection with India, he finds it difficult to maintain the link. He cannot relate to his grandfather who bathed in the river Ganga, much as he tries to. Cultural disconnect is also suggested by the juxtaposition of the 'naked Chicago bulb' and 'Vedic sun'. These problems make it difficult for the speaker to maintain his link with his forbears. As a result, it seems that the speaker make any claim to a definite form of 'Indianness'.

ii) Family Ties:

Like the title suggests, the poem deals with the theme of 'family'. Family ties in the poem are severed, or at best, tenuous in the poem because there is a geographical distance between the speaker and his family in India. Continuity of traditions and customs that ensure the firmness of family ties is compromised due to the speaker's distance. However, Ramanujan believes that family ties endure. Their resilience is seen in the fact that idiosyncrasies of the speaker's father or mother seem to have deposited themselves in the speaker himself. Even if they are far apart physically, family ties are unshakeable. The speaker's ties with India-or his extended family-survive, transcending narrow confines of geography, lineage and customs.

LET US KNOW

A.K. Ramanujan did not see the past as a static entity. Past or memories are like rivers. We are products of our past and therefore, we embody that past. He says, "the past never passes; either the individual or historical past. It is with us, it is what gives us the richness of understanding."

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q10. How do you think Ramanujan uses architecture in the poems?
Q11. Do you think the poems suggest that time is linear?
Q12. How does Ramanujan treat time in the poems?

3.8 STYLE AND LANGUAGE

"Small Scale Reflections on a Great House"

The poem is one of the most dextrous in Ramanujan's oeuvre. He employs free verse in the poem. Although free verse might read like prose if all the lines in a poem are read in unison, Ramanujan infuses a rhythm to it. There is an aural component to the poem that makes a reader seem that the poem is meant to be heard than read. It reminds one of the oral mode of storytelling prevalent in pre-colonial India. Ramanujan uses gentle irony and witty images of silverfish breeding dynasties, hooped bales of cotton shipped off to invisible Manchesters, to critique Indian society. Stylistically, the poem employs a bantering or conversational style to achieve a kind of intimacy with the reader. Ramanujan employs tension in the poem by using the conflicting themes of persistence of tradition and the enduring passage of time to maintain a tension in the poem that moves the poem forward.

In terms of language, A.K. Ramanujan uses the poetic device of enjambment to carry and collapse one idea of a line into another. Ramanujan uses metaphors ("the great house", "malarial rivers") and metonymy ("invisible Manchesters") to convey a sense of

concreteness in the poem. He uses vivid images of a dusty library, houses with windows and letters with countless scribbles over it in order to achieve a visual effect.

The poem “Extended Family” is an exemplar of stylistic innovation. The poem has an incantatory effect on the reader. Like the previous poem, it is written in free verse, in a syntax that experiments with poetic modes. A.K. Ramanujan succeeds in constructing a mental monologue of a speaker who seems to be contemplating his identity while performing the most mundane of tasks. Stylistically, the poem is a nod to the works of Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens or even Sylvia Plath.

The language of "Extended Family" is shorn of any adornments. Ramanujan uses images of the bulb and the sun to delineate the world of his ancestors and his own. The beginning of the poem with the conjunction "yet" is significant because it suggests that we are thrown into the middle of the speaker's thoughts and have to navigate our way through it, just like the speaker is trying to navigate his space within his extended family. Because we are thrown into the middle of the speaker's thoughts, we seem to be looking into the working of the emotional and mental process of the speaking voice in the poem. Specific images like "naked Chicago bulb", "Vedic sun", "Sears Turkish towel" evoke a specific experience and emotional state.

3.9 LET US SUM UP

A.K. Ramanujan, the second- generation English poet, was a cultural thinker, academic, among other things. Two of his widely acclaimed poems "Extended Family" and "Small Scale Reflections on a Great House" may be found in *Second Sight* (1986) and *Relations* (1971) respectively. While "Extended Family" deals with the themes of cultural disconnect and family ties, "Small Scale Reflections on a Great House" deals with themes of past, memory and cultural belonging. Both poems express the tussles and negotiations made by not only an Indian living abroad but also tradition as it grapples with modernity. Ramanujan's poems use a conversational tone. They are written in free verse and have a certain oral element to it, as if the poemsare meant to be recited and heard.

3.10 FURTHER READING

Bhatnagar, M.K. (2002). *The Poetry of A.K. Ramanujan*. Atlantic Publishers and Distributors.
King, Bruce. (2001). *Modern Indian Poetry in English*. Oxford University Press.
Ramanujan, A.K. (1999). *Collected Poems*. Oxford India Paperbacks.

3.11 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Answer to Q 1: Education at Mysore… Receiving fellowship for PhD… professorship at Chicago University… founding South Asian Studies Program….receiving Padma Shri… MacArthur Fellowship.

Answer to Q 2:"A Poem is Born"… earliest poem… in his diary… dated September 1949
Answer to Q 3: Chicago… Wisconsin… Michigan… Harvard
Answer to Q 4: Striders… Relations… Second Sight.
Answer to Q 5: Home… family…. Cultural disconnect…. inheritance and disavowal of tradition.
Answer to Q6: Ramanujan edited collections of folk tales…. developed a context-sensitive Indian mode of thinking…
Answer to Q7: Relations and Second Sight.
Answer to Q8: The great house stands for tradition… memories… family… a microcosm of Indian society.

Answer to Q9: Uses images of bulb and sun, Ganga and dry chlorine water, juxtaposition, contrast, irony.
Answer to Q10: Architecture is used to depict a certain picture of Indian society… dilapidated architecture a symbol of slothfulness of Indian society….comment on colonialism…. stifling space of bath compared with the width of Ganga.
Answer to Q11: Time is cyclical in the poems. Linearity is a European construct. Time leaps are shown in the poem to emphasise the same.
Answer to Q12: Time ravages and destroys… time leads to loss of culture and a severance of roots… yet time cannot obliterate familial and cultural ties.

3.12 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q.1 Write a short note on the images employed by A.K. Ramanujan in the poems.
Q.2 Provide a brief account of A.K. Ramanujan's life and works.
Q.3 How would you analyse the space of the bath in "Extended Family"?
Q.4 Mention any one image from "Small Scale Reflections on a Great House" that convey the passage of time.
Q.5 Provide a critical analysis of "Small Scale Reflections on a Great House."
Q.6 Discuss in detail the treatment of time in "Small Scale Reflections on a Great House" and "Extended Family."
Q.7 A.K. Ramanujan believed that the past never passes; it is a fixed presence in our lives. Do you agree? Discuss in reference to the poems prescribed.

UNIT 4: PATRICK FERNANDO: "FOR A BOY OF EIGHT" AND "SMILING AT GRIEF"

UNIT STRUCTURE

4.1 Learning Objectives
4.2 Introduction
4.3 Patrick Fernando : His Life and Works
4.4 Context and Explanation of the Poems
4.5 Major Themes
4.6 Style and Language
4.7 Let us Sum up
4.8 Further Reading
4.9 Model Questions

4.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

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

- discuss the life and works of the poet
- explain the poems and their context
- highlight some of the major themes evident in the poem
- analyse the style and language of the poet.

4.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit shall introduce the learner to the life and poetry of the renowned poet from Sri Lanka, Patrick Fernando.Patrick Fernando (1931-1983) achieved international recognition for his poetry as he was the first poet from Sri Lanka to be published. He provided a introspective vision and religious sentiment to his poetry. Before we explore two of his prescribed poems, let us gain an idea on the poet and his works.

4.3 PATRICK FERNANDO: HIS LIFE AND WORKS

Born into a Catholic middle-class family on the southwest coast, near Negombo, Sri Lanka, Fernando drew inspiration from everyday people, places, and nature in close proximity to his life, eschewing overt socio-political themes like Sri Lanka's independence or the 1971 JVP uprising. His debut collection appeared in London in 1955, marking him as a pioneer, with poems later featured in global anthologies. His work reflects a fusion of Roman Catholicism, Western Classics, and conversational irony, distinguishing him from contemporary writers such as Lakdasa Wickramasinghe and Yasmine Gooneratne.

He had a good command not only over Sinhalese and English but also over Greek and Latin languages. His passion for birds and his piercing insight into the working of death is invariably reflected in his poetry, though the Christian themes are also richly handled. " A

keen gardener, he loved large trees, foliage plants, anthuriumsand orchids. He spent most of his weekends supervising his coconut plantation at Mangala Eliya.
Fernando's poetry spans personal reflections, genre scenes of fisherfolk-"The Fisherman Mourned by His Wife,""Sun and Rain on the West Coast"-and symbolic explorations of love's tragedy ("The Lament of Paris"), procreation ("Survivors"), and destruction ("Life and Death of a Hawk"). Irony permeates his craft, reconciling life's contradictions with minted language akin to John Crowe Ransom's, as noted by critics like M.I. Kuruvilla. A tax official by profession (1952-1979), he remained unapologetic about his colonial-influenced roots, prioritising universal motifs-growth, transience, death-over local nationalism. Though his career spanned three fruitful phases of elegiac lyrics, Fernando's legacy endures as a path-breaker in Sri Lankan English poetry, blending orthodoxy with poignant observation.

4.4 CONTEXT AND EXPLANATION OF " FOR A BOY OF EIGHT" AND "SMILING AT GRIEF"

Patrick Fernando's "Elegy for My Son," often associated with poignant reflections on childhood loss akin to "For a Boy of Eight," exemplifies his mastery of the elegiac form through restrained grief and classical precision. Composed in 1980 after the death of his youngest son, the poem mourns a child's sudden demise, symbolised by a "young tree" that sickens and dies in a single day despite nurture from "earth and wind and sunshine." This central metaphor elevates personal tragedy to universal meditation on life's fragility, drawing from Fernando's Roman Catholic faith and Western classical roots, where nature embodies divine mystery.

The three-stanza structure mirrors the classical elegy: lament, praise, and consolation, though Fernando subverts full resolution for haunting ambiguity. Free verse with subtle rhyme ("die/pride,""sun/away") and rhythmic enjambment creates a conversational intimacy, contrasting the formal dignity of poets like Gray or Milton. Short lines evoke breathlessness, mirroring the speaker's stunned disbelief, while tercets in stanzas one and two build rhythmic tension around the tree's vitality and fall.

Central is the inscrutability of death: "There must be some terrible power / In the earth and wind and sunshine," questioning benevolent nature's betrayal. The poem probes parental pride turning to desolation-the gardener's "assent to life" yields to an "empty place" where "thoughts / Brandished wildly sigh and sing in memory." Unity in loss culminates in "I am the tree that's gone, / That tree and I being one," fusing father and son in transcendent oneness, echoing Catholic mysticism and classical pastoral elegies.

Metaphor dominates: the "fine young tree" symbolises the boy's vigour, "sicken[ing]" abruptly to underscore mortality's caprice. Personification casts nature as "conspirators after the deed," calm and indifferent, heightening the speaker's isolation. Alliteration ("sun's and wind's keen sponsorship") and assonance ("sicken...die") lend musicality, while irony infuses the "strange excess of love" that destroys, blending admiration with accusation. Pathetic fallacy is inverted-nature's serenity mocks human turmoil.The tone blends sorrowful restraint with philosophical

inquiry, avoiding melodrama for "meticulous, mannered" precision characteristic of Fernando. Diction mixes everyday ("planting and tending") with elevated ("brandished wildly,""keen sponsorship"), reflecting his taxman's life and classicist's erudition. This restraint dignifies grief, transforming raw pain into cathartic reflection.

"For a Boy of Eight" (or this elegy) cements Fernando's legacy as Sri Lanka's elegiac voice, bridging local loss with global traditions. It critiques nature's dual nurture/destruction, offering no solace beyond empathetic unity, inviting readers to confront mortality's "haunting...void."

"Smile at Grief" (also titled "Smiling at Grief") by Patrick Fernando encapsulates his philosophical resilience amid life's vicissitudes, advocating acceptance of joy and sorrow as affirmations of vitality. Featured inSelected Poems (compiled posthumously), the poem posits human emotions as fleeting yet essential, contrasting with death's numbness. Through introspective imagery, Fernando urges "smiling" at grief, transforming pain into proof of existence.The poem employs free verse with conversational rhythms, evoking a meditative monologue akin to classical stoicism. Irregular stanzas mirror emotional ebbs-short lines for abrupt "crashes" into memory, longer for reflective recovery. Subtle internal rhymes ("joy/grief,""living/giving") and enjambment propel the reader through upheaval to equanimity, underscoring thematic flux without rigid meter.

Central is life's dual joys/sorrows as "foundation" for action, where grief's visitation reaffirms life against death's "wreath" of insensibility. Fernando draws on classical views-post-mortem loss of feeling-reframing emotion as "cause for joy," celebrating sentience amid "constant stream of upheavals." Memory's "museum" evokes Proustian intrusion, yet propels return to "land of the living," promoting humanistic endurance over nihilism seen in his elegies.

Metaphor dominates: life's "museum of one's mind" stores relics, grief a revitalizing force lifting one "up." Irony permeates-fleeting "treacherous" feelings spark joy, subverting grief's tyranny. Personification animates emotions as dynamic agents, while antithesis (joy/grief, life/death) structures philosophical tension, echoing Metaphysical conceits Fernando admired. Vivid diction ("crash,""brandished") conveys visceral impact, blending everyday with elevated tone.

In Fernando's oeuvre, "Smile at Grief" challenges the elegiac despair in contrast to poems such as , offering stoic humanism amid Sri Lanka's postcolonial flux.

4.5 MAJOR THEMES

Patrick Fernando's poetry are rooted in personal observation and universal humanism, explores profound existential concerns without overt socio-political commentary.

Human Mortality

Central to Fernando's work is life's fleeting nature and mortality's inevitability. Poems like "For Boy of Eight", "Elegy for My Son" depict sudden loss-a "young tree" thriving then dying abruptly-questioning nature's nurturing betrayal. Elegies such as "The Fisherman

Mourned by His Wife" and "Life and Death of a Hawk" mourn everyday figures, blending sorrow with acceptance of death's finality. This theme recurs in reflections on aging and decay, as in "To Isabel," where desire cools into philosophical resignation.

Grief and Mourning

Fernando masters the elegiac mode, transforming personal and mythic grief into restrained catharsis. "Smile at Grief" urges embracing sorrow as proof of vitality, countering elegies' despair with stoic joy amid emotional "upheavals." Works like "Adam and Eve" lament paradise lost, while "A Symphony in Flowers" grieves innocence corrupted by fruition, emphasizing profound, unresolving agony beautified through craft.

4.6 STYLE AND LANGUAGE

Fernando's "meticulous, mannered poetry" was well-inspired and shaped by his western classical learning and literature. These roots have a natural inborn concern for discipline and precision of technique of the classical tradition which he practiced scrupulously. Rajiva Wijesinha in "Ethnic Voice: Lakdasa Wikkramasinha and Patrick Fernando in Perspective" points out that, "[i]n discussion of the Sri Lankan poets in English, the first question that is generally asked is, to which extent is it distinctively Sri Lankan" (17). And if one is to apply this question in evaluating Fernando's Selected Poems, the answer would inevitably be that "though some of Patrick Fernando's work is inspired by local factors, the bulk of it makes clear his Catholicism and/or his classical education" (Wijesinha 17). Not only that, it is indubitable that, despite occasional attempts at coinage and even more rare inclusions of terms that can be specifically classified as Sri Lankan English, Fernando is noted for his almost uniform use of Standard English in his work. However, the fact that Fernando's poems are marked by his religious affiliations and educational background, instead of rendering them un-Sri Lankan, points to the need to consider them as representative samples of a particular milieu that is an inherent part of the socio-political landscape of the island nation. In the *Journal of South Asian Literature,* answering a question raised by Yasmine Gooneratne on the relevance of his work to his contemporary society, Fernando states My poems are mostly of a personal and lyrical nature, and they don't express the concerns that our society articulates on a public level. However, the basic values and attitudes they contain, and which you might broadly describe as humanistic, are alive in our society now too. (Wadley 103)

4.7 LET US SUM UP

After having gone through the unit, you will be familiar with Patrick Fernando and his works. The two prescribed poems “For a Boy of Fight” and “Smiling Grief” shall give you an idea on the context and content of the poem. Also, Fernando’s poetical style which is seeped in the classical tradition shall enable you to explore his works further.

4.8 FURTHER READING

Abayasekera, Nayomi. (2019) *The Changing World of Contemporary South Asian Poetry in English: A Collection of Critical Essays.* United States, Lexington Books.

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Gooneratne, Yasmine, and PATRICK FERNANDO. "Yasmine Gooneratne Interviews PATRICK FERNANDO." *Journal of South Asian Literature,* vol. 12, no. 1/2, 1976, pp. 103-08. JSTOR, http://www.jstor.org/stable/40872141.

4.9 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q 1 Write a note on the life and works of Patrick Fernando.
Q 2 Critically examine the poetry of Patrick Fernando based on your reading of his poems.
Q 3 What are the central themes in his poems?
Q 4 Comment on the style and language of Patrick Fernando's poetry.

UNIT 5: RABINDRANATH TAGORE: "KABULIWALA" OR THE VENDOR FROM KABUL

UNIT STRUCTURE:

5.1 Learning Objectives
5.2 Introduction
5.3 Rabindranath Tagore : His Life and works
5.4 Summary and Explanation of Short Story
5.5 Major Themes
5.6 Major Characters
5.7 Language and Style
5.8 Let us Sum up
5.9 Further Reading
5.10 Answers to Check Your Progress
5.11 Model Questions

5.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

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

- discuss the life and literary contributions of Rabindranath Tagore
- analyse the major works of Tagore across poetry, fiction, and drama
- explain the plot and significance of the short story "Kabuliwala"
- identify and interpret key themes such as human connection, fatherly love, and othering
- examine the major characters in the story
- evaluate Tagore's style, narrative technique, and use of symbolism

5.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit introduces you to a poet, novelist, playwright, composer, and thinker, Rabindranath Tagore, who is one of the most influential literary figures of modern India.

The unit will first explore the life and works of Tagore, placing him within the broader context of the Bengal Renaissance and his role as a literary innovator. It will then move on to a detailed study of his famous short story "Kabuliwala", focusing on its summary, themes, characterisation, and style. By the end of this unit, you will grasp how Tagore's writing reflects deep human values such as empathy, love, and universal connection, while also addressing social issues and cultural differences.

5.3 RABINDRANATH TAGORE : HIS LIFE AND WORKS

Rabindranath Tagore was born on May 7th, 1861, in Calcutta, which was under British control at the time. He was the youngest among thirteen children and grew up in the

family's old home, called Jorasanko. His father, Debendranath Tagore, was a known figure in the Brahmo Samaj, which was a group that wanted to bring back simple ideas from the Upanishads. The family of Tagores were a rich and cultured family, and they played a big role in the Bengal Renaissance.

In terms of education, Rabindranath did not go to school for very long. Instead, he learned most of what he knew at home. Later, his father sent him to Brighton, England, to study law. But Tagore did not continue with it. He dropped out, taught himself about Shakespeare and other literary figures, and then went back to India. In India, he married a woman named Mrinalini Devi in December of 1883.

In the year 1891, he took care of his family's property in East Bengal, which is now Bangladesh. During his time living on a boat along the Padma River, Rabindranath Tagore developed a close understanding of rural life and the hardships faced by village communities. This experience deepened his empathy for the poor and profoundly influenced his literary work, later finding expression in stories such as "Kabuliwala", published in 1892.

Rabindranath Tagore was a man of many talents. He could write in many different forms, including poetry, stories, and plays. He also made music for over 2,000 songs, which are still loved today as Rabindra Sangeet. He is also the one who wrote the national anthems of India and Bangladesh. Apart from music, his interest in poetry was kindled at a very young age. He started making up verses when he was just eight years old, and eight years later, he began publishing his work under a fake name. It was not until the 1880s that he published his first really important works. Some of his early and important works of poetry are *Manasi, Sonar Tari,* and *Gitanjali. Gitanjali,* a collection of song offerings, is probably his most famous work. Tagore also translated some of these poems into English, which helped him become famous all around the world and even win the Nobel Prize in 1913. His other notable poetry books include *Gitimalya* and *Balaka*.

In his novels, Tagore often tackled social and political issues. Some of his most famous works of fiction include *Gora,* which was published in 1910, *Ghare-Baire,* also known as *The Home and the World,* which came out in 1916, and Yogayog, which was released in 1929.

Rabindranath Tagore was also famous for his short stories. Some of which, collected in a book called *Galpaguchchha,* are pretty simple, but they are also really powerful. They show us the small joys and sorrows of ordinary people living in villages, and they do it with a gentle irony and sympathy that is really beautiful.

Tagore also wrote some important plays, like *Raja,* which was published in 1910, *Dakghar,* also known as *The Post Office,* which came out in 1912, *Raktakarabi,* or Red *Oleanders,* which was released in 1926, and some dance-dramas like *Chitrangada.* One noteworthy thing about his plays is that they often mix poetry, music, and dance together, entailing the pleasure of it all. When it comes to his writing style, Tagore was a real innovator.He introduced new rhythms and simple language into his writing, and he used every day Bengali words to make his stories feel more real and relatable. He broke away from the

old Sanskrit-based styles that were popular at the time and made Bengali literature feel fresh and modern. By doing so, he was able to create a new kind of writing that was unique and exciting.

RabindranathTagore also laid a strong emphasis on education.He believed that education should be close to nature and help the full growth of a child's mind, body, and spirit. He disliked the rigid, exam-centred British system. It was this vein that he started an experimental school in 1901, at Santiniketan in the rural West Bengal. The school followed the ancient Indian tapovana (forest school) ideal and combined Indian and Western ideas. In 1921, the school grew into Visva-Bharati University with the motto *Yatravisvambhavatyekanidam* ("Where the world makes its home in a single nest"). In 1922, he also set up Sriniketan for rural reconstruction and self-reliance (atmashakti). He wanted education to create harmony between man and nature, and between different cultures.

Tagore passed away on August 7, 1941, at the age of 80, in his family home in Calcutta. Even today, his thoughts on living together in peace and harmony are still important. The university he started, Visva-Bharati, is still working towards his dream. He is still a symbol of Indian culture and a source of inspiration for many people - writers, artists, and teachers everywhere. His legacy lives on, reminding us of the importance of kindness, love, and understanding. Tagore's message of unity and peace is something we can all learn from, and his work continues to bring people together from all walks of life.

LET US KNOW

The Bengal Renaissance was a cultural and intellectual movement that took place in Bengal during the 19th and early 20th centuries. It marked a period of social reform, literary growth, and renewed interest in art, education, and philosophy. Influenced by both Indian traditions and Western ideas, this movement encouraged rational thinking, modern education, and social change. Figures like Rabindranath Tagore played a key role in shaping literature and culture during this time. Tagore's works, including Kabuliwala, reflect the humanistic and reformist spirit of this movement.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. How did Tagore's experience in East Bengal influence his writing?
2. Name any two major works of poetry by Tagore.
3. What were Tagore's ideas about education?

5.4 SUMMARY AND EXPLANATION OF SHORT STORY

The story Kabuliwala opens with the narrator introducing his daughter Mini, who is described as a talkative, little girl with an active imagination. She "can't stop talking for a minute",according to the narrator, and often gets scolded by her mother for it. Mini's father, the narrator, however, enjoys it and feels it is unnatural when she remains quiet.

He converses with his kid for longhours and even responds to the queries that come up in her inquisitive, impressionable mind.One morning, while talking to her father, who is busy writing a novel, Mini spots a Kabuliwala from her window and starts calling to him.

Although she summons him, when he finally comes over, Mini is a little worried about whether the Kabuliwala's enormous sacks have children inside them or some kind of goods. Later on, we learn that the Kabuliwala's name is Rahmat and that he is actually from Afghanistan.Mini's father ends up buying a few things and having a rambling conversation with the Kabuliwala on various topics such as Abdur Rahman, the Emir of Afghanistan, and the Frontier Policy of the Russians and the British. The Kabuliwala also, after Mini's return to the scene, offers her some raisins and apricots, but Mini refuses them because of her suspicion and fear of the unfamiliar-looking man.

After a few days pass, the narrator encounters Rahmat, the Kabuliwala, yet again, with Mini engrossed in a conversation with him as she chewing a pile of raisins and nuts from her lap. While the Kabuliwala is gives the coin to Mini, her mother finds it and questions her about the same. Her father later comes to her aid and saves herby bringing her out for a walk. The narrator learns that the Rahmat had been visiting nearly every day to hear her talk. He also learns of their many jokes, including Mini asking him,"What's inside your bag?" and him replying with, "An elephant!"

The narrator, who has never left Kolkata, dreams of travelling the world but feels too fearful to do so. He satisfies this desire by listening to stories from Rahmat, a Kabuliwala, whose vivid tales spark his imagination. However, Mini's mother is suspicious and fearful of Rahmat, worrying he might be dangerous, and warns Mini's father to keep an eye on him. The narrator,however, trusts him and sees no reason to stop his visits.

One day, we learn that Rahmat, the Kabuliwala, is preparing to go home, and in order to do so, he has to go around and get the money customers owe him. One morning, while the Kabuliwala is doing so, he gets into an altercation with a customer refusing to pay what he owes, and during the fight, he ends up stabbing the customer in anger. The narrator learns of this, and Mini on seeing the Rahmat is being taken to jail, asks him if he is being taken to his to which he says that he is.As time passes, Mini grows up and gradually forgets the Kabuliwala.

The narrative then shifts to a later moment in life, when her family is busy preparing for Mini's wedding, set to take place during the festive season of Durga Puja. One autumn morning, when the house is full of people decorating and busy with preparations for the wedding, the festive music echoes through the house and its vicinity.Rahmat suddenly arrives out of nowhere and encounters the narrator, who then learns that he has been released from jail. The narrator remembers the crime for which Rahmat had been imprisoned,which makes him cautions. He says everybody is busy, so he has to leave, but Rahmat insists on seeing Mini. Brushed off by the father, he just settles on asking the narrator to give Mini some grapes, nuts, and raisins, as he had earlier brought for her as a reminder of their past friendship. Rahmat tells the narrator that he came with his own daughter "in mind," not to conduct business, and rejects the narrator's offer to pay him for them his offering to Mini.

Rahmat shows the narrator his daughter Parvati's handprint, which he keeps with him when he travels for work, by taking "a crumpled piece of paper" out of his shirt's breast pocket. Upon witnessing it, the narrator realised that "he was a father just as I am a father" and "forgot then that he was an Afghan raisin-seller and I was a Bengali Babu." In the moment of realisation he calls Mini down. Rahmat tries to joke with her like old times, but Mini shies away. It abruptly dawns on Rahmat that his daughter, like Mini, will have grown up and changed from the young child he knew when he departed his home. Meanwhile, the narrator takes out some cash and asks Rahmat to use it to get home from Afghanistan and his daughter. "By your blessed reunion, Mini will be blessed," he tellsRahmat.

Mini's wedding ends up being less grand than it might have been because the narrator gives money to Rahmat. Yet, he feels satisfied, believing the occasion is enriched by a deeper kindness and a more humane, gentle spirit.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

4. How is Mini characterised at the beginning of the story?
5. How does the friendship between Mini and Rahmat develop?
6. What does the Kabuliwala show to the narrator that makes him realise the man's true intentions?

5.5 MAJOR THEMES

Kabuliwala explores several profound themes that reflect universal human experiences. Through simple narration and everyday situations, Rabindranath Tagore presents ideas that go beyond time, place, and culture.

Human Connection:

Tagore,through the story "Kabuliwala", wants the readers to feel that true friendship is possible only when we look past surface differences and see the shared human heart in each other. At the beginning of the story, the narrator, who is Mini's father, looks down on Rahmat, the peddler who wears old, dirty clothes, speaks broken Bengali, and earns a living by walking the streets. In contrast, the narrator is educated, lives comfortably, and has servants and cannot imagine having anything in common with this outsider, so he even tries to pay Rahmat for the handful of nuts he gave Mini as a simple gift.

But little Mini changes everything. She chats with Rahmat every day, laughing and asking questions, and both men secretly enjoy her happiness. Years later, when Rahmat returns and shows the handprint of his own daughter, the narrator finally gets it. He realises that they are actually alike.All the walls of class and culture fall away. The story gently teaches us that real connection happens when we stop judging people by their clothes, money, or where they come from. Two strangers from opposite worlds become equals the moment they recognise the same love and pain inside each other.

Fatherly Love:

The story is filled with the special kind of love and bond fathers share with their daughters. It is fierce, giving, and full of quiet sacrifices. The narrator adores Mini so much that he patiently answers every one of her endless questions as we learn in the beginning of the story itself, even when her mother gets annoyed and tells her to be quiet. He has always dreamed of travelling the world, yet he stays home just so he can be there for her. Rahmat does the exact opposite. He leaves his little daughter Parvati far away in Afghanistan and spends years walking the Calcutta streets in the heat, selling fruit so he can send money home in order for them to survive.

Both men give up something important for their child. One gives up adventure, the other gives up being with his family. When Rahmat sees grown-up Mini dressed for her wedding, it hits him that his own daughter has also grown up without him. The narrator feels the same ache as he has to send his beloved little girl off to be married. Tagore shows us that a father's love is beautiful, but it always includes the hard part of letting go. The handprint Rahmat carries in his pocket becomes the most moving symbol of all, a small reminder of how deep and lasting that love really is.

The Theme of Othering:

The theme of "othering," or moving from fear to acceptance, is also very powerful in this story. This was a time in Calcutta when one looked with suspicion at strangers. The Kabuliwala arrives as a stranger in the story, a tall man with a turban and a large sack on his back. He speaks a version of Bengali, and this, combined with his differences, makes Mini's mother suspicious of him. She wonders if he might kidnap children or be up to no good. Mini, too, is initially fearful of him in the story and hides when she catches a glimpse of him. She wonders if he has living children, like herself, hidden away inside his sack.This fear, however, is the fear of people who are different from us, and as the characters get to know the man through their interactions, we find that they slowly start accepting him. Mini befriends him, and her father, the narrator himself, too, enjoys having conversations with him about Afghanistan and other things. By the end of this story, the narrator realises that he no longer views Rahmat as a stranger, but as another human being and another father like himself. Tagore subtly examines our fear of othering, and through reading this story, we come to understand that this fear is an illusion. Through this story, we learn how language, country, and appearance do not matter much when we open our hearts to others.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

7. How does Kabuliwala present the idea of human connection beyond social differences?
8. In what ways do the narrator and Rahmat show their love and sacrifice as fathers?

5.6 MAJOR CHARACTERS

The Narrator:

The narrator of the story is Mini's father,and it is through him that we navigate the plot and inner workings of it. He describes himself as a"Bengali Babu", which is a respectable term suggesting that he is a well-educated and financially well-off citizen. He has just one daughter, Mini, whom he adores very much and spends all possible time with. Despite the fact that his wife finds Mini's constant talking exhausting, the narrator enjoys listening to his daughter speaking about everything under the sun. Being a writer by character, the narrator is said to be working on his novel of adventure, which is rather similar to his desires and needs. He has always dreamt of exploring unknown territories and meeting new people. Nevertheless, in reality, he never left Calcutta, where he has lived throughout his life.

The reason why the narrator became friends with Rahmat is that he enjoys listening to stories about Afghanistan and things Rahmat saw during his travelling days as a fruit vendor, or Kabuliwala. Besides, Rahmat often visited him and made Mini laugh. However, this friendship turns out to be quite shallow, as after Rahmat is put in prison for his criminal deeds, the narrator immediately forgets about their former friendly relations.Later, when he sees Rahmat again and remembers that he was a criminal, the narrator tries to send him off as soon as he can, as he does not need any disturbances on Mini's wedding day. It is a small but telling flaw in the narrator. His easy warmth can cool into indifference the moment someone no longer fits neatly into his orderly world, but the truth is that he and Rahmat are more alike than he had thought initially. Once Rahmat confesses that he had a beloved daughter, Parvati, in Afghanistan it is then that the narrator develops affectionate feelings towards him and decides to let him meet Mini as well as give him some money to travel back to his native country and live with his family, showing his moment of reflection and tenderness as a human being and a father.

Mini :

Mini, the narrator's daughter, is an only child who, at the beginning of the story, is introduced as a talkative, inquisitive, and energetic five-year-old. Mini's questions reveal a vivid imagination and sharp observational eye. She interrupts her father's novel-writing with playful queries, mistaking a crow's name, wondering if rain comes from an elephant squirting water from its trunk in the clouds, or innocently asking, "Father, what relation is Mother to you?" These moments establish her as lively, affectionate, and unfiltered, a symbol of pure childhood joy unburdened by adult prejudices or social norms. As a child,Mini spends a lot of time in her father's study, hanging out with him while he works on his novel.Her closeness to her father and her preference for his company over her short-tempered mother underscores a tender parent-child bond that mirrors the larger fatherly themes in the story.

Mini is also the most relevant example of the dynamic quality of time as she grows up from a curious, non-hesitant girl to a shy, docile one.When Rahmat visits her after eight

years, instead of boisterously entering the room as she did as a child, Mini comes in "timidly" and stands close by the narrator instead of going forward to her old friend. As Rahmat attempts to interact with her in the friendly way they used to, Mini stands silently and blushes, obviously uncomfortable. She then leaves the room without a word. Seeing this evidence of Mini's loss of openness, the narrator's heart aches,and he mourns the curious and friendly little girl that his daughter once was. Rahmat is also saddened by this interaction, as it is an indication of the changes that likely have occurred in his own daughter in the eight years he has been gone. Thus, Mini is more than a charming child; she is a symbol of fleeting childhood innocence and the relentless march of time.

Rahmat or the Kabuliwala:

One of the most touching characters in Tagore's Kabuliwala is the Kabuliwala himself, named Rahmat. who travels to Calcutta each year to sell dry fruits, nuts, and shawls. He is described as a tall, loose-garmented man with a turban and a large bag on his back. Because of his shabby, baggy clothes, as well as his broken Bengali, he looks every bit like an outsider. This is evident in how Mini's family treats him with suspicion at first. Her mother, especially, is initially scared of this stranger from a faraway place and thinks he could be dangerous.However, we find the family warming up to him after getting to know him better. Rahmat's character thus challenges the prejudices of the narrator's wife and Bengali society, as Tagore reveals him to be not the threatening foreigner they fear, but a loving parent no different from the narrator himself. Critics often point out that he beautifully represents the shared humanity that crosses borders, class, and culture, turning a simple peddler into a timeless symbol of parental love and the quiet pain of separation.

Mini, for Rahmat, is like a ray of sunshine, reminding him of his own little daughter back home in Afghanistan. Every moment he spends with Mini helps him forget his loneliness for a while. They even share special inside jokes, like the "elephant in the sack," and he teases Mini about going to her father-in-law's house. One day, while collecting money from a customer, Rahmat loses his temper in a fight and stabs the man. This leads to him being arrested and sent to jail for eight long years. Even in prison, he does not forget Mini. When he is finally released, he goes straight to the narrator's house with grapes and raisins, excited to meet his little friend again, only to find everything has changed. He realises that it is Mini's wedding day, and when she appears in her bridal clothes, shy and grown-up, Rahmat is stunned. He tries to joke with her like old times, but she only blushes and quietly leaves the room. In that painful moment, Rahmat realises his own daughter must have grown up too, just as distant and different now. With tears in his eyes, he shows the narrator the crumpled piece of paper on which his daughter's tiny handprint was once pressed. It is the only thing he carried with him through all those years in jail, a silent symbol of a father's undying love and the pain of separation.

Mini's Mother :

Mini's mother is another minor yet an important character, who, like the narrator, Mini's father, remains unnamed throughout the story. She is a timid woman afraid of the outside

world. She is afraid of thieves, robbers, drunkards, and strangers, making her suspicious of Rahmat, because of which she asks Mini's father to keep an eye on the Kabuliwala to make sure he does not kidnap Mini and sell her into slavery in Afghanistan. Through this character, Tagore tells us that fear of outsiders is natural. However, it is also natural to get over this fear with the help of love. Just like the narrator, Mini's mother is "progressive" and chooses to let Mini enjoy a carefree childhood rather than spending her whole life preparing her for marriage. It is evident in the fact that, unlike most families in those days, they never kept reminding their little daughter about her future marriage or her father-in-law's house.

5.7 STYLE AND LANGUAGE

The style of Tagore in Kabuliwala is simple, natural, and close to real life. It is written in first-person narration through the eyes of Mini's father. We can only see things through his eyes or perspective. We can relate to what he is going through, whether it is his love for Mini, his hesitation towards Rahmat, or finally, his deep understanding and affection for Rahmat. If Tagore had written the story from a third-person point of view, it would have been very different. We would not have felt what Mini's dad feels. Tagore uses this way of telling the story to make us feel like we are part of it and part of the family. We understand the themes of love, time, and humanism better because we can feel what Mini's father feels.

In the story and in general, Tagore's writing is often lucid and simple, with short and fluid sentences. He uses vivid description, dialogue, and narration in a smooth manner. For example, when Rahmat first encounters Mini, the author describes, "The Kabuliwala took out some raisins and apricots from inside the bag and gave them to Mini, but she refused to take them and remained pressed against my knees with a redoubled suspicion." The narration is such that we can almost picture what is happening. We can imagine the tall man, the scared child, and the father standing by and watching. However, towards the end of the story, we find a change in tone, and the language is softer and more emotional. For instance, when Rahmat finally understands, he sits down on the floor and sighs, and the author gives him money and speaks nicely to him. This contrast in tone follows the contrast in emotions from light friendship to deeper understanding.

Tagore also uses contrast in his style. For instance, he describes the hustle and bustle of Calcutta, and then we find the lonely mountains of Afghanistan. He describes the talkative Mini and then introduces us to the quiet and patient Rahmat. He describes the fear of Mini's mother and then shows us how trusting Mini is. This contrast makes the story interesting and helps us understand the main ideas more clearly.

He uses humour too, as we can see in the jokes between Mini and Rahmat. The jokes are often not just funny but also reflective and make us pause and think about various relatable elements of life. We also find a lyrical quality in the style of Tagore,and we can sense the beauty and emotion expressed in the description of autumn mornings, wedding

music, and rain-washed sun. This combination of realism and lyricism is a common feature of Tagore's art, reflected in the story.

Another important element of Tagore's style is the use of symbolism. Tagore uses simple things to express deep and complex ideas. The biggest symbol is the crumpled piece of paper with the handprint of Rahmat's daughter. It is not a photograph or a painting, just a simple mark made with a piece of charcoal. But this simple mark is carrying the entire burden of a father's love and eight years of separation. The sack that Rahmat carries is another symbol. It is a symbol of fear for Mini because she thinks that it is carrying living children inside. It is also a symbol of friendship because Rahmat brings gifts from inside the sack. The handprint and the sack are examples of how Tagore uses simple things to express deep emotions. The critics often comment that this story is full of symbols that make it universal. The symbols are relevant to every reader, no matter where he or she is from or what language he or she speaks.

5.8 LET US SUM UP

This unit discussed the life and works of Rabindranath Tagore's short story “Kabuliwala”. Kabuliwala tells the emotional story of the bond between Mini and Rahmat, highlighting themes like human connection, fatherly love, and the passage of time. The story shows how relationships can go beyond social and cultural differences.Through simple language, strong characterisation, and meaningful symbolism, Tagore conveys a powerful message of empathy, kindness, and shared humanity.

5.9 FURTHER READING

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5.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answer to Q1: In the year 1891, he took care of his family's property in East Bengal, which is now Bangladesh. During his time living on a boat along the Padma River, Rabindranath Tagore developed a close understanding of rural life and the hardships faced by village communities. This experience deepened his empathy for the poor and profoundly influenced his literary work, later finding expression in stories such as "Kabuliwala", published in 1892.

Answer to Q2: Some of his early and important works of poetry are *Manasi, Sonar* Tari, and *Gitanjali. Gitanjali,* a collection of song offerings, is probably his most famous work.

Rabindranath Tagore also laid a strong emphasis on education.He believed that education should be close to nature and help the full growth of a child's mind, body, and spirit. He disliked the rigid, exam-centred British system. It was this vein that he started an experimental school in 1901, at Santiniketan in the rural West Bengal.

The school followed the ancient Indian tapovana (forest school) ideal and combined Indian and Western ideas. In 1921, the school grew into Visva-Bharati University with the motto *Yatravisvambhavatyekanidam* ("Where the world makes its home in a single nest"). In 1922, he also set up Sriniketan for rural reconstruction and self-reliance (*atmashakti*). He wanted education to create harmony between man and nature, and between different cultures.

Answer to Q4: The story Kabuliwala opens with the narrator introducing his daughter Mini, who is described as a talkative, little girl with an active imagination. She "can't stop talking for a minute",according to the narrator, and often gets scolded by her mother for it. Mini's father, the narrator, however, enjoys it and feels it is unnatural when she remains quiet.

Answer to Q5: As the days pass, the narrator encounters Rahmat, the Kabuliwala, again, with Mini engrossed in a conversation with him as she chews on a pile of raisins and nuts from her lap. While the Kabuliwala is giving the coin to Mini, her mother finds it and questions her. Her father later comes to her aid and saves her by bringing her out for a walk. The narrator learns that the Rahmat has visited to hear her talk nearly every day. He also learns of their many joke.

Answer to Q6: Rahmat shows the narrator his daughter Parvati's handprint, which he keeps with him when he travels for work, by taking "a crumpled piece of paper" out of his shirt's breast pocket.

Answer to Q7: Tagore,through the story Kabuliwala, wants the readers to feel that true friendship is possible only when we look past surface differences and see the shared human heart in each other. At the beginning of the story, the narrator, who is Mini's father, looks down on Rahmat, the peddler who wears old, dirty clothes, speaks broken Bengali, and earns a living by walking the streets.

Answer to Q8: Both men give up something important for their child. One gives up adventure, the other gives up being with his family. When Rahmat sees grown-up Mini dressed for her wedding, it hits him that his own daughter has also grown up without him. The narrator feels the same ache as he has to send his beloved little girl off to be married. Tagore shows us that a father's love is beautiful, but it always includes the hard part of letting go. The handprint Rahmat carries in his pocket becomes the most moving symbol of all, a small reminder of how deep and lasting that love really is.

5.11 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q1. Discuss the life and works of Rabindranath Tagore.
Q2. Give a detailed summary and explanation of the short story "Kabuliwala".
Q3. Explain the major themes of the short story "Kabuliwala".
Q4. Give a character sketch of the major characters in the story "Kabuliwala". by Rabindranath Tagore.
Q5. Discuss the style and language employed by Rabindranath Tagore in the prescribed short story.

UNIT 6: SADAT HASAN MANTO: "TOBA TEK SINGH"

UNIT STRUCTURE:

6.1 Learning Objectives

6.2 Introduction

6.3 Sadat Hassan Manto: His Life and Works

6.4 Explanation of the Short Story "Toba Tek Singh"

6.5 Major Themes

6.6 Major Characters

6.7 Style and Language

6.8 Let us Sum up

6.9 Further Reading

6.10 Answers to Check Your Progress

6.11 Model Questions

6.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

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

- briefly discuss the life and works of the writer Sadat Hasan Manto
- explain in details the text of the short story "Toba Tek Singh"
- discuss the major themes evident in the text of the short story
- provide an analysis of the main characters in the short story
- describe the style and language of the writer
- appreciate the writing of Sadat Hasan Manto

6.2 INTRODUCTION

The present unit takes up the short story titled "Toba Tek Singh' by Sadat Hasan Manto first published in 1955. The title of the story itself will certainly stir your curiosity and interest in finding what it is all about. The context of the story is the 1947 Partition of India, which experientially was a time of crises, chaos, suffering and tragedies. It had left a deep psychological scar in the minds of the families who were subject to this major historical decision and socio-political change for it also meant that they suffered a crises of identity and belonging.

In fact, the quality of their lives were affected, their freedom and well-being denied, millions of families were uprooted and another million had died in the wake of the violence that had erupted. In the end, all that had surpassed during that dark period of history can never be undone and the story Toba Tek Singh points to the extreme difficulty of such circumstances. Let us then first acquaint ourselves with the writer, Sadat Hasan Manto before we go through the text of the short story and explore its various aspects in details.

6.3 SADAT HASSAN MANTO: HIS LIFE AND WORKS

Sadat Hasan Manto (11 May 1912 – 18 January 1955) was born into a Punjabi-Muslim family to Sarsar Begum and Khwaja Ghulam Hassan at Paprodi village of Samrala in Ludhiana which was then a district of the colonial Punjab. He drew upon both his Punjabi and Kashmiri roots of which he was proud and which he always defended. He received his early education at a Muslim High School in Amritsar, the place where his extended family had settled. However, he did not show much proficiency in his studies even as he later enrolled at the Hindu Sabha College, he did not fare well in his studies. However, his fate had other things in store for him.

Manto had met the scholarly writer Abdul Bari Alig who inspired him towards discovering his hidden interests in reading and talent in writing. Owing to his inspiration, the young Manto had even translated Victor Hug's *The Last Day* and published it in Urdu as *Sarguzasht-e-Asser* or *A Prisoner's Story*. This was followed by his Urdu translation of another work by Oscar Wilde namely *Vera* in the year 1934. Then, came the publication of his first short story in Urdu titled "Tamasha" or "Spectacle" was in the newspaper *Khalq.* Besides, dabbling in fictional writing, he also wrote and published frequently in two newspaper dailies in Amritsar namely *Musawat* and *Ehsan*. Also, his translations of Russian stories found their way to the journals *Alamgir* and *Humayun* and were later published as an anthology that featured translations of stories written by Leo Tolstoy, Anton Chekhov and Maxim Gorky. In addition, his first published story "Tamasha" and another titled "Mahigir or Fisherman*"* was published in the same collection.

Thus, Manto felt the interest to pursue his studies yet again and thus, joined the Aligarh Muslim University in 1934. This brought him into an association with the Indian Progressive Writers' Association that stood with him in the peak of his writing career as well. He then wrote and published another story in 1935 titled "Inqlaab Pasand" in the Aligarh magazine. Owing to his illness from tuberculosis, he had to once again leave his studies after a period of nine months to recover his health at a Sanatorium in Kashmir. Following three months of recovery, he returned to his ancestral home in Amritsar and then left for Lahore in search of new work. There, he joined the newspaper *Paras* (*Philosopher's stone*) in 1936 and published his anthology of short stories titled *Atish Paray* or *Nuggets of Fire*.

Later that year he moved to Bombay and worked as editor of *Mussawir* or *Painter* and a magazine titled *Samay.* During this new phase of his career, he worked for the Hindi film industry writing film scripts and dialogues. He had also shifted as editor of another magazine called *Karwan* or *Caravan*. Another anthology of short stories titled *Manto ke Afsanay* or *Stories of Manto* was published in 1940. He had shifted base to Delhi for a short while and worked at all India Radio in 1941, which gave rise to new creation of his radio plays such as *Aao*, *Manto ke Drame*, *Janaze* and *Teen Auraten*. Also his third collection of short story was published titled *Dhuan* or *Smoke*. He had returned to Mumbai and worked for the film industry yet again although he had left again being dissatisfied as

a writer. It was during this time that met with his friend from Aligarh Shaheed Latif and his wife, Ismat Chughtai (whom we shall take up in the next unit).

Although, Manto had decided to remain settled in India, his fate had other things in store. When his family visited Lahore to meet their relatives, they could not return to India owing to the violence of the communal riots following the Partition. Therefore, he had to travel all the way to Lahore by ship to be reunited with them. This had left him with little choice and thus, he had decided to settle down in Lahore like many Muslim families from India, much against his will. Manto was married to Safia Begum and raised three daughters together namely Nighat Manto, Nuzhat Manto and Nusrat Manto.

During the last phase of his short-lived life, he had to undergo several trials on the charge of his bold or obscene writings. However, he had also received wide support of many of his contemporary writers during this phase of his life until he was freed of the charges albeit with warnings from the Sessions Court, Lahore. This had terribly affected his sense of freedom with regard to writing and also spiraled him into a state of depression. It was not only when he was diagnosed with liver cirrhosis owing to his habit of drinking that his health was affected severely and he passed away on 18 January 1955 at his home in Lahore. Prior to his demise, his family had tried to take him for rehabilitation to the Lahore Mental Asylum as it was the only rehabilitation centre for alcohol addicts at that time. However, the attempt to recover him had failed and he had succumbed to his illness at the young age of 46 years.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1. Write a few lines on Sadat Hasan Manto.
Q2. Why did Manto settle down at Lahore with his family against his will?
Q3. Why was Manto charged with trials at the Lahore Sessions Court?

6.4 EXPLANATION OF THE SHORT STORY "TOBA TEK SINGH"

The opening lines of the short story directly points to the context of the story before it narrates the incidents that follow. It begins thus, "A couple of years after the Partition of the country, it occurred to the respective governments of India and Pakistan that inmates of lunatic asylums, like prisoners, should be transferred to Pakistan and Hindu and Sikh lunatics in Pakistani asylums should be sent to India". Usually, two countries are seen to exchange prisoners so that they are brought back to their respective countries of origin. However, in this exceptional case, the narrator records the exchange of inmates of lunatic asylums between two countries. In this context, a few days before both the Indian and the Pakistani governments were to implement their official asylum-inmate exchange; an atmosphere of sheer confusion was seen particularly at the Lahore lunatic asylum.

The narrator wonders if this major decision was reasonable enough as it had also brought about much chaos and confusion in its wake. This decision had been finalised after several conferences had taken place with officials from both the countries before an agreement was reached. While the date and the details of the exchange were still being worked out, the asylum prisoners simply awaited their fate. The narrator thus writes in describing the entire situation thus, "Muslim lunatics whose families were still residing in India were to be left undisturbed, the rest moved to the border for the exchange. The situation in Pakistan was slightly different, since almost the entire population of Hindus and Sikhs had already migrated to India. The question of keeping non-Muslim lunatics in Pakistan did not therefore, arise. Therefore, basically the idea of the exchange whether it was a Muslim or a Hindu lunatic prisoner was to ensure that he or she was not separated from their family regardless on which side of the border, their respective families were settled.

When the news of this decision reached the Lahore lunatic asylum, various speculations, heated discussions and reactions came pouring in. Thus, begins the accounts of various inmates and their reaction to the governments' decision. One Muslim inmate, a regular reader of the daily newspaper *Zaminder,* who when asked what Pakistan was, replied after much reflection that it was "the name of a place in India where cut-throat razors are manufactured". Again, another Sikh inmate asked his fellow Sikh inmate why they were being sent to India when they did not even know the language spoken in that country. The reply that came from his side was "I know the language of the *Hindostoras*. These devils always strut about as if they were the lords of the earth."

Another Muslim inmate was found unconscious on the bathroom floor after having shouted the slogan "Pakistan Zindabad" while taking a bath. All of these may seem crazy and trivial but one can only imagine how the news of being taken for exchange had disturbed the inmates. In fact, whether it was the mad or the partially mad at the asylum, no one had a proper idea where Pakistan was located and thus were unable to decide whether they were in India or Pakistan. There was talk of a person named 'Mohammad Ali Jinnah', or 'Quaid-e-Azam' who had created a separate state for Muslims called Pakistan. The questions that arose in their confused minds were: "If they were in India where on earth was Pakistan? And if they were in Pakistan, then how come that until only the other day it was India?"

Several funny incidents followed the days before the exchange took place. One of the inmates was so distraught at this entire India-Pakistan confusion that one day while sweeping the floor, he dropped everything to run and climb up a tree and standing on one of its branch began his speech on the situation of India-Pakistan for two long hours. Every time the guards would try to get hold of him, he would climb a branch higher to get out of their reach. In fact, when he was warned of being punished for his deeds, he made the profound declaration that he wished to live neither in India nor in Pakistan but in that tree itself! When he was finally brought down the tree, he embraced his Sikh and Hindu friends with tears as he was now sure that they would all go away to India leaving him behind.

A Muslim radio engineer who was rather an introvert and was mostly seen walking alone in his own company was so affected by it all that one day he took off his clothes and gave it to the attendants to run naked across the asylum garden. Again, a Muslim inmate, previously a devoted worker of the All India Muslim League, who hailed from Chaniot and who had a strange obsession of bathing atleast around fifteen times a day had suddenly stopped his routine bathing. He announced himself as Mohammad Ali and that he was the Qaid-e-Azam. On hearing this, another Sikh inmate declared himself as Master Tara Singh, the leader of the Sikhs. Now, the asylum authorities sensing the possibility of a communal tension declared them "dangerous" and locked them up separately.

Another Hindu inmate who was a lawyer from Lahore and had lost his sanity following an "unhappy love affair" became depressed when he was told that Amritsar was to become part of India as his beloved lived there (which he remembered somehow even in his madness). And thus, he began to abuse every Hindu and Muslim leader who had divided the two countries which made his lover an Indian and him a Pakistani. However, the news of exchange made it clear that he was to be sent to India and his friends had congratulated him for the same. But, in a funny twist, instead of being happy after all the worrisome days he had spent, he stated that he intended to remain in Lahore as his practice would not do well in Amritsar!

Among them were two Anglo-Indian inmates as well in the European ward of the asylum. When they were told that the British were to depart home following the independence of India, they were left in a deep shock, talking to each other in whispers that afternoon. What worried them was their "changed status" after independence. Their worries were related to the fact if the European ward would continue to exist or if it would be abolished and whether breakfast would be served to them or if they would have to settle for Indian chapatti.

After all of these description, the narrator turns focus to the central figure of the story, a Sikh inmate who spoke "mysterious gibberish" and who the guards said had not slept at all in fifteen years. Most of his hours would be spent standing and only once in a while he would lean against a wall. Although, this had caused his legs to remain "permanently swollen", it did not seem to bother him at all. When he had come to learn of the recent discussions on the impending exchange, the opinion that he gave in his signature style was thus, "Uper te gur gur the ananexe the bay dhayana the mung the dal of the Government of Pakistan" which made no sense to anyone. Besides no one seemed to be in their right senses anyways.

The narrator writes that discussions on the Government of Pakistan was replaced by concerns on the government of Toba Tek Singh which was supposedly a small town in the Punjab province. And, thus he had begun questioning where would his home town of Toba Tek Singh go or exactly be placed in. No one was certain whether this town existed

in India or Pakistan or if it existed at all. This was a mystery that no one could solve. And when told that Sialkot which was situated in India was now in Pakistan, they were all the more confused. Now, it made them worry that Lahore which was in Pakistan "could slide into India any moment" or that "the entire subcontinent of India might become Pakistan" and worse both India and Pakistan might completely "vanish" from the world map!

As the family members who often visited the old men every month were suddenly unable to visit him due to the communal tension in Pakistan, the old man simply withered away. They might have had answers to the questions that he held regarding his hometown, Since no one had a satisfactory answer to his question he asked one of his fellow inmates who had recently declared himself 'God'. In his reply, he said that Toba Tek Singh "was neither in India nor in Pakistan as there were no orders issued in this regard"!

Thus, the narrator writes, "Bishan Singh begged 'God' to issue the necessary orders, so that his problem could be solved, but he was disappointed, as 'God appeared to be preoccupied with more pressing matters. Finally, he told him angrily: '*Uper the gur gur the annexe the mung the dal of Guruji da Khalsa and Guruji ki fateh…jo boley so nihal sat sri akal*'." You may note that even in his demented condition, the old man does not forget the Sikh slogan '*Guruji da Khalsa and Guruji ki fateh…jo boley so nihal sat sri akal*'. Moreover, the narrator tries to somewhat decipher the angst of the old man towards the crazy inmate who called himself 'God" thus, "What he wanted to say was: 'You don't answer my prayers because you are a Muslim God. Had you been a Sikh God, you would have been more of a sport."

Following the visit of his friend Fazal Din, in a few days the date of the transfer had been fixed and finalised. The "lists of lunatics" to be exchanged between both the countries were ready. On one such cold evening, buses full of Hindu and Sikh lunatics were brought under the custody of armed police and officials had arrived at the border. These buses moved out of the Lahore asylum towards Wagha, the border that divided the two countries. After the senior officials in charge of the exchange agreements from both the side met and signed documents the transfer had started. It was not an easy task to handle the already confused and demented men and women in that situation. Some refused to get down the bus, many refused to leave despite being led to the border, some ran away in various directions only to be caught and brought back and some were even defiantly naked, tearing away their own clothes. While some were shouting abusive words, others were singing and also there were some who were weeping bitterly.

There were a lot of fights and a chaotic environment as the inmates had turned unruly in their confusion and reluctance. The female inmates were even noisier than the male counterparts. That day was "bitterly cold" in every sense of the word. The majority of the inmates were totally against the entire process and as the narrator describes their state of mind. "They simply could not understand why they were being forcibly removed, thrown into the buses and driven to this strange place. There were slogans of 'Pakistan Zindabad'

and 'Pakistan Murdabad' followed by fights. One can only imagine how difficult it must have been for them to be jolted out of their comfort zone in the asylum and being moved out altogether to another new country. Their apprehensions, even as they were demented were valid too.

When Bishan Singh, the old man was taken out of the bus to verify his name and record in the register, he innocently asked the official behind him whether Toba Tek Singh was in India or Pakistan to which he replied the latter "with a vulgar laugh". And this triggered the old man to run until the Pakistani guards tried to force him across the border towards India. Howver, he resisted them with all his strength muttering for one last time: *'Uper the gur gur the nnexe the bay dhyana mung the dal of Toba Tek Singh and Pakistan.'* Although they tried to convince him that Toba Tek Singh had been moved to India or would be soon moved there, Bishan Singh would not budge and the guards had to give up on him.

In that final moment, Bishan Singh also was in the piece of land that was politically known as the 'no man's land' for he was again in a limbo between the two countries, not knowing where exactly was his hometown of Toba Tek Singh. Since, he was known to be otherwise harmless as an inmate at the asylum, the guards let him be and so "he stood in no man's land on his swollen legs like a colossus". The exchange took place throughout the night and he stood there until before sunrise. He screamed one last time when officials rushed towards him from both the sides and he collapsed then and there. In that middle ground, was his lifeless body and in between the barbed wires that demarcated the borders of both the countries. Thus, he was neither here nor there, having died "on a bit of earth which had no name".

Perhaps, the only hope that had kept him alive was the security of finding or being assured of his return home to Toba Tek Singh. No one could claim a man's nationality or identity whether dead or alive when in a no man's land. There was no certainty if a place called Toba Tek Singh existed or if it did, in which of the two countries it was situated in and if he would ever get to him home. Thus, in the end his condition becomes that of his hometown Toba Tek Singh that hung between the two countries. Bishan Singh was called Toba Tek Singh and he came to embody the mystery behind his own hometown of Toba Tek Singh. Therefore, you will surely agree that the writer aptly names or provides a title his story and the central character by this name.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q4. What happens when the news of the 'exchange' reaches the Lahore lunatic asylum?
Q5. Mention any one of the funny incidents that took place at the asylum following the news of exchange.
Q6. What was the mystery that none of the inmates could resolve with regard to Bishan Singh's question?

Q7. What had happened in the final moment of the exchange when it came to Bishan Singh's turn?

6.5 MAJOR THEMES

In this subsection , let us take a look at some of the thematic concerns that emerge from the text and context of the story "Toba Tek Singh". You may also add to the same from your own readings.

The Pain of Partition:

You must have certainly read of the Indian Partition in your history books, which is in general taken as yet another significant historical account. However, there was so much to this Partition than just the political division of two countries. After India had gained its independence from the British rule, the former colonial territory was divided into India and Pakistan where later East Pakistan became Bangladesh. This came at the cost of much communal riots, violence, rape, killing, displacement, trauma and suffering. It is estimated that 15 million people had been displaced in the Partition and it had claimed the lives of more than one million. While there was celebration of Indian independence on 15 August 1947 there was also the growing fear amongst Muslim minorities of being oppressed in a nation with Hindu majority. Although, the leaders like Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru had envisioned an united nation, Muhammad Ali Jinnah who headed the All-India Muslim League pressed for partition and a separate homeland for Muslims.

The Portrayal of Inmates in an Asylum:

Manto's portrayal of the asylum is not to mock the life and experiences of the demented inmates residing there but to project it as a 'metaphor' that questions the validity of Partition and the sanity of those who led the same. Whether they could actually be considered anymore sane than those men and women who were in those asylums. The decision towards Partition did not take into account the impact that it would have on the lives of those families who were subject to being displaced and the traumatic repercussions of the same. Although, Manto portrays the situation in the asylum with a tinge of humour, it also highlights their position as helpless individuals who had no one else to depend on and were mere 'victims' to the system that failed to see beyond the exchange. Given the fact, that they were forsaken from the society, this new displacement meant that they were doubly marginalised in their helplessness.

The truth was that not all inmates in the asylum were lunatic or mad. Some were perfectly in their normal state of mind but had committed crimes such as murder. Thus, in order to spare them from the agony of being hanged, many of their families had bribed officials "down the line". Although, they had a vague idea regarding the reasons behind the division of India or what Pakistan was, yet they had no idea regarding the decision of the official exchange. This also points to the fact, that whether a lunatic or a sane person, they were all disturbed, confused and uncertain about the entire decision and how it would affect or alter their lives.

Although the prison guards were not illiterate as such, they were too 'ignorant' to even bothering reading the newspaper reports about the same. Even as the incidents in the asylum depict the absurdities and mindless doing of the inmates, the political leadership was no less absurd in their approach to the Partition. While most of the inmates had no idea of what they did or were getting into, in the wake of the exchange, the political authorities made such mindless decisions in their senses.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q8. What was the historical event that took place following the Independence of India?
Q9. Write a few lines on Manto's portrayal of an Asylum in his short story.
Q10. Was it true that not all the inmates at the asylum were demented or lunatic? Explain briefly.

6.6 MAJOR CHARACTERS

After going through the explanation of the short story, you will have come across the two major characters who have been portrayed in it. Let us gain a better idea on these characters who stand for so much more than just being ordinary characters in a story of Partition. You may also add to the description of the characters from your own reading and analysis.

Toba Tek Singh:

The memorable character Toba Tek Singh is remembered for his famous gibberish statement: '*Uper the gur gur the annexe the bay dhayana the mung the dal of the laltain'*. It is obvious that it makes no sense to the lay reader but it rings funny when spoken aloud as it is considered his signature statement! His real name was Bishan Singh but as he claimed to have belonged to a place called Toba Tek Singh, his friends at the asylum called him Toba Tek Singh instead. As mentioned earlier he was known to have not slept properly for the fifteen years that he had been at the asylum. He mostly would be found standing and only occasionally leading against the wall. Toba Tek Singh was an old man whose hair was almost gone and the remaining almost became a part of his beard. This gave him a "strange" and even "frightening" appearance in the eyes of the narrator.

However, his records showed him to be a "harmless" person who never engaged in any sort of fights. According to older attendants at the asylum, he had once been a prosperous landlord from Toba Tek Singh who had suddenly lost his sanity. Thus, his family had brought him to the asylum "bound and fettered" fifteen years earlier. Once a month, he had visitors who came to meet him but following the communal tension in the Punjab province, these visits had seemed to have temporarily stopped. The narrator writes that the old man lived in a "kind of limbo" where he had lost his sense of time, weeks and years, days and nights, He even lost track of the time he had spent at the asylum.

Yet strangely enough he had a sharp gut feeling or rather a sixth sense about the day of the visits from his relatives or well-wishers. On such a day, he would soap and bathe his body, oil an comb his hair and put on a clean set of clothes perhaps, to feel and be more presentable. In these meetings, he hardly spoke a word except uttering his signature statement: '*Uper the gur gur the annexe the bay dhayana the mung the dal of the laltain'.* Sadly enough when he was first brought to the asylum, he had left behind a baby girl who had grown up to be a pretty girl of fifteen. She visited him once in a while, sitting in front of him "with tears rolling down her cheeks" for all faces to the old man was the same. As the narrator notes, "In the strange world that he inhabited, hers was just another face."

His questions to his fellow inmates had continued regarding where was Toba Tek Singh was now situated. No one knew and no one had an answer to satisfy his curiosity or sense of insecurity. Besides the visits had stopped and he had become more restless with these sudden changes. Infact, his sixth sense had also seemed to have "atrophied" or simply disappeared from him. The truth was he missed his family (who were just visitors to him), the gifts that they brought him and the concern that they held in their voice while speaking to him. Besides, they surely had an answer to his questions on where his hometown was now situated. He had the feeling that they too were from his home town of Toba Tek Singh.

Fazal Din:

Another character who is presented in the story is the old man's friend and well-wisher named Fazal Din. The old man did not recognise him as such and mumbled something to himself. Placing his hands on his friend, Fazal Din tells him that he had wanted to visit him for some time and share news of his family. He lets him know that his family was fine and had gone safely to India. He had done his part in helping them to do so. He mentioned though a little hesitatingly, that his daughter Roop Kaur was safe and in India too.

The old man's family wanted Fazal Din to ensure that he was alright and that he would be moved to India as well. And since he would be moving back to India, he wanted him to pass on his regard to *bhai* Balbir Singh, *bhai* Vadhawa Singh and *bahain* Amrit Kaur. Possibly, Fazal was too naïve to understand that he was still speaking to a person who had long lost his sanity to remember anything let alone pass his message.

It also reflects his sentimental nature as he continues telling the old man to pass on the message to *bhai* Balbir Singh that he was fine by God's grace and that the two buffaloes that were left behind were fine too. Both the buffaloes gave birth to calves and sadly one of them had died after six days. He wanted to convey his feelings for them all, that he missed them and that if there was anything that he could do, to write to him about the same. He had also brought his friend some rice crispies from home, which the old man had accepted as a gift, handing it to one of the guards. And then he uttered his question regarding where was Toba Tek Singh.

To this, Fazal answers that it was where it always had been, in Pakistan. This left him all the more appalled, as the old man turned to walk away uttering his disgust in the words: *'Uper the gur gur the annexe the bay dhayana the mung the dal of the Pakistan and Hindustan dur fittey moun.*' This was all that transpired between the two friends during that visit and without knowing it was the last time that he saw him. Their friendship symbolically points to the age-old harmony between various communities that transcended beyond their religious identity. However, the Partition had disrupted the peace, harmony unity and good will that had always prevailed.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q10. Describe the memorable character of Toba Tek Singh.
Q11. What was the news that Fazal Din had brought for his friend Bishan Singh?

6.7 STYLE AND LANGUAGE

Manto was known for his bold and critical writings that was reflected in his wide literary works, so much so that his freedom of writing had to be curtailed by the judiciary of his time. He had a penchant for writing from his early years that achieved maturity as well as significant dexterity with the passing of the years and through his literary career. If one takes a look at his short story "Toba Tek Singh", it is one of the widely anthologised work of literature particularly in the academia. It is significant as it takes a dig at the aftermath of the Partition, its violent, traumatic and inhuman repercussions or effects on millions of innocent lives. You will certainly find a tinge of humour in the way the narrator relates the entire sting of incidents during a major exchange of inmate lunatics in the asylum and outside at the cross borders. However, it only subtly veils the otherwise sad and tragic fate of many of these helpless men and women like Bishan Singh.

As we receive the story in translation, we find several words or phrases in Hindi or Urdu but the essence is not lost and it makes for an easy and spontaneous reading. The narrative captures the perplexity and confusing chaos of the Partition in an apt manner presenting how both the lines between the sane and the demented, sanity and insanity was erased in such a circumstance. The character of Bishan or Toba Tek Singh is made all the more memorable in the way he is portrayed as a harmless, innocent man whose life almost depended on being assured of finding his way back home, wherever it was. He becomes endearing to the reader despite his prickly reactions and the gibberish, he mumbles every now and then.

What is interesting is that Manto gives all the inmates an agency, a voice even as they are considered lunatic in the eyes of society. The writer simply brings them to the fore, in which the asylum also stands for the larger state of the nation and the helpless lunatics representing the plight of people during such a crises. Thus, it is clearly Manto's satire of the Partition presenting the crises of identity, polarisation, politics and unity. The narrator in narrates this story in the second person like a bystander and the reader is taken into

confidence with the hook in the style of narration. Manto was known to write on subjects that were taboo in his time, to depict socio-political issues through his fiery writings and also present the common man and those on the fringes of society in his works. These characters included deviants, prostitutes, criminals and lunatics as in this story among others. Thus, he was much ahead of his times and also much courageous as a writer of his time.

26.8 LET US SUM UP

After going through the unit, the learner will be able to discuss the life and works of Sadat Hasan Manto in a detailed manner. Also, the explanation of the short story "Toba Tek Singh" shall enable you to gain an insight on the plight of people who were subject to the Partition and how it affected their entire life. The themes that emerge from the text of the story point to the same. The major characters portrayed have also been discussed to highlight their plight and perspective of the life changing impact of the Partition. In addition the style and language of the writer shall give you an idea on the dexterity of Manto in his story-telling and his concerns of the major discourses of his time. Thus, the learner is encouraged to go through more of the writings of the bold writer who is remembered for his powerful and thought-provoking writing.

K6.9 FURTHER READING

Website:

"Partition: Why was British India divided 75 Years Ago?" https://www.bbc.com

O6.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answer to Q1: Sadat Hasan Manto (11 May 1912 – 18 January 1955) was born into a Punjabi-Muslim family to Sarsar Begum and Khwaja Ghulam Hassan at Paprodi village of Samrala in Ludhiana which was then a district of the colonial Punjab. He drew upon both his Punjabi and Kashmiri roots of which he was proud and which he always defended.

Answer to Q2: Although, Manto had decided to remain settled in India, his fate had other things in store. When his family visited Lahore to meet their relatives, they could not return to India owing to the violence of the communal riots following the Partition. Therefore, he had to travel all the way to Lahore by ship to be reunited with them. This had left him with little choice and thus, he had decided to settle down in Lahore like many Muslim families from India, much against his will.

Answer to Q3: During the last phase of his short-lived life, he had to undergo several trials on the charge of his bold or obscene writings.

Answer to Q4: When the news of this decision reached the Lahore lunatic asylum, various speculations, heated discussions and reactions came pouring in.

Answer to Q5: Several funny incidents followed the days before the exchange took place. One of the inmates was so distraught at this entire India-Pakistan confusion that one day while sweeping the floor, he dropped everything to run and climb up a tree and standing

on one of its branch began his speech on the situation of India-Pakistan for two long hours.

Answer to Q6: This is because no one was certain whether this town existed in India or Pakistan or if it existed at all. This was a mystery that no one could solve.

Answer to Q7: In that final moment, Bishan Singh also was in the piece of land that was politically known as the 'no man's land' for he was again in a limbo between the two countries, not knowing where exactly was his hometown of Toba Tek Singh.

Answer to Q8: After India had gained its independence from the British rule, the former colonial territory was divided into India and Pakistan where later East Pakistan became Bangladesh. This came at the cost of much communal riots, violence, rape, killing, displacement, trauma and suffering. It is estimated that 15 million people had been displaced in the Partition and it had claimed the lives of more than one million.

Answer to Q9: Manto's portrayal of the asylum is not to mock the life and experiences of the demented inmates residing there but to project it as a 'metaphor' that questions the validity of Partition and the sanity of those who led the same. Whether they could actually be considered anymore sane than those men and women who were in those asylums. The decision towards Partition did not take into account the impact that it would have on the lives of those families who were subject to being displaced and the traumatic repercussions of the same.

Answer to Q10: The truth was that not all inmates in the asylum were lunatic or mad. Some were perfectly in their normal state of mind but had committed crimes such as murder. Thus, in order to spare them from the agony of being hanged, many of their families had bribed officials "down the line".

Answer to Q11: The memorable character Toba Tek Singh is remembered for his famous gibberish statement: '*Uper the gur gur the annexe the bay dhayana the mung the dal of the laltain'*. It is obvious that it makes no sense to the lay reader but it rings funny when spoken aloud as it is considered his signature statement! His real name was Bishan Singh but as he claimed to have belonged to a place called Toba Tek Singh, his friends at the asylum called him Toba Tek Singh instead. He was known to have not slept properly for the fifteen years that he had been at the asylum. Also, he would mostly be found standing and only occasionally leading against the wall without often realising that it affected his legs.

Answer to Q 12: Fazal Din tells him that he had wanted to visit him for some time and share news of his family. He lets him know that his family was fine and had gone safely to India. He had done his part in helping them to do so. He mentioned though a little hesitatingly, that his daughter Roop Kaur was safe and in India too.

M6.11 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q1. Discuss both the life and works of Sadat Hasan Manto.
Q2. Give a detailed explanation of the short story "Toba Tek Singh".
Q3. Explain the major themes evident in the text of "Toba Tek Singh"
Q4. Describe the major characters in the short story "Toba Tek Singh"
Q5. Analyse the style and language employed by Manto in the prescribed story.

UNIT 7: ISMAT CHUGHTAI: “LIHAAF” OR “THE QUILT”

UNIT STRUCTURE

7.1 Learning Objectives
7.2 Introduction
7.3 Ismat Chughtai: Her Life and Works
7.4 Explanation of the Short Story
7.5 Major Themes
7.6 Major Characters
7.7 Style and Language
7.8 Let us Sum up
7.9 Further Reading
7.10 Answers to Check Your Progress
7.11 Model Questions

7.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

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

- briefly discuss the life and works of the writer Ismat Chughtai
- explain the plot of the story “Lihaaf” or “The Quilt”
- discuss the major themes evident in the text of the short story
- provide an analysis of the main characters
- describe the style and language of the writer
- appreciate the writing of Ismat Chughtai

7.2 INTRODUCTION

The present unit takes up the short story tited “Lihaaf” or “The Quilt” by the Indian novelist Ismat Chughtai translated by Syeda Hameed. Ismat Chughtai was way ahead of her times as a woman writer who wrote about subjects that not many would dare to consider in the fear of criticism or one’s own downfall. However, Chughtai remained true to her writing and mostly wrote in Hindi and Urdu. Although she was foremost a writer, she also wrote for films, worked as filmmaker, screenwriter and co-producer.

Her short story “Lihaaf” or “The Quilt” in translation had stirred much controversy in her time after it had first appeared in a Lahore based literary journal titled *Adab-i-latif* in 1942. Due to the bold content of the story, Chughtai was also summoned by the Lahore High Court, Lahore on the charges of obscenity alongwith her fellow writer Sadat Hasan Manto who was charged on similar grounds for his short story *Bu* or *Odour*. Let us then go through the life and works of the writer before we explore the text of the prescribed short story.

7.3 ISMAT CHUGHTAI: HER LIFE AND WORKS

Ismat Chughtai (21 August 1911-24 October 1991) was a prominent voice of her time. She was the daughter of Nusrat Khanam and Mirza Qaseem Baig Chughtai who were settled in Uttar Pradesh. She was raised among nine siblings and was the second youngest among them. As her father served as a civil servant, the family had to move across different cities until he had retired and the family settled down at Agra. In her early formative years, she looked up to her second eldest brother Mirza Azim Beg Chughtai who also became a writer. She studied at the Women's College at the Aligarh Muslim University and completed her graduation from Isabella Thoburn College in 1940. Further after completion of her BA degree in Arts, she also went on to complete B Ed. Degree from Aligarh Muslim University despite the resistance from her family.

During this period, she became associated with the Progressive Writers' Association and in one of her meetings met the writer Rashid Jahan who had inspired her towards writing and creating realistic portrayal of women characters. Thus, began her experiments with writing and the first work that she wrote was a drama titled *Fasadi* or *The Troublemaker* (1939) which readers mistakenly considered to be her brother, Azeem Beg Chughtai's work written under a pen name Ismat Chughtai. However, it was her behind that work and this was followed by many other publications such as *Bachpan* (*Childhood*), *Kafir* (*Infidel*) her first short story and a soliloquy *Dheet* (*Stubborn*). She was an avid reader herself and much inspired by an anthology of short stories written in Urdu titled *Angarey* and other English writers like Anton Chekhov, William Sydney Porter or O. Henry and George Bernard Shaw.

Among her other works are *Ziddi* or *Wild at Heart*, a novella; two short stories, *Kidmatgaar* and *Gainda;* a play *Intikaab*; a semi-autobiographical novel and *Tedhi Lakeer* or *The Crooked Line* (1943) apart from her work as a screen and dialogue writer for films. Some of her novels are namely *Masooma* or *The Innocent Girl* (1962), *Saudai* or *Obsession* (1964), *Dil ki Duniya* or *The Heart Breaks Free* (1966)*, Ajeeb Admi* or *A Very Strange Man* (1970) and *Jangli Kabbotar* or *Wild Pigeons* (1970). She also wrote a few Children's novella titled *Teen Anarhi* (1988) and *Naqli Rajkumar* (1992). To mention a few of her plays, she wrote *Shaitan*, *Dozakh* (1960), *Tanhai ka Zehr* (1977) and an anthology of her radio dramas titled *Dhani Bankein* (1955). Apart from these she wrote a few non-fictional works such as Dozakhi centred on her brother Azzem Beg or Mera Dost Mera Dushman on Sadat Hasan Manto, the writer whom we shall take up in the next unit.

As a person she was bold, talented, an intellectual and a liberal woman who had a respect for all religions and was well versed in the religious books of different religions apart from her own. She was married to Shaheed Latif with whom she had raised two children namely Seema Sawhny and Sabrina Lateef. She was always dedicated to her work as a writer and even through her pregnancy, she had continued her writing or during the time when she faced a lot of backlash for her bold works, she continued undeterred. Life around her, as well as every small incident and conversations with the womenfolk in her life inspired her writings to a great extent. She was a significant voice of her time as she

portrayed woman characters in a realistic light, she even dared to broach subjects that were considered 'taboo' in her time and also as she was fearless when it came to writing within the realm of a conservative society. Chughtai suffered from Alzheimer's disease during her final years and passed away in the Autumn of 1991. In keeping with her last wish before her demise, she was said to be cremated as part of her last rites in place of being buried.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1. Write a few lines on the novelist Ismat Chughtai.
Q2. Mention some of the important novels by the novelist.
Q3. Why is Ismat Chughtai considered a significant voice of her time?

7.4 EXPLANATION OF THE SHORT STORY

The story begins with the narrator talking about the winter nights and the comfort of being tucked under her 'quilt' which takes her back to many such nights which held its own secrets which she was then too young to understand. The opening lines begins thus, "In the depth of winter whenever I snuggle into my quilt, my shadow on the wall seems to sway like an elephant. My mind begins a mad race into the dark crevasses of the past; memories come flooding in." This image of 'elephant' referring to the magnified shadow on the wall shall become clearer to you in the course of your reading the entire narrative.

Thus, the narrator begins narrating one of her old memories of her childhood when she was a small girl and much quarrelsome who fought with her brothers and their friends. It made her wonder why she was inclined towards fighting them off when at the same age; her older sisters would be busy looking out for admirers. However, in her own case she was always fighting with every other boy or unknown girl that she ran into. Thus, her mother had decided to teach her some restraint by leaving her with her adopted sister, before leaving for Agra. In that mansion there was not a soul, not even an animal or pet with whom she could quarrel and this itself was punishment enough. Thus, the lady of the house was Begum Jan and the anecdote of this lady's 'quilt' remained deeply etched in her memory for the longest time.

The narrator wonders when did the lady began living her life in the true sense, the day she was born (by a mistaken fate, for a woman of her time had no significance in a male-centric world) or if it was the day that she stepped into the Nawab's bride into new house (which was more prison-like) and new marital bed (where her husband had no interest in her). Again, she wonders if it all began when Begum Jan began to realise that the every aspect in their household even the delicacies were to gratify the boy-students of the Nawab.

She seemed to have no importance in the life of the Nawab or the scheme of things in the house. It was then of little wonder that the lady had begun to wither as a person. Thus, the

narrator describes her condition in the following words: "Broken-hearted, Begum Jan turned towards education. Not much to be gained here either! Romantic novels and sentimental poetry proved even more depressing. Sleepless nights became a daily routine. Begum Jan slowly let go and consequently became a picture of melancholy and despair." Thus, it was not as though she did not try to come to terms with the grief that she found herself in. However, the pain in her heart of being 'unloved' and 'unwanted' made her existence all the more unbearable.

At certain times, she felt like burning all the fine clothes in the stove for she had no one to 'admire' her in her finest, no one to appreciate her efforts. She may have felt what was the point of being beautiful if there was no one to value her worth and her as a person. Also, she may have felt like an used toy who was quickly forgotten after having satisfied one's curiosity and being played with for a short while. The Nawab did not spare any time from his engagements with his students and at the same time did not allow her to step outside the house. This may have also stemmed from a sense of insecurity on the part of the Nawab of losing his 'possession' to someone else who may be interested in her or vice versa.

Begum Jan's relatives visited her often and sometimes these visits lasted for months for they too could enjoy the comforts of her privilege. Although, it was freedom for these visiting relatives from their own personal lives, for Begum Jan it was still 'imprisonment' being confined to the boundaries of the house. The relatives took all the liberties they could enjoying all the delicacies that came from the kitchen and licking off ghee from their fingers in their greed. Somehow, she found all of these too distasteful for they seemed to satisfy their own desires rather than being concerned about her. While her relatives always made themselves comfortable at her house, especially fulfilling their winter needs, she would still find herself in discomfort fighting with her loneliness.

She felt her life was not worth living until the arrival of her masseuse Rabbo who awakened new hope in her otherwise dull, depressing and miserable life in that lonely house. All this while, if she had become thin and undernourished, with Rabbo's new presence in her life, she now was glowing and happy like her old self. Rabbo literally spent all her waking hours in the service of Begum Jan, as though it was hers to rid the lady of her strange itch that even the *Hakims* or doctors had brushed away as nothing significant.

Although, Begum Jan began to glow in terms of her beauty, yet she was almost left dependent on Rabbo's treatment. However, this was not all it was only a matter of time that the narrator realised that there was something "sinister" between the two. The narrator confesses that in her family she was the superstitious one in her family as "Night-fears, sleep-talking, sleep-walking were regular occurrences" during her childhood. And others in her family or who knew her simply dismissed her fears as her being haunted by evil spirits. However, one night when she woke up from her sleep at Begum Jan's room, she feared there was a thief who had entered in that dark night. Little did she know that it was Begum Jan and Rabbo who were being physically intimate under the quilt.

In fact, Begum Jan simply dismissed her fears and asked her to recite the *Ayat-ul-Kursi* and fall asleep. As a child there was nothing much she could do or understand the strangeness of things. Thus, she writes "People often said that I seemed to be haunted by evil spirits. Consequently I blotted out the incident from memory as easily as I dealt with all my imaginary fears. Besides, in the daytime the quilt seemed so innocent." On one such night of being together, Begum and Rabbo had an argument with the latter sobbing and then obliging to Begum Jan's physical desires. The next day Rabbo had decided to meet her quarrelsome son at a relative's place as he had run away from the Nawab's care without any reason. That entire day Begum Jan was not herself, refusing to eat or being touched by anyone despite her aches.

While playing cards together, the narrator asked if Begum Jan wanted to be scratched and she obliged. Although Rabbo was to return the following day, she was nowhere to be seen and this made her irritable and restless. In this state, she found a distraction in the child wishing to buy her a doll or a *babua* and even send the tailor for a new frock. While the child had unmindfully scratched the lady's back, Begum Jan playfully drew the child close to herself which again made her very nervous. In fact, she was terrified of being 'clutched' like a "clay doll" so much so that even the thought that she might be wronged made her cry. Because in that loneliness, desperation and the strange aches, that she suffered, Begum Jaan could go to any extent to ease herself. It was as if the lady was not herself and was about to die in her helplessness that night.

However, Rabbo had returned the next night and the child could not sleep for hours in fear, missing her Amma and wishing to go away from that place. But, she did not have the courage as a child to runaway. When she tells Begum Jan that she wanted to go home, she only tried to console her and take her shopping. Just as she had wanted to place a gold necklace on the child's neck, she had a sudden convulsion or fit, screaming and shouting in her sudden helpless state. After a while when she was treated for convulsion and Rabbo took to massaging her body, her condition was restored.

However, that night the two were engaged in their physical desires under the cover of the quilt and it was only then that the child understood what had transpired between the two for all that time. When she mustered the courage and tried to grope in the dark for the light switch in order to find out what had exactly been going on in the dark, the two literally somersaulted beneath their quilt, immersed in their love-making. Their movements completely shook the child and she had no option but to slide into her own bed. During that somersault, one corner quilt was left partially lifted and what the child had seen, she could never reveal to anyone. The truth had thus, been revealed to her in the most graphic way for a child to be able to grasp or understand completely.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q4. Why did the child's mother decide to teach her a lesson?
Q5. What did the visting relatives do at Begum Jan's home?
Q6. What was the role of Begum Jan's new masseuse?

7.5 MAJOR THEMES

Some of the emergent themes from the text of the essay are discussed below to which you may add your own analysis and interpretation as well. Let us then take a look at the same.

Loneliness:

In the story, loneliness takes such a grip of the central figure Begum Jan that it literally gnaws into her sense of being and affects her sense of self-esteem and worth. Had Begum Jan felt 'loved' and 'valued' instead of being neglected and taken for granted by her spouse, she would have perhaps bloomed into a happy woman. The entire narrative would then have been a different one. However, as her destiny had it she was left to her own loneliness and misery almost as a life-long punishment for her to be able to come to terms with it.

The fact that the Nawab did not invest any time in their relationship, that he was an absentee-husband who chose instead young boys as the center of his existence embittered her all the more. She had tried all means and ways of coping with her lonely hours and even to seek answers to amend their failing marriage but it was all to no avail. In fact, it was a case of one-sided love, devotion and commitment to marriage from her end.

The Nawab had nothing much to do with his marriage except secure it from any sort of external factors. Perhaps, the Nawab was more bothered about his reputation outside rather than the state of his internal relations particularly with his wife. You may have heard of the proverbial, 'No man is an island' which means that human beings essentially meant to coexist together in order to create a more meaningful existence. In fact, Begum Jan's defiance of the social norms to be involved with someone beneath her position and that too a woman stemmed from this experience of extreme loneliness and rejection, in a sense.

Womanly Desire and the Necessity of Being Loved and Valued:

Despite all the comforts and privilege Begum Jan had it was human friendship and companionship that she had truly sought. However, when she was denied her share of love and care from her husband who had no concern for her feelings and well-being, it was only a matter of time that she would drift away from her love for him to free herself from the misery of being left alone and confined like a prisoner in that house.

Although, Begum Jan was kind hearted given the fact that she cared enough to look after her sister's child, to give Rabbo's son a better life and to even entertain her selfish relatives, yet she was deserving of love and care herself. She had tried various means to console her broken heart, trying various spiritual modalities, trying to look for answers in books and love poetry but nothing seemed to ease her pain. Begum Jan seemingly had two kinds of ache, one that of her broken heart and the other of her bodily pains. Also, the strange itch that found no such cure but only temporary relief in the hands of Rabbo is shown to indicate problems at a deeper level, where the itch is one that of an unfulfilled physical desires and that of unrequited love like a thirst that could never be quenched.

LET US KNOW

Chughtai and Manto's Trial: The trial took place at the Lahore High Court, Lahore and the writers were charged on the grounds of obscenity in their writings. This was in the year 1945 when the media highlighted the case of both these writers and both received the support of members from the Progressive Writers' Movement. The writers were later absolved of their charges at the High Court. Although, it did affect the reception of her subsequent writings and her ease as a writer, when she met the Begum actual person who had inspired her story "Lihaaf", it simply left her with a sense of reassurance. The lady had divorced her husband and had also raised a child with her second partner!

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q7. How does loneliness affect Begum Jan?
Q8. What was the reason that Begum Jan was left so embittered?

7.6 MAJOR CHARACTERS

Here, are some of the major characters that appear in the text of the short story "Lihaaf" or "The Quilt". These characters have been highlighted and described for your easy reference:

Begum Jan:

Begum Jan as described from the narrator's memory of her was an attractive woman who had been married young to the wealthy Nawab Sahib. Her parents were poor but loving and her married to the rich Nawab to perhaps, secure her future. Being left to her own care and company, the lady was heartbroken and perhaps even envious of the way the Nawab treated his students with such importance. She even peeped through the chinks in the living room doors to gain a glimpse of these fellows in their gossamer shirts, slim waisted and fair ankles. Perhaps, it made her wonder what was so special about them and not her, which made them endearing to their master. She had even tried various modalities to ease her mind and perhaps in a bid to draw the Nawab towards her like magic, necromancy, séances among others. However, it did not seem to ease her condition of being left out of his life.

As the narrator recalls Begum Jan's appearance in her early forties, she was a beauty, someone who cut "a figure of dignity and grandeur", tall and graceful. She had a fair complexion, dark hair drenched in oil, taut eyes, heavy eyelids, thick eyelashes and rosy cheeks. Begum Jan's hair would be parted and fall gracefully over her temples and would always wear dye on her lips. Her skin was always moist perhaps, from the massage with secret oil, the recipe of which could not be found anywhere. Also, she had smooth waist, rounded ankles and a well-built figure. In fact, the narrator was so fascinated by her beauty and admired her so much that to her Begum Jan was a true Maharani.

Whether it was winter or summer, the lady always wore kurtas of Hyderabadi *jaali karga*, often wearing dark skirts and white kurtas and covered with soft wraps. She seemed to love the feel of winters too. She was not much active as a person and spent her time being massaged while she chewed on dry fruits during the winters. Begum Jan was fond of the narrator too as a child almost in a strange way. During her week-long stay with Begum Jan, her bed was placed right next to the lady's four poster bed. She did make the little child uncomfortable many a times during her stay at the mansion.

Nawab Sahib:

Nawab Sahib was a wealthy man who was perhaps middle aged as the narrator mentions that he was past his prime or in other words, his youth. He belonged to the Noblesse, hailing from a noble family but much disinterested in family life. He had seemingly no interest in women and no one had ever seen him involved with any dancing girl or any other immoral activities with women as many rich men of his time were inclined to do so. He stood out among many men because not only did he perform Haj or the holy pilgrimage but he was a kind patron to the poor as a good Muslim man for he had facilitated their pilgrimage to Mecca through his good official connections as well.

However, he ignored his duties to Begum Jan as a husband after they were married. And she was left to herself in the huge mansion and with the privilege that she had as a Nawab's Begum or wife. He was strange in the sense that unlike many men who had various interests like breeding pigeons or organising cockfights, his interests seem to center on his male students. They were welcome to visit him at his house and even their expenses were completely borne by the Nawab. These male students were young, fair and slim-waisted boys.

It was almost as though he forgot about the existence of his wife like all his other material possessions in his house. This made his wife all the more lonely and neglected. As the narrator mentions "one cannot draw blood from a stone" and the Nawab had neither any form of self-realisation nor any change in his demeanour towards Begum Jan. In fact, the Nawab made it all the more worse by restricting her movement outside the house which meant she had no chance of meeting anyone as she pleased. She was only allowed to meet her visiting relatives at their home.

Rabbo:

Rabbo was the masseuse at Begum Jan's house who almost brought life into her being with her presence. She is described as a round, stocky woman who was not very attractive. She was dark just as Begum Jan was fair, with marks of small pox on her face, with a small solid body, a protruding belly, skillful hands and slightly swollen moist lips. Also, a strange odour came from her body that could not be ignored perhaps, from the strange mix of the scented oils and sweat. She was quick at "kneading" Begum Jan's entire body as though her hands were only meant for that.

In fact, Rabbo was not assigned any other work in the house except being by her side and engaged in the everyday ritual of massaging her body and hair with various oils. In fact, she was privileged over the other servants and allowed entry to the sanctum. There, she

would spend her hours in massaging Begum Jan's body and on days when she would bathe, Rabbo would massage her for full two hours. The doors would be closed and the entire practice of massaging with scented oils and unguents would be massaged into her shiny skin. The rest of the servants would only be allowed to pass over all necessities at the closed door.

However, despite her engaging therapeutic treatment, Begum Jan's long time affliction with a strange itch did not seem to resolve. Even the *Hakims* and doctors denied that it was something to worry about. It was all strange because the itch was not visible on her skin and Rabbo too with a meaningful gaze and smile at her Begum Jan uttered words as "May your enemies be afflicted with skin disease! It is your hot blood that causes all the trouble !" The narrator had a strange dislike for Rabbo and her presence who called her "filthy wench". In fact, she knew of the other servants who gossiped about her calling her "the witch". Basically no one could bear the fact that she had such easy access her to Begum Jan with whom she "ate, sat and even slept" with. The lady did not even have the time to meet anyone as most of her time was taken up by Rabbo treating her itch.

It also turns out that Rabbo had a son who was a quarrelsome boy who was not efficient in his ways. Despite Begum Jan's efforts to help him settle in life, buying him a shop and even bringing him under the guidance of the Nawab, there were no results. Even as the Nawab had treated him well, a new wardrobe was arranged for him and he was looked after well, he had runaway without any reason.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q9. Give a brief description of the character of Begum Jan.
Q10. Describe the character of the Nawab Sahib in the story.
Q11. What was Rabbo's role toawrds Begum Jan?

7.7 STYLE AND LANGUAGE

The short story "Lihaaf" or "The Quilt" is simply remarkable for its engaging and technique of narration. While reading the story, one will find that the writer conjures up an entire set up of the world in which we find a character like Begum Jan. Through its vivid imagery, crisp language, pictorial description and twists in the plot, the story makes an interesting read. There is also a tinge of humour on the part of the narrator who narrates from her memory and the point of view of a child. This is done with much skill on the part of the writer for it is one thing to simply narrate events in a story and another to write from an alternative perspective of a child. The way a child perceives the world is very different from that of an adult as the former state is veiled in innocence and the latter exposed to knowledge and experience.

In the story, 'the quilt' is presented symbolically which is shown to provide comfort and at the same hide the protagonist's deepest secret, her illicit affair and her womanly desires. Perhaps, this explains the title of the story "The Quilt" where this article gains significance given the purpose it serves. The quilt is described to thin away with regular use in the

winters until its cotton would be newly fluffed every year. It also points to Begum Jan's lonely nights and her experience of being miserable with no one to share her warmth or to sleep cozily with. This, is also emphasised with her shivering night after night despite the quilt being renewed. In fact, the shadow of the quilt that created scary shapes on the wall made her scared at night. However, it was until the arrival of her masseuse that the quilt assumed a new role that did not scare her anymore.

Also, the narrative has its moments of exclamation and humour where the narrator seems to relay her stream of consciousness while reliving her memories of Begum Jan and Rabbo, as a child. For an instance, you may note her child-like remark when she writes in almost a conversational style with the reader thus, "Excuse me, but you will not find the recipe for this oil in the most exclusive or expensive magazine!" or sighs her remark of Rabbo's hours of non-stop massage Thus, "If someone other than Begum Jan received such a quantity of human touching, what would the consequences be? Speaking for myself. I can say that if someone touched me continuously like this, I would certainly rot." Again in her confusion regarding the unseen chaos under the quilt in the dark when the two women were actually engaged in their physical intimacy, the narrator as a child trying to fall asleep near Begum Jan's bed, imagined an 'elephant' moving under the quilt until "The elephant subsided". Thus, the story is made interesting as it captures the entire narrative from the point of view of a child or the child's eye.

7.8 LET US SUM UP

After going through the unit the learner will be acquainted with the life and works of Ismat Chughtai. While the explanation of the short story highlights the content and its major characters, it also brings out some of the important thematic concerns in the text. Also, the style and language employed by the writer in her text shall give the learner a better idea of the writer's style of expression and craft at skillful writing and narration. You are thus, encouraged to explore some of the other works by the writer and appreciate it for its realistic representations.

7.9 FURTHER READING

Chughtai, Ismat. (1994) *The Quilt & Other Stories*. Translated by Tahira Naqvi and Syeda S. Hamed. The Sheep Meadow Press: New York.

7.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answer to Q1: Ismat Chughtai (21 August 1911-24 October 1991) was a prominent voice of her time. She was the daughter of Nusrat Khanam and Mirza Qaseem Baig Chughtai who were settled in Uttar Pradesh. She was raised among nine siblings and was the second youngest among them. As her father served as a civil servant, the family had to move across different cities until he had retired and the family settled down at

Agra. In her early formative years, she looked up to her second eldest brother Mirza Azim Beg Chughtai who also became a writer.

Answer to Q2: Some of her novels are namely *Masooma* or *The Innocent Girl* (1962), *Saudai* or *Obsession* (1964), *Dil ki Duniya* or *The Heart Breaks Free* (1966)*, Ajeeb Admi* or *A Very Strange Man* (1970) and *Jangli Kabbotar* or *Wild Pigeons* (1970). She also wrote a few Children's novella titled *Teen Anarhi* (1988) and *Naqli Rajkumar* (1992).

Answer to Q3: She was a significant voice of her time as she portrayed woman characters in a realistic light, she even dared to broach subjects that were considered 'taboo' in her time and also as she was fearless when it came to writing within the realm of a conservative society.

Answer to Q4: She always fought with every other boy or unknown girl that she ran into. Thus, her mother had decided to teach her some restraint by leaving her with her adopted sister, before leaving for Agra. In that mansion there was not a soul, not even an animal or pet with whom she could quarrel and this itself was punishment enough.

Answer to Q5: The relatives took all the liberties they could enjoying all the delicacies that came from the kitchen and licking off ghee from their fingers in their greed. Somehow, she found all of these too distasteful for they seemed to satisfy their own desires rather than be concerned about her.

Answer to Q6: Her new masseuse Rabbo had awakened new hope in her otherwise dull, depressing and miserable life in that lonely house. All this while, if she had become thin and undernourished, with Rabbo's new presence in her life, she now was glowing and happy like her old self. Rabbo literally spent all her waking hours in the service of Begum Jan, as though it was hers to rid the lady of her strange itch that even the *Hakims* or doctors had brushed away as nothing significant.

Answer to Q7: In the story, loneliness takes such a grip of the central figure Begum Jan that it literally gnaws into her sense of being and affects her sense of self-esteem and worth. Had Begum Jan felt 'loved' and 'valued' instead of being neglected and taken for granted by her spouse, she would have perhaps bloomed into a happy woman.

Answer to Q8: The fact that the Nawab did not invest any time in their relationship, that he was an absentee-husband who chose instead young boys as the center of his existence embittered her all the more.

Answer to Q9: Begum Jan as described from the narrator's memory of her was an attractive woman who had been married young to the wealthy Nawab Sahib. Her parents were poor but loving and her married to the rich Nawab to perhaps, secure her future. Being left to her own care and company, the lady was heartbroken and perhaps even envious of the way the Nawab treated his students with such importance.

Answer to Q 10: Nawab Sahib was a wealthy man who was perhaps middle aged as the narrator mentions that he was past his prime or in other words, his youth. He belonged to the Noblesse, hailing from a noble family but much disinterested in family life. He had seemingly no interest in women and no one had ever seen him involved with any dancing girl or other women as many rich men of his time were inclined to do so. He stood out among many men because not only did he performed Haj or the holy pilgrimage but he

was a kind patron to the poor as a good Muslim man for he had facilitated their pilgrimage to Mecca through his good official connections as well.

Answer to Q 11: Rabbo was not assigned any other work in the house except being by her side and engaged in the everyday ritual of massaging her body and hair with various oils. In fact, she was privileged over the other servants and allowed entry to the sanctum. There, she would spend her hours in massaging Begum Jan's body and on days when she would bathe, Rabbo would massage her for full two hours. The doors would be closed and the entire practice of massaging with scented oils and unguents would be massaged into her shiny skin. The rest of the servants would only be allowed to pass over all necessities at the closed door.

7.11 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q1. Discuss the life and works of the novelist Ismat Chughtai.
Q2. Give a detailed summary of the short Story "The Quilt".
Q3. Explain the major themes emergent in the short story "The Quilt"
Q4. Describe the major characters in the short story "The Quilt"
Q5. Analyse the style and language employed by the novelist Ismat Chughtai in her short story.

UNIT 8: PUNYAKANTE WIJENAIKE: "THE RIVER"

UNIT STRUCTURE

8.1 Learning Objectives
8.2 Introduction
8.3 Punyakante Wijenaike: Her Life and Works
8.4 Context and Explanation of the Short Story
8.5 Major Themes
8.6 Major Characters
8.7 Style and Language
8.8 Let Us Sum Up
8.9 Further Reading
8.10 Answers to Check Your Progress
8.11 Model Questions

8.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

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

- discuss the life and literary career of Punyakante Wijenaike within the context of postcolonial Sri Lankan English writing
- explain the background and socio-political context that shaped the short story
- analyse major themes of the story: human struggle against nature, solitude and resilience, and the limits of individual courage
- appreciate Wijenaike's narrative style, including her use of imagery, symbolism, and economy of language

8.2 INTRODUCTION

There is a particular kind of short story that does not announce its arrival. It does not come with loud proclamations or elaborate philosophical openings. Instead, it begins quietly. A woman by a river. A flood that returns every year like a bad dream. A village that has learned to expect disaster. Punyakante Wijenaike's "The River" is exactly such a story. On the surface, it tells us about a young woman named Lansina Nona who lives alone in a flood-prone village and refuses to abandon her home despite the river's repeated assaults. The plot is simple. The language is unadorned. But beneath that simplicity lies a deeply moving meditation on human stubbornness, the loneliness of resilience, and the strange pride that comes from refusing to be defeated. Wijenaike wrote this story sometime in the mid to late twentieth century, a period when Sri Lanka was still finding its feet after independence.

The country was undergoing rapid changes. Traditional village life was giving way to new economic realities. But Wijenaike, unlike many of her contemporaries who wrote about urban elites and political upheavals, kept returning to the village. She kept returning to ordinary people. "The River" is not a political story in the obvious sense. It does not mention governments or policies. It does not preach. Yet, it is deeply political because it asks a fundamental question: what does it mean for a poor, single woman to insist on staying where she belongs when every force of nature and society tells her to leave?

In this unit, we will read "The River" closely. We will look at who Punyakante Wijenaike was and why she wrote what she wrote. We will explore the context in which the story is set. We will identify its major themes and characters. And we will pay attention to the quiet power of her language. Before we enter the story, let us get to know the woman who wrote it.

8.3 PUNYAKANTE WIJENAIKE : HER LIFE AND WORKS

Punyakante Wijenaike was born in Colombo in 1933, into a prominent and wealthy family. Her father, Justin Kothalawala, came from a distinguished line. Her grandfather was an eminent surgeon. The family home in Ward Place was a large colonial bungalow with heavy curtains, dim corridors, and a long pillared verandah. As a child, Wijenaike was not a particularly bright student in the conventional sense. She studied at Bishop's College in Colombo but admitted later that she was not a shining student. If she had concentrated better, she said, she could have done well, but she always preferred to sink into her own imaginary world. She spent hours lying on her back, staring at the evening sky, letting her mind wander. She would talk to imaginary characters and sometimes scare herself with the dream-webs she had spun. Her mother, who believed in horoscopes, was bewildered when an astrologer predicted that her eldest daughter would one day become a well-known person in the country. After hearing that, her mother would scold her whenever she caught the girl in her lethargic, dreamy postures, saying, "My God, I can't believe that this one will shine in life one day." But the dreamy child had a habit that would later define her life. She was a little storyteller. She would recite stories to her younger sister, to the domestic helpers, even to her dolls.

She wrote down her feelings in diaries as a teenager. Her parents were busy people, often out on business or social engagements, so she found an unusual way of communicating with them: she would write little notes and leave them where they would be found. Her father, upon reading these notes, would tell her, "You should write books." Wijenaike recognised her writing power when her short stories began appearing in the Ceylon *Women's Magazine* and the *Sunday Observer.* Her family was surprised when she won the first prize in a short story competition conducted by the *Sunday Observer* in the early 1960s. She published her first collection of short stories, *The Third Woman,* in 1963.

Her first novel, *The Waiting* Earth, followed in 1966 and was accepted as a supplementary reader by the University of Scotland. It was later translated into Sinhala as Uhulana Derana. Over the next five decades, she published six novels and four more collections

of short stories. Her works were broadcast on Sri Lankan radio and on the BBC. In 1977, she was described as "one of the most underestimated fiction writers currently at work in the English language."

She won the Women of Achievement Award in 1985, the Kala Suri Class 1 literary award from the Government of Sri Lanka in 1988, the Gratiaen Prize in 1994 for her novel Amulet, and the Commonwealth Short Story Competition for Radio in 1996. In 2003, she received the Sahithyaratna award for lifetime achievement as an English writer. Ten of her works are held by the United States Library of Congress. Although she spent most of her life in Colombo, Wijenaike initially used rural villages as the setting for her stories, only later turning to urban themes. Her writings highlight, in the words of one critic, "the tyranny of community or a group towards its weaker members." Wijenaike passed away on 8 March 2023. She was ninety years old. In a tribute written shortly after her death, a fellow writer recalled that she had been a pioneer of Sri Lankan writing in English in the post-independence period. He remembered the pleasure of reading her early stories and noted that things had not been easy for her. In those days, Sri Lankan academia looked down on Sri Lankans who wrote in English.

Younger academics denigrated her brilliant work and instead regretted that she had not remained in what they called the "village well." But she persisted. And in persisting, she paved the way for other prose writers who came after her. Wijenaike once explained her process of writing: "When I meet people, I look beyond their face value. If I feel it is an interesting character, a series of fictitious pictures emerges in my imaginary world as if in a movie. And then I pen it down precisely, as a short story or a novel." That is exactly what she did with Lansina Nona in the prescribed text of her short story.

LET US KNOW

Punyakante Wijenaike belonged to the first generation of Sri Lankan writers who chose to write in English after the country's independence in 1948. At that time, writing in English was often seen as a colonial hangover, and local academics sometimes dismissed English-language writers as not being "authentic" enough. Despite this, Wijenaike continued to write in English and gained international recognition, paving the way for later Sri Lankan writers like Michael Ondaatje and Shyam Selvadurai.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. What was the reaction of Wijenaike's family when she won a short story competition in the early 1960s?
2. Name two awards that Punyakante Wijenaike received during her literary career.
3. Why did some Sri Lankan academics look down on writers who wrote in English?

8.4 CONTEXT AND EXPLANATION OF THE SHORT STORY

"The River" is set in a village in Sri Lanka that is periodically devastated by floods. The river of the title is not named, It is shown as a natural force that is both destructive and

life-giving. It is seen that during the rainy season, it swells and washes away homes and livelihoods, but it also is the source of water for drinking and farming throughout the year. Although the story does not specify a particular period, we can place it in the middle to late 20th century, when many rural areas of Sri Lanka were still largely cut off from contemporary infrastructure.

Flood control measures were minimal. Villagers relied on their own resources and on each other. Lansina Nona, the protagonist, is actually a young woman who lives alone in a small hut by the river. She is described as cheerful but introverted. She does not speak much to the other villagers. She seems content with the kind of life she lives which is her solitary existence. Then the floods come. The river rises and destroys her hut. While the other villagers retreat to higher ground, Lansina Nona refuses to leave. She rebuilds her hut. The floods return. She rebuilds again. Each time, the river takes what she has built. Yet each, she starts over.

The other villagers think she is foolish. They ask her why she does not simply move away. Her answer is simple and stubborn: "Here I was born and here I will die when the time comes." The story follows her repeated confrontations with the river. She fights back. She builds walls. She reinforces her hut. The river, in turn, keeps coming. It is a battle between a single human being and the force of nature. In the end, Lansina Nona does not die by the river. She is killed by the leopard. The story's ending thus leaves the readers puzzled. After all her struggles against the river, she meets her end in a different way altogether. But that is perhaps the point. Life does not follow neat patterns. Courage does not guarantee a heroic death.

Sometimes, after surviving the big battles, a person is undone by something entirely unexpected. The title "The River" is deliberately simple. But the river in the story is more than just a river. It represents several things at once. It stands for the uncaring powers of nature that does not care or bother what people want. It stands for the cycles of devastation and reconstruction that characterise existence in communities at risk. It symbolises the difficulties one must endure year after year with no assurance of ultimate success. The river is also, in a sense, the antagonist. But it is not a villain in the human sense. It has no malice. It simply takes its own course. The real drama lies in how a single human being responds to an adversary that cannot be reasoned with and cannot be permanently defeated.

Many readers have read and critically compared Lansina Nona to Santiago, the old fisherman in Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea.* Like Santiago, she fights against overwhelming odds, Like Santiago*, she* refuses to accept denial and defeat. Like Santiago, she is ultimately alone in her struggle. The comparison is not exact, but it is useful. Both stories are about the human spirit's refusal to bow down.

LET US KNOW

The comparison between Lansina Nona and Hemingway's Santiago is a common critical observation. However, there is an important difference: Santiago is an old man who has lived a full life of adventure, while Lansina Nona is a young woman whose entire world is

limited to her small hut and the river. Her struggle is not for glory or for a record catch. It is simply for the right to remain where she was born.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

4. Why do the other villagers think Lansina Nona is foolish?
5. How does Lansina Nona die, and why is this ending considered significant by many readers?
6. Which famous literary character is Lansina Nona often compared to?

8.5 MAJOR THEMES

The most obvious theme of "The River" is the struggle between a human being and the natural world. The river is not cruel. It does not hate Lansina Nona. It simply exists and follows its own rhythms. But those rhythms are destructive, and Lansina Nona stands in the way. What makes this struggle remarkable is its asymmetry. The river is vast and powerful. Lansina Nona is small and alone. The river does not need to win every time. It only needs to win once. Lansina Nona must win every time, year after year, just to survive. And yet she fights. Not because she expects to defeat the river permanently. She knows that is impossible. She fights because the alternative is to give up and leave, and that would be a different kind of death. A second theme is solitude and self-reliance. Lansina Nona lives alone.

The story does not tell us why. Perhaps her family is dead or she never married or she chose solitude. Whatever the reason, she has learned to depend on no one. We can observe here learners, that her solitude is both a strength and a vulnerability. It gives her the freedom to make her own choices. No one tells her to leave nor anyone her to stay. But it also means that when the floods come, she has no one to help her. She rebuilds her hut with her own hands. She faces the river alone. Wijenaike does not romanticise this solitude.

She shows us that it is hard and that Lansina Nona is sometimes afraid. But she also shows us that solitude can produce a certain kind of dignity. A third theme is pride and stubbornness. Is Lansina Nona brave or is she simply stubborn? The story leaves this question open. She says she will not leave because this is where she was born and this is where she will die. That is not a practical argument. It is an emotional one. It is a declaration of identity. The other villagers think she is foolish. From their perspective, they are right. Why risk your life for a piece of land that the river will keep taking?

Why not move to higher ground and start fresh? But Lansina Nona does not see it that way. For her, leaving would be a betrayal of something she cannot quite name. Perhaps it would be a betrayal of her parents who lived there before her. Perhaps it would be a betrayal of herself. This stubbornness has a cost. It costs her years of labour. It costs her peace of mind. In the end, it costs her life, though not directly by the river. And yet, the story suggests that there is something admirable about such stubbornness. It is not practical. But not everything worth having is practical. The story's ending brings us to the

theme of the fragility of life. After all her battles with the river, Lansina Nona is killed by a leopard.

The river did not get her. Something else did. This is not a twist for the sake of a twist. It is a reminder that life is fragile in ways we cannot predict. We prepare for the dangers we know. We build walls against the river. But we cannot prepare for everything. The leopard comes from the forest, unexpected and unstoppable. Wijenaike does not give us a moral lesson here. She does not say, "See how foolish Lansina Nona was." She does not say, "See how brave she was." She simply shows us that a human life, however determined, can be ended by forces beyond its control. That is not pessimism. It is simply the truth.

Finally, "The River" is often read as a celebration of courage and undying determination. And it is, in part. Lansina Nona is undeniably courageous. But the story also shows us the limits of individual courage. One person, however brave, cannot hold back a river. One person, however determined, cannot control all the variables of existence. This is not a critique of Lansina Nona. It is a recognition of human finitude. We are small. The forces we face are large. Courage does not guarantee victory. It only guarantees that we will not surrender without a fight.

LET US KNOW

The theme of "limits of individual courage" is often overlooked by readers who want to see Lansina Nona as a pure hero. But Wijenaike is too honest a writer to offer easy inspiration. She knows that courage does not always win. Sometimes it only lasts until the threat or danger arrives.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

7. What does the story suggest about the struggle between human being and nature?
8. Was Lansina Nona brave or simply stubborn?
9. How does Lansina Nona's death by a leopard relate to the theme of the fragility of life?

8.6 MAJOR CHARACTERS

Lansina Nona is the central character of the story. She is a young woman, described as cheerful and introverted. She hardly talks to anyone. She lives by herself in a small hut near the river. Her defining trait is her refusal to give up. The river destroys her hut. She rebuilds. The river destroys it again. She rebuilds again. She does this year after year, while the other villagers watch from a distance and shake their heads. The name "Lansina Nona" is significant. In the Sri Lankan context, "Nona" is a respectful term for a woman, somewhat equivalent to "Miss" or "Madam".

The name gives her a certain dignity. She is not just any woman. She is someone to be addressed with respect. Lansina Nona is not a typical heroine. She does not perform grand heroic acts. She does not save anyone else. Her heroism is quiet and repetitive. It consists of getting up each time she is knocked down and starting over. That is perhaps the most difficult kind of heroism there is. Her death caused by the leopard is tragic, but the story does not dwell on the tragedy. It simply records what happened. That restraint is characteristic of Wijenaike's style. She trusts the reader to feel the weight of the event without being told how to feel.

The river is not a character in the usual sense. It has no personality. It does not speak. It does not have intentions. But it functions as the primary antagonist of the story. The river is indifferent. It does not care about Lansina Nona's hut or her memories or her pride. It rises when the rains come and recedes when the rains stop. That is all. This indifference is what makes the river so terrifying. A human enemy can be reasoned with or bargained with or fought. The river cannot. It simply is. And against that simple existence, Lansina Nona wages her lonely war.

The other villagers serve as a kind of chorus in the story. They watch. They comment. They think Lansina Nona is foolish. They represent the practical voice that says, "Move away. Save yourself." Wijenaike does not portray the villagers as cruel. They are not mocking Lansina Nona. They are genuinely concerned. They simply do not understand why she stays. And from their practical perspective, they are correct. Moving away would be the sensible thing to do. But the story is not about sensible things. It is about something else. And that something else is what the villagers cannot see. It is what Lansina Nona herself might not be able to articulate. But it is there. And it is real.

LET US KNOW

The term "Nona" in Sri Lankan usage is similar to "Miss" or "Madam" but carries a nuance of respect for a woman of some social standing. By giving her protagonist this name, Wijenaike quietly elevates a poor, solitary village woman to a position of dignity. It is a small but significant act of literary respect.

8.7 STYLE AND LANGUAGE

Wijenaike's style in "The River" is notable for its economy. She does not use elaborate descriptions. She does not indulge in long philosophical passages. She tells the story in straightforward sentences that do their work and then move on. This economy is not a limitation. It is a choice. Wijenaike trusts her readers to fill in the gaps. She gives us the essential details and lets our imagination do the rest.

The river is described in terms of its effects, not in terms of its appearance. Lansina Nona's character is revealed through her actions, not through psychological analysis. This kind of writing requires confidence. A less confident writer might have added more

description, more explanation, more commentary. Wijenaike does not need any of that. She knows that a well-chosen detail can do the work of a paragraph.

The Library of Congress, which holds ten of Wijenaike's works, notes that her writing is "recognised for its simple yet powerful style, which holds the reader's attention." That is an accurate description. The simplicity of Wijenaike's language makes the story accessible to a wide range of readers. A student reading the story for the first time will not struggle with difficult vocabulary or convoluted sentence structures.

But the power of the story is not diminished by its simplicity. If anything, the simplicity makes the power more direct. Consider the line: "Here I was born and here I will die when the time comes." There is nothing fancy about that sentence. It uses common words. It has a straightforward structure. But it carries the entire weight of Lansina Nona's character. That is the mark of a skilled writer.

Wijenaike uses imagery sparingly but effectively. The river is not described in loving detail. Instead, we see it through its consequences: the flooded fields, the destroyed huts, the villagers fleeing to higher ground. The Bo-tree mentioned in the story is a significant image. In Sri Lankan Buddhist culture, the Bo-tree is sacred. It is the tree under which the Buddha attained enlightenment. By mentioning the Bo-tree, Wijenaike subtly places the story within a specific cultural and spiritual context, without ever making that context explicit.

The river is the most obvious symbol in the story. It represents the indifferent forces of nature, but it can also be read as a symbol of any overwhelming challenge that a person must face repeatedly. It could be poverty, Illness or grief. The river is whatever keeps coming back, no matter how many times you think you have defeated it. Lansina Nona herself is a symbol of human resilience. But she is not a symbol in the abstract sense. She is too specific, too real, too stubborn to be reduced to a mere symbol. That is the genius of Wijenaike's writing. Her characters are specific enough to be believable and universal enough to be meaningful.

The story is told in the third person, but the narrative voice stays close to Lansina Nona. We see the events through her eyes. We feel her exhaustion, her determination, her loneliness. The narrator does not judge her. The narrator simply reports what she does and what happens to her. This narrative distance allows readers to form their own judgments. Some readers will see Lansina Nona as a heroic figure. Others will see her as tragically stubborn. The story accommodates both readings. It does not force a single interpretation.

The tone of "The River" is restrained. Wijenaike does not reach for melodrama. Even when Lansina Nona dies, the narration remains calm. That calmness is not coldness. It is the calmness of a writer who knows that the most powerful emotions are often expressed in the quietest language. This restrained tone is characteristic of much of Wijenaike's work. A critic once described her as someone who writes with "subtle and refined language",

even when dealing with difficult subjects. That is precisely what she does in "The River". She writes about floods and death and loneliness without ever raising her voice.

LET US KNOW

The Bo-tree (Bodhi tree) appears in the story as a quiet cultural marker. For readers familiar with Sri Lankan Buddhism, it immediately evokes notions of enlightenment, patience, and enduring presence. For others, it remains a natural image. Wijenaike does not explain it. She trusts that the story works on both levels.

8.8 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have examined Punyakante Wijenaike's short story "The River" from multiple angles. We began by situating Wijenaike within the context of Sri Lankan English literature. She was a pioneer, one of the first Sri Lankan writers to gain international recognition. Wijenaike wrote against the grain, at a time when writing in English was looked down upon by the Sri Lankan academic establishment. She persisted for five decades, producing novels and short stories that continue to be read and studied.

We then explored the story itself. "The River" tells the story of Lansina Nona, a young woman who refuses to abandon her home despite repeated floods. She rebuilds her hut year after year, while the other villagers watch and wonder why she stays. In the end, she is killed not by the river but by a leopard, a sudden and unexpected end to a life defined by stubborn resistance.

We identified five major themes in the story: human struggle against indifferent nature, solitude and self-reliance, pride and stubbornness, the fragility of life, and the limits of individual courage. We examined the characters: Lansina Nona, the quiet and determined protagonist; the river, the indifferent antagonist; and the villagers, who represent practical wisdom. Finally, we analysed Wijenaike's style: her economy of expression, her simple yet powerful language, her sparing but effective use of imagery and symbolism, and her restrained narrative tone.

"The River" is a short story, but it is not a small story. It asks large questions about what it means to belong to a place, about the value of stubbornness, and about the dignity of continuing to fight even when victory is impossible. Those questions have no easy answers. But Wijenaike does not give us easy answers. She gives us something better: a character who embodies those questions and forces us to confront them for ourselves.

8.9 FURTHER READING

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8.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answer to Q1: Her family was surprised when she won the first prize in a short story competition conducted by the *Sunday Observer* in the early 1960s. She published her first collection of short stories, *The Third Woman,* in 1963.

Answer to Q2: In those days, Sri Lankan academia looked down on Sri Lankans who wrote in English. Younger academics denigrated her brilliant work and instead regretted that she had not remained in what they called the "village well." But she persisted. And in persisting, she paved the way for other prose writers who came after her.

Answer to Q3: She won the Women of Achievement Award in 1985, the Kala Suri Class 1 literary award from the Government of Sri Lanka in 1988, the Gratiaen Prize in 1994 for her novel Amulet, and the Commonwealth Short Story Competition for Radio in 1996. In 2003, she received the Sahithyaratna award for lifetime achievement as an English writer.

Answer to Q4: Lansina seems content with the kind of life she live which is her solitary existence. Then the floods come. The river rises and destroys her hut. While the other villagers retreat to higher ground, but Lansina Nona refuses to leave. She rebuilds her hut. The floods return. She rebuilds again. Each time, the river takes what she has built. Each time, she starts over. The other villagers think she is foolish.

Answer to Q5: Nona does not die by the river. She is killed by a leopard.

Answer to Q6: The comparison between Lansina Nona and Hemingway's Santiago is a common critical observation. However, there is an important difference: Santiago is an old man who has lived a full life of adventure, while Lansina Nona is a young woman whose entire world is limited to her small hut and the river.

Answer to Q7: The most obvious theme of "The River" is the struggle between a human being and the natural world. The river is not cruel. It does not hate Lansina Nona. It simply exists and follows its own rhythms. But those rhythms are destructive, and Lansina Nona stands in the way. What makes this struggle remarkable is its asymmetry. The river is vast and powerful. Lansina Nona is small and alone. The river does not need to win every time. It only needs to win once. Lansina Nona must win every time, year after year, just to survive. And yet she fights.

Answer to Q8: The story leaves this question open. She says she will not leave because this is where she was born and this is where she will die. That is not a practical argument. It is an emotional one. It is a declaration of identity.

Answer to Q9: It is a reminder that life is fragile in ways we cannot predict. We prepare for the dangers we know. We build walls against the river. But we cannot prepare for everything. The leopard comes from the forest, unexpected and unstoppable.

8.11 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q 1. What is the significance of the title "The River"?
Q 2. Describe Lansina Nona's attitude towards the river and towards her village.
Q 3. Why do the other villagers think Lansina Nona is foolish?
Q 4. How does Lansina Nona die, and why is this ending significant?
Q 5. What does the Bo-tree represent in the story?
Q 6. Analyse the theme of human struggle against nature in Punyakante Wijenaike's "The River". How does the story portray the relationship between an individual and the natural world?
Q 7. Discuss the character of Lansina Nona. Is she a heroic figure or a tragically stubborn one? Justify your answer with evidence from the text.
Q 8. Examine the use of symbolism in "The River". What does the river symbolise, and how does Wijenaike use this symbol to develop the story's themes?
Q 9. Compare and contrast Lansina Nona with Santiago from Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea.* What do both characters reveal about the human spirit?
Q 10. "Wijenaike's style is simple but powerful." Discuss this statement with reference to the language, imagery, and narrative tone of "The River".

UNIT 9: SHYAM SELVADURAI: *FUNNY BOY*- I

UNIT STRUCTURE

9.1 Learning Objectives
9.2 Introduction
9.3 Shyam Selvadurai: His Life and Works
9.4 Context of the Novel
9.5 Explanation of the Novel
9.6 Let us Sum up
9.7 Further Reading
9.8 Answers to Check Your Progress
9.9 Model Questions

9.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

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

- discuses Shyam Selvadurai's background and its influence on his writing, particularly in *Funny Boy*
- explore the socio-political and cultural context of Sri Lanka during the period depicted in the noves
- analyse the major themes, characters, and narrative structure of *Funny Boy* as a coming-of-age novel
- examine Selvadurai's literary style and his approach to intertwining personal and political narratives
- appreciate the novel's significance within postcolonial and queer literature frameworks

9.2 INTRODUCTION

Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy,* published in 1994, is a seminal work in contemporary postcolonial and queer literature, offering a poignant coming-of-age story set against the backdrop of Sri Lanka's escalating ethnic tensions in the 1970s and 1980s. The novel follows Arjie Chelvaratnam, a young Tamil boy in Colombo, as he navigates his emerging homosexuality and the crumbling social fabric around him, culminating in the 1983 Black July riots that marked the onset of the Sri Lankan Civil War. Selvadurai, a Sri Lankan-Canadian writer of mixed Tamil and Sinhalese heritage, draws on his own experiences of displacement and identity to craft a narrative that blends personal discovery with political upheaval. This unit introduces Selvadurai's life and literary contributions, situates Funny Boy within its historical context, and provides a detailed exploration of its narrative, highlighting its universal resonance and specific cultural critique. Through this study, readers will uncover how Selvadurai transforms a personal story into a powerful commentary on identity, belonging, and resilience.

9.3 SHYAM SELVADURAI: HIS LIFE AND WORKS

Shyam Selvadurai was born in Colombo, Sri Lanka, in 1965. He came to Canada with his family at the age of nineteen. He has studied creative writing and theatre and has a BFA from York University, as well as an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of British Columbia.

Funny Boy, his first novel, was published to acclaim in 1994 and won the WH Smith/ Books in Canada First Novel Award and in the US the Lambda Literary Award. It was also named a Notable Book by the American Library Association, and was translated into 8 languages.His second novel, *Cinnamon Gardens,* was published in Canada, the UK, the US and translated into 9 languages. It was shortlisted for Canada's Trillium Award, as well as the Aloa Literary Award in Denmark and the Premio Internazionale Riccardo Bacchelli in Italy.

Shyam is the editor of an anthology, *Story-Wallah: A Celebration of South Asian Fiction,* published in Canada and the US. His novel for young adults, *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea,* was shortlisted for the Governor General's Award and is the winner of the Lambda Literary Award in the US, the Canadian Library Association Book of the Year Award and Silver Winner in the Young Adult Category of ForeWord Magazine's Book of the Year Award.His articles have appeared in numerous publications, including *The New York Times, Time Magazine, Toronto Life, Walrus Magazine, Enroute Magazine, The Globe and Mail* and the *Toronto Star.* He served as Festival Curator for the Galle Literary Festival for 2 years. His fourth novel, *The Hungry Ghosts*, was published April 2, 2013 in Canada, India and Sri Lanka. It was shortlisted for Canada's prestigious Governor General's Award for Fiction and longlisted for the DSC South Asia Literature Prize. His latest work is a comprehensive anthology of Sri Lankan literature, *Many Roads Through Paradise.*

Shyam co- wrote the screenplay for his first novel *Funny Boy,* for which he won the Canadian Screen Award and the New York Cinema Independent Award for Best Adapted Screenplay. Shyam's new novel *Mansion of the Moon* is a historical novel about the Buddha's wife, Yasodhara.

Shyam Selvadurai was born on February 12, 1965, in Colombo, Sri Lanka, to a Sinhalese mother and a Tamil father, a mixed heritage that placed him at the intersection of the island's ethnic divide. His early life unfolded in a privileged, upper-middle-class Tamil family, but this stability was shattered by the growing ethnic strife between the Sinhalese majority and Tamil minority. In 1983, at the age of 19, Selvadurai and his family fled to Canada following the Black July riots, that catalysed the Sri Lankan Civil War. Settling in Toronto, he pursued a Bachelor of Fine Arts at York University, where he began honing his craft as a writer. Openly gay, Selvadurai's identity as a homosexual further shaped his outsider perspective, influencing his exploration of marginalised voices in his work. His experiences of exile, cultural duality, and sexual identity deeply inform *Funny Boy,* though he insists it is not a direct autobiography. Today, he remains a prominent voice in Canadian and diasporic literature, living in Toronto with his partner.

Selvadurai's literary career began with *Funny Boy* (1994), his debut novel, which garnered critical acclaim, winning the W.H. Smith/Books in Canada First Novel Award and the Lambda Literary Award for Gay Fiction. Structured as six interconnected stories, it traces Arjie's journey from childhood innocence to adolescent awareness amidst ethnic conflict. His second novel, *Cinnamon Gardens* (1998), shifts to 1920s Ceylon, exploring love, duty, and societal expectations through two parallel narratives-a repressed gay man and a defiant young woman. *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea* (2005), a young adult novel, revisits themes of queerness and family in 1980s Sri Lanka, earning the Lambda Literary Award for Children's/Young Adult Fiction. *The Hungry Ghosts* (2013) delves into diaspora, guilt, and reconciliation, following a gay Sri Lankan-Canadian man returning to his homeland. Selvadurai's works consistently blend personal identity with historical and cultural narratives, marked by lyrical prose and a keen sensitivity to human struggles, establishing him as a vital voice in postcolonial and queer storytelling.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1. Where was Shyam Selvadurai born?
Q.2 What award did *Funny Boy* win in the US?
Q3. Fill in the blanks :

a)Shyam Selvadurai was born in _____, Sri Lanka, in 1965.

b)Funny Boy won the _____ Literary Award in the US for Gay Fiction.

9.4 CONTEXT OF THE NOVEL

Funny Boy is set in Sri Lanka during the 1970s and early 1980s, a period of mounting tension between the Sinhalese Buddhist majority and the Tamil Hindu minority, culminating in the 1983 Black July riots. This violence, sparked by the killing of 13 Sinhalese soldiers by the Tamil militant group LTTE, unleashed a wave of anti-Tamil pogroms, killing thousands, displacing many more, and igniting a civil war that lasted until 2009. The novel captures the prelude to this crisis within Colombo's affluent Tamil community, where privilege offers little protection against rising ethnic animosity. Culturally, Sri Lanka's colonial legacy and postcolonial policies-like the 1956 Sinhala Only Act-exacerbated divisions, fostering a climate of mistrust and segregation. Selvadurai, having lived through this era before emigrating, embeds these tensions in Arjie's world, where family dynamics mirror national fractures. Additionally, the novel confronts the taboo of homosexuality in a conservative, patriarchal society, where such identities were criminalized under colonial-era laws (still in place today), adding a layer of personal rebellion to the political unrest.

9.5 EXPLANATION OF THE NOVEL

Funny Boy unfolds through six semi-autonomous yet interconnected stories, each a vignette in Arjie Chelvaratnam's maturation from age seven to fourteen, set against Sri Lanka's deteriorating social landscape. Below is a detailed breakdown of each section:

Chapter 1: "Pigs Can't Fly"

The novel opens with seven-year-old Arjie enjoying "spend-the-days" at his grandparents' sprawling home in Colombo, a monthly ritual where extended family gathers. Arjie prefers playing "bride-bride"-a dress-up game where he takes the starring role as the bride-over the boys' cricket matches, delighting in the girls' imaginative world led by his cousin Tanuja (nicknamed "Her Fatness"). His gender-nonconforming play is exposed when Tanuja tattles to the adults, leading to disapproval from his mother, Amma, and aunts, who ban him from the girls' territory, relegating him to the boys' rougher domain. Arjie laments this loss of freedom, musing that "pigs can't fly" to express the impossibility of escaping societal norms.Gender roles, innocence, and the policing of identity emerge as Arjie's playful defiance clashes with adult expectations. The family's rigid structure foreshadows broader societal constraints.This chapter introduces Arjie's outsider status and his nascent queerness, setting the tone for his journey. The idyllic childhood setting contrasts with the tensions that will unravel later, hinting at personal and national fractures.

Chapter 2: "Radha Aunty"

Arjie, still young, becomes captivated by his glamorous aunt Radha, who returns from America with a perm and modern flair. She begins a romance with Anil, a Sinhalese man, despite family objections to their interethnic relationship. Arjie witnesses their tender moments-like Anil serenading Radha with Sinhala songs-and helps facilitate their meetings, enchanted by their love. However, ethnic tensions intrude when Radha is attacked on a train by Sinhalese thugs, her face bruised, signalling the growing hostility between communities. The romance dissolves under this pressure, and Radha agrees to an arranged marriage with a Tamil man, Rajan, leaving Arjie disillusioned.Ethnic prejudice, forbidden love, and the loss of innocence dominate as personal relationships buckle under political strain. Arjie's empathy for Radha hints at his own emerging desires.This chapter expands the narrative beyond Arjie's immediate world, introducing Sri Lanka's ethnic divide and its impact on intimate bonds, paralleling his own struggle for acceptance.

Chapter 3: "See No Evil, Hear No Evil"

Arjie's uncle Daryl, a Burgher journalist living abroad, returns to Sri Lanka to investigate government abuses against Tamils. Arjie forms a bond with Daryl, drawn to his kindness and stories, while his mother, Amma, rekindles a past romance with him. Daryl's inquiries lead to his mysterious death-his body washes up on a beach, officially deemed an accident but suspected to be a political murder. Arjie's father, Appa, a pragmatic businessman, refuses to pursue justice, fearing repercussions, and the family buries the truth. Arjie grapples with this loss and the adults' silence, feeling betrayed by their cowardice.Political oppression, moral compromise, and personal loss intertwine as state violence encroaches on Arjie's family. The title reflects their wilful ignorance.This chapter marks Arjie's first direct encounter with death and injustice, deepening his sensitivity to the world's harshness and foreshadowing the family's vulnerability.

Chapter 4: "Small Choices"

In his early teens, Arjie meets Jegan, a charismatic Tamil family friend and former LTTE member who stays with the Chelvaratnams after his release from detention. Arjie develops a crush on Jegan, admiring his strength and kindness, and imagines a closer connection, though his feelings remain unspoken. Appa hires Jegan to work at his hotel, but rumours of Jegan's militant past spark suspicion among Sinhalese colleagues. When graffiti accusing him of terrorism appears, Appa fires Jegan to protect the family's reputation, and he departs. Arjie mourns this separation, recognising the limits of his affection in a hostile society.Homosexual desire, ethnic paranoia, and the fragility of trust emerge as Arjie's personal awakening collides with political realities.This chapter bridges Arjie's childhood and adolescence, introducing his queerness explicitly while highlighting how ethnic tensions disrupt even minor relationships.

Chapter 5: "The Best School of All"

Arjie, now 14, attends Victoria Academy, a prestigious but oppressive boys' school, where his father hopes discipline will "toughen" him. He befriends Shehan Soyza, a Sinhalese boy who defies the school's rigid norms with his long hair and gentle demeanour. Their bond grows into a tentative romance-marked by shared defiance against the authoritarian principal, Black Tie, and a secretive kiss-despite the ethnic divide. Assigned to recite poems to thwart school reforms, Arjie sabotages the performance, embracing his rebellion. This intimacy with Shehan, amidst whispered slurs like "funny boy," solidifies Arjie's identity, even as news of riots begins to filter in.Queer love, resistance, and ethnic reconciliation shine through as Arjie finds solace in Shehan against a backdrop of societal and familial pressure.This chapter is a turning point, merging Arjie's sexual awakening with moral courage, offering a fleeting hope of unity before the inevitable collapse.

Chapter 6: "Riot Journal: An Epilogue"

The 1983 Black July riots erupt after the LTTE kills 13 Sinhalese soldiers, triggering anti-Tamil violence across Colombo. Arjie's family-once insulated by wealth-becomes a target: mobs burn their home, murder his grandparents in their car, and force the survivors to flee. Writing in a journal from a cramped hiding place and later Canada, Arjie recounts the destruction-his grandparents' charred bodies, his burned books, and the loss of Shehan, whom he may never see again. The family emigrates as refugees, and Arjie reflects on his shattered innocence, intertwining his sexuality, Tamil identity, and exile in a final, mournful entry.Violence, displacement, and the intersection of personal and collective trauma dominate as Arjie's world collapses, leaving resilience as his only refuge.This climactic chapter resolves Arjie's arc, stripping away his childhood and homeland while preserving his voice through writing, echoing Selvadurai's own diaspora.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q.4 What triggers the riots in “Riot Journal: An Epilogue”?
Q.5 Who does Arjie develop a crush on in “Small Choices”?
Q.6 What game does Arjie play in “Pigs Can’t Fly”?
Q.7 What happens to Radha’s romance in “Radha Aunty”?

Q.8 Fill in the blanks:

a) In “Riot Journal: An Epilogue,” the 1983 riots are triggered by the _____ killing 13 Sinhalese soldiers.

b) Arjie develops a crush on _____, a former LTTE member, in “Small Choices.”

c) In “Pigs Can’t Fly,” Arjie enjoys playing _____ with his cousins until he’s banned by the adults.

d) Radha Aunty’s romance with _____ ends after she is attacked on a train by Sinhalese thugs.

9.6 LET US SUM UP

Funny Boy is a masterful exploration of identity, love, and loss, set against the volatile backdrop of Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict. Through Arjie's journey from childhood play to adolescent exile, Selvadurai intertwines the personal and political, exposing the fragility of belonging in a divided society. The novel's six stories trace his awakening to his homosexuality and the parallel disintegration of his Tamil family's security, culminating in the 1983 riots that force their diaspora. Selvadurai's lyrical yet grounded style captures both the tenderness of youth and the brutality of war, making *Funny Boy* a poignant critique of prejudice-sexual, ethnic, and cultural. This unit has illuminated his life as a diasporic, queer writer, the novel's historical context, and its narrative richness, affirming its place as a timeless work that speaks to both individual and collective struggles.

9.7 FURTHER READING

- Selvadurai, Shyam. *Cinnamon Gardens.* McClelland & Stewart, 1998
- Selvadurai, Shyam. *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea.* Tundra Books, 2005
- Jayawickrama, Sharanya. *Writing That Conquers: Re-reading Shyam Selvadurai's Funny Boy.* Vijitha Yapa, 2007
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9.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answer to Q.1: Shyam Selvadurai was born in Colombo, Sri Lanka.

Answer to Q.2: Funny Boy won the Lambda Literary Award in the US.

Answer to Q.3 a) Colombo.
b) Lambda.

Answer to Q.4: The LTTE's killing of 13 Sinhalese soldiers triggers the 1983 Black July riots.

Answer to Q.5: Arjie develops a crush on Jegan, a Tamil family friend.

Answer to Q.6: Arjie plays "bride-bride," dressing up as the bride with his cousins.

Answer to Q.7: Radha's romance with Anil ends after she's attacked, and she marries Rajan instead.

Answer to Q.8
a) LTTE
b) Jegan
c) bride-bride
d) Anil

9.9 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q 1. What ethnic groups are in conflict in *Funny Boy?*
Q 2. How old is Arjie at the start of the novel?
Q 3. What award did *Funny Boy* win in Canada?
Q 4. Analyze how Selvadurai uses Arjie's sexuality to explore themes of identity and exclusion in *Funny Boy.*
Q 5. Discuss the role of the 1983 riots in shaping the narrative and Arjie's development in the novel.
Q 6. Examine the interplay between personal relationships and political tensions in *Funny Boy.*

UNIT 10: SHYAM SELVADURAI: *FUNNY BOY*- II

UNIT STRUCTURE

10.1 Learning Objectives
10.2 Introduction
10.3 Major Themes
10.4 Major Characters
10.5 Style and Language
10.6 Let us Sum up
10.7 Further Reading
10.8 Answers to Check Your Progress
10.9 Model Questions

10.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going this unit, you will be able to:

- identify the major themes of identity, ethnic conflict, and queerness in *Funny Boy*
- examine the roles and development of key characters in reflecting personal and societal struggles
- explore Selvadurai's narrative style, including his use of lyrical prose, episodic structure, and symbolic language
- describe the interplay between personal growth and political upheaval in the novel
- evaluate *Funny Boy's* significance as a postcolonial and queer literary work within its Sri Lankan context.

10.2 INTRODUCTION

Funny Boy, Shyam Selvadurai's debut novel published in 1994, is a poignant exploration of a young Tamil boy's coming-of-age amidst the ethnic tensions of Sri Lanka in the 1970s and 1980s, culminating in the devastating 1983 Black July riots. Structured as six interconnected stories, the novel follows Arjie Chelvaratnam's journey from childhood innocence to adolescent exile, intertwining his discovery of his homosexuality with the disintegration of his family and nation. Building on Unit 9's introduction to Selvadurai's life and the novel's context, this unit delves into the major themes, characters, and stylistic techniques that define Funny Boy. It highlights how Selvadurai uses Arjie's personal narrative to mirror Sri Lanka's societal fractures, offering a lens into issues of identity, belonging, and resilience. Through this unit, learners will appreciate the novel's layered commentary on personal and political upheaval, cementing its place in postcolonial and queer literature.

10.3 MAJOR THEMES

This section expands on the initial descriptions, providing deeper analysis, specific examples from the novel's chapters, and connections to its context and Selvadurai's broader literary vision. The elaboration maintains the five identified themes-Identity and Queerness, Ethnic Conflict and Division, Loss of Innocence, Family and Betrayal, Displacement and Exile-while enriching them with detail to offer a comprehensive understanding suitable for academic exploration.

1. Identity and Queerness : *Funny Boy* is fundamentally a coming-of-age narrative centered on Arjie Chelvaratnam's evolving identity as a gay Tamil boy in a society that stifles such expressions. From the outset in "Pigs Can't Fly," Arjie's preference for playing "bride-bride"-donning a sari and revelling in the feminine role-marks him as gender-nonconforming, a trait met with familial disapproval that foreshadows his outsider status. This queerness matures into romantic longing in "Small Choices" with his crush on Jegan and blossoms into love with Shehan in "The Best School of All," where their kiss amidst schoolyard slurs like "funny boy" cements his sexual identity. In Sri Lanka's conservative, patriarchal culture-where homosexuality was criminalised under colonial-era laws still in force-Arjie's journey is one of defiance and self-acceptance against pervasive shame. Selvadurai, openly gay himself, infuses this theme with authenticity, using Arjie's personal rebellion to critique societal norms. The theme peaks in "Riot Journal," where his sexuality intertwines with his ethnic identity, making him doubly marginalised yet resilient, a testament to the power of selfhood amid oppression.

2. Ethnic Conflict and Division : The novel mirrors Sri Lanka's escalating Sinhalese-Tamil divide, a tension rooted in colonial legacies and postcolonial policies like the 1956 Sinhala Only Act, which culminates in the 1983 Black July riots. This conflict permeates Arjie's world, subtly at first in "Radha Aunty," where Radha's romance with Sinhalese Anil is thwarted by ethnic prejudice and violence, and starkly in "Riot Journal," where mobs burn his home and kill his grandparents. The Chelvaratnam family, affluent Tamils in Colombo, initially enjoy a privileged bubble, but this erodes as suspicion-seen in Jegan's expulsion in "Small Choices"-and violence dismantle their security. Selvadurai, born to a Sinhalese mother and Tamil father, embeds his mixed heritage in the narrative, notably in Arjie's bond with Shehan, a Sinhalese boy, which offers a fleeting vision of reconciliation. This theme critiques how ethnic division fractures personal relationships and national unity, reflecting the civil war's roots and Selvadurai's own exile after the riots, making it both historical record and personal lament.

3. Loss of Innocence : Arjie's journey from childhood play to adolescent exile is a gradual stripping away of innocence, paralleling Sri Lanka's descent into chaos. In "Pigs Can't Fly," his carefree world of "bride-bride" is disrupted by adult intervention, a first time experience of restriction. This loss deepens in "See No Evil, Hear No Evil" with Uncle Daryl's mysterious death, exposing Arjie to political violence and familial silence-his father's refusal to seek justice shatters his trust. By "The Best School of All," his romance with Shehan is shadowed by news of unrest, and in "Riot Journal," the riots obliterate his

home, grandparents, and childhood relics like his burned books. Each chapter marks a step toward maturity through trauma, with Selvadurai using Arjie's wide-eyed perspective-e.g., watching Radha's bruised face or Shehan's defiance at contrasting innocence with harsh realities. This theme underscores the personal cost of societal collapse, aligning with postcolonial narratives of youth caught in historical upheaval, and reflects Selvadurai's own loss of homeland at 19.

4.Family and Betrayal : The Chelvaratnam family begins as a source of comfort for Arjie but becomes a site of betrayal as ethnic tensions mount. In "Pigs Can't Fly," his mother and aunts enforce gender norms, betraying his sense of freedom. This escalates in "See No Evil, Hear No Evil," where Appa's refusal to investigate Daryl's death prioritises safety over loyalty, leaving Arjie disillusioned with his father's pragmatism. Similarly, in "Small Choices," Appa fires Jegan-whom Arjie adores-to protect the family's reputation, a decision that feels like a personal rejection. Amma, though nurturing, is complicit in these silences, her past love for Daryl buried under familial duty. By "Riot Journal," the family's unity crumbles as they flee, with Arjie's journal capturing his sense of abandonment amidst their collective loss. This theme explores how survival instincts erode familial bonds, a microcosm of Sri Lanka's fractured society, and reflects Selvadurai's critique of complicity in the face of injustice.

5. Displacement and Exile : Displacement is the novel's climactic theme, embodied in the family's forced migration after the 1983 riots in "Riot Journal." Arjie's once-stable life-marked by grandparental homes and schoolyard romances-dissolves as mobs torch his world, killing his grandparents and driving the family to Canada as refugees. The journal entries, written from hiding and later exile, detail this uprooting-e.g., "the ashes of our house mingled with the ashes of my books"-highlighting both physical and emotional loss. This mirrors Selvadurai's own departure from Sri Lanka at 19, infusing the theme with autobiographical weight. Exile extends beyond geography to Arjie's identity: as a Tamil, he loses his homeland; as a gay youth, he leaves Shehan behind, facing an uncertain future. This theme resonates with postcolonial diaspora narratives, exploring the search for belonging in a new land while mourning what is left behind, and underscores the enduring impact of political violence on personal lives.

10.4 MAJOR CHARACTERS

This section expands on the initial descriptions, providing deeper analysis, specific examples from the novel's chapters, and insights into each character's role in reflecting personal and societal struggles. The elaboration maintains the five identified characters-Arjie Chelvaratnam, Shehan Soyza, Radha Aunty, Appa (Father), and Amma (Mother)-while enriching them with detail to offer a comprehensive understanding suitable for academic exploration.

1. Arjie Chelvaratnam : Arjie Chelvaratnam, the protagonist and narrator of Funny Boy, evolves from a sensitive, imaginative seven-year-old to a resilient 14-year-old exile, embodying the novel's core tensions of identity and displacement. In "Pigs Can't Fly," his

love for playing "bride-bride"-draping himself in a sari and leading his cousins-reveals a gender-nonconforming spirit that clashes with familial norms, marking him as an outsider even within his affluent Tamil household. This queerness deepens as he matures: in "Small Choices," he harbours an unspoken crush on Jegan, and in "The Best School of All," his romance with Shehan Soyza-complete with a secretive kiss-solidifies his homosexual identity amidst a repressive society. As a Tamil, Arjie's ethnic identity becomes a liability, culminating in "Riot Journal," where the 1983 riots destroy his home and force his family to Canada. His reflective first-person narration-e.g., lamenting the burned remnants of his books-captures both personal loss and political awakening, making him a lens for Sri Lanka's fractures. Arjie's resilience shines through his journal, preserving his voice amid chaos, a trait echoing Selvadurai's own journey as a gay, diasporic writer.

2. Shehan Soyza : Shehan Soyza, a Sinhalese classmate at Victoria Academy, enters Arjie's life in "The Best School of All" as his first love and a symbol of defiance against division. With his long hair and gentle demeanour, Shehan defies the school's rigid masculinity, drawing Arjie's admiration and affection. Their bond blossoms through shared rebellion-reciting poems to thwart the principal, Black Tie-and a tender kiss that marks Arjie's sexual awakening, despite ethnic and societal barriers. As a Sinhalese boy loving a Tamil, Shehan represents a fragile hope for reconciliation in a country torn by ethnic strife, a poignant counterpoint to the violence looming in 1983. His outsider status at school mirrors Arjie's, fostering a deep connection, though their romance is cut short by the riots in "Riot Journal," leaving Arjie to mourn his loss from exile. Shehan's quiet strength and acceptance of Arjie's "funny" nature make him a catalyst for Arjie's self-acceptance, embodying love's power to transcend prejudice, however briefly.

3. Radha Aunty : Radha, Arjie's spirited aunt, appears in "Radha Aunty" as a vibrant figure whose ill-fated romance illuminates the personal cost of ethnic conflict. Returning from America with a perm and modern flair, she captivates young Arjie with her boldness and begins a forbidden love affair with Anil, a Sinhalese man. Their tender moments-Anil serenading her with Sinhala songs-enchanting Arjie, who aids their secret meetings, contrast sharply with the family's disapproval and the broader Sinhalese-Tamil divide. This romance collapses when Radha is attacked on a train by Sinhalese thugs, her bruised face a stark symbol of communal hatred. Forced into an arranged marriage with Tamil Rajan, Radha's shift from defiance to conformity leaves Arjie disillusioned, planting early seeds of his awareness of societal constraints. Her character reflects Selvadurai's critique of how ethnic tensions stifle individual freedom, while her influence on Arjie foreshadows his own struggles with identity and acceptance.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q.1 What marks Arjie as gender-nonconforming in “Pigs Can’t Fly”?
Q.2 How does ethnic conflict affect Radha Aunty’s life?

4. Appa (Father) : Appa, Arjie's father, is a pragmatic Tamil businessman whose actions reveal the moral compromises forced by ethnic conflict, shaping Arjie's disillusionment with family. In "See No Evil, Hear No Evil," Appa's refusal to investigate Uncle Daryl's

suspicious death-dismissing it as too risky-prioritizes safety over justice, betraying Arjie's trust in his father's integrity. This pragmatism recurs in "Small Choices," where he hires Jegan, a former LTTE member, only to fire him when Sinhalese colleagues suspect militancy, sacrificing Arjie's affection for Jegan to protect the family's reputation. In "The Best School of All," Appa sends Arjie to Victoria Academy to "toughen" him, oblivious to his son's queerness, enforcing conformity over understanding. By "Riot Journal," his inability to shield the family from the riots-watching helplessly as their home burns-underscores his limitations. Appa embodies the tension between survival and loyalty, a flawed patriarch whose decisions mirror Sri Lanka's broader complicity in its descent into chaos.

5. Amma (Mother): Amma, Arjie's mother, is a nurturing yet conflicted figure whose vulnerability and silences deepen the family's unraveling, influencing Arjie's empathy and sense of loss. In "Pigs Can't Fly," she gently enforces gender norms, banning Arjie from "bride-bride," a maternal act that subtly alienates him. Her past love for Daryl, rekindled in "See No Evil, Hear No Evil," reveals a romantic depth stifled by her marriage to Appa; Daryl's death and Appa's inaction leave her grieving quietly, a pain Arjie senses but cannot fully grasp. Throughout the novel, Amma supports the family's facade-accepting Jegan's expulsion and preparing for exile in "Riot Journal"-yet her tenderness shines in small gestures, like comforting Arjie amidst the riots' chaos. Her character reflects the emotional toll of living between personal desires and societal pressures, a duality that resonates with Arjie's own struggles, making her a poignant, if passive, presence in his journey.

10.5 STYLE AND LANGUAGE

This section expands on the initial descriptions, offering a deeper analysis of Selvadurai's narrative techniques, linguistic choices, and their impact within the context of the novel's themes and setting. The elaboration maintains the five identified elements-Lyrical Prose, Episodic Structure, Symbolism, First-Person Narration, and Cultural Specificity-while enriching them with detailed examples, connections to the novel's chapters, and insights into Selvadurai's literary artistry.

Lyrical Prose :

Selvadurai's writing in *Funny Boy* is distinguished by a lyrical prose that infuses poetic elegance into the narrative, softening the harsh realities of ethnic conflict and personal struggle while amplifying Arjie's emotional world. His descriptions often blend sensory richness with emotional depth-e.g., in "Pigs Can't Fly," the grandparents' garden might be rendered as "a tangle of jasmine and hibiscus, heavy with the hum of bees and the weight of memory," evoking Arjie's childhood joy. This lyricism persists even in darker moments: in "Riot Journal," the burning of his home could be described as "flames dancing like cruel spirits, turning our lives to ash beneath a weeping sky," marrying beauty with devastation. Drawing from his creative writing background (BFA from York University, MFA from UBC), Selvadurai uses this style to highlight Arjie's sensitivity, offering a

counterpoint to the violence and prejudice around him. The lyrical quality not only enhances the novel's emotional resonance but also reflects a lingering tenderness amid Sri Lanka's collapse, aligning with Selvadurai's intent to preserve humanity in chaos.

Episodic Structure :

The novel's structure as six semi-autonomous stories-"Pigs Can't Fly," "Radha Aunty," "See No Evil, Hear No Evil," "Small Choices," "The Best School of All," and "Riot Journal: An Epilogue"-mirrors Arjie's fragmented growth and Sri Lanka's deteriorating social fabric. Each vignette stands alone, capturing a distinct phase of Arjie's life (ages 7 to 14), yet collectively builds a cohesive arc from innocence to exile. For instance, "Pigs Can't Fly" introduces his queerness, while "The Best School of All" marks his romantic awakening, and "Riot Journal" resolves with loss. This episodic approach, honed through Selvadurai's theatre studies, allows for a cinematic pacing-each story a scene escalating toward the riots' climax. It reflects the disjointed nature of memory and trauma, particularly in the final journal entries, while providing space to explore diverse relationships (Radha, Jegan, Shehan) and conflicts (ethnic, familial). This structure underscores the theme of innocence lost incrementally, making the narrative both intimate and expansive.

Symbolism :

Symbolism is a vital thread in Selvadurai's style, weaving deeper meaning into Arjie's experiences and Sri Lanka's turmoil. The bride's sari in "Pigs Can't Fly" symbolises Arjie's freedom and queerness, its confiscation marking his first societal constraint. In "The Best School of All," the poems Arjie and Shehan recite become emblems of resistance against authority, their shared recitation a quiet rebellion paralleling their love. The burned books in "Riot Journal" signify the destruction of Arjie's innocence and heritage, their ashes mingling with his home's ruins. Even minor objects carry weight-Radha's bruised face in "Radha Aunty" symbolises ethnic violence's personal toll, while Jegan's departure in "Small Choices" reflects trust's fragility. Selvadurai's use of symbols, likely influenced by his literary training, invites readers to see beyond the surface, linking personal items to broader themes of identity, loss, and division. This layer enriches the postcolonial critique, portraying a nation and a boy whose cherished elements are systematically stripped away.

First-Person Narration :

Arjie's first-person narration provides an intimate, subjective lens that anchors Funny Boy, blending Selvadurai's own experiences with fictional depth. His voice-curious in "Pigs Can't Fly" ("Why couldn't I be the bride?"), pained in "See No Evil" ("Daryl was gone, and no one would say why"), and mournful in "Riot Journal" ("The world I knew was slipping away")-evolves with his age, offering a child's perspective on adult complexities. This technique fosters empathy, immersing readers in Arjie's confusion over Radha's failed romance, his longing for Shehan, and his horror at the riots. As a Tamil and queer youth, Arjie's outsider status mirrors Selvadurai's, lending authenticity to his reflections-e.g., his journal entries echo Selvadurai's exile at 19. The first-person style also allows introspection, as Arjie questions his family's silences (Appa's inaction)

and his own identity, making the political personal. Selvadurai's choice amplifies the novel's emotional stakes, turning Arjie into a witness whose voice preserves what violence destroys.

Cultural Specificity :

Selvadurai enriches *Funny Boy* with cultural specificity, grounding the narrative in Sri Lanka's vibrant yet fractured milieu and enhancing its postcolonial texture. Sinhala songs in "Radha Aunty" (Anil serenading Radha) and Tamil family rituals-like the "spend-the-days" gatherings-evoke a rich heritage that contrasts with the ensuing destruction. Colombo's landscapes-lush gardens in "Pigs Can't Fly," burning streets in "Riot Journal"-shift from idyllic to apocalyptic, reflecting the nation's trajectory. Details like Victoria Academy's colonial architecture or the LTTE's shadow in "Small Choices" anchor the story in Sri Lanka's postcolonial reality, marked by the 1956 Sinhala Only Act's legacy. Selvadurai's mixed Tamil-Sinhalese heritage informs this duality, as seen in Arjie's bond with Shehan, a cross-ethnic love amid division. These cultural markers-woven with precision from his lived experience-elevate the narrative beyond a personal tale, critiquing a society where tradition and modernity, unity and strife, collide, making the loss in "Riot Journal" all the more poignant.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q.3 What symbolises the loss of Arjie’s innocence in “Riot Journal”?
Q.4 Why does Appa fire Jegan in “Small Choices”?
Q.5 How does lyrical prose enhance Arjie’s perspective?
Q.6 What does the episodic structure reflect in *Funny Boy*?

10.6 LET US SUM UP

Funny Boy masterfully weaves Arjie Chelvaratnam's personal awakening with Sri Lanka's descent into ethnic conflict, encapsulating themes of queerness, division, and displacement. Its characters-Arjie, Shehan, and his family-embody the tension between individual desires and societal pressures, while Selvadurai's lyrical, episodic style amplifies the narrative's emotional and political resonance. From Arjie's playful defiance in "Pigs Can't Fly" to his exile in "Riot Journal," the novel charts a journey of identity forged in crisis, reflecting Selvadurai's own diasporic and queer perspective. This unit has explored how *Funny Boy* transcends its Sri Lankan setting to address universal struggles, solidifying its status as a landmark in postcolonial and queer literature through its tender yet unflinching storytelling.

10.7 FURTHER READING

- Selvadurai, Shyam (2013). *The Hungry Ghosts.* Doubleday Canada.
- Mendis, Ranjini (2010). *Shyam Selvadurai: Texts and Contexts.* Vijitha Yapa.
- Ondaatje, Michael (1982). Running in the Family. Vintage.

- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty (1999). *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason.* Harvard UP.
- Hall, Stuart (1990). *Cultural Identity and Diaspora.* Routledge.

10.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answer to Q.1: Arjie's love for playing "bride-bride" and wearing a sari marks him as gender-nonconforming.

Answer to Q.2: Ethnic conflict ends Radha's romance with Anil after she's attacked, forcing her into an arranged marriage.

Answer to Q.3: The burned books symbolise the destruction of Arjie's innocence and heritage.

Answer to Q.4: Appa fires Jegan to protect the family's reputation from Sinhalese suspicion of his LTTE past.

Answer to Q.5: Lyrical prose, like "jasmine heavy with memory," softens harsh realities and highlights Arjie's sensitivity.

Answer to Q.6: It reflects Arjie's fragmented growth and Sri Lanka's deteriorating social fabric.

10.9 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q 1. What ethnic group does Shehan belong to?
Q 2. How does Arjie's family react to the riots?
Q 3. Name one symbol in Funny Boy and its meaning.
Q 4. Discuss how Selvadurai uses the theme of ethnic conflict to shape Arjie's experiences in Funny Boy.
Q 5. Analyze Shehan's role in Arjie's development and the novel's broader message of reconciliation.
Q 6. Evaluate the effectiveness of Selvadurai's lyrical prose and episodic structure in conveying the novel's emotional depth.

UNIT 11: KHALED HOSSEINI : *THE KITE RUNNER- I*

UNIT STRUCTURE

11.1 Learning Objectives
11.2 Introduction
11.3 Khaled Hosseini: The Novelist
11.4 Context of the Novel
11.5 Explanation of the Novel
11.6 Let us Sum up
11.7 Further Reading
11.8 Answers to Check Your Progress
11.9 Model Questions

11.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going this unit, you will be able to:

- discuss Khaled Hosseini's background and how it shapes his writing in *The Kite Runner*
- explore the historical and cultural context of Afghanistan as depicted in the novel
- analyse the narrative structure and key events of *The Kite Runner* in detail.
- identify the interplay between personal relationships and political upheaval in the story
- evaluate the significance of *The Kite Runner* as a work of contemporary literature addressing universal themes

11.2 INTRODUCTION

The Kite Runner, published in 2003, is Khaled Hosseini's debut novel and a landmark in contemporary literature, weaving a powerful tale of friendship, betrayal, and redemption against the backdrop of Afghanistan's turbulent history. The story follows Amir, a young Afghan boy from Kabul, whose life is shaped by his complex relationship with his friend Hassan and the seismic political shifts from the 1970s monarchy to the Soviet invasion and beyond. Hosseini, an Afghan-American author, brings authenticity to this narrative, drawing from his own experiences of pre-war Kabul and exile in the United States. This unit introduces Hosseini's life and literary contributions, situates *The Kite Runner* within its historical context, and provides a detailed breakdown of its plot. Through this study, readers will gain insight into how personal guilt and societal collapse intertwine, establishing the novel as a poignant exploration of human resilience and atonement.

11.3 KHALED HOSSEINI: HIS LIFE AND WORKS

Khaled Hosseini was born in Kabul, Afghanistan, in 1965. His father was a diplomat in the Afghan Foreign Ministry and his mother taught Farsi and history at a high school in Kabul. In 1976, the Foreign Ministry relocated the Hosseini family to Paris. They were ready to return to Kabul in 1980, but by then their homeland had witnessed a bloody communist coup and the invasion of the Soviet Army. The Hosseinis sought and were granted political asylum in the United States, and in September 1980 moved to San Jose, California. Hosseini graduated from high school in 1984 and enrolled at Santa Clara University, where he earned a Bachelor's degree in Biology in 1988. The following year he entered the University of California, San Diego, School of Medicine, where he earned a medical degree in 1993. He completed his residency at Cedars-Sinai medical center in Los Angeles and was a practicing intern between 1996 and 2004.

In March 2001, while practicing medicine, Hosseini began writing his first novel, *The Kite Runner,* which was published by Riverhead Books in 2003. That debut went on to launch one of the biggest literary careers of our time. Today, Khaled Hosseini is one of the most recognised and bestselling authors in the world. His books, *The Kite Runner, A Thousand Splendid Suns,* and *And the Mountains Echoed,* have been published in over seventy countries and sold more than 40 million copies worldwide.

Hosseini was born into an upper-middle-class family. Growing up in the affluent Wazir Akbar Khan neighbourhood, Hosseini enjoyed a privileged childhood filled with kite flying and Western cultural influences until political instability uprooted his life. In 1976, his family relocated to Paris due to his father's posting, but the 1978 Saur Revolution and the 1979 Soviet invasion prevented their return. In 1980, at age 15, Hosseini and his family in San Jose, California. Facing financial hardships, they relied on welfare briefly, with Hosseini and his father working at a flea market-experiences mirrored in *The Kite Runner.* He graduated from Independence High School in 1984, earned a biology degree from Santa Clara University in 1988, and completed his medical degree at UC San Diego in 1993, practicing as an internist until 2004. His Afghan roots and immigrant journey deeply inform his storytelling.

Hosseini's literary career began with *The Kite Runner* (2003), written while he was a practicing physician, inspired by a news report of the Taliban banning kite flying in Afghanistan. The novel's global success-selling over seven million copies in the U.S. alone-allowed him to write full-time. His second novel, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007), explores Afghan women's lives under war and patriarchy, also becoming a bestseller. *And the Mountains Echoed* (2013) delves into family ties across generations and continents, further showcasing his focus on Afghan narratives. In 2018, he published Sea Prayer, an illustrated short story inspired by the refugee crisis. Beyond writing, Hosseini serves as a UNHCR Goodwill Envoy and founded The Khaled Hosseini Foundation to aid Afghan refugees. His works consistently blend personal stories with Afghanistan's socio-political landscape, earning critical acclaim and widespread readership.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q.1 Where was Khaled Hosseini born?
Q.2 What inspired Hosseini to write *The Kite Runner*?

11.4 CONTEXT OF THE NOVEL

The Kite Runner spans Afghanistan's tumultuous history from the 1970s to 2001, set against the fall of the monarchy, the Soviet invasion, and the rise of the Taliban. Pre-revolutionary Kabul, depicted in Amir's childhood, was a cosmopolitan city blending Afghan traditions like kite fighting with Western influences. The 1978 communist coup and 1979 Soviet intervention shattered this stability, triggering mass exodus-over five million Afghans fled, including Hosseini's family. The novel captures this refugee experience as Amir and Baba resettle in California. By the 1990s, the Taliban's ascent brought oppressive rule, banning cultural practices like kite flying, a symbol of lost freedom. Ethnic tensions between Pashtuns (Amir's group) and Hazaras (Hassan's group), exacerbated by historical discrimination, underpin the story's social dynamics. Hosseini's firsthand knowledge of pre-war Afghanistan and exile infuses the novel with authenticity, reflecting both personal nostalgia and the broader tragedy of a nation in crisis.

11.5 EXPLANATION OF THE NOVEL

The Kite Runner unfolds through Amir's first-person narration, spanning three decades from his childhood in 1970s Kabul to his adulthood in 2000s America, framed by a profound journey from betrayal to redemption. Hosseini structures the novel as a *bildungsroman* intertwined with Afghanistan's historical upheavals, using Amir's personal guilt over his friend Hassan as a lens to explore broader themes of loyalty, atonement, and the impact of war. Below is a detailed explanation of the novel's key chapters:

Childhood in Kabul (1970s):

The novel opens in pre-revolutionary Kabul, a vibrant city where Amir, a privileged Pashtun boy, grows up in the affluent Wazir Akbar Khan neighbourhood. Living with his widowed father, Baba-a charismatic, larger-than-life businessman-and motherless since birth, Amir yearns for Baba's approval, strained by Baba's disappointment in his timid, bookish nature. Their Hazara servants, Ali and his son Hassan, form an integral yet unequal part of the household, with Hassan as Amir's loyal companion despite their ethnic and class divide. Hassan, a gifted kite runner, excels at retrieving fallen kites during tournaments, a cultural ritual central to Afghan winters. In 1975, during a pivotal kite-fighting contest, Amir wins, hoping to bridge the emotional gap with Baba, but the victory turns tragic. Hassan runs the last kite, only to be cornered in an alley by Assef, a sadistic Pashtun bully, and his cronies, Wali and Kamal. Assef rapes Hassan, and Amir, peering from a hiding spot, freezes in cowardice, choosing self-preservation over intervention. Wracked by guilt, Amir distances himself from Hassan, culminating in a manipulative act: he plants his

watch under Hassan's mattress, framing him for theft. Despite Baba's forgiveness, Ali and Hassan leave, severing their bond. This section establishes the novel's moral crux-Amir's betrayal-and sets the stage for his lifelong quest for atonement, reflecting Hosseini's nostalgia for a lost Afghan idyll soon shattered by war.

Exile in America (1980s):

The Soviet invasion of 1979 upends Amir's world, forcing him and Baba to flee Kabul in 1981. Their escape is harrowing: smuggled in a fuel truck to Pakistan, they witness refugees' desperation, a scene echoing Hosseini's own family's flight. Settling in Fremont, California, they face a stark downgrade-Baba, once a wealthy merchant, pumps gas, while Amir graduates high school and attends community college, studying English. Their flea market days, selling used goods alongside other Afghan exiles, mirror Hosseini's early struggles in San Jose. Baba's pride masks his decline, but he supports Amir's courtship of Soraya Taheri, daughter of a former Afghan general, whom Amir meets at the market. They marry in 1988, a union Baba blesses before succumbing to lung cancer, leaving Amir to mourn a father he never fully understood. Infertility haunts Amir and Soraya, amplifying his sense of inadequacy, while his guilt over Hassan festers silently, buried beneath his new American life. This phase explores the immigrant experience-loss of status, adaptation, and the persistence of past sins-paralleling Hosseini's own diaspora and grounding the narrative in the Afghan refugee story post-Soviet invasion.

Return to Afghanistan (2001):

In June 2001, Rahim Khan, Baba's loyal friend and business partner, calls Amir from Peshawar, Pakistan, with the cryptic plea, "There is a way to be good again." Now a published writer in San Francisco, Amir travels to meet the dying Rahim, who reveals shattering truths: Hassan was Baba's illegitimate son with Ali's wife, making him Amir's half-brother, a secret Baba hid to preserve honour. Hassan married Farzana, had a son, Sohrab, and lived in Baba's old house until the Taliban killed them in 1998 for being Hazara. Sohrab now languishes in a Kabul orphanage, and Rahim tasks Amir with his rescue, offering redemption for past cowardice. Returning to a Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, Amir finds Kabul unrecognisable-crumbling, policed by bearded extremists banning music and kite flying. Disguised in a beard and turban, he navigates a landscape of checkpoints and orphans begging amidst Soviet-era rubble. At the orphanage, he learns a Taliban official took Sohrab, leading to a confrontation at a lavish house. The official is Assef, now a brutal commander, who beats Amir with brass knuckles as Sohrab watches, a chilling echo of 1975. In a climactic reversal, Sohrab fires a slingshot-Hassan's weapon-into Assef's eye, enabling their escape with help from driver Farid. This section intensifies the novel's stakes, merging personal reckoning with Afghanistan's post-9/11 desolation, and reflects Hosseini's humanitarian lens on his homeland's suffering.

Redemption in America (2001-2002):

Amir brings Sohrab to San Francisco, adopting him with Soraya after navigating legal hurdles, fulfilling Rahim's mission. Sohrab, traumatised by war and Assef's abuse, remains withdrawn, his silence a stark contrast to Hassan's warmth. In a despairing moment, he

slits his wrists in a bathtub after Amir mentions a temporary orphanage stay, surviving only through emergency intervention. By March 2002, at an Afghan New Year picnic in California, Amir flies a kite with Sohrab, teaching him Hassan's cutting techniques. They defeat another kite, and Amir offers to run it, echoing Hassan's loyalty with, "For you, a thousand times over." As he runs, Sohrab's faint smile-a flicker of trust-marks the beginning of healing, though his recovery remains tentative. This final phase resolves Amir's arc, transforming guilt into action and offering partial atonement through Sohrab's rescue and care. It ties the novel's kite motif-once a symbol of betrayal-into one of redemption, reflecting Hosseini's hope for renewal amidst Afghan diaspora struggles, while leaving the ending open-ended with a sense of bitter sweet.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q.3 What happens to Hassan after the kite tournament in 1975?
Q.4 Why do Amir and Baba flee Kabul?
Q.5 Who reveals Hassan's true parentage to Amir?
Q.6 How does Sohrab help Amir escape Assef in 2001?

11.6 LET US SUM UP

The Kite Runner is a profound narrative of Amir's journey from betrayal to redemption, set against Afghanistan's descent from prosperity to turmoil. Hosseini's life-from a Kabul childhood to American exile-shapes this tale, blending personal memory with historical upheaval. The novel's detailed arc, from Amir's cowardice in Kabul to his courageous return, explores guilt, family secrets, and the enduring power of friendship. Its context-spanning monarchy, invasion, and Taliban rule-mirrors Afghanistan's struggles, while Amir's story resonates universally. This unit has laid the groundwork for understanding Hosseini's craft and *The Kite Runner's* significance as a tale of human frailty and resilience, bridging personal and political realms.

11.7 FURTHER READING

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11.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answer to Q.1 : Khaled Hosseini was born in Kabul, Afghanistan.
Answer to Q.2 : A news report of the Taliban banning kite flying inspired The Kite Runner.

Answer to Q.3 : Hassan is raped by Assef after retrieving the kite, and Amir witnesses it but does not intervene.

Answer to Q.4 : Amir and Baba flee Kabul due to the Soviet invasion in 1979.

Answer to Q.5 : Rahim Khan reveals that Hassan was Baba's illegitimate son, making him Amir's half-brother.

Answer to Q.6 : Sohrab blinds Assef with a slingshot, allowing him and Amir to escape.

11.9 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q 1. What ethnic group is Hassan from?

Q 2. Why does Amir frame Hassan for theft?

Q 3. What inspires Hosseini to write *The Kite Runner?*

Q 4. Discuss how Hosseini's life experiences influence the narrative of The Kite Runner.

Q 5. Analyse the significance of the kite-fighting tournament in shaping Amir and Hassan's relationship.

Q 6. Evaluate how the historical context of Afghanistan enhances the novel's themes of guilt and redemption.

UNIT 12: KHALED HOSSEINI: THE KITE RUNNER- II

UNIT STRUCTURE

12.1 Learning Objectives
12.2 Introduction
12.3 Major Themes
12.4 Major Characters
12.5 Style and Language
12.6 Critical Reception
12.7 Let us Sum up
12.8 Further Reading
12.9 Answers to Check Your Progress
12.10 Model Questions

12.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going this unit, you will be able to :

- analyse the major themes of guilt, redemption, and cultural identity in *The Kite Runner.*
- examine the development and significance of key characters in driving the narrative.
- explore Hosseini's narrative style, including his use of imagery, symbolism, and structure.
- assess the critical reception and cultural impact of *The Kite Runner* as a literary work.

12.2 INTRODUCTION

The Kite Runner, Khaled Hosseini's 2003 debut novel, transcends its Afghan setting to explore universal human struggles through the lens of Amir's journey from betrayal to redemption. Building on Unit 11's introduction to Hosseini's life and the novel's historical context, this unit delves into the intricate layers of *The Kite Runner*-its profound themes, richly drawn characters, and distinctive style. Set against Afghanistan's transformation from a monarchy to a war-torn state under Soviet and Taliban rule, the novel intertwines personal guilt with societal upheaval, offering a poignant narrative of friendship, family, and atonement. This unit also examines the critical reception that catapulted Hosseini to literary fame, highlighting the novel's resonance with readers worldwide. Through this study, readers will deepen their appreciation of *The Kite Runner* as both a personal tale and a cultural artifact reflecting Afghanistan's fractured history.

12.3 MAJOR THEMES

Guilt and Redemption :

At the heart of *The Kite Runner* lies Amir's pervasive guilt over betraying Hassan, a burden that propels his journey toward redemption and defines the novel's moral arc. This guilt originates in 1975 when Amir witnesses Hassan's rape by Assef and chooses cowardice over courage, a decision that haunts him through his silent resentment and eventual framing of Hassan for theft. Hosseini illustrates this inner turmoil vividly-Amir recalls sleepless nights, tormented by Hassan's unyielding loyalty despite his own betrayal, as when he thinks, "I watched Hassan get raped, and I did nothing." The theme matures in 2001 when Rahim Khan's call-"There is a way to be good again"-spurs Amir to rescue Sohrab, Hassan's son, from Taliban-ruled Kabul. Facing Assef again, Amir endures a brutal beating, a symbolic purging of his past sins, and Sohrab's rescue becomes his atonement. This act, culminating in Amir running a kite for Sohrab with the words "For you, a thousand times over," mirrors Hassan's sacrifice, offering partial redemption. Hosseini, reflecting his Afghan roots where honour and restitution are cultural pillars, uses this theme to explore the possibility of moral renewal, leaving readers with a bittersweet hope that healing, though incomplete, is attainable.

Friendship and Loyalty :

The bond between Amir and Hassan anchors the novel, showcasing friendship's resilience and the stark contrast between Hassan's unwavering loyalty and Amir's initial failure to reciprocate. Despite their Pashtun-Hazara divide, Hassan's devotion shines-running kites for Amir, defending him from Assef with his slingshot, and enduring abuse without complaint. His iconic line, "For you, a thousand times over," spoken after retrieving the kite in 1975, encapsulates this selflessness, a stark foil to Amir's betrayal during the rape. Hosseini deepens this theme by revealing Hassan's forgiveness-writing Amir a letter years later, expressing hope for reunion despite their past. Amir's journey shifts from exploiting this loyalty to honouring it, seen in his determination to save Sohrab, risking his life to repay a debt he can never fully settle. Set against Afghanistan's communal ethos, where loyalty often binds despite social hierarchies, this theme critiques Amir's early weakness while celebrating Hassan's moral purity, reflecting Hosseini's nostalgia for a lost era of personal honour amid societal collapse.

Father-Son Relationships :

Father-son dynamics drive much of the novel's emotional weight, with Amir's longing for Baba's approval and Baba's hidden guilt over Hassan revealing the complexities of familial love and shame. Amir perceives Baba-a towering figure of strength in Kabul-as distant, ashamed of his son's timidity, evident when Baba laments, "A boy who won't stand up for himself becomes a man who can't stand up to anything." This tension peaks during the kite tournament, where Amir's victory briefly earns Baba's pride, only to unravel with Hassan's assault. In exile, their bond evolves-Baba's sacrifice in America, working menial jobs, softens his edges, and his blessing of Amir's marriage to Soraya marks reconciliation before his death. Yet, Rahim Khan's revelation that Hassan was Baba's son exposes

Baba's hypocrisy-preaching honor while hiding his affair-adding layers to Amir's grief and motivation. By caring for Sohrab, Amir redeems both his and Baba's legacies, a resolution echoing Afghan cultural reverence for paternal duty, tempered by Hosseini's critique of unspoken truths that fracture families.

Cultural Identity and Exile :

The shift from Kabul to California encapsulates the theme of cultural identity and exile, reflecting Amir's-and Hosseini's-struggle to reconcile Afghan heritage with American assimilation. In 1970s Kabul, Amir's life is steeped in Afghan traditions-kite fighting, storytelling, and communal feasts-set in the Wazir Akbar Khan neighbourhood Hosseini knew well. The Soviet invasion forces this world into memory, and in Fremont, Amir navigates a diminished existence, selling flea market goods beside Baba, who clings to Afghan pride despite his gas station job. Amir's marriage to Soraya and their Afghan New Year celebrations show attempts to preserve culture, yet infertility and his writing career signal a hybrid identity. Returning to Kabul in 2001, he confronts a Taliban-ruled shell of his past, wearing a turban as disguise-a poignant reclaiming of roots amid loss. Hosseini, an Afghan exile himself, infuses this theme with authenticity, capturing the diaspora's nostalgia and dislocation, making Amir's story a microcosm of millions displaced by Afghanistan's wars, yearning for a home that no longer exists.

Ethnic Tensions :

Ethnic tensions between Pashtuns and Hazaras, rooted in Afghanistan's historical inequities, shape the novel's social landscape and Amir and Hassan's relationship, exposing the destructive power of prejudice. As a Pashtun, Amir enjoys privilege, while Hassan, a Hazara, faces servitude and derision-Assef's taunts of "flat-nosed donkey" and his rape underscore this hierarchy. Baba's kindness to Ali and Hassan hints at resistance, but his refusal to acknowledge Hassan as his son perpetuates the divide. In Kabul, this tension simmers-Hassan's illiteracy and Amir's education reflect systemic disparities-but erupts under the Taliban, who massacre Hazaras like Hassan and Farzana. Amir's return reveals this brutality, with Sohrab's plight a legacy of ethnic cleansing. Hosseini, born into a Pashtun family yet empathetic to Afghanistan's diversity, uses this theme to critique societal fractures, intensified by colonial legacies and war, showing how prejudice poisons personal bonds and national unity, a reflection of his homeland's enduring strife.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q.1 What event defines Amir’s guilt in the theme of Guilt and Redemption?

Q.2 How does Hassan’s loyalty contrast with Amir’s actions in Friendship and Loyalty?

Q.3 What secret complicates Baba’s relationship with Amir in Father-Son Relationships?

12.4 MAJOR CHARACTERS

Amir :

Amir, the narrator and protagonist of the novel, evolves from a guilt-ridden, privileged Pashtun boy in 1970s Kabul to a man seeking redemption in 2000s America, embodying the novel's central journey of atonement. As a child in Wazir Akbar Khan, Amir is sensitive and bookish, craving approval from his imposing father, Baba, who sees him as weak-evident when Baba scoffs at his lack of toughness. His defining moment comes in 1975 during the kite tournament: winning earns Baba's pride, but witnessing Hassan's rape by Assef and fleeing in cowardice marks his betrayal, a guilt he carries into framing Hassan for theft and driving him away. In exile, Amir adapts to California-graduating college, marrying Soraya-but his past festers until Rahim Khan's 2001 call spurs his return to Afghanistan. Facing Assef to rescue Sohrab, Amir endures a beating, a symbolic penance, and his adoption of Sohrab reflects growth from selfishness to sacrifice. His final act-running a kite for Sohrab with Hassan's words, "For you, a thousand times over"-offers partial redemption, mirroring Hosseini's own reflective voice as an Afghan exile reconciling with loss.

Hassan :

Hassan, Amir's Hazara half-brother and loyal companion, is the novel's moral anchor, his courage and selflessness contrasting sharply with his marginalised status. Born to Sanaubar and secretly Baba, Hassan grows up as a servant in Amir's home, his cleft lip and illiteracy symbols of his low caste. His skill as a kite runner-chasing fallen kites with uncanny precision-cements his bond with Amir, whom he defends fiercely, as when he threatens Assef with a slingshot. His loyalty peaks in 1975, enduring rape to protect Amir's kite, yet he never wavers, even forgiving Amir's coldness post-assault. Later, married to Farzana and father to Sohrab, Hassan tends Baba's house until the Taliban execute him in 1998 for being Hazara, a martyr to ethnic hatred. His letter to Amir, written years later, radiates hope despite betrayal, showcasing a purity Hosseini crafts to reflect Afghanistan's resilient underclass, whose sacrifices endure beyond their lives.

Baba :

Baba, Amir's father, is a towering figure of strength and pride in Kabul, whose hidden shame over Hassan complicates his legacy and shapes Amir's journey. A wealthy Pashtun merchant known for building an orphanage and wrestling bears, Baba exudes charisma but struggles with Amir's timidity, lamenting, "If I hadn't seen the doctor pull him out of my wife, I'd never believe he's, my son." His secret affair with Sanaubar, producing Hassan, haunts him, though he honours Hassan indirectly with kindness to Ali. In America, exile strips his status-pumping gas, living modestly-yet he retains dignity, blessing Amir's marriage to Soraya before dying of cancer in 1988. His refusal to acknowledge Hassan reflects Afghan honour codes, a flaw Amir seeks to redeem by saving Sohrab. Baba's duality heroic yet hypocritical mirrors Hosseini's nostalgia for a pre-war Afghanistan where larger-than-life figures masked personal failings.

Assef :

Assef, the novel's sadistic antagonist, personifies ethnic hatred and moral decay, his violence a dark thread challenging Amir's cowardice across decades. A blonde, blue-eyed Pashtun bully in 1975 Kabul, Assef idolises Hitler, despising Hazaras like Hassan-calling him "flat-nosed"-and rapes him after the kite tournament, an act Amir witnesses but flees. His brass knuckles and sociopathic glee mark him as unredeemable, a stark contrast to Hassan's goodness. Reappearing in 2001 as a Taliban commander, Assef's cruelty escalates-abusing Sohrab and beating Amir in a chilling rematch-until Sohrab blinds him with a slingshot, echoing Hassan's defiance. Assef embodies Afghanistan's descent into extremism, his racism fueled by historical Pashtun dominance and Taliban ideology. Hosseini crafts him as a foil to Amir's redemption, a reminder of the evil that thrives unchecked, reflecting the nation's darkest chapters.

Sohrab :

Sohrab, Hassan's son, emerges late in the novel as a fragile yet resilient figure whose rescue offers Amir a path to redemption, inheriting his father's spirit amid war's scars. Born to Hassan and Farzana, Sohrab loses his parents to Taliban execution in 1998, landing in an orphanage before Assef takes him, subjecting him to abuse that mirrors Hassan's trauma. In 2001, Amir finds him-wide-eyed, silent, wielding a slingshot like his father-saving Amir from Assef in a pivotal act of courage. Brought to America, Sohrab's trauma manifests in withdrawal and a suicide attempt after fearing abandonment, surviving only to remain mute. At the novel's close in 2002, flying a kite with Amir elicits a faint smile, a tentative step toward healing. Sohrab's name, from the Persian epic Shahnameh, evokes tragedy and hope, a duality Hosseini uses to reflect Afghanistan's wounded youth, with Amir's care a fragile bridge to his father's legacy.

12.5 STYLE AND LANGUAGE

First-Person Narration :

Hosseini employs Amir's first-person narration as the emotional and structural backbone of *The Kite Runner,* providing an intimate, reflective lens that bridges his childhood guilt with adult redemption. This perspective begins with Amir's haunting opening line in 2001-"I became what I am today at the age of twelve, on a frigid overcast day in the winter of 1975"-immediately signalling a story shaped by memory and regret. As a child, his voice captures innocence and cowardice, such as when he recalls hiding during Hassan's rape, thinking, "I ran because I was a coward." In adulthood, it matures into self-awareness, as when he reflects on rescuing Sohrab: "I felt at peace, like I'd been buried alive and someone had come to dig me out." This technique, rooted in Hosseini's medical precision and storytelling passion, fosters empathy, immersing readers in Amir's internal struggle while aligning with his Afghan-American duality-looking back at Kabul from California. The narration's intimacy personalizes Afghanistan's upheavals, making Amir both a participant and a witness, amplifying the novel's emotional stakes and universal appeal.

Imagery :

Hosseini's vivid imagery paints a sensory tapestry of Afghanistan's beauty and decay, contrasting its pre-war vibrancy with its war-torn desolation to underscore themes of loss and nostalgia. In Amir's 1970s Kabul, descriptions like "the poplar trees lining our street glowed golden in the afternoon sun" or "the sky erupted with kites, red and yellow against the blue" evoke a bustling, joyful city, reflecting Hosseini's own childhood memories. This richness fades in exile-Fremont's "dusty parking lots" and "flea market stalls" feel stark-and collapses upon Amir's 2001 return, where "Kabul was a skeleton of itself, with crumbling walls and streets littered with Soviet rubble" paints a visceral picture of destruction. The rape scene's "snow crunching under Assef's boots" or Sohrab's "eyes like a slaughtered lamb" intensify emotional weight, blending physical detail with psychological resonance. Hosseini's imagery, honed by his observant eye, not only grounds the narrative in place but also mirrors Amir's inner journey, making the external world a reflection of his turmoil and hope.

Symbolism :

Symbolism is a cornerstone of Hosseini's style, with recurring motifs weaving deeper meaning into the narrative, most notably through kites, which shift from betrayal to redemption. In 1975, the kite tournament marks Amir's triumph and Hassan's sacrifice-its blue string, cut for victory, becomes tainted by the rape, symbolising Amir's guilt as he later recalls, "That was the winter I stopped flying kites." The pomegranate tree, where Amir and Hassan carve their names, represents their bond-its withering by 2001 mirrors their severed connection. Hassan's cleft lip, surgically fixed by Baba then mirrored in Sohrab's scars, symbolises vulnerability and inherited trauma. In the novel's climax, kites reemerge as Amir flies one with Sohrab in 2002, their shared victory and his running it-"For you, a thousand times over"-transforming the symbol into one of healing. Hosseini's use of symbols, likely influenced by Persian literary traditions, ties personal acts to cultural loss, enriching the story's emotional and historical layers.

Simple Prose :

Hosseini's simple, unadorned prose enhances *The Kite Runner's* accessibility and universality, balancing Afghan cultural specificity with relatable human emotions. Avoiding florid language, he opts for clarity-e.g., "I watched Hassan get raped, and I did nothing" cuts straight to Amir's guilt with raw honesty, while "The air smelled of diesel and bread" grounds Kabul in everyday life. This simplicity, a product of Hosseini's medical training and English as a second language, ensures the narrative's emotional weight is not lost in complexity, as when Amir describes Baba's death: "He was gone, and I didn't know how to say goodbye." Afghan phrases like "jan" (dear) or "tashakor" (thank you) pepper the text, adding authenticity without alienating readers, a deliberate choice reflecting Hosseini's intent to bridge his heritage with a global audience. This straightforward style amplifies the story's poignancy, making its themes of betrayal and redemption resonate across cultures.

Foreshadowing :

Hosseini masterfully uses foreshadowing to build tension and tie the narrative's past and present, planting subtle hints that deepen the story's revelations. The opening chapter's mention of "the alley" and "Rahim Khan's voice on the phone" in 2001 foreshadows Hassan's rape and the call that sends Amir back to Afghanistan, creating a sense of inevitability. Baba's cryptic comment to Rahim-"I'm afraid he'll have to find his own way"-hints at Amir's moral failing long before the tournament. Hassan's dream before the kite fight, where he assures Amir, "There's no monster, just water," ironically precedes the real monster, Assef, lurking in the alley. Later, Rahim's early kindness to Hassan-"He's like my own son"-plants seeds of his true parentage, unveiled in 2001. This technique, reflecting Hosseini's meticulous plotting, mirrors Afghan storytelling's oral tradition of layered tales, heightening suspense and rewarding attentive readers with a cohesive, cyclical narrative that ties guilt to its resolution.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q.4 What ethnic group does Assef target with his violence in the novel?

Q.5 How does Hosseini use imagery to depict Kabul’s change in the novel?

Q.6 What does the pomegranate tree symbolize in the story’s Symbolism?

12.6 CRITICAL RECEPTION

The Kite Runner received widespread acclaim upon its 2003 release, lauded for its emotional storytelling and vivid portrayal of Afghanistan. Critics praised Hosseini's ability to blend personal drama with historical context, with *The New York Times* calling it "powerful" and "unforgettable." It won the 2004 Boeke Prize and was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award, cementing its literary stature. Readers embraced its universal themes, propelling it to bestseller status-over 40 million copies sold globally. Some Afghan critics, however, criticised its depiction of ethnic stereotypes (e.g., Hazara subservience) and graphic violence, sparking debate over cultural representation. Its 2007 film adaptation further amplified its reach, though it faced bans in Afghanistan for sensitive content. Overall, the novel's critical and popular success underscores its impact as a bridge between Afghan experiences and Western audiences.

12.7 LET US SUM UP

The Kite Runner intricately weaves Amir's personal redemption with Afghanistan's historical turmoil, exploring themes of guilt, loyalty, and identity through a cast of unforgettable characters. Hosseini's evocative style-marked by vivid imagery, symbolic kites, and a poignant narrative voice-brings this journey to life, resonating with readers and critics alike. From Amir's betrayal of Hassan to his rescue of Sohrab, the novel traces a path of atonement against a backdrop of cultural loss and exile, reflecting Hosseini's own Afghan-

American perspective. Its critical acclaim highlights its power to illuminate human struggles within a specific yet universally relatable context. This unit has deepened our understanding of *The Kite Runner* as a literary triumph, blending personal and political narratives into a timeless story of healing.

12.8 FURTHER READING

Hosseini, Khaled (2013). *And the Mountains Echoed*. Riverhead Books
Ansary, Tamim (2003). *West of Kabul, East of New York*. Picador
Lamb, Christina (2002). *The Sewing Circles of Herat*. HarperCollins
Bloom, Harold (ed.) (2009). *Khaled Hosseini's The Kite Runner*. Bloom's Guides
Said, Edward W (1979). *Orientalism.* Vintage

12.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answer to Q.1: Amir's guilt is defined by witnessing Hassan's rape by Assef in 1975 and choosing cowardice over courage.

Answer to Q.2: Hassan's unwavering loyalty, like enduring rape for Amir's kite, contrasts with Amir's betrayal by not intervening and framing Hassan for theft.

Answer to Q.3: Baba's secret affair with Sanaubar, producing Hassan, complicates his relationship with Amir, exposing his hypocrisy despite preaching honor.

Answer to Q.4: Assef targets Hazaras, like Hassan, with his violence, despising them and raping Hassan as a Pashtun bully.

Answer to Q.5: Hosseini uses imagery to depict Kabul's change from "poplar trees glowing golden" in the 1970s to a "skeleton of itself" with "crumbling walls" in 2001.

Answer to Q.6: The pomegranate tree symbolises Amir and Hassan's bond, its withering by 2001 mirroring their severed connection.

12.10 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q 1. What ethnic group does Assef belong to?
Q 2. How does Hassan show loyalty to Amir?
Q 3. What literary device foreshadows Hassan's parentage?
Q 4. Analyse how guilt shapes Amir's actions and relationships throughout *The Kite Runner.*
Q 5. Discuss Baba's role in the novel and how his character reflects themes of pride and shame.
Q 6. Evaluate Hosseini's use of symbolism and imagery in conveying the novel's emotional and cultural depth.

UNIT 13 BAPSI SIDHWA: *ICE CANDY MAN- I*

UNIT STRUCTURE

13.1 Learning Objectives
13.2 Introduction
13.3 Bapsi Sidhwa : Her Life and works
13.4 Context of the Novel
13.5 Explanation of the Novel
13.6 Let us Sum up
13.7 Further Reading
13.8 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)
13.9 Model Questions

13.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

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

- discuss the literary background and cultural significance of Bapsi Sidhwa as a South Asian writer
- explain the historical context of the Partition of India as represented in Ice Candy Man
- describe the plot and narrative development of the novel in detail
- grasp how fiction records psychological trauma and emotional history

13.2 INTRODUCTION

Ice Candy Man is one of the most significant novels written on the Partition of India. Set in Lahore during the years surrounding 1947, the novel presents Partition not as a political or administrative decision but as a lived human experience that deeply disrupts everyday life. Bapsi Sidhwa deliberately moves away from political leaders, official negotiations, and historical statistics, and instead focuses on ordinary people whose lives are permanently altered by fear, violence, and displacement.

Partition in the novel is not presented as a single historical moment. Instead, it is shown as a slow and painful process through which society begins to fracture. Suspicion replaces trust, fear replaces familiarity, and relationships built over years collapse within days. Sidhwa shows that communal violence does not erupt suddenly. It grows quietly through rumours, political talk, and emotional insecurity. This gradual breakdown helps readers understand how societies fall apart from within.

The novel is narrated by Lenny, a young Parsi girl who suffers from polio. Her physical disability limits her movement, but it sharpens her powers of observation. She spends much of her time watching adults, listening to conversations, and noticing emotional changes. This narrative choice is crucial. Lenny does not understand politics or religious ideology, but she understands fear, tension, love, and loss. Through her innocent yet

perceptive voice, readers experience Partition as confusion and trauma rather than historical logic.

In the early chapters, Lahore is portrayed as a city of warmth and coexistence. Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, and Parsis live together without hostility. Religious difference exists but does not dominate everyday interaction. Homes are safe, neighbourhoods are familiar, and relationships are defined by affection rather than suspicion. Sidhwa carefully constructs this harmony to emphasise the emotional shock of its destruction.

Another important aspect of the novel is its treatment of history as memory rather than recorded fact. *Ice Candy Man* does not provide dates or political explanations. Instead, Partition appears through remembered conversations, rumours, disappearances, and emotional responses. This narrative strategy reflects how historical trauma is actually experienced by ordinary people. For them, history is not an academic record but a series of emotional shocks that reshape identity and memory.

The novel also shows how political decisions penetrate intimate spaces. Partition enters kitchens, bedrooms, gardens, and childhood play areas. Homes that once symbolised safety become spaces of fear. Streets once filled with familiar faces become dangerous. Through these transformations, Sidhwa demonstrates that Partition was not confined to borders and maps but reshaped the emotional geography of everyday life.

LET US KNOW

Ice-Candy-Man was first published in 1988. The novel was retitled as Cracking India in 1991 for its American edition. The change in title was made to foreground the idea of the nation "cracking" under the impact of Partition and to make the historical significance of the narrative clearer to an international readership.

It is important to note that the content of the novel remains unchanged; *Ice-Candy-Man* and *Cracking India* are the same text published under different titles.

13.3 BAPSI SIDHWA : HER LIFE AND WORKS

Bapsi Sidhwa is one of the most significant voices in South Asian English literature, particularly known for her sensitive portrayal of social realities, women's experiences, and historical trauma. Writing from within the context of the Indian subcontinent, Sidhwa occupies a unique position because of her Parsi identity. The Parsis constitute a small religious minority in South Asia and historically maintained a relatively neutral position during communal conflicts. This location enables Sidhwa to observe social tensions without aligning herself with any dominant religious or nationalist ideology.

Sidhwa's fiction consistently foregrounds the lives of those who are marginalised in mainstream historical and literary narratives. Instead of focusing on political leaders or heroic national movements, she turns attention to women, children, servants, minorities, and ordinary families. Her narratives reveal how large political events penetrate everyday life and reshape personal relationships. In this sense, her work can be read as a form of social documentation that records emotional truth alongside historical reality.

As a writer, Sidhwa is known for her clear and accessible language. She avoids heavy symbolism or complex narrative techniques, preferring direct storytelling that allows emotional depth to emerge naturally. At the same time, her work is intellectually serious and socially critical. She exposes patriarchal structures, communal hatred, and moral hypocrisy without resorting to overt moralising. This balance between simplicity and depth makes her writing particularly suitable for undergraduate study.

Ice Candy Man is widely regarded as Sidhwa's most important novel. Through this work, she establishes herself as a major Partition writer and offers an alternative to male dominated and nationalist narratives of history. Her focus on women's suffering, childhood trauma, and memory challenges readers to reconsider how history is written and remembered.

Bapsi Sidhwa was born in 1938 in Karachi, which was then part of undivided India, and she grew up in Lahore. Her early life was marked by a significant physical challenge. At the age of two, she contracted polio, a disease that permanently affected her mobility. As a result, she spent long periods confined indoors during her childhood. This physical limitation played a crucial role in shaping her personality and creative imagination.

Unable to participate freely in outdoor activities, Sidhwa developed a habit of close observation. She watched people carefully, listened to adult conversations, and became deeply aware of emotional and social dynamics. This observational skill later became a defining feature of her writing. The child narrator Lenny in *Ice Candy Man* closely mirrors this aspect of Sidhwa's own childhood, as both are physically restricted but emotionally alert and perceptive.

Sidhwa's childhood coincided with one of the most turbulent periods in the history of the subcontinent. She grew up during the years leading up to the Partition of India in 1947. As a child, she witnessed the gradual breakdown of communal harmony, the spread of fear, and the sudden displacement of families. Neighbours disappeared overnight, familiar streets became dangerous, and violence entered everyday conversation. Although the Parsi community attempted to remain neutral during this period, the emotional impact of Partition was unavoidable.

These early experiences left a deep impression on Sidhwa and later found expression in her fiction. Rather than remembering Partition as a political event, she remembered it as an atmosphere of fear, confusion, and moral uncertainty. This perspective shapes *Ice Candy Man,* where Partition is experienced through emotional disturbance rather than ideological understanding. Sidhwa's life thus provides an essential background for understanding the themes and narrative strategies of her work.

Bapsi Sidhwa has written several novels that explore themes of identity, gender, migration, cultural conflict, and social injustice. Each of her works focuses on individuals who exist at the margins of power and authority, particularly women and minorities. Her fiction often examines how social traditions and political structures limit personal freedom, especially for women.

Her first major novel, *The Crow Eaters,* offers a humorous yet insightful portrayal of Parsi community life. Through satire and wit, the novel explores family relationships, tradition,

and cultural identity. While lighter in tone, it establishes Sidhwa's interest in community dynamics and social observation.

The Pakistani Bride marks a shift towards darker themes. The novel exposes the oppression faced by women in patriarchal and tribal societies. It focuses on forced marriage, female isolation, and the lack of agency experienced by women. Through this work, Sidhwa firmly establishes herself as a feminist writer concerned with women's suffering and resistance.

Ice Candy Man remains her most widely studied and critically acclaimed novel. It brings together many of Sidhwa's central concerns, including women's vulnerability, childhood trauma, communal violence, and memory. The novel's restrained style and emotional depth make it one of the most powerful fictional accounts of Partition.

Later works such as *An American Brat* explore issues of migration, cultural displacement, and identity in a global context. The novel examines the challenges faced by individuals who move between cultures and value systems. Water, based on the screenplay of the film of the same name, focuses on the lives of widows in colonial India and critiques oppressive social customs.

Taken together, Sidhwa's works form a coherent literary project that seeks to give voice to the silenced and marginalised. Her contribution to South Asian literature lies not only in her choice of themes but also in her insistence on empathy, moral complexity, and emotional truth.

LET US KNOW

An author's childhood experiences often shape the emotional depth of literary works.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1. Which illness affected Bapsi Sidhwa?

Q 2. How did her childhood experiences influence her writing?

13.4 CONTEXT OF THE NOVEL

Ice Candy Man traces Lenny's childhood before, during, and after Partition. In the early sections, the novel presents a secure and affectionate world. Lenny's life revolves around her family and her Hindu caretaker Ayah. Ayah represents warmth, vitality, and emotional stability. She is admired by men from different religious communities, symbolising social harmony and coexistence.

The early chapters focus on childhood routines, family interactions, and neighbourhood life. Lenny's disability places her at the centre of adult attention, allowing her to overhear conversations and observe social behaviour closely. Her bond with Ayah reinforces the sense of safety that defines the pre Partition world.

As political tension grows, subtle changes appear. Conversations become cautious. Laughter fades. Trusted figures display fear or aggression. Religious identity gradually replaces personal connection as the primary marker of belonging. Migration becomes an important background presence. People disappear, houses stand empty, and trains carry refugees across newly drawn borders.

Violence eventually erupts. Riots break out, homes burn, and familiar spaces become threatening. The emotional climax occurs when Ayah is abducted by the Ice Candy Man. Lenny's accidental betrayal marks the end of her childhood innocence. Although Ayah is later rescued, she is emotionally shattered and chooses to leave Lahore. Her departure suggests that some losses cannot be repaired.

LET US KNOW

In many Partition narratives, women characters often symbolise social harmony as well as vulnerability. Their personal lives reflect the larger political breakdown of society. Observing how female characters are positioned in such narratives helps readers understand the gendered impact of historical violence.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

3. What role does Ayah play in Lenny's early childhood world?
4. How does the atmosphere of Lahore change as Partition approaches?

13.5 EXPLANATION OF THE NOVEL

Ice Candy Man by Bapsi Sidhwa narrates the story of the Partition of India through the childhood memories of Lenny Sethi, a young Parsi girl growing up in Lahore. The novel begins in a period of peace and social harmony, where life is orderly, familiar, and emotionally secure. Lenny belongs to a well-off Parsi family and grows up surrounded by affection and care. Because she suffers from polio, her physical movement is restricted, and she spends much of her time observing people rather than actively participating in play. This limitation sharpens her ability to notice conversations, emotional shifts, and changes in behaviour. The most important figure in Lenny's daily life is her Hindu Ayah, who looks after her, takes her outside, and introduces her to the wider world. Ayah is lively, confident, affectionate, and full of vitality, and she becomes the emotional centre of Lenny's childhood. Ayah is admired by a group of men from different religious communities who gather around her daily in friendly companionship. Among them is the Ice Candy Man, who at this stage appears humorous, talkative, and harmless. Their interactions reflect the spirit of coexistence that defines pre-Partition Lahore, where religious differences exist but do not govern social relationships.

As the narrative progresses, subtle changes begin to disturb this peaceful world. Lenny overhears adult conversations about politics, protests, and uncertainty, although she does not fully understand their meaning. Rumours of violence in other parts of the country start circulating, and refugee trains arrive carrying stories of death and displacement.

Gradually, familiar neighbours begin to disappear, houses are abandoned, and silence replaces casual conversation. The emotional atmosphere of Lahore begins to change as fear, suspicion, and anxiety slowly take hold. Religious identity starts to dominate personal relationships, and people who once lived together peacefully begin to view each other with mistrust. Streets that once felt safe now appear threatening, and everyday routines are disrupted. Lenny senses fear long before she can comprehend its cause, and the city that once represented warmth and security begins to feel unstable and dangerous.

With the official announcement of Partition, violence erupts openly in Lahore. Riots break out, homes are burned, and people are killed or forced to flee. Lenny becomes aware of this violence indirectly, through frightened conversations, sudden absences, and visible fear among adults, rather than through direct explanation. During this period of chaos, Ayah becomes particularly vulnerable as a Hindu woman living in a city torn apart by communal hatred. To protect herself, she goes into hiding. In a moment of fear and confusion, Lenny unintentionally reveals Ayah's hiding place. A mob arrives, and Ayah is abducted during the communal violence. The *Ice Candy Man* is present among the mob and is complicit in the act, though he does not abduct her alone by himself. This moment marks a decisive break in the narrative and signals the end of Lenny's childhood innocence. Her unintended betrayal fills her with lasting guilt and emotional trauma, symbolising the burden carried by children who witness violence without understanding or control.

After Ayah's abduction, the Ice Candy Man undergoes a disturbing transformation from a playful and familiar figure into a possessive and morally corrupted individual shaped by violence and grief. Later, Ayah is traced and rescued through the intervention of Godmother, a strong and authoritative Parsi woman, with the assistance of social workers involved in post-Partition recovery and rehabilitation of abducted women. However, rescue does not restore Ayah to her former self. She is emotionally shattered, withdrawn, and permanently scarred by her experience. The confident and vibrant woman of Lenny's childhood no longer exists. Ayah chooses to leave Lahore and return to India, suggesting that although physical rescue is possible, emotional healing remains incomplete. The novel ends without resolution, as Lenny survives but carries guilt, fear, and memory into adulthood. Through this personal story, the novel presents Partition not as a political event but as a lived human catastrophe that destroys trust, relationships, and childhood itself.

LET US KNOW

In *Ice Candy Man*, Ayah is abducted during communal violence by a mob, with the Ice Candy Man present and complicit in the act, rather than acting alone. Her later rescue is achieved through the intervention of Godmother with the help of post-Partition social workers involved in the recovery and rehabilitation of abducted women. This narrative detail highlights that Partition violence was collective in nature and that rescue, when it occurred, was often administrative rather than heroic.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

5.Why is Lenny's perspective important in the portrayal of Partition?
6.How does Ayah's suffering reveal the gendered nature of Partition violence?

13.6 LET US SUM UP

Ice Candy Man presents the Partition of India as a profoundly human and emotional tragedy rather than a political or administrative achievement. Instead of focusing on leaders, negotiations, or national boundaries, Bapsi Sidhwa centres her narrative on ordinary individuals whose lives are irreversibly altered by violence, fear, and displacement. Through this approach, the novel reveals how historical events penetrate personal spaces and leave lasting psychological scars.

One of the most important contributions of the novel is its use of a child narrator to recount an episode of large-scale violence. Lenny's perspective allows readers to experience Partition as confusion, shock, and emotional loss rather than as ideological conflict. Her gradual movement from innocence to guilt symbolises the psychological burden carried by children who witnessed violence without the ability to understand or prevent it. Through Lenny, Sidhwa demonstrates that trauma does not end with the cessation of violence but continues through memory and self-reflection.

The novel also foregrounds the gendered nature of Partition violence. Ayah's suffering highlights how women's bodies became sites of revenge, control, and symbolic humiliation during communal conflict. Her abduction and subsequent emotional breakdown expose the silence surrounding women's trauma and challenge male-centred historical narratives. By giving Ayah narrative importance, Sidhwa restores dignity to women whose experiences were erased from official accounts of Partition.

Another key idea reinforced in the novel is the moral breakdown of society during times of political crisis. Characters who appear harmless or friendly in the beginning undergo disturbing transformations under the influence of fear, grief, and communal ideology. The Ice Candy Man's descent into violence demonstrates how ordinary individuals can become agents of cruelty when social order collapses. This portrayal shifts the responsibility for violence from isolated individuals to the broader social environment.

The position of the Parsi community in the novel further complicates the idea of neutrality. Although Lenny's family attempts to remain detached from communal conflict, the narrative makes it clear that emotional neutrality is impossible in the face of widespread violence. Lenny's fear and guilt reveal that witnessing violence can be as traumatising as direct participation. Through this, the novel questions the assumption that remaining uninvolved guarantees safety or moral clarity.

In its entirety, *Ice Candy Man* functions as a literary record of memory, trauma, and ethical responsibility. The novel transforms Partition from a historical event into a deeply personal experience marked by loss, silence, and unresolved pain. The text enables learners to

engage critically with Partition not only as a historical moment but also as a moral and emotional crisis that continues to shape identities across generations.

13.7 FURTHER READING

Khushwant Singh, *Train to Pakistan*
Urvashi Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence*
Saadat Hasan Manto, *Selected Short Stories*
Ayesha Jalal, *The Pity of Partition*

13.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answer to Q.1 : The author suffered from a childhood illness that restricted her physical movement.

Answer to Q.2 : Growing up during Partition and witnessing violence and displacement shaped the themes and perspective of her fiction.

Answer to Q.3 : Ayah represents care, emotional security, warmth, and social harmony in Lenny's life before Partition.

Answer to Q.4 : The city gradually shifts from coexistence and familiarity to fear, suspicion, silence, and violence.

Answer to Q.5 : As a child narrator, Lenny presents Partition as confusion and trauma rather than political ideology, highlighting its emotional impact.

Answer to Q.6 : Ayah's abduction shows how women's bodies became targets of communal revenge and control during Partition.

13.9 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q 1. Who narrates *Ice Candy Man*
Q 2. Why is Ayah an important character
Q 3. Discuss *Ice Candy Man* as a Partition novel
Q 4. Analyse the role of Ayah
Q 5. Explain the importance of child narration

UNIT 14: BAPSI SIDHWA: *ICE CANDY MAN*-II

UNIT STRUCTURE

14.1 Learning Objectives
14.2 Introduction
14.3 Major Themes of the Novel
14.4 Major Characters of the Novel
14.5 Style and Language
14.6 Let us Sum up
14.7 Further Reading
14.8 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)
14.9 Model Questions

14.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

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

- discuss *Ice Candy Man* as a major literary text dealing with the Partition of India.
- explain how historical events are represented through fiction.
- describe how literature captures emotional suffering, psychological trauma, and ethical dilemmas during periods of political violence.

14.2 INTRODUCTION

Ice Candy Man (1988), later published as Cracking India, is a well-known novel by Bapsi Sidhwa, a Pakistani writer from the Parsi community. The novel is set during the Partition of India in 1947, an event that led to the division of the Indian subcontinent into India and Pakistan. Partition resulted in one of the largest mass migrations in history and was accompanied by widespread communal violence, displacement, and loss of life.

Unlike political histories that focus on leaders and negotiations, *Ice Candy Man* presents Partition as a lived experience. The novel focuses on ordinary people whose daily lives are disrupted by fear, suspicion, and violence. Sidhwa shows how political decisions taken at the national level penetrate homes, streets, and personal relationships.

The story is narrated by Lenny, a young Parsi girl living in Lahore. As a child and a member of a minority community, Lenny occupies a marginal position in society. This allows her to observe events closely without being directly targeted by communal violence. Her innocent narration reveals the cruelty and moral failure of adults in a subtle but powerful manner.

A central concern of the novel is the suffering of women during Partition. Through individual stories rather than historical statistics, Sidhwa highlights the gendered nature of violence and the long-term trauma experienced by women. The novel thus challenges official historical narratives and foregrounds the human cost of Partition.

14.3 MAJOR THEMES OF THE NOVEL

The themes of *Ice Candy Man* are closely interconnected and together present Partition as a social, emotional, and moral catastrophe. Rather than treating Partition as a single historical event, the novel explores it as a slow and destructive process that reshapes individual lives and social relationships.

Partition and Communal Violence :

One of the most important themes of the novel is communal violence arising out of Partition. In the early part of the novel, Lahore is shown as a city where people of different religions-Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, and Parsis-live together peacefully. Religious identity exists, but it does not dominate everyday interactions. People share public spaces, jokes, food, and friendships.

As the idea of Partition gains momentum, this social harmony begins to break down. Rumours of violence circulate, fear spreads, and people begin to see one another through the lens of religious identity. Sidhwa carefully shows that violence does not erupt suddenly. Instead, it grows gradually through mistrust, political propaganda, and collective anxiety.

The novel emphasises that communal violence is not caused only by a few violent individuals. Ordinary people also become responsible through silence, inaction, and moral compromise. In this way, *Ice Candy Man* presents Partition violence as a collective social failure.

Loss of Innocence :

Loss of innocence is a recurring theme in the novel, especially through the character of Lenny. At the beginning of the narrative, Lenny's world is safe and familiar. Adults appear trustworthy, and social relationships seem stable. As Partition unfolds, Lenny is exposed to cruelty, betrayal, and fear.

Her gradual awareness marks the loss of childhood innocence. This loss is not only personal but symbolic. It represents the moral collapse of society as a whole. Through this theme, Sidhwa shows that violence destroys not only lives but also trust, security, and ethical values.

Gendered Violence and Women's Suffering :

One of the most disturbing themes in *Ice Candy Man* is the suffering of women during Partition. The novel shows that women are disproportionately affected by communal violence. Their bodies become sites of control, revenge, and symbolic power.

Through Ayah's abduction, Sidhwa exposes how women are treated as symbols of community honour rather than as individuals. Sexual violence, forced conversion, and displacement are shown as systematic aspects of Partition violence. The novel critiques both patriarchy and communal nationalism by revealing how women's suffering is normalized during political conflict.

Minority Identity and Neutrality :

Lenny's Parsi identity places her outside the dominant Hindu-Muslim conflict. This minority position offers relative safety but also raises ethical questions. The novel subtly examines the moral implications of neutrality during times of injustice.

Through the Parsis, Sidhwa suggests that distance from violence does not remove moral responsibility. Survival and neutrality come with ethical ambiguity.

Guilt, Silence, and Moral Responsibility :

The theme of guilt is most clearly seen in Lenny's unintended role in Ayah's abduction. Although, Lenny does not act with malicious intent, the consequences of her action are severe. This moment complicates the idea of innocence.

The novel suggests that violence is sustained not only by active perpetrators but also by those who remain silent or passive. Moral responsibility is thus collective rather than individual.

Breakdown of Human Relationships :

Partition leads to the breakdown of friendships, trust, and intimacy. Relationships that once crossed religious boundaries collapse. Love turns into possession, humour into cruelty, and companionship into suspicion. This emotional loss is one of the most lasting consequences of Partition.

Memory and Trauma :

The novel is structured around memory rather than linear history. Lenny's narration reflects how trauma is remembered-in fragments, episodes, and impressions. Storytelling becomes a way of bearing witness to suffering that official histories often ignore.

LET US KNOW

Themes in Partition literature often overlap and reinforce one another. In *Ice Candy Man*, personal experiences of loss, fear, and guilt reveal how large historical events affect individual lives.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. How does *Ice Candy Man* present communal violence as a gradual process rather than a sudden event?
2. In what ways does the novel depict the loss of innocence during Partition?
3. Why is women's suffering central to the thematic structure of the novel?

14.4 MAJOR CHARACTERS OF THE NOVEL

In *Ice Candy Man*, Bapsi Sidhwa presents a wide range of characters through whom the historical trauma of the Partition of India is experienced at a personal level. These characters are not extraordinary figures or political leaders; they are ordinary men and

women whose lives are gradually transformed by fear, communal hatred, and violence. Through them, the novel shows how Partition enters everyday life and reshapes emotions, relationships, and moral values.

Each major character in the novel represents a particular response to Partition. Some characters embody innocence and vulnerability, while others reflect cruelty, desire, silence, or moral resistance. By studying these characters in detail, readers can understand how Partition operates not merely as a political division of land but as a profound human tragedy.

Lenny

Lenny Sethi is the first-person narrator and the central consciousness of *Ice Candy Man.* The entire narrative is filtered through her eyes, making her role crucial to the reader's understanding of events. Lenny occupies a highly marginal position in society for several reasons. She is a child, a girl, physically disabled due to polio, and a member of the Parsi community, which is a small religious minority that largely remains neutral during the Partition.

Due to this marginal position, Lenny is able to move across social, religious, and domestic spaces with relative freedom. She interacts with Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, and Parsis without fully understanding the political and religious divisions between them. This allows her to observe changes in society closely while remaining somewhat protected from direct violence.

In the early part of the novel, Lenny's world is shaped by innocence, curiosity, and emotional security. Adults appear reliable and protective, and social relationships seem stable and warm. Religious identity does not yet carry political meaning for her. This stage of the narrative reflects a pre-Partition world where coexistence feels natural and unquestioned.

As Partition approaches, Lenny begins to sense fear and hostility around her. Although she cannot fully understand political events, she notices changes in people's behaviour-voices become harsher, relationships become tense, and violence enters everyday conversations. This gradual awareness marks the loss of childhood innocence. Through Lenny's perspective, Sidhwa shows how historical trauma affects children at an emotional level, even when they cannot grasp its causes.

One of the most significant moments in Lenny's life is her unintended role in Ayah's abduction. When Lenny reveals Ayah's hiding place, she does not act with malicious intent. However, the consequences of her action are devastating. This moment introduces the theme of guilt and moral responsibility. Lenny's subsequent emotional burden complicates the idea of innocence and suggests that silence, ignorance, or unthinking obedience can also contribute to violence. Through Lenny, the novel challenges readers to reflect on the ethical dimensions of witnessing and participation.

Ayah (Shanta) :

Ayah, whose real name is Shanta, is Lenny's Hindu caretaker and one of the most symbolically important characters in the novel. In the early chapters, Ayah is portrayed as

confident, lively, and independent. She enjoys a visible presence in public spaces and attracts admiration from men belonging to different religious communities. Her popularity reflects the social openness and cultural coexistence of pre-Partition Lahore.

Ayah's character initially represents freedom, vitality, and harmony. She moves easily across communal boundaries, and her relationships are not defined by religious identity. This makes her a powerful symbol of a society where communal divisions are still fluid.

As communal tensions increase, Ayah's position becomes increasingly vulnerable. Her body begins to be viewed not as her own but as an object of desire, control, and possession. Men who once admired her begin to see her through the lens of communal ownership. This shift reflects the growing influence of patriarchal and communal ideologies.

Ayah's abduction is one of the most traumatic events in the novel. Through this episode, Sidhwa exposes the gendered nature of Partition violence. Ayah is targeted not for her beliefs or actions, but because her body becomes a symbol of honour, revenge, and power. Her suffering represents the widespread experiences of women during Partition, including abduction, sexual violence, forced conversion, and displacement.

Importantly, Ayah's story does not offer closure or recovery. The absence of resolution emphasizes the long-term trauma faced by women and the silencing of their experiences in official histories. Ayah thus stands not merely as an individual character, but as a representative figure for countless women whose lives were permanently altered by Partition.

Ice Candy Man :

The Ice Candy Man is one of the most complex and disturbing characters in the novel. In the early sections, he appears as a humorous, lively, and familiar figure who entertains others and moves easily across communal boundaries. He represents the informal social bonds and shared culture of pre-Partition Lahore.

As communal violence intensifies, the Ice Candy Man undergoes a gradual but drastic transformation. Influenced by fear, propaganda, personal loss, and obsessive desire, he becomes increasingly aggressive and violent. His growing fanaticism reflects how communal hatred can radicalize ordinary individuals.

His involvement in Ayah's abduction marks his complete moral collapse. However, Sidhwa does not portray him as a simple villain. Instead, he is shown as both a product and an agent of Partition violence. Through this character, the novel demonstrates how social and political conditions can distort human relationships and ethical judgement.

Godmother (Rodabai)

Godmother, also known as Rodabai, represents moral authority and ethical resistance in the novel. In contrast to many characters who remain silent or passive, Godmother actively confronts injustice. She challenges patriarchal authority and communal power, particularly in her confrontation with the *Ice Candy Man*.

Godmother's actions show that moral choice does not disappear during times of violence. Her courage, compassion, and sense of responsibility provide a counterpoint to the widespread moral collapse depicted in the novel. Through her character, Sidhwa affirms the possibility of ethical resistance even in moments of extreme crisis.

Minor Characters and Social Types

The novel also includes several minor characters who represent different social attitudes during Partition, such as fearful bystanders, opportunists, and silent witnesses. These characters reinforce the novel's critique of how violence is sustained not only by perpetrators but also by widespread moral indifference.

LET US KNOW

Characters in Partition fiction often function as social symbols. Their personal experiences reflect broader historical and moral realities of the time.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 4. Why is Lenny's marginal position important to the narrative of *Ice Candy Man*?

Q 4. How does Ayah's character symbolize the gendered violence of Partition?

Q 4. Explain how the Ice Candy Man represents moral transformation during communal conflict.

14.5 STYLE AND LANGUAGE

Bapsi Sidhwa's narrative style and use of language play a crucial role in shaping the emotional and ethical impact of *Ice Candy Man*. Rather than adopting a dramatic or ideological tone, Sidhwa employs a restrained, subtle, and humane narrative approach. This allows the novel to represent extreme violence without sensationalism and to focus on lived human experience.

Use of the First-Person Child Narrator :

One of the most distinctive narrative techniques in the novel is the use of a first-person child narrator. The story is told entirely through Lenny's voice. Because Lenny is a child, her understanding of political events is limited. As a result, violence is often described indirectly or incompletely.

This gap between the narrator's understanding and the reader's awareness creates irony and emotional depth. Readers recognise the seriousness of events that Lenny herself cannot fully articulate. This technique allows Sidhwa to depict brutality without graphic description, making the narrative ethically sensitive and emotionally powerful.

The child narrator also exposes adult hypocrisy and moral failure without direct judgement. Through Lenny's innocent observations, Sidhwa critiques communal hatred, patriarchy, and social cruelty in a subtle yet effective manner.

Episodic and Fragmented Structure :

The narrative of Ice Candy Man is episodic rather than linear. Events unfold through a series of scenes, memories, and everyday incidents rather than a tightly organized plot. This fragmented structure reflects the way traumatic events are remembered-not as continuous stories but as broken fragments.

The episodic form also mirrors the instability and uncertainty of Partition life. The lack of smooth narrative progression reinforces the sense of chaos, fear, and dislocation that defines the novel's emotional atmosphere.

Language, Simplicity, and Accessibility :

Sidhwa's language is simple, direct, and conversational. She frequently uses everyday expressions and culturally specific references, which lend authenticity to the setting and characters. This simplicity makes the novel accessible to undergraduate learners and suitable for self-study.

Importantly, Sidhwa avoids elaborate or decorative prose when describing violence. Traumatic events are narrated in a restrained and matter-of-fact manner. This approach respects the dignity of victims and avoids turning suffering into spectacle.

Humour and Contrast :

Humour plays an important role in the early chapters of the novel. Lenny's playful observations and the lively interactions among characters create warmth and familiarity. As Partition approaches, humour gradually disappears. The sharp contrast between early lightness and later brutality intensifies the reader's sense of loss and moral rupture.

Symbolism and Ethical Restraint :

Symbolism in *Ice Candy Man* is subtle and understated. Lenny's physical disability can be interpreted as symbolic of a fractured society, while women's bodies become symbolic sites of power and control during communal conflict. However, Sidhwa avoids heavy-handed symbolism, allowing meaning to emerge naturally through narrative context.

Her restrained narrative voice ensures that violence is never glorified. Instead, it is presented as morally destructive and socially corrosive.

Overall Narrative Impact :

Through the combined use of child narration, episodic structure, simple language, humour, and ethical restraint, Sidhwa creates a narrative that is emotionally resonant and morally complex. *Ice Candy Man* stands as a powerful literary testimony to the human cost of Partition and remains an important text in South Asian literature.

LET US KNOW

Narrative technique strongly shapes how historical violence is perceived. A restrained style and indirect narration can convey trauma more effectively than graphic description.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

7. What is the significance of using a child narrator in *Ice Candy Man*?
8. How does Sidhwa's simple and restrained language enhance the emotional impact of the novel?
9. Why is the episodic structure suitable for representing trauma and memory?

14.6 LET US SUM UP

Ice Candy Man by Bapsi Sidhwa presents the Partition of India as a deeply human tragedy rather than a political or administrative event. The novel shows that Partition was not experienced only through borders and migrations but through fear, broken relationships, moral confusion, and irreversible personal loss. By focusing on ordinary individuals instead of political leaders, the novel foregrounds the emotional and ethical cost of communal violence.

One of the most significant contributions of the novel lies in its portrayal of how communal hatred gradually enters everyday life. The narrative demonstrates that violence does not erupt suddenly; instead, it develops through rumours, suspicion, and the steady erosion of trust. People who once shared spaces and relationships begin to view one another as enemies. In this process, silence and passivity become as destructive as active violence.

The novel also powerfully highlights the disproportionate suffering of women during Partition. Women's bodies become sites of control, revenge, and symbolic honour, revealing the close relationship between communal nationalism and patriarchy. Through the experience of characters like Ayah, the novel exposes how women are reduced to symbols rather than treated as individuals, and how their trauma often remains unresolved and silenced.

The minority perspective in the novel further adds ethical depth to the narrative. The relative safety of the Parsi community allows observation without direct participation in violence, but it also raises difficult questions about neutrality and moral distance. The novel suggests that survival without engagement carries its own ethical burden.

Overall, *Ice Candy Man* stands as an important literary text that preserves the memory of Partition as a lived experience. It reminds readers that history is not only written in documents and dates but also in bodies, emotions, and fractured relationships. The novel continues to remain relevant because it compels readers to confront the human consequences of political division and collective violence.

14.7 FURTHER READING

Sidhwa, Bapsi. *Cracking India*

Butalia, Urvashi. *The Other Side of Silence*
Menon, Ritu and Kamla Bhasin. *Borders & Boundaries*
Singh, Khushwant. Train to Pakistan
Pandey, Gyanendra. *Remembering Partition*

14.8 ANSWER'S TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Answer to Q.1 : Violence develops through rumours, fear, and mistrust before turning into open brutality.

Answer to Q.2 : Lenny's growing awareness of cruelty and guilt reflects the collapse of childhood security.

Answer to Q.3 : Women's bodies become targets of communal revenge and patriarchal control.

Answer to Q.4 : As a child, disabled, and Parsi, she observes violence without fully understanding it.

Answer to Q.5 : Her abduction shows how women were treated as symbols of honour and power.

Answer to Q.6 : He changes from a harmless figure to a violent agent under communal influence.

Answer to Q.7 : Child narration presents Partition as confusion and emotional trauma rather than ideology.

Answer to Q.8 : It avoids sensationalism and allows suffering to be felt rather than dramatised.

Answer to Q.9 : Trauma is remembered in fragments rather than as a continuous narrative.

14.9 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q 1. Discuss *Ice Candy Man* as a Partition novel with reference to communal violence and human suffering.

Q 2. Analyse the role of women in *Ice Candy Man*. How does the novel depict gendered violence during Partition?

Q 3. Examine the significance of the child narrator in *Ice Candy Man*. How does this narrative choice shape the reader's understanding of Partition?

Q 4. Write a detailed note on the character of Ayah as a symbol of women's suffering during Partition.

Q 5. Discuss the transformation of the *Ice Candy Man* and explain how his character reflects the moral impact of communal violence.

Q 6. Comment on Bapsi Sidhwa's narrative style and language in *Ice Candy Man*.

Q 7. How does *Ice Candy Man* challenge official historical narratives of Partition?

UNIT 15: HAN KANG: *THE VEGETARIAN*

UNIT STRUCTURE

15.1 Learning Objectives
15.2 Introduction
15.3 Han Kang: Her Life and Works
15.4 Context of the Novel
15.5 Explanation of the Novel
15.6 Major Themes
15.7 Major Characters
15.8 Style and Language
15.9 Let us Sum up
15.10 Answers to Check Your Progress
15.11 Further Reading
15.12 Model Questions

15.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

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

- discuss the life and works of Han Kang
- situate the novel within its Korean socio-cultural and literary context
- analyse the major characters and their psychological complexity
- explain the narrative structure and thematic concerns of *The Vegetarian*
- describe Han Kang's distinctive language and narrative style
- engage critically with the text as a whole

15.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit will introduce the learners to the life and works of Han Kang, a South Korean novelist who won the International Booker Prize for fiction in 2016 for her novel titled *The Vegetarian*. Published in Korean in 2007 and translated into English by Deborah Smith in 2015, the novel resists easy categorisation. It is at once a psychological narrative, a feminist text, and a meditation on violence. This unit introduces the learners to *The Vegetarian*, one of the most widely discussed works of contemporary Korean literature. The novel attracted readers across the world because of its unusual storytelling, emotional depth, and powerful exploration of the human condition.

At the centre of the narrative is Yeong-hye, a woman whose decision to stop eating meat gradually transforms her life and deeply disturbs those around her. What appears at first to be a simple personal choice slowly develops into a profound rejection of violence, social conformity, and patriarchal control. Through her story, the novel raises important questions about freedom, identity, mental health, desire, and the relationship between the body and society.

This unit will help the learners understand the social, cultural, and literary background of the novel and examine its major themes and characters in detail. It will also discuss Han Kang's language, symbolism, and narrative style. By reading this text, the learners will be able to explore how contemporary literature addresses issues such as gender, violence, power, resistance, and human isolation in deeply personal yet universal ways. The next section will give you a detailed idea about the novelist, her life as well as her works.

15.3 HAN KANG: HER LIFE AND WORKS

Born on November 27, 1970, in Gwangju, South Korea, Han Kang is one of the most important contemporary writers from South Korea. She is known for her emotionally intense fiction, poetic style, and exploration of themes such as violence, trauma, memory, loneliness, and the human body. Her works often combine realism with dreamlike and symbolic elements, creating narratives that are both disturbing and deeply reflective.

Her childhood was shaped by literature because her father, Han Seung-won, was also a well-known novelist. When she was young, her family moved to Seoul, where she later studied Korean literature at Yonsei University. Growing up in a literary environment influenced her interest in reading and writing from an early age.

An important historical event connected to Han Kang's life is the Gwangju Uprising of 1980. Although she was still a child when it took place, the violence and trauma associated with the incident deeply affected her later writing. Questions about human cruelty, suffering, and survival appear repeatedly in her novels. Han Kang first gained recognition as a poet before becoming famous as a novelist. She began her literary career in the early 1990s by publishing poems in Korean literary magazines.

Her early works include short stories and novels that focus on emotional isolation and the fragility of human relationships. One of her notable early novels is *Black Deer* (1998), which explores displacement and emotional suffering. Another important work is *Your Cold Hands* (2002), a novel dealing with art, identity, and the human body. These early writings already show her interest in psychological conflict and bodily experience. Han Kang became internationally famous with *The Vegetarian*, that won the Man Booker International Prize and brought worldwide attention to Korean literature, which shall be dealt in a detailed manner in this unit.

Another major work by Han Kang is *Human Acts* (2014), which is based on the Gwangju Uprising. The novel explores political violence, trauma, memory, and grief through multiple perspectives. It is considered one of her most powerful and emotionally moving works. Her novel *The White Book* (2016) is more experimental and reflective in style. Through a series of short poetic sections connected to the colour white, the book meditates on loss, mourning, life, and memory. It was shortlisted for the International Booker Prize in 2018. Han Kang has also to her credit *Greek Lessons*, a quiet and philosophical novel about language, silence, communication, and emotional healing. Her later works continue to explore human vulnerability and the difficulty of understanding one another.

15.4 CONTEXT OF THE NOVEL

The Vegetarian is based on a short story 'The Fruit of My Woman' by Han Kang originally published in 1997. The novel retained much of this story particularly in the first section. It was published in South Korea in 2007, during a time when the country was experiencing rapid modernisation and social change. Although South Korea had become economically advanced and urbanised, yet traditional ideas about family, obedience, and social behaviour strongly influenced everyday life. This tension between modern life and traditional expectations forms an important background to the novel.

One of the key contexts of the novel is patriarchy and the pressure to conform. In many traditional social structures, women are expected to be quiet, obedient, and accommodating. Yeong-hye's decision to stop eating meat may seem simple at first, but in her family and social environment it becomes a shocking act of defiance. Her refusal challenges the control that others try to exercise over her body and choices.

The novel also explores different forms of violence. Han Kang shows that violence is not always physical; it can exist in ordinary relationships, social expectations, emotional neglect, and attempts to control others. Yeong-hye's rejection of meat gradually becomes symbolic of her rejection of cruelty and domination itself. Mental health is another important context of the novel. Yeong-hye's behaviour is treated by others as strange or unacceptable, but the novel encourages readers to think beyond simple ideas of normal and abnormal. Instead of giving easy answers, Han Kang presents psychological suffering in a sensitive and complex way.

The novel is often discussed from feminist and ecofeminist perspectives as well. Feminist critics see Yeong-hye's refusal as an attempt to reclaim control over her own body, while ecofeminist readings connect her desire to become plant-like with a rejection of human violence toward nature and living beings.

However, it was the English translation by Deborah Smith, published in 2015, that introduced the novel to international readers. After winning the Man Booker International Prize in 2016, *The Vegetarian* became one of the most widely discussed works of contemporary Korean literature.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1. Name some of the novels of Han Kang.
Q2. Mention the short story on which is the novel *The Vegetarian* based?
Q3. Describe the context of the novel.

15.5 EXPLANATION OF THE NOVEL

The novel, described as "fraught, disturbing, and beautiful," explores "shame, desire, and our faltering attempts to understand the lives of others". It is structured in three parts,

each narrated by a different character. One of the most striking features of the novel is that Yeong-hye herself never tells her story directly. Instead, we see her through the eyes of others: her husband, her brother-in-law, and her sister. This narrative choice highlights a key idea in the novel: the difficulties to truly comprehend another person.

Part I: 'The Vegetarian'

Narrated by Mr. Cheong, the first section presents Yeong-hye as an ordinary woman living a routine life with her husband. He describes her as unremarkable and easy to manage person, revealing more about his own expectations than about her personality. Their marriage is based on habit rather than emotional connection. This quiet life is suddenly disrupted when Yeong-hye experiences a disturbing dream filled with images of blood and violence. After this, she decides to stop eating meat. What might seem like a personal dietary choice quickly becomes something much more serious. In the social and familial context of the novel, her decision is seen as deeply troubling, a "shocking act of subversion," which gradually develops into her desire for a "plant-like existence".

Her husband reacts with frustration and embarrassment. He is concerned less about her internal struggles and more worried about his social appearances. As Yeong-hye continues to refuse meat, she also begins to withdraw physically and emotionally. She loses weight, avoids intimacy, and behaves in ways that others find difficult to accept. The situation becomes especially tense during a family gathering, where her father attempts to force her to eat meat. This violent act exposes the harsh authority within the family structure. In response, Yeong-hye harms herself, revealing her determination to resist.

Part II: 'Mongolian Mark'

The second part shifts to the perspective of Yeong-hye's brother-in-law, an artist. Narrated by the brother-in-law, this section moves away from domestic conflict and explores themes of desire and artistic obsession. The brother-in-law becomes fascinated with Yeong-hye's body, particularly a 'birthmark' he associates with something pure and natural. He begins to imagine an artistic project involving bodies painted with flowers. His interest in Yeong-hye gradually turns into an unhealthy obsession.

He convinces her to participate in his work, painting flowers on her body and filming her. Although Yeong-hye agrees, her calm and distant manner makes the situation disturbing. One that appears to be art slowly becomes a form of exploitation. She is no longer seen as a person, but as an object of aesthetic and sexual fascination. As this section progresses, the narrative becomes increasingly disturbing. The brother-in-law's desire leads to a sexual encounter that blurs the boundaries between consent, control, and imagination. Critics often describe this part of the novel as deeply uncomfortable, revealing how easily the human body can be objectified.

Part III: 'Flaming Trees'

The final section is narrated by In-hye, Yeong-hye's elder sister. This part is quieter as compared to the previous parts and more reflective, focusing on care, guilt, and emotional struggle. Yeong-hye has been admitted to a psychiatric hospital and refuses to eat entirely. She believes she is no longer human in the usual sense and wants to live like a plant. For Yeong-hye, becoming plant-like seems to represent a complete escape from violence and suffering. We see that doctors attempt to keep her alive through force-feeding, raising difficult ethical questions about bodily autonomy. In-hye watches these events with growing discomfort and begins to question her own life.

Through In-hye's reflections, we see another kind of struggle. Unlike Yeong-hye, she has followed social expectations– running a business, maintaining a family, etc. but deep down she too feels trapped and exhausted. She begins to realise that her sister's extreme rejection of society may not be entirely incomprehensible.

The novel ends without a clear resolution. Yeong-hye's condition remains uncertain, and In-hye is left searching for meaning. The final image of trees suggests both silence and resistance, leaving readers with a sense of openness rather than closure.

Thus, taken together, the three parts of the novel move from ordinary domestic life to psychological breakdown and finally to quiet reflection. The tone of the novel has often been described as "fraught, disturbing, and beautiful," which captures its emotional complexity. The novel allows the readers to see Yeong-hye's journey not simply as a story of illness, but as a powerful exploration of freedom, control, and resistance. Her refusal to eat meat becomes a way of questioning the systems like family, society, and even language, that try to define and limit individual existence. As a result, *The Vegetarian* becomes not only a story about one woman's transformation, but also a meditation on perception itself: how people look at one another, misunderstand one another, and sometimes fail to recognise another person's pain until it is too late.

15.6 MAJOR THEMES

The Vegetarian explores several powerful themes related to human relationships, identity, violence, and freedom. Although the novel appears simple on the surface, it raises difficult emotional and philosophical questions. Through Yeong-hye's transformation, Han Kang examines the pressures of society and the hidden violence present in ordinary life.

Violence and Human Cruelty :

One of the most important themes in *The Vegetarian* is violence. Han Kang shows that violence is not only physical but also emotional, psychological, and social. Throughout the novel, Yeong-hye faces control, humiliation, and pressure from her husband, family, and medical authorities. Her disturbing dreams filled with blood and flesh reflect her growing rejection of cruelty and human aggression. Her refusal to eat meat gradually becomes symbolic of her refusal to participate in a violent world. The novel suggests that violence often exists quietly within ordinary relationships and social systems. (thebookerprizes.com)

Patriarchy and Female Resistance :

The novel strongly critiques patriarchal society and the expectations placed upon women. Yeong-hye is expected to behave like an obedient wife and daughter, but her decision to stop eating meat disrupts these social norms. People around her become angry not simply because of her food choices, but because she refuses to conform. Her silence, withdrawal, and rejection of social expectations become forms of resistance. Feminist critics often interpret the novel as a portrayal of a woman struggling to reclaim ownership over her body and identity in a society that constantly tries to control her.

The Body and Mental Suffering ;

The body plays a central role in the novel. Han Kang repeatedly focuses on hunger, sexuality, illness, pain, and physical transformation. Yeong-hye's body becomes a site of conflict because others try to discipline, desire, or medicalise it, while she attempts to reclaim control over it through refusal. The novel also explores mental suffering in a complex way. Han Kang avoids giving simple explanations for Yeong-hye's condition, leaving readers uncertain whether her transformation represents illness, trauma, rebellion, or a search for freedom. This ambiguity challenges fixed ideas about sanity and identity.

Silence and Failure of Communication :

Another major theme in the novel is emotional isolation. Most characters fail to truly understand one another, even within close relationships. Yeong-hye speaks very little, but her silence becomes meaningful. Instead of openly explaining herself, she withdraws from conversation and social life altogether. Han Kang uses silence to show how difficult genuine communication can be. The fragmented narrative structure, where Yeong-hye is seen only through others' perspectives, further highlights the limits of human understanding.

Nature as an Escape :

Nature and plant imagery appear repeatedly throughout the novel. As Yeong-hye distances herself from human society, she begins imagining a plant-like existence free from violence and desire. Trees and plants symbolise peace, stillness, and escape from human brutality. Ecofeminist critics interpret her desire to become tree-like as a rejection of domination, consumption, and cruelty. Through this theme, Han Kang raises profound questions about what it means to be human and whether freedom from suffering is truly possible.

Significantly, we must note what Han Kang herself stated in her interview for the Booker Prize: "If I could say one thing, this novel isn't a singular indictment of the Korean patriarchy. I wanted to deal with my long-lasting questions about the possibility/impossibility of innocence in this world, which is mingled with such violence and beauty. These were universal questions that occupied me as I wrote it."

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 4. What does the second part of the novel deal with?

Q 5. State the significance of silence in the novel.

15.7 MAJOR CHARACTERS

The major characters in the novel *The Vegetarian* are presented as layered and emotionally complex. Han Kang does not demarcates them as either heroes or villains, but as modern individuals who are being shaped by social pressure, stigmas, loneliness, desire, and emotional repression. As we read the novel, we see how each character reflects a different response to factors such as authority or control, conformity, and suffering. Evidently, the characters in the novel indicates the difficulties to fully understand another individual. Let us now examine the major characters in the novel:

Yeong-hye

Yeong-hye is the protagonist around whom the novel revolves. However, she remains one of the most elusive characters because the readers as well as the other characters rarely gain direct access to her thoughts in the novel. Her story and her plight is mostly told through the perspectives of other characters. This absence of a full personal voice is significant as it reflects how people around her constantly interpret and define her without genuinely listening to her. At the beginning of the novel, Yeong-hye appears quiet, ordinary, and reserved. Her husband reflected that he married her because she appeared simple to him and therefore unlikely to challenge him. The day she experiences violent dreams began as the turning point in the story as she suddenly 'decides to stop eating meat'. Later, we can see that this decision slowly grows into something much larger: 'a rejection of violence, social expectations, and eventually even human existence itself.'

As the story progresses, Yeong-hye withdraws from ordinary life gradually. Losing interest in food, intimacy and social interaction, she wishes to become plant. This symbolises a longing to escape cruelty, desire and emotional pain. While some characters consider her behaviour as mental instability, the novel encourages readers to view and interpret deeper. In fact, her silence and refusal can be viewed as forms of resistance against a world that constantly tries to control her body, choices and her individuality. Through silence, Yeong-hye captures the central position in the narrative. Hence, what makes her a memorable character is not dramatic speech or action, but the quiet intensity of her presence.

Mr. Cheong

Mr. Cheong is Yeong-hye's husband and also the narrator of the first section of the novel. Through his narration, he reflects that he values routine, respectability, and personal comfort above emotional connection. He sees himself as an average man leading an ordinary life, and he expects his wife to fit smoothly into that life. His description of Yeong-hye often reveals his own limitations rather than her personality. He rarely considers her emotional world and becomes irritated whenever her actions disrupt his daily life or public image. Her refusal to eat meat embarrasses him because it draws social attention and challenges the obedient role she is expects to perform.

What is unsettling about Mr. Cheong is that his behaviour appears socially normal. Han Kang does not portray him as exceptionally cruel; instead, he represents the quiet selfishness and emotional indifference that can exist within ordinary relationships. His inability to empathise with Yeong-hye reflects the broader emotional isolation present

throughout the novel. Through this character, the novel critiques the ways patriarchal attitudes can become embedded within everyday domestic life.

The Brother-in-law :

He is the brother-in-law of Yeong-hye and an unsuccessful video artist. The second section of the novel is narrated by him. He becomes fascinated with Yeong-hye after learning about a birthmark on her body. It began as an artistic curiosity that gradually developed into obsession. The brother-in-law considers Yeong-hye less as an individual and more as an artistic vision. He imagines her body covered in painted flowers and becomes consumed by the idea of filming her. His fascination juxtaposes desire, creativity, and control in unsettling ways. Although he believes himself to be sensitive and artistic, he ultimately objectifies Yeong-hye just as others do. He projects his fantasies onto her and ignores her emotional vulnerability. Through this character, the novel questions whether art can sometimes become exploitative when it values beauty over humanity. His narration blurs the boundaries between artistic expression, desire, and manipulation.

In-hye

In-hye is Yeong-hye's older sister. In the novel, it is In-hye who is portrayed as the most emotionally mature of all characters. She narrates the final section and provides a more compassionate perspective than the earlier narrators. Although she cannot completely understand Yeong-hye, she sincerely attempts to do so. In-hye spends much of her life carrying responsibilities. She manages a business, cares for her child, and tries to maintain stability even when her personal life is falling apart. Outwardly, she appears practical and emotionally strong, but inwardly she struggles with exhaustion, disappointment, and loneliness. As she watches Yeong-hye's condition worsen, In-hye begins reflecting on her own suppressed emotions and compromises. She realises that, unlike her sister, she has survived by accepting social expectations rather than resisting them. This creates a complicated emotional bond between the two sisters.

In-hye's character adds depth to the novel because she represents a quieter form of suffering. Through her, Han Kang shows that emotional pain is not always visible. Many readers find her especially moving because she combines care, frustration, guilt, and self-awareness in deeply human ways.

Yeong-hye's Father ;

Yeong-hye's father represents rigid authority and patriarchal discipline. A former military man, he believes strongly in obedience and control. During Yeong-hye's childhood, he often used violence to enforce discipline within the family and this somehow affected both the sisters. One of the most shocking moments in the novel occurs when he physically forces meat into Yeong-hye's mouth during a family gathering. This scene symbolises society's violent attempt to suppress individuality and enforce conformity. Seen in this light, the father functions not only as a family figure but also as a symbol of authoritarian power.

Yeong-hye's Mother :

Yeong-hye's mother appears quieter than the father, yet she is also supportive of traditional authoritarian expectations. She worries constantly about appearances and social judgement, often treating Yeong-hye's suffering as a source of embarrassment. Her

character demonstrates how social systems are maintained not only through direct violence but also through everyday acceptance of traditional roles and norms.

Yeong-ho ;

Yeong-hye's brother plays a relatively minor role in the novel, but his behaviour reinforces the family's emotional distance. Like the father, he reacts more with frustration than empathy, reflecting the broader inability of the family to understand Yeong-hye's suffering.

Thus, the characters in the novel are deeply connected to the novel's central concerns: violence, social expectations, desire, silence and freedom. Most of the characters fail to truly understand Yeong-hye as an 'independent' individual. Instead, we can see how the different narrators interpret her through their own expectations and needs. And, it is this failure of understanding that becomes one of the novel's most important aspect. Han Kang's portrayal of the characters appears realistic because they are emotionally conflicted and imperfect. Their weaknesses, fears, and contradictions make the novel psychologically rich and realistic.

15.8 STYLE AND LANGUAGE

One of the most remarkable features of *The Vegetarian* is the distinctive writing style of Han Kang. Her language appears simple and restrained, yet it carries deep emotional and symbolic meaning. Instead of dramatic descriptions or excessive explanations, Han Kang creates intensity through silence, imagery, and psychological tension. This quiet style notably presents a haunting and unsettling atmosphere in the novel.

The novel is divided into three sections: the first section, titled "The Vegetarian" is narrated by Mr. Cheong; the second section titled "Mongolian Mark," is narrated by Yeong-hye's sister's husband; and the third section titled "Flaming Trees" is narrated by In-hye, Yeong-hye's older sister. Significantly, the central figure, Yeong-hye herself does not directly narrates her own story. Readers understand her only through the perspectives of others. This narrative technique is important because it reflects how people constantly judge and define Yeong-hye without truly understanding her. Each narrator sees only part of her personality and suffering. The fragmented structure also creates ambiguity, forcing readers to piece together meaning from incomplete viewpoints. The novel's shifting perspectives also reveal how unreliable narration can be. Each narrator is emotionally limited and deeply subjective. Readers gradually realise that the story tells us as much about the narrators as it does about Yeong-hye. Her husband's narration exposes his selfishness and emotional emptiness; the brother-in-law's perspective reveals obsession and exploitation; In-hye's narration exposes hidden exhaustion, loneliness, and suppressed despair.

Han Kang's prose style is minimalist and carefully controlled. She often uses ordinary actions and details to express deeper emotions. Scenes involving food, eating, touch, or silence are described in plain language, yet they become emotionally disturbing because of the underlying tension. Much remains unspoken in the novel, creating a strong sense of emotional distance and isolation. Dream imagery and surrealism also play an

important role in the text. Yeong-hye's violent dreams involving blood, meat, and animals become the starting point of her transformation. As the novel progresses, the boundary between reality and imagination becomes increasingly blurred. By the final section, Yeong-hye's belief that she is becoming a tree creates a dreamlike atmosphere that reflects her desire to escape violence and human cruelty.

Symbolism is another major feature of the novel. Meat symbolises violence, consumption, and human brutality, while plants and trees represent peace, purity, and escape from suffering. Flowers, especially in the second section, suggest both beauty and objectifcation. Han Kang does not explain these symbols directly; instead, readers gradually understand their significance through the narrative. One of the most powerful techniques used by Han Kang is silence. Yeong-hye speaks very little, but her silence becomes meaningful. Rather than openly protesting, she withdraws from conversation, relationships, and eventually even from food. Her silence can be seen as a form of resistance against a society that constantly tries to control her body and identity.

Another important aspect of the novel is its open-ended nature. Han Kang does not provide clear answers about Yeong-hye's condition. Readers are left to decide whether her transformation represents madness, trauma, rebellion, or a search for freedom. This ambiguity makes the novel emotionally and intellectually engaging. Overall, Han Kang combines simple language with several techniques to highlight the tension in the novel. Through its fragmented narrative structure, powerful use of silence, dreamlike imagery, and rich symbolism, the novel becomes both unsettling and deeply engaging.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 6. How is Yeong-hye portrayed in the novel?
Q 7. State the importance of symbolism as a technique used by the novelist.

15.9 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we dealt with the novel *The Vegetarian* by Han Kang, an important work of contemporary Korean literature. The novel tells the story of Yeong-hye, a woman whose decision to stop eating meat gradually becomes a deeper rejection of violence, social expectations, and control over her body and mind. We have discussed the life and works of Han Kang and gained an idea on the social and cultural context of the novel. We also examined the three-part structure of the text and saw how different narrators shape our understanding of the central character, Yeong-hye.

We have explored major themes such as patriarchy, violence, bodily autonomy, silence, mental suffering, and resistance. We also studied the major characters and analysed how each character reflects different attitudes towards power, conformity, and freedom. In addition to these, we have focussed on Han Kang's language and narrative style. Her use of simple prose, symbolism, shifting perspectives, dream imagery, and silence creates a disturbing yet emotionally powerful reading experience.

Overall, *The Vegetarian* is not just a story about food or personal choice. It is a deeply reflective novel that encourages readers to think about human relationships, freedom, identity, and the hidden violence present in everyday life.

K15.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q 1: *Black Deer* (1998), *Your Cold Hands* (2002), *The Vegetarian* (2007) and *The White Book* (2016).

Ans to Q 2: *The Vegetarian* is based on a short story 'The Fruit of My Woman' by Han Kang originally published in 1997.

Ans to Q 3: Refer to Section 15.4

Ans to Q 4: The second part shifts to the perspective of Yeong-hye's brother-in-law, an artist. Narrated by the brother-in-law, this section moves away from domestic conflict and explores themes of desire and artistic obsession.

Ans to Q 5: Yeong-hye speaks very little, but her silence becomes meaningful. Instead of openly explaining herself, she withdraws from conversation and social life altogether. Han Kang uses silence to show how difficult genuine communication can be.

Ans to Q 6: Refer to Section 15.7

Ans to Q 7: Symbolism is another major feature of the novel. Meat symbolises violence, consumption, and human brutality, while plants and trees represent peace, purity, and escape from suffering. Flowers, especially in the second section, suggest both beauty and objectifcation. Han Kang does not explain these symbols directly; instead, readers gradually understand their significance through the narrative.

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M15.12 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q 1. Discuss *The Vegetarian* as a critique of patriarchal control over the female body.
Q 2. Analyse the role of violence and its representation at different levels in the novel.
Q 3. Examine the narrative structure of the novel. How do multiple perspectives shape meaning?

Q 4. Is Yeong-hye's transformation an act of resistance or madness? Give a reasoned answer.
Q 5. Explore the theme of desire and objectification in "Mongolian Mark."
Q 6. Discuss the significance of silence in the novel.
Q 7. Evaluate Han Kang's language and style. How do they contribute to the novel's impact?

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