PGEG S3 04

Indian English Literature

SEMESTER III

ENGLISH

BLOCK 3

KRISHNA KANTA HANDIQUI STATE OPEN UNIVERSITY

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SEMESTER 3
MA IN ENGLISH
COURSE 4: INDIAN ENGLISH LITERATURE
BLOCK 3: INDIAN ENGLISH NOVELS

CONTENTS

		Pages
Unit 11:	**R K Narayan: *The Vendor of Sweets***	**225 - 241**
	R. K. Narayan: The Novelist, His Life & Works, Reading the Novel: *The Vendor of Sweets,* The Storyline, Major Themes, Major Characters, Narayan's Narrative Style, Critical Reception of Narayan	
Unit 12:	**Mulk Raj Anand: *Untouchable***	**242 - 266**
	Mulk Raj Anand: The Novelist, His Life & Works, Reading the Novel: *Untouchable,* The Storyline, Major Themes, Major Characters, Anand's Narrative Style, Critical Reception of Anand	
Unit 13:	**Anita Desai: *Clear Light of Day***	**267 - 289**
	Anita Desai: The Novelist, Her Life and Works, Reading the Novel: *Clear Light of Day,* The Storyline, Major Themes, Major Characters, Desai's Narrative Style, Critical Reception of Desai's *Clear Light of Day*	
Unit 14:	**Amitav Ghosh: *The Hungry Tide* (Part I)**	**290 - 306**
	Amitav Ghosh: The Novelist, His Life and Works,The Storyline of THT, Critical Reception of Amitabh Ghosh	
Unit 15:	**Amitav Ghosh: *The Hungry Tide* (Part II)**	**307 - 323**
	Reading the Novel THT, Major Themes, Major Characters, Ghosh's Narrative Style	

BLOCK 3: INTRODUCTION

The form of the novel that appeared as a popular literary form in the 18th century England, is undoubtedly new to India. The Indian literary historian K. R. Srinivas Iyengar stated that for the novel in India, they had to wait till the latter half of the 19th century. Although the western influence on Indian English novel was quite obvious and although the early Indian English novel was called derivative and imitative of English models, the Indian novelists have successfully employed the Western techniques of novel writing for expressing their ethos and sensibility. Therefore, what essentially distinguishes Indian English novels is its social concern, realism and unfailing interest in men. It represents the cultural perspectives of the Indian people which in a way also helps to articulate the 'Indian' identity. Therefore, Indian English novels have to be studied as an expression of the writers sense of 'Indianness' as well as their hopes and aspirations.

This Block contains total five units. The details of the unit are as follows:

Unit 11: This unit deals with an Indian English novel *The Vendor of Sweets* by R. K. Narayan. Narayan is one among the three leading figures of Indian Writing in English alongside Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao. The novel deals with Jagan who is a prosperous sweet vendor at his 60s, and who is influenced by Gandhian principles. He is extremely fond of his son Mali who announces that he is abandoning school to go to America to become a writer. After a year or two, Mali returns with a half-Korean and half-American wife and with a grand scheme of marketing a machine that would help in novel writing. Jagan is utterly at a loss as he is forced to confront a new world in which his cherished notion of marriage and morals seem to have no importance.

Unit 12: This unit shall introduce you to Mulk Raj Anand, another important Indian English novelist and his highly acclaimed novel *Untouchable.* The novel provides a glimpse of the miserable condition of the untouchables in a society, which had been stratified into various parts on the basis of caste and creed. Anand dealt with the subject of untouchability in a very poignant manner by delineating one day of an untouchable young man's life. He made a definitive protest against the ancient caste system responsible for the menace of untouchability.

Unit 13: This unit deals with Anita Desai's novel *Clear Light of Day.* In this novel, Desai wove the history of Delhi with a middle class Hindu family. Bimala or Bim is a history professor, feels betrayed by her sister Tara and replays her memory in a decaying family mansion in Old Delhi. It is difficult for Tara to understand why Bim does not what to change herself from her sterile existence. *Clear Light of Day* is often considered one of the most successful works of the author, and is praised for "its highly evocative portrait of two sisters caught in the lassitude of Indian life."

Unit 14: In this unit, you will be introduced to Amitav Ghosh and his novel *The Hungry Tide.* Born in Kolkata and now a resident of New York, Amitav Ghosh has been one of the most renowned *Indian* English authors of recent times. A recipient of the coveted Padma Shri Award from the Government of India in 2007, Ghosh has by now established himself as one of the most versatile of the "post Rushdie" generation of expatriate Indian authors writing in English. This unit shall serve as an introduction to Amitav Ghosh—the author and his novel *The Hungry Tide* that tends to focus on a 'micro' culture within the region namely, the Sundarbans or the 'tide country".

Unit 15: This unit provides a discussion on Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Hungry Tide*. The incident of Morichjhapi massacre that took place in 1978-79, when the government of West Bengal forcibly evicted thousands of Bengali refugees who had settled on the island, forms one of the backgrounds for the novel. The novel is set in the Sundarbans the immense labyrinth of tiny islands in the Bay of Bengal. For the settlers here, life is extremely dangerous with possibilities of attacks by tigers, unrest and eviction by the Government. Many a times, without warning tidal floods rise and surge over the land, causing devastation everywhere. As you finish reading the unit, you will learn that the novel explores topics like humanism and environmentalism, especially when they come into a conflict of interest with each other.

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. These have been designed to self-check your progress of study. The hints for the answers to these questions are given at the end of the unit. We strongly advise that you answer the questions immediately after you finish reading the section in which these questions occur. We have also included a few books in the "FURTHER READING" which will be helpful for your further consultation. The books referred to in the preparation of the units have been added at the end of the block. As you know the world of literature and criticism is too big, we strongly advise you not to take a unit to be an end in itself. Despite our attempts to make a unit self-contained, we advise that you read the original texts of the authors prescribed as well as other additional materials for a thorough understanding of the contents of a particular unit.

UNIT 11: R. K. NARAYAN: *THE VENDOR OF SWEETS*

UNIT STRUCTURE

11.1 Learning Objectives

11.2 Introduction

11.3 R. K. Narayan: The Novelist

11.4 Reading the Novel: *The Vendor of Sweets*

- 11.4.1 The Storyline
- 11.4.2 Major Themes
- 11.4.3 Major Characters
- 11.4.4 Narayan's Narrative Style

11.5 Critical Reception of Narayan

11.6 Let us Sum up

11.7 Further Reading

11.8 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

11.9 Possible Questions

11.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- discuss the life and works of R. K. Narayan, one of the important novelists of the early phase of Indian English novels
- form an idea of Narayan as a major novelist of his generation
- discuss the novel *The Vendor of Sweets* in terms of its different aspects
- make an assessment of the reception of R. K. Narayan as well as of the novel.

11.2 INTRODUCTION

This is the first unit of Block 3 of the course on Indian English literature. In this unit, you will gain some ideas about Indian English fiction through R. K. Narayan's novel *The Vendor of Sweets.* Narayan is one among

the three leading figures of early Indian Writing in English alongside Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao. The novel deals with Jagan who is a prosperous sweet vendor at his 60s, and who is influenced by Gandhian principles. He is extremely fond of his son Mali who announces that he is abandoning school to go to America to become a writer. Jagan is confused. After a year or two Mali returns with a half-Korean and half-American wife and with a grand scheme of marketing a machine that would help in novel writing. Jagan is utterly at a loss as he is forced to confront a new world in which his cherished notion of marriage and morals seem to have no importance. Gradually, the clash of civilisation deepens as each chapter progresses. Thus, this novel is an excellent rendering of the experiences of Narayan's own generation of people. By the time you finish reading this unit, you should be able to appreciate the novel as one of the landmarks of Indian fiction writing in English.

11.3 R. K. NARAYAN: THE NOVELIST

Rasipuram Krishnaswami Iyer Narayanaswami (1906–2001), known to the world as R. K. Narayan is an Indian writer who is best known for his "Malgudi" novels set in the fictional South Indian town of Malgudi. R. K. Narayan was born in Madras. His father was a school headmaster. Narayan did some of his studies under his father in his school. It is heard that Narayan's family mostly conversed in English. In later life, Narayan studied at different schools in Madras. Since his childhood days, he was an avid reader of Dickens, Wodehouse, Arthur Conan Doyle and Thomas Hardy. Narayan moved to Mysore to live with his family when his father was transferred to the Maharajah's College High School. The well-stocked library at the school, as well as his father's own, fed his reading habit, and he started writing. After completing high school, Narayan failed the university entrance examination and spent a year at home reading and writing. He subsequently passed the examination in 1926 and joined Maharaja College of Mysore. It took Narayan four years to obtain his Bachelor's degree. Narayan realised later that the only career he was ready to embark on was writing, and he decided to stay at home and write novels.

Narayan wrote his first novel, *Swami and Friends* in 1930. The book was semi-autobiographical and built upon many incidents from his own childhood. With this book, Narayan created Malgudi, a town that creatively reproduced the social sphere of India. However, it was rejected by a publisher. He sent the manuscript of *Swami and Friends* to a friend at Oxford, who instead showed the manuscript to Graham Greene. Greene recommended the book to his publisher, and it was finally published in 1935. Greene also counselled Narayan on shortening his name to become more familiar to the English-speaking audience. Narayan's next novel *The Bachelor of Arts* (1937), was inspired in part by his experiences at college, and dealt with the theme of a rebellious adolescent transitioning to a rather well adjusted adult. His third novel, *The Dark Room* (1938) was about domestic disharmony, showcasing the man as the oppressor and the woman as the victim within a marriage.

After the death of his wife Rajam in 1939, Narayan remained depressed for a long time. The bereavement brought about a significant change in his life and became the inspiration behind his next novel, *The English Teacher*. This novel, like his first two books, is autobiographical to a significant extent, and completes a supposed trilogy following *Swami and Friends* and *The Bachelor of Arts*. In 1940, Narayan tried his hand at a journal, *Indian Thought*. With the help of his uncle, a car salesman, Narayan managed to get more than a thousand subscribers in Madras city alone.

In November 1942, was published his first collection of short stories *Malgudi Days,* followed by *The English Teacher* in 1945. In between, Narayan also started his own publishing company, naming it Indian Thought Publications. After *The English Teacher*, Narayan's writing took a more imaginative and creative turn. His next effort *Mr. Sampath*, was the first book exhibiting this modified approach. Soon after, he published yet another novel *The Financial Expert*, a very significant and original works of fiction in 1951. The novel was based on a true story about a genius called *Margayya*, related to him by his brother. His next novel *Waiting for the Mahatma* is loosely based on a fictional visit of Mahatma Gandhi to Malgudi and includes significant references to the Indian Independence Movement.

In 1953, his works were published in the United States for the first time, by Michigan State University Press. *The Guide* was written while he was visiting the United States in 1956 on the Rockefeller Fellowship. While in the States, Narayan maintained a daily journal that laid the foundation for his book *My Dateless Diary*. Around this time, on a sudden visit to England, Narayan met Graham Greene for the first time. On his return to India, *The Guide* was published. It won him the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award in 1958.

In 1961 was published his *The Man-Eater of Malgudi.* The book was written in the classical art form of comedy. Then Narayan spent three weeks in Adelaide, Sydney and Melbourne on his visit to Australia to have lectures on Indian literature. The trip was funded by a fellowship from the Australian Writers' Group. By this time, Narayan had also achieved significant success and fame. In 1964, Narayan published his first mythological work *Gods, Demons and Others*, a collection of rewritten and translated short stories from Hindu epics. Like many of his other works, this book was illustrated by his younger brother R. K. Laxman. You must have heard about Laxman who had been a great cartoonist of India.

Narayan's next major publication was *The Vendor of Sweets* (1967). It was inspired in part by his visits to America and his contemplations on cultural differences. Then he published a collection of short stories entitled *A Horse and Two Goats* in 1970. Narayan was commissioned by the Karnataka government to write a book to promote tourism in the state. This bore fruits as *The Emerald Route* (Indian Thought Publications, 1980). The book contains his personal perspective on Karnataka's local history and heritage. The same year, he was elected as an honorary member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters and won the AC Benson Medal from the Royal Society of Literature. In 1983, Narayan published his next novel, *A Tiger for Malgudi*, about the relationship between a tiger and humans. His next novel *Talkative Man* was published in 1986. It is the tale of an aspiring journalist from Malgudi.

In 1980, Narayan was nominated to the Rajya Sabha, for his contributions to Indian literature. In 1990, he published his next novel *The*

World of Nagaraj another novel set in Malgudi. Around 1994, Narayan published his final book *Grandmother's Tale*. The book is an autobiographical novella, about his great-grandmother who travelled far and wide to find her husband, but who ran away shortly after their marriage.

Narayan died on 13 May 2001, in Chennai at the age of 94. In his sixty years of writing career, Narayan received many awards and honours. These include the A C Benson Medal from the Royal Society of Literature and the Padma Vibhushan, India's second-highest civilian award.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: Discuss the life and works of R. K. Narayan in brief.

Q 2: Which three novels of Narayan are autobiographical?

11.4 READING THE NOVEL: *THE VENDOR OF SWEETS*

The following sections will guide you to read the novel in terms of its various aspects.

11.4.1 The Storyline

The main plot of the novel revolves around the issues arising from the generation gap between father Jagan and his son Mali. Narayan in his superb style narrates Jagan's role in India's freedom struggle during his youth. He tries to act on the principles described in the great epic Ramayana. Naturopathy forms the pivotal of his life and he even desires to publish his natural way of living in the form of a book, but obviously, it is a futile dream as the draft has been gathering dust in the publisher's office for the last five years. He wears hand-spun cloth that signifies purity to him. In his early days, Jagan loses his wife Ambika because of his belief in nature cures. He had never spent much time with his wife, something that causes discontent in his son Mali. Mali has got his passport and tickets

ready without even informing Jagan about his plans. Mali, without his father's permission discontinues his education, and goes to America to get training to write a book. However, the old man accepts even this diversion with good heart, treasures every letter received from Mali, and proudly exhibits it to anyone who cares to listen. A few years later, he comes back very westernised and brings along a half-American, half-Korean girl, Grace. Jagan assumes that they are married, though Mali never told him this in a straightforward way, which causes great disappointment to Jagan. Jagan however develops affection for Grace and feels Mali is not giving her the attention she deserves. Soon Mali expresses a desire to start a machine factory with some partners from America. He asks his father to invest in this factory. Jagan is unwilling, which causes friction between Jagan and Mali. Troubled by the turmoil, Jagan decides to retire from active working. As this is happening, Mali is caught by the police for drunkenness and deserts his wife. Jagan then asks his cousin to make sure that Mali stays in prison for some time, so that he can learn his mistakes. Jagan also gives some amount of money to the cousin so that he can buy a plane ticket to Grace so that she can go back to her hometown.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 3: Narrate the story of the novel *The Vendor of Sweets* in your own words.

11.4.2 Major Themes

The following are the major themes of the novel *The Vendor of Sweets*.

East versus West/Tradition versus Modernity:

The relationship between Jagan and his son Mali is central to the clash between Eastern and Western cultural values. The two present two diametrically opposite ways of thought as well as two different

lifestyles. This can be found for example, in their food habits: while Jagan maintains a strict, religiously founded diet, Mali starts eating beef and drinking alcohol after his stint in America. Again, while Jagan prefers his vocation of a sweet vendor, and prefers to walk everywhere, Mali aspires for a higher social status that manifests itself in his desire to buy a car. Again, by choosing to enter the field of technology and industry, Mali shows a more westernised outlook while Jagan looks at such a desire as too shallow. For Narayan, progress cannot be reduced to technological advancements but in an individual's successful confrontation and consequent reconciliation with oneself. It thus implies a victory over oneself and over one's material desires. Narayan thus moves away from the seemingly more materialistic Western concept of progress, to the Indian ideal of self- realization that is perceived to be a marker of an authentic life. Each of Narayan's novels take up this theme in various manifestations and all his protagonists undergo significant moments of self-doubt that allow them to question their beliefs and opinions that they have held only superficially after which they arrive at a moment of revelation that takes them to a deeper spiritual or mystical level. Again, in the novel, "the elements of tradition are based on the Hindu view of life and Gandhian ethics, the two most powerful influences discernable in the character of Jagan" (Jha 91). Frequent mentions of the Gita, the Puranas and such texts help create a framework of tradition on which the framework of modernity (the fantastic plan of Mali to manufacture and sell story-telling machines being at the centre of it all) is superimposed. Tradition, as it were, seeps into even the everyday habits of Jagan: "eating natural salts, wearing khadi, spinning the charkha, reading the Gita and writing a book on nature therapy" (Jha 92). Mali, the rebellious college-dropout son of Jagan, on the other hand, becomes remote from such a life. This remoteness and rejection is symbolised by the terse letters and telegrams sent by him to his father, announcing certain significant activities like that of eating beef and drinking alcohol.

Father and Son:

The above theme naturally leads us to another theme: that of the generational gap between the father and the son, representing two different versions of India. Jagan, still living in the past and basking in his glory as a Gandhian who was jailed for his participating in the freedom struggle, does not realise that his son does not share these same ideals. For one who opposed British rule in his youth, Mali's embracing of Western ideals becomes distressing for Jagan, but at the same time, he himself does not realise that part of the reason for this are his own actions, particularly his reluctance to avail of the advantages of modern medicine that cost the life of his wife and Mali's mother. From taking a stereotypical paternal pride in his son and his journey to America for his higher studies, Jagan comes down to despair at the foolhardiness and arrogance of his son, and finally is of the opinion that a bit of jail time will actually make him learn the hard lessons of life more efficiently and teach him some responsibility.

Human versus Machine:

The theme of modernity is manifested in the crucial image of the story-writing machine, which evokes "two major modernist values – mechanization of an area of activity which requires to remain human and a frenzied effort for material prosperity" (Jha 92). The refusal of Jagan to sponsor the project thus affirms the human in preference to the mechanical, and paves the way for the spiritual regeneration of the protagonist, Jagan.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 4: What are the major themes of the novel *The Vendor of Sweets*?

11.4.3 Major Characters

The following are the major characters of the novel.

Jagan:

Jagan is the protagonist of the novel. A follower of Gandhi in his youth, Jagan is now a vendor of sweets. It is Jagan who embodies the ideals of the East. Jagan "discovers the reality of the West through his own son, Mali" (Pousse 44). Jagan is a widower and has a tremendous love for his son, Mali. In an apparent paradox, given his extremely successful career as a sweetmeat seller, Jagan is very conscious and disciplined about his dietary habits. As mentioned earlier, during his youth, Jagan was active in Gandhi's Satyagraha movement, and had even gone to jail. He was consequently criticised and rejected by his family for what they saw as the slackening of his Hindu orthodox beliefs and the fact that he mingled with people from lower classes too. After Independence, he settled in Malgudi where he opened a small business that grew into a large establishment employing twelve people. Jagan leads a Gandhian lifestyle all his life, though, as is pointed out in the novel, it is merely in name, not in spirit. "He makes a point of spinning a few yards of cotton daily and makes sure that his shoes have been cut out of the hide of an animal who died of old age and was not slaughtered. ...he keeps his savings in his house, up in the attic, and lives a very modest life. It is clear that Jagan represents modern India, mistaking religion for routine and finding it normal to cheat the State in order to save money. He gives to beggars on Fridays only and keeps double accounts, one private and one 'which could be inspected by anyone'" (Pousse 44).

While Jagan is dismayed and disappointed by his son's marrying a foreigner and trying to introduce technology into the daily life of tradition in Malgudi, Grace, on the other hand, elicits his sympathy and affection. Because of Jagan's objection to Mali's project of introducing a machine that will write stories, father and son become alienated to each other. Their conflict is further aggravated when Mali expects his father to help him financially in the project, which Jagan is aware that it is a failure from the start. He cannot accept

the fact that his son refuses to follow Gandhian ideals in his life. However, after Mali fails in the project and is jailed for drunkenness, he realises that it is not only his son who has abandoned these ideals but he too is guilty of doing the same. Subsequent to his realization, he renounces his old material life and retires into an old house previously inhabited by a stone carver. As Pousse argues, "[w]ith the independence of India, Jagan has unconsciously forgotten his own identity. While he wanted Mali to inherit his business, it is because of Mali's misbehavior that he finds inner peace and contentment" (Pousse 45). Jagan reconciliation with himself and his circumstances is however in contrast to the original idea Narayan had for him: "In the original idea, Jagan was to make penance for the sins of his ancestors and of his debauched son by building a temple. In this godly service, he was to meet with corrupt contractors. As Narayan explained to Mehta: 'Such are the ways of the world'" (Pousse 57).

Mali:

Jagan's son. Mali blames his father for his mother's death since Jagan had refused to take the help of modern medicine for his ill wife. After living in America he dislikes his hometown and wants to modernise it. Mali wins a scholarship to go and study for a year in the United States of America from where he returns with a Korean-American girl friend. During his stay in America, Mali has transformed into a total Westerner. He eats beef, drinks alcohol and has in mind "a fantastic plan to make money and educate people"...[and]With the help of an American friend and with his father's money, he hopes to manufacture and sell in India a machine which can write novels and short stories" (Pousse 44).

Grace:

A Korean-American girl who is brought home by Mali to India and announced as his wife. Unlike Mali who is arrogant, she is gentle and accommodating, and tries to integrate into the different culture that she encounters in India. She thus works like a catalyst between

the two cultures, as well as a bridge between Jagan and Mali. Jagan becomes very fond of her, and after Mali is jailed due to his misadventures, Jagan arranges for her to go back to America.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 5: What ideas can you have of Jagan from the reading of this section?

11.4.4 Narayan's Narrative Style

In his fiction, Narayan attempts to grapple with the changing nature of India as it emerges into a modern nation after Independence. In this, he privileges the picture of India seen through the eyes of middle-class people from the South. Most of his work including *The Vendor of Sweets* is thus set in the fictional town of Malgudi. In telling the stories of ordinary people trying to live their lives in a changing world, Narayan uses a realistic style that is marked by simplicity and subtle humour. At the same time, his is a critical realism that enables the inclusion of ethical or moral preoccupations into the accounts of everyday lives of his characters. His use of English, again, is devoted towards recreating a picture of everyday Indian life through the introduction of Indian words and phrases as well as texts like the Gita that also evoke the spiritual aspects of this life. Narayan also tends to focus on characters rather than storyline. Pousse argues that this is related to the Indian tradition of passing on stories orally and the need for a slow building up of the complications and a large amount of humour to keep the audience's attention. Narayan also displays a reluctance to be overtly political in his fiction. Frequently in his work, Narayan uses contrasts in order to pursue his themes more powerfully. In this novel, for example, the two main characters are used as foils against each other so as to bring out the conflict within India between the past and the present and between tradition and modernity more powerful. Narayan then goes on to show ironically how the two terms can themselves

become interchangeable in that the supposedly traditional (in a positive sense) Jagan has himself succumbed to a materialistic, modern (in a negative sense) India, and how by going back to a more spiritually rewarding life has actually made Jagan more tolerant of others (a more progressive outlook that can be seen for example in his treatment of Grace).

Moreover, as Fawzia Afzal Khan argues, "there is a balancing of various genres in Narayan's novels, a harmonious coexistence symbolising a unity, a wholeness, toward which Narayan's protagonists are constantly progressing and which they must achieve if they are to mature fully" (Khan 27-28). This "wholeness" is "possible in the Malgudi of Narayan's novels because it is a world rooted in Indian myth and tradition, a town that is still pastoral in its innocence of the political reality of modern, twentieth-century India...what matters most is not how the natives deal with the aftermath of political fragmentation, but whether they will achieve an authentic and sincere identity as Indians in an 'authentic' Indian setting (Khan 28). Khan connects this aspect of wholeness to both Western realism as well as an Indian framework of myth. Western realism, she argues, aims at the individual achieving "a state of balance between individual autonomy and social responsibility (neither extreme being viewed as good) and this is usually achieved through becoming honest, or sincere, about oneself and one's motives, which, in turn, leads to sincerity and responsibility toward others" (Khan 28). However, Narayan adds to this, the element of myth, since "it is through the use of Indian myth that some measure of an authentic Indian past can be recreated" (Khan 28). In addition, this "wholeness", again, does not always lead to a balance between the individual and society in his fiction, but, as in the present novel, lead away from the society, as in the case of Jagan. Thus, characters like Jagan "choose against maturity and sincerity in the realist mode, although they may achieve authenticity and wisdom within the mode of myth" (Khan 28). The realist mode of Narayan thus is not mere

derivation but through the mythic mode, also incorporates ways of narration that are closer to societies like India.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 6: Comment on Narayan's narrative style.

11.5 CRITICAL RECEPTION OF NARAYAN

Narayan has been seen primarily as a realist, but the critical realism apparent in his work, as can be seen from the above section, does require some clarification. We have already seen the arguments made by Pousse regarding Narayan's portrayal of a modern India in spiritual crisis in his fiction, something that is embodied in Jagan in the present novel. While, Fawzia Afzal Khan talks about the mythic mode that accompanies the Narayan's realism in his fiction. Critics (William Walsh, Alam, Ramtake, Jha, and so on) have also commented frequently on Narayan's preoccupation with the tradition/modernity and East/West binaries. In this novel, these manifest themselves in the generational gap and consequent clashes between the father and son duo, Jagan and Mali. This theme is discussed in detail in the earlier section on themes. Ramtake also discusses the social perspective of Narayan discernible in his treatment of the hypocrisy of Jagan who carefully builds up a distinctive surface and deeper life (symbolised, for example, in his double account books).

Finally, postcolonial criticism of the novel has tried to read the novel as one of decolonisation (as in Reeja Jose P.'s essay "The Decolonized Self in *The Vendor of Sweets*"). Jagan is seen as striving hard to "resist the various phases of colonization" while it is his son Mali, "the extended self of Jagan who plays the role of the agency of imperialistic expansion" (Jose P. 35). The two "together constitute the transitional phase of the Indian colony characterised by economic changes, social upheavals, political outbursts and cultural bombardments", so that the "tussle between past and present" represents "a tug of war between the two extremes of consciousness – 'the colonized' and 'the decolonized'" (Jose P. 35, 36).



11.6 LET US SUM UP

By this time, you have learnt that R. K. Narayan rendered a major contribution to the development of the genre of Indian English novels before the Independence. You must have understood that the novel *The Vendor of Sweets* provides a picture of traditional India, which is set against the modern India. This novel also reflects Narayan's understanding of the fact that a large number of young men go to America only to return with westernised thinking. They turn a deaf ear to their own native traditions and customs. This aspect is best represented by Mali, Jagan's son. So, from your reading of this unit, you must have formed an idea of Narayan as a major novelist of his generation and the different social issues he raised in his novels. You are now in a position to discuss the different important aspects related to the novel *The Vendor of Sweets.* You must have also learnt how to assess the reception of the novel since its publication.



11.7 FURTHER READING

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Website and Electronic Resources:

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http://www.penguinbooksindia.com/en/content/rk-narayan

http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/403425/RK-Narayan

11.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: R.K. Narayan was born in Madras in 1906 in South India… …his novels *Swami and Friends* and *The Bachelor of Arts* are both set in the fictional world of Malgudi… …Narayan's work *The Guide* won him the prestigious National Prize of the Indian Literary Academy… …Narayan has also authored collections of short stories which include *A Horse and Two Goats*, *Malgudi Days*, and *Under the Banyan Tree*…. …In 1980, he was awarded the A.C. Benson Medal by the Royal Society of Literature and in 1982 he was made an Honorary Member of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. Narayan died in 2001.

Ans to Q 2: *The English Teacher*… …. *Swami and Friends*… …*The Bachelor of Arts*.

Ans to Q 3: Jagan is extremely frond of her son Mali… …Mali, without his father's permission, discontinues his education, and goes to America to get training to write a book… …A few years later, he comes back very westernised and brings along a half-American, half-Korean girl,

Grace… … Jagan assumes that they are married, though Mali never told him this in a straightforward way, which causes great disappointment to Jagan…. …troubled by the turmoil, Jagan gets confused about the generation gaps.

Ans to Q 4: East versus West/Tradition versus Modernity… …Father Son relationship… …men versus machine and so on.

Ans to Q 5: Jagan is a follower of Gandhi in his youth… …now he is a vendor of sweets… …after Independence, he settled in Malgudi…. …he is dismayed and disappointed by his son's marrying a foreigner and trying to introduce technology into the daily life of the Malgudi people… …their conflict is further aggravated by Mali's expectations that his father should help him financially in the project.

Ans to Q 6: In telling the stories of ordinary people trying to live their lives in a changing world, Narayan uses a realistic style… …this style is marked by simplicity and subtle humour… … his is a critical realism that enables the inclusion of ethical or moral preoccupations into the accounts of everyday lives of his characters… … he introduces Indian words and phrases as well as texts like the *Gita* to evoke the spiritual aspects of Indian life…. …uses contrasts in order to pursue his theme of cultural differences.



11.9 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: Discuss the significance of the literary renderings of R. K. Narayan into Indian English fiction.

Q 2: In what ways is the relationship between Jagan and his son Mali central to Narayan's novel *The Vendor of Sweets*? Discuss with reference to the novel.

Q 3: Narayan's preoccupation with the tradition/modernity and East/West binaries is best reflected in the generational gap and consequent clashes between the father and son. Discuss.

Q 4: What are the narrative techniques used by Narayan in this novel? Read the text of the novel carefully and find out the examples of Narayan's use of contrasts in the novel.

Q 5: In what ways, do you think, is *The Vendor of Sweets* an 'Indian' novel although it is written in a non-native language like English?

Q 6: Jagan is suspicious of his son Mali who returns from America with a machine, but he is sympathetic towards Grace. Discuss.

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UNIT 12: MULK RAJ ANAND: *UNTOUCHABLE*

UNIT STRUCTURE

12.1 Learning Objectives

12.2 Introduction

12.3 Mulk Raj Anand: The Novelist

12.4 Reading the Novel: *Untouchable*

- 12.4.1 The Storyline
- 12.4.2 Major Themes
- 12.4.3 Major Characters
- 12.4.4 Anand's Narrative Style

12.5 Critical Reception of Anand

12.6 Let us Sum up

12.7 Further Reading

12.8 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

12.9 Possible Questions

12.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- discuss the life and works of Mulk Raj Anand who mostly dealt with the social realities of pre-Independent India.
- trace the formative influences on Anand that helped him emerge as a novelist with a purpose
- explain the difficulties of the untouchables living in a very inclement society of high caste Hindus.
- get an outline of Mahatma Gandhi's appeal as the greatest leader of Indian national congress through your reading of the novel
- assess the reception of Mulk Raj Anand as an important novelist in Pre-Independence India.

12.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit shall introduce you to Mulk Raj Anand, an important Indian English novelist and his novel *Untouchable.* Anand, a severe critic of the fossilised Indian traditions was influenced by western culture and philosophy. Eventually, he tried to incorporate in his writings all the best ideas he had received from the west. In the novel *Untouchable*, you will get a glimpse of the miserable condition of the untouchables in a society, which had been stratified into various parts on the basis of caste and creed. Anand dealt with the subject of untouchability in a very poignant manner by delineating one day of an untouchable young man's life. While doing so, he took resort to one of the most sophisticated modern narrative technique "stream of consciousness" in a modified form to suite his style of narrative in Indian context. In this unit, you will also learn that by exposing the evils of untouchability prevalent in the Indian society to the wide gaze of the world, Anand made a definitive protest against the ancient caste system responsible for the menace of untouchability. Therefore, this unit will not only enhance your knowledge of Anand as a novelist and *Untouchable* as a novel of protest but also shall make you aware of the social realities of pre-Independence India.

12.3 MULK RAJ ANAND: THE NOVELIST

In this section, we shall discuss Mulk Raj Anand's life and works. After reading this section, you will understand why Anand has been regarded as one of the most important novelists of the early 20th century Indian English novel.

Mulk Raj Anand was born in1905. The formative years of Anand were marked by social awakening and political turmoil. Anand's hometown Amritsar was the centre of all political activities, which helped him to become well acquainted with the contemporary political climate of India. In 1919, when the martial law was imposed in Amritsar; Anand came out to the streets. Subsequently, he was arrested for violating the curfew, and by the order of the police superintendent, he was punished with seven stripes on

the back. This incident created deep impression on Anand's young mind. Later, Anand also took part in Gurudwara Reform Movement when he was studying in Khalsa College and was imprisoned for this.

Anand's father belonged to the coppersmith community who received western education and enrolled himself as a clerk in the British army. His father's money-mindedness was a matter of profound dislike for Anand. He became conscious of his sanity and self-respect because of his dislike for his father's meanness, greediness, duplicity, lack of moral scruple and servility towards the British. Anand's mother was very different from his father. Her father was a Sikh peasant who fought for the Khalsa army against the British in various Sikh wars. When Anand was in jail for breaking the curfew in 1919, his mother went to the jail for seeking his release. Anand's father could not accept his behaviour, but his mother went to receive him when he was released. In this way, Anand grew into manhood in a very difficult situation because of the confluence of two opposing forces i.e., the influence of his father and mother. He got the spirit of rebellion and patriotism from his mother.

Anand's adopted uncle Dev Dutt, a Sanskrit scholar and a prominent leader of Arya Samaj, also influenced him very much. Through him, Anand became aware of the blind superstition and meaningless rituals practised by the coppersmith community. Those practices were intolerable for Anand. The Urdu poet Mohammad Iqbal's poem *Asrar-i-Khudi* attracted him so much that he even went to Lahore to meet Iqbal who supported Anand when he stated about the atmosphere of slavery and falsehood responsible for creating in him a sense of despair and disgust. Similarly, Guru Nanak's fight against inequality and injustice shaped Anand's moral understanding. Inspired by the preaching of Guru Nanak, Anand decided to fight against the cruelty prevalent in India of his time. It was Guru Nanak's attempt of finding truth, which inspired Anand to visit England in search of his identity at the age of twenty. It was because, in India at that time, there were many restrictions on individual sensibility and so it was not possible for Anand to get the desired identity he was searching for.

In 1925, Anand went to London and enrolled himself in the University College. There he came in touch with the members of 'Bloomsbury group' such as—E. M. Forster, T. S. Eliot, John Strachey, Leonard Woolf and Virginia Woolf. In 1927, he went to Ireland and was immensely influenced by W. B. Yeats. With utmost attention, he noticed Yeats' adequate representation of the village life of the Irish common men in his writing. It was as if Anand received the much-needed way through the maze to decide his goal. The general strike of England in 1926 also had a great impact on Anand. He was shocked to observe that in England like in India, class-consciousness was very much intense. During the strike, the upper class people were against the workers who were fighting for better wages. Anand supported the strike, and he had to face physical assault for this. Anand realised that in exploiting the poor, the situations in England and India were alike.

However, the failure of the general strike was a baffling incident for him. He discussed with his Marxist friends about the possibilities of communism in eradicating the social problems. In 1932, Anand got the opportunity to read the writings of Karl Marx on India, which influenced him greatly. After his perusal of *Communist Manifesto,* he began to take part in the discussion of Marxism with the famous trade unionist and pamphleteer Allen Hall. Anand said that after this he began to look at the world with different perspectives. Anand was charged as a communist propagandist, which pained him much, and to clarify such a charge, he said that he got the idea of socialism from Tolstoy, Ruskin and Mahatma Gandhi. Inspired by Marx's writing, Anand also published his *Letters on India.* Anand in his Letters on India castigated the ruthless exploitation of British government of the Indian masses.

In 1927, when he visited India, he spent a few months in Gandhi's Sabarmati Ashram in Ahmadabad. He had read Gandhi's banned book *Hind Swaraj* (1909) when he was at school. From that time onwards, he was influenced by Gandhi. While living in his Ashram, Anand consulted with Gandhi regarding the first draft of his novel *Untouchable.* Gandhi however, did not consider it favourably, because according to him, the draft carried the touch of 'Bloomsbury' spirit in it. Therefore, Anand revised the draft. Later, he stated that Gandhi made an indelible impression on him.

In 1938, Anand extensively travelled across India, spent a few months with the communist leader Kanwar Brajesh Singh of Kalakankar, and helped him in organising Kisan Sabhas. After that, he returned to London. He had planned to return to India soon, but in the mean time, World War II started. Therefore, he decided to contribute his share of participation in India's freedom struggle while still living in London. There he collaborated with V. K. Krishna Menon, the great Indian nationalist, diplomat, and politician, in raising the awareness of the Englishmen and the Indians living in England. While doing so, he was also aware that the British were not the only entity to exploit the poor Indian masses. Anand envisioned a huge panorama of native exploitative forces in India and he decided to fight against them, so that he could liberate the exploited. Anand believed that in the Indian society there were many social evils due to the blind faith of the Indian masses on God and god-men.

Mulk Raj Anand began his novelistic career with *Untouchable.* He revolutionised Indian novel in English when he made an untouchable the protagonist of his first novel. Only a writer like Anand who dedicated his literary career for the exploited and the oppressed could dare to do so. Anand's love for the suffering masses of India was unprecedented. It only speaks of Anand's immense love for human beings however debased their position may be in the social hierarchy. All his novels are testament to his uncompromising love for the lowest dregs of the society. Along with his love for his exploited countrymen, he also portrayed burning social issues of his time through his novels. *Coolie* (1936) was Anand's second novel. It is about the sufferings of Munoo a fifteen years old boy from Kangra hills. His uncle forcefully placed him in the household of Babu Nathoo Ram as a domestic help. The plight of Munoo ended only when he breathed his last in Simla while working for Mrs. Mainwaring.

Two Leaves and A Bud (1937) was the third novel of Anand where he delineated the sufferings of the tea-plantation labourers. Protagonist Gangu and his family came to Macpherson tea estate of Assam in search of work, land and happiness but in the process lost his wife and his own life leaving his son and daughter in the wilderness. *The Village* (1939), *Across*

the Black Waters (1941) and *The Sword and the Sickle* (1942) are known as the Lal Singh trilogy where Anand delineated the poignant tales of the condition of the Indian peasants with Lal Singh as the protagonist of all the novels. Anand's next novel *The Big Heart* (1945) was his last novel before the independence. The novel realistically represented the travails of the thathiars due to setting up of an industry by the wealthy thathiars. The protagonist Ananta met with a tragic end for his readiness to support the machine. In *The Old Woman and the Cow* (1960) which is later renamed as *Gauri*, Anand portrays the character of a peasant girl Gauri who was at first forsaken by her husband but later she became self-reliant and independent. *The Road* (1964) is written on the theme of untouchability but the success of *Untouchable* was missing. *The Private Life of an Indian Prince* (1953) is a moving detail of a prince Victor and his sufferings because of the accession of his state to independent India. *Seven Summers* (1951) is a fictional autobiography with its hero Krishan. The novel encompasses the first seven years of Krishan's life. *Morning face* (1968) is a sequel to the earlier novel *Seven Summers* where we have Krishan in his boyhood. Krishan's college life is portrayed in *Confession of a Lover* (1976). The novel attempted to delineate the academic ambience of a college with considerable success.

Apart from these novels, Anand also wrote six collections of short stories. These collections are –*The Lost Child and Other Stories* (1934), *The Barber's Trade Union and Other Stories* (1944), *The Tractor and the Corn Goddess and Other Stories* (1947), *Reflections on the Golden Bed and Other Stories* (1953), *The Power of Darkness*, *Lajwanti and Other Stories* (1966) and *Between Tears and Laughter* (1973). In mode, spirit and tone, his short stories are wide ranging. Both rural and urban settings are used with felicity by Anand. His characters also belong to various strata of the society. Fable, parable, bardic narrative and folk tales etc are various forms that Anand used in his short stories.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: How did the writings of Karl Marx influence Anand?

Q 2: Mention the two novels of Anand written on the lives of the coolies.

12.4 READING THE NOVEL: *UNTOUCHABLE*

This section will help you to understand the novel in its essential detail. It is suggested that you should read the novel in its entirety so that you can have a firsthand experience of Anand's character delineation as well as his narrative style.

12.4.1 The Storyline

Untouchable is Anand's first novel. Here, he portrays a day in the life of Bakha—a sweeper boy. The novel is about Bakha's gradual self-realization of his caste and the stigma of untouchability associated with it. Bakha lives in the outcaste's colony outside the town of Bulandshahr. In the mud-walled houses of the colony, there lived the outcastes. The colony was quite unhygienic to live in because it lacked adequate drainage system; its lanes were covered with donkey, sheep, horse, cow and buffalo dung; and the air was filled with the odious smell of hides and skins of dead carcasses. Bakha lived a simple life with his father Lakha who was the Jemadar of all the sweepers along with his brother Rakha and his sister Sohini. Because of his old age, Lakha stopped his work of latrine cleaning, and left it for his eighteen year old son Bakha. The sweeper family lived in a small and dark cottage and they accepted the caste realities without any protest. But, Bakha gradually found it hard to understand why he couldn't get due respect as a human being in spite of working very hard all day long from the dawn to the dusk. He was fascinated by the manners of the Tommies as they treated him amiably. He

also had fondness for his friend as they called him as 'Pilpali Shahib' due to his English attire.

As a scavenger, Bakha was efficient and quick in his work. The havildar Charat Singh liked Bakha's alacrity of latrine cleaning. He praised Bakha and promised to give him a hockey stick as reward. Bakha's sister Sohini had very attractive physical features. She faced many injustices because of her young age and attractiveness. Bakha and his sister Sohini were destined to suffer from various unfair treatments from the caste-ridden society because of their ancestral work of scavenging. One day, he accidentally touched a high-caste Hindu for which he was insulted and beaten. Then, his sister Sohini also faced an attempt of molestation by the village priest Pundit Kali Nath at the temple on the pretext of helping her. Bakha was helpless because he was aware of the fact that he could do nothing. When he went for the customary begging trip to have food items, a high caste Hindu woman threw down a piece of bread to Bakha from the balcony of her house. Such inhuman treatment and humiliations were really intolerable for him.

However, he went on facing them without any complaint but it burned his inner being considerably. He faced the humiliation without any complaint but inwardly he burned in fury. His frustration was unlimited because of the insults he faced throughout the day. He was sad and heartbroken. He met the Salvation Army chief Colonel Hutchinson who asked him to come to church to pacify his disturbed mind. But, Colonel Hutchinson's soothing words were ineffective in pacifying his indignation at the society. Later, he went to Golbagh where he got the chance to listen to Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi's embalming words uttered in support of the untouchables were really thrilling for Bakha. He was fascinated by the support Mahatma promised for the untouchables. But, his anguished heart was pacified when the poet Iqbal Nath Sarashar mentioned the

modern invention of flush system in latrines. At last, Bakha became hopeful of finding a solution to the curse of his low birth.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 3: In what condition did the outcastes of Bulandshahr live?

Q 4: How did Bakha get rays of hope at the end of the day?

12.4.2 Major Themes

The following are the major themes of the novel *Untouchable*. These themes are seemingly interconnected with the life of the central protagonist Bakha. While reading the novel, you should learn to demarcate them on the basis of your understanding.

Exploitation of the Untouchables:

Thousands of years ago, the ancient Indian society was divided into different classes so that all the communities living within it would function properly. Such a classification might have contributed greatly to the development and prosperity of man's life during that time. However, with the changing time, the social necessities and basis must also change. Throughout the ages, the Indian society changed in multiple aspects, but the strict structure of caste system had been still a dominant one. In fact, casteism had been associated with many social and economic evils, which dampened the progress of Indian society towards having modern and progressive outlook.

In Indian society, caste is related to birth and therefore cannot be chosen. In ancient times, the Indian society consisted of four classes–the Brahmans, the Kshatriyas, the Vaishyas and the Shudra. The Brahmans were entrusted with the duty of imparting knowledge and performing priestly rituals. The Kshatriyas were the people belonging to ruling classes. The Vaishyas were the class of people consisting of tradesmen and peasants. The Shudras were

at the lowest strata of the society. In the caste system, the Brahmans were on the top of the hierarchical order. The Kshatriyas followed them. The Vaishyas and the Shudras were next to follow. Carpenters, weavers and blacksmiths were included in the artisan caste, whereas tanners, barbers, washermen, potters and oilpressers belonged to the menial caste. Both these two castes i.e., artisans and menials belonged to the Sudras. The lowest among all the castes were the scavenger castes. These castes were regarded unclean and untouchable. Inter-marriage amongst the castes was prohibited, and if any violation was observed it was dealt with severe punishments. Like inter caste marriage, inter-dinning was also strictly prohibited amongst the higher castes and lower castes.

Every society has its unwritten laws, which it enforces on its members. Most often, in the Indian society, social and religious rules have close relationship and there are specific sets of rules for specific castes, which were to be followed with strict adherence. Sometimes, for the higher castes the public opinion served as rules. For the lower castes, caste authority was strictly maintained by the Panchayats to obtain obedience from them for the customary rules. Panchayat acted as standing body to look after any transgression or violation of the rules related to castes. The caste authority like Panchayat dealt with the breaches of caste rules for marriage, and laws relating to eating and drinking amongst the castes. There were various punishments for the offender when the offence was established. The general form of punishment was in the mode of fine, and depending on the caste status, the amount of the fine varied. Sometimes, the punishment was delivered in the form of feast to be fed to the Panchayat or the community. Purification ceremony following the rules of shastras was also prescribed by the Panchayat. The severest punishment was social excommunication. Such a dreaded punishment was offered only when the offender was found to be rebellious and recalcitrant.

Constant subjugation and humiliation of the untouchables bred a mental attitude, which was fatal to their development as human beings. To avoid pollution, the untouchables were made to live in isolated places away from the inhabiting places of higher caste people. No public well was open to them and their children could not study in all schools. Though they were Hindus, the doors of the temples were restricted to their entry. The extent of exclusion was such that even the mere shadow of the untouchable could pollute the high caste person. In this way, in the Indian society, the caste system nullified the right to equality and destroyed the self-esteem of the lower-caste people, basically the untouchables. It also debarred the untouchables from any kind of freedom since ancient times. They were in constant fear of transgressing the caste rules and the consequent punishment to be followed for such violation. Generation after generation passed facing different kinds of exploitation and subjugation, which imprinted indelible impression on the untouchables. Sometimes, occasional sense of resentment might arise in their minds, but that was too faint to get expression from their dominated heart. No help from any quarter was there for these people. They were accustomed to their lowest position in the society and never ever tried to change it. They knew in acceptance lay their happiness and they went on doing so.

In *Untouchable,* Anand created the character of Bakha who became a glaring example of the suffering youth of the untouchable community. The hopes and dreams of Bakha were similar to that of every other youth of his time. His dissatisfactions and agonies were at work to expose the menace of untouchability in the Pre-independence Indian society. His discontent against the obsessively guarded ritualised rules of caste hierarchy against slightest of violation was justified because it approved of the sufferings of the untouchables which led to their dehumanisation. But, his fellow untouchables accepted their humiliating position without any apparent show of dissatisfaction. They were censored throughout

the ages. Such censorship often put indelible impressions on their body and mind. Thus, Anand's first novel *Untouchable* became a living testament of the pain, misery and distress of the untouchables of India. The novel most faithfully represented the realities of the hardships confronted by the untouchables in their day-to-day life through the character of Bakha.

Conflict between Traditional and Modern Values:

Untouchable was written in the early period of 1930s, a period marked by national agitations led by Gandhi. Men and women followed his dictums to fight against the colonisers and the degrading social practises. Consequently, many social customs and beliefs could no longer sustain their hold on to the society as they did in earlier periods. It was a transitional society where there was conflict between tradition and modernity. This theme of the clash of values old and modern gained ground in the character of Bakha, the protagonist of the novel. He was an untouchable bodily but within himself, he had a mind, which was always questioning his traditional place in the society. He knew that he was destined to suffer a life of seclusion, but he would like to change it if possible, for which he was wandering aimlessly to have his questions answered. Sometimes, he wanted to change his lot by having dressed like a European. His cherished desire was to be a white sahib but not a caste Hindu. Unlike Bakha, other untouchables were not at all concerned about their degraded lot. They accepted their position in the society without even dreaming to change it. Bakha's father and brother were two such untouchables. Mahatma's speech in the Golbagh and the poet Iqbal's arguments with Bashir offered the promise of change for which there was eager waiting on the part of yearning souls like Bakha.

Social Criticism:

In *Untouchable*, Anand portrayed the character of Bakha, revolving whom the whole action of the novel proceeds, keeping in mind the actual social ambience of the society of his time. The rigidity

and strictness of the caste system was such that the outcastes and lower castes had to face discrimination in every step of their life. It was as if they were not human beings but beasts of burdens. The majority sentiment was that even if some day they would vanish from the earth, there would not be any harm to the human race. Nobody would deny the harmful effect of such a standing regarding the members of the society who all the time found them at the receiving end of the caste system. For thousands of years, they had been subjected to discrimination on the basis of caste. Result of such discrimination is very severe one because whatever is portrayed in *Untouchable* may be fictional, but the suffering of the untouchable in the caste ridden Indian society is very much real. They had been deprived of all the amenities of civilised life. The untouchables were given secluded place away from the high caste people to live in, they were not allowed to draw water from the public well, they needed to shout out loud about their approach on the road, they were not permitted to worship in the religious place where 'clean' and 'noble' jatis used to go etc. These are some of the instances of injustice done to the untouchables, which got expressed in *Untouchable.* Though there was no frequent dissatisfaction amongst the untouchables, occasionally they showed their discontent when situation demanded. Apart from Bakha, his father Lakha also once violated the norms of the caste system when he entered into the Hakim's chamber to get medicine for dying Bakha. There is no denying that the untouchables are obsequious to the demands of the society regarding caste, but at the same time, it is also true that in extreme conditions they expressed their anguish and discontent. Anand successfully delineated the sufferings of the untouchables in his first novel *Untouchable* and made forceful critique of the menace of untouchability.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 5: Give an account of the four classes of the Indian society.

Q 6: How do you estimate Anand's handling of the theme of untouchability with reference to the caste system?

Q 7: Do you think Anand is successful in portraying the condition of the untouchables in his novel?

12.4.3 Major Characters:

It is apparent, the development of the plot in *Untouchable* is solely dependent upon its central protagonist Bakha's psychological broodings and negligible actions. However, there are some other characters, who also contribute significantly to the unfurling of actions in the novel. They are discussed along with the character of Bakha. Of course, you should create your own understanding of the characters with reference to their context inside the novel.

Bakha:

In *Untouchable,* the central character Bakha was dissatisfied with his life from the very beginning. Time and again, he had been expressing his discontent towards the inhuman treatment meted out to his fellow beings. He was an untouchable but at the same time, he was a jovial young man with all the characteristic dreams and wishes. Unlike his fellow untouchables, he never learnt to see himself as an untouchable. He wanted to be a Babu because his uncle told him about the life style of a Babu. Sometimes, he was fascinated by the British sepoys and tried to imitate them by living like them or dressing like them. All the trials and tribulations made him aware of his untouchable status in the society. It was the grim reality of being an untouchable, which haunted him like anything. His sufferings made him strong but at the same time, it also made him aware of the difficulties of an untouchable. He realised that his caste would never let him live a free life.

Bakha had to face numerous difficulties in the society due to his caste. He was oblivious of the stigma of untouchability. He wanted to live life to the brim. He had an indomitable desire to play hockey and when Havildar Charat Singh offered to give him a hockey stick, he was overjoyed. He was full of gratitude and characteristic servility of a slave was apparent in him. As a cheerful young boy, he wanted to go to school because he wanted to become a sahib but his father did not fulfil his wish. His father told him that schools were not for the Bhangis. It was later when he could understand the reason of his father's refusal to send him to school. He understood that he was a sweeper's son and could never become a babu. He also realised that no school could admit him for fear of pollution to other high caste Hindu. When Bakha was abused by the upper caste men on the street, he could have fled away. However, he did not do so because many upper caste men who surrounded him would have been defiled by his touch. Of course, he would have liked to run away from the spot. There was no scope of revolt for the untouchables. After this incident, the bitter reality dawned upon Bakha, and most pathetically, he treaded on the road shouting at the pedestrian cautioning them about his approach. Such inhuman abuses and humiliations were familiar occurrence for the untouchables. But, for Bakha it was new and so he could not reconcile such treatment and a faint shade of rebellion was visible in him. Later, in a show of defiance, he entered into the temple, which he was unable to think of earlier. There was curiosity in his heart regarding the temple for he never in his life entered in to a temple. His determination was like that of a murderer in his attempt to enter into the temple. There was more surprise waiting for him when he met his sister Sohini, who told him how the temple priest Pundit Kali Nath attempted to molest her. He was mad with anger and declared menacingly that he would go and kill him. However, it was only a verbal threatening. He was unable to attempt physical violence because he could not overcome the psychological barrier created

by thousand years of oppression. He wanted to take revenge but he could not, he was shackled by an abstract intangible power. It was a psychological barrier, which restrained him to go against the high caste Hindus.

It is true, whenever he faced an adverse reaction from any member of the high caste Hindu society, he was angry and inwardly showed his anger. However, he never tried to turn it to physical action. In fact, he was a lonely figure amongst the untouchables who used to look deep into the norms of orthodox Hindu society and found them inhuman and prejudicial. He never liked his vocation of cleaning the latrines and he expressed it candidly, whenever he got a chance. That is why, he was elated when the poet Sarashar talked about the flush to remove all the Harijans from the task of cleaning the latrines. Bakha thought they would be able save themselves from the stigma of untouchability when the flush system would be introduced to the latrines. Therefore, it is clear that Bakha is a conscious untouchable who could dare to think of showing dissatisfaction against the severe rules of caste system. He could have fought against the caste system, had he been an educated young man with the knowledge of the way of the world. Whenever he faced humiliating situation, he asked himself many questions, which were remained unanswered. He was not having any way out from the web of the caste system, which entwined him and his fellow untouchables in a python grip.

Lakha:

Lakha is the peevish and short-tempered father of Bakha. He is the Jamadar amongst the sweepers but routinely avoids work due to his old age. Unlike Bakha, he regards the caste Hindus as his superiors and tells Bakha to respect them. Passive and meek, he can never think of fighting for his self-respect. He is fond of delicious food and so he always sends Bakha to collect food items for him. Of course, his warm-heartedness is revealed when he recounted his past days in which he did his best to save the life of

his young son Bakha. Lakha represents the common untouchables and his weaknesses as such only highlighted Bakha's superiority and uncommonness.

Sohini:

Sohini is the daughter of Lakha. She is charming and modest but hard working young girl. In the absence of her mother, she has to look after all the household work and go for cleaning the houses of high caste Hindus. Apart from such works, she also goes for drawing water from the public well. It is an arduous task as she cannot do it by herself. The untouchables are debarred from using the public wells. It is only if a high caste Hindu takes pity on them and draws water from the well, they can have it. It is in such an outing to draw water that she comes to the notice of Pundit Kali Nath's lustful eyes. Sohini represents those beautiful untouchable girls who are simple, innocent, and prone to fall victim to the lust of some evil minded high caste Hindus.

Colonel Hutchinson:

Colonel Hutchinson is not a military officer but the chief of the Salvation Army with the primary duty of propagating the messages of Christ. He visits the colony of the untouchables for possible converts. He does his best in telling the untouchables about Christ and his messages of love and the Kingdom of Heaven. He thinks that it is the duty of the missionaries in India to go closer to the native Indians instead of expecting the Indians to come closer to the missionaries. He is clever enough to learn Hindustani to come closer to the Indians. At the same time, he finds it necessary that the missionaries should dress like the natives to bring about a feeling of closeness. He tries his best to convert Bakha by saying that in Christianity, Brahmin and Bhangi are treated equally. Bakha could have impressed but when the Colonel's wife indirectly refers to him as a dirty Bhangi, he loses all interests and moves away from the place. The colonel represents some of the Christian missionaries who come to India for the purpose of helping the Indians by converting them to Christianity.

Mahatma Gandhi:

At the last part of *Untouchable,* Gandhi appears as one of the characters of the novel to deliver a speech. People react frenziedly to the news of the arrival of Mahatma in the Golbagh and throng the place. In his speech, Mahatma says that he regards untouchability as the greatest blot on Hinduism. He also says that emancipation of the untouchables is one of his strongest desires that keep him alive. But, at the same time, he also puts the onus on the untouchables by mentioning their evil habit of eating carrion.

Iqbal Nath Sarashar:

Iqbal Nath Sarashar is a poet and the editor of *Nawan Jug***.** He is a young man with a feline face, sparkling eyes and long black curly hair. After the departure of Mahatma, he argues with the Barrister-at-Law Bashir, regarding the poverty of India. He opines that India is poor because she has chosen to depend upon agriculture. But, at the same time, he also states that in terms of natural resources India is one of the richest countries of the world. The poet has a logical mind and he argues fiercely in support of the machine. According to him, India should accept the machine for the much needed progress and development. It will also benefit the untouchable because when the flush system will be introduced the untouchable will no longer have to handle the dung. Again, he says that abolition of the caste system will remove untouchability from the society. Iqbal Nath Sarashar represents the educated Indians who learn to see the world in a new logical perspective.

Pundit Kali Nath:

Pundit Kali Nath is the priest in *Untouchable*. In spite of being engaged in the pious work of serving in the temple, he is full of lust and desire. He is also a very greedy person who loves delicacies offered to him by the devotees. He tries to seduce Bakha's beautiful sister Sohini when she goes to his house to sweep. However, when she declines his immoral advances, he makes hue and cry by shouting "polluted, polluted." He wants to convey the message that

by touching him Sohini pollutes him. And, when Bakha proceeds towards him in sheer anger, he cringes behind. Pundit Kali Nath represents those hypocrites who boasts of their high caste status but, when finds opportunity, descends to commit any immoral deeds.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 8: What did Bakha want to be?

Q 9: Discuss the importance of the arguments of Iqbal Nath Sarashar in the context of the novel.

12.4.4 Anand's Narrative Style

Anand stated that he resorted to writing novels out of compulsions. The real people and actual events of his childhood and youth got expressed through his novels. In fact, the inspiration that he received from them was repaid by him in the form of his novels. Anand believed that the Indian English novelists should adopt the comparison and contrast method to achieve excellence in the narrative technique. He preferred the western method of story- telling as he was against authorial intrusions into the narrative. However, at the same time, he believed that an author could always associate himself indirectly with the narrative by the loving the characters, overcoming his own isolation, growing with them and co-existing with them in their joys and sorrows. According to Anand, the novelist must focus on the inner changes of the mind, which he termed as the soul drama. He appreciated James Joyce's 'stream of consciousness' technique, which was later practised by Dorothy Richardson and Virginia Woolf. He preferred and supported Joyce's technique as it could reproduce the restless and disturbed consciousness of the modern man in a more subtle and authentic way. However, Anand was not in favour of directly following Joyce but in a modified way in which the novelist could offer value judgements about the characters.

In *Untouchable,* Anand let the readers see the predicament of the protagonist Bakha through his consciousness. All the events of the novel happened in a single day. Anand employed "stream of consciousness technique" in a judicious way. He used flash backs only when occasion demanded. Bakha was the centre of consciousness. The reader could perceive Bakha's humiliation as an untouchable through his consciousness. Anand juxtaposed Bakha's consciousness and the real situations to drive home the complex social milieu of the period. Such a technique also helped the reader to judge the situation for himself. For example, in the episode where Bakha accidentally touched a caste Hindu, his terror stricken consciousness was placed alongside the abuses of the caste Hindus. Readers found themselves sympathising with the poor untouchable Bakha who was experiencing a great emotional turmoil at such a humiliation. Bakha's torment only authenticated the menace of untouchability in the pre-Independent Indian society. Same is the case with the incident in which Bakha's sister was attempted to be seduced by Pundit Kali Nath. Deep within, Bakha was intensely furious at such a heinous attempt on the modesty of his sister but he was also aware of his inability to move further. Bakha's reaction to different situations whether good or evil contributed to the narrative pattern. As he hardly reacted physically, his psychological reaction was delineated by Anand through the 'stream of consciousness' technique.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 10. How can Anand's narrative style be regarded as distinctively modern?

12.5 CRITICAL RECEPTION OF ANAND

Novel writing for Anand was a self-imposed duty through which he wanted to change the world. He did not take novel writing for earning fame

nor for making money. Writing was a response to his inner call. At the very beginning of his writing career, he faced set back when nineteen publishers refused to publish *Untouchable.* It was this belief in his decision of becoming a writer that helped him continue his pursuit as a writer. Anand also believed that art is for life's sake, and art should always be integrated with the life of community. He stated that the creative artist was suited to change the society. At the same time, he also opined that a creative artist should be sincere about himself since he could elevate men to the heights of their dignity. He regarded the creative artist as the prophet of the age rather than an entertainer. It is in such a backdrop that Anand's critics have judged him as a novelist of Indian English novels.

In her book *The Wisdom of the Heart*, Marlene Fisher considers Anand's commitment to fight against the exploitation of the poor and underprivileged as exposition to his humanism. Saros Cowasjee in *So Many Freedoms* stated that Anand had necessary insight and sensitivity of mind to look into his characters, which make him a formidable Indian English novelist. But, the most important critique of Anand as a novelist came from E. M. Forster when he wrote in the preface to *Untouchable*- "Untouchable could have been written by an Indian and by an Indian who observed from the outside. No European, however sympathetic, could have created the character of Bakha, because he would not have known enough about his troubles". Such an opinion from none other than Forster who has been hailed as one of the most accomplished novelists of the 20th century definitely helped Anand's acceptance as a novelist of stature in the English literary world. Gillian Packham stated that it was Anand's deep sympathy for the oppressed, which helped him to write a novel like *Untouchable.*

Whatever may be the critical reaction to the novels of Anand, there is no denying that he started novel writing in such a period when most of the educated Indians devoted themselves either to the nationalistic cause of fighting against the British or to their own upliftment by accepting lucrative positions in the administrative service of the British government in India. Anand took novel writing as a means to raise the awareness of the Indians to the problems besetting the Indian society. Perennial interest shown to his novels has proven his popularity and relevance in Indian English literature.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 11: Why, according to Forster, *Untouchable* could only be written by an Indian?

Q 12: What did Gillian Packham say about Anand?



12.6 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, you have acquainted yourself with Mulk Raj Anand and his immortal work *Untouchable.* Your understanding of Anand as a novelist will help you to look at Indian English novel in terms of the social milieu of the period. In *Untouchable,* Anand wrote about the menace of untouchability, but at the same time, he gave a definite twist to the plot when he brought in Mahatma to deliver a speech in Golbagh. By doing so, he highlighted the popularity of one of the greatest political leaders of the Indian National Congress and also authenticated Mahatma's concern for the curse of untouchability in the context of the novel. *Untouchable* is a living document, which still carries forward the plight of an untouchable in the Indian social set up. It will go on to be regarded as the seminal text on the protest against untouchability till the time when one shall be able to say-once there was a caste called untouchable in Indian society.



12.7 FURTHER READING

Anand, M. R. (1946). *Apology for Heroism*. Bombay: Kutub-Popular.

Anand, M. R. (1977). Why I write. In *Indo-English Literature: A Collection of Critical Essays.* Ghaziabad: Vimal Prakashan.

Agarwal, B. R. (Ed.). (2006). *Mulk Raj Anand.* New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers.

Asnani, S. M. (1985). *Critical Response to Indian English Fiction.* Delhi: Mittal Publications.

Berry, M. (1971). *Mulk Raj Anand: The Man and the Novelist.* Amsterdam: Oriental Press.

Cowasjee, S. (1977). *So Many Freedoms: A Study of the Major Fiction of Mulk Raj Anand.* Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Fisher, M. (1985). *The Wisdom of the Heart: A Study of the Works of Mulk Raj Anand.* New Delhi: Sterling Publishers.

12.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: Anand read the writings of Karl Marx on India… …after his perusal of *Communist Manifesto,* the discussion of Marxism with Allen Hall.. …Anand said he began to look at the world from different perspectives.

Ans to Q 2: *Coolie* (1936) was Anand's second novel… …Munoo a fifteen years old boy in the household of Babu Nathoo Ram… …*Two Leaves and A Bud* (1937) was the third novel… …the sufferings of the tea-plantation labourers… …lost his wife and his own life leaving his son and daughter in the wilderness.

Ans to Q 3: In the mud-walled houses of the colony… …totally unhygienic to live in … …lanes were covered with donkey… …the air is filled… …hides and skins of dead carcasses.

Ans to Q 4: He met Salvation Army chief Colonel Hutchinson… …he went to Golbagh to listen to Mahatma Gandhi… …fascinated by the support Mahatma promised… …the poet Iqbal Nath Sarashar… …flush system in latrines… …hopeful of finding a solution to the curse of his low birth.

Ans to Q 5: The Indian society consisted of four classes… …The Brahmans, performing priestly rituals… …The Kshatriyas, ruling class… …the Vaishyas, tradesmen and peasants… …The Shudras, the lowest strata of the society… …in the caste system, the Brahmans are at the top of the hierarchical order.

Ans to Q 6: In *Untouchable,* Anand created the character of Bakha… …the hopes and dreams of Bakha… …dissatisfactions and agonies… …his discontent against the obsessively guarded ritualised rules… …a living

testament of the pain, misery and distress of the untouchables of India… …through the character of Bakha.

Ans to Q 7: Anand portrayed the character of Bakha… …it was as if they were not human beings but beasts of burdens… …for thousands of years, they had been subjected to discrimination… …suffering of the untouchable… …given secluded place… …delineated the sufferings of the untouchables… …critique of the menace of untouchability.

Ans to Q 8: Bakha never learnt to see… …wanted to be a Babu… …he was fascinated by the British sepoys……dressed like them… …his untouchable status in the society.

Ans to Q 9: Sarashar opines that India is poor… …has a logical mind and he argues fiercely… …flush system will be introduced… …handle the dung… …abolition of the caste system …from the society.

Ans to Q 10: According to Anand, inner changes of the mind… …appreciated James Joyce's stream of consciousness technique… …preferred and supported Joyce's technique … …not in favour of directly following Joyce… …value judgements about the characters.

Ans to Q 11: Untouchable… …by an Indian who observed… …No European… …would not have known enough about his troubles.

Ans to Q 12: Gillian Packham stated… …deep sympathy for the oppressed… …novel like *Untouchable.*



12.9 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: Discuss the impact of various influences on Mulk Raj Anand in the context of Indian English literature.

Q 2: Discuss *Untouchable* as a social criticism on the evils of untouchability in the Indian society.

Q 3: Discuss the relevance of *Untouchable* in modern times with reference to the important social issues raised in the novel.

Q 4: Write critical commentaries on the following characters:

a. Bakha

b. Colonel Hutchinson

c. The Theme of Untouchability

Q 5: Discuss Mulk Raj Anand as a humanist on the basis of his depiction of the life of untouchables.

Q 6: Write a critical note on Anand's narrative style in the novel *Untouchable*.

Q 7: Critically examine the character of Bakha in *Untouchable*..

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UNIT 13: ANITA DESAI: *CLEAR LIGHT OF DAY*

UNIT STRUCTURE

13.1 Learning Objectives

13.2 Introduction

13.3 Anita Desai: The Novelist

13.3.1 Her Life

13.3.2 Her Works

13.4 Reading the Novel: *Clear Light of Day*

13.4.1 The Storyline

13.4.2 Major Themes

13.4.3 Major Characters

13.4.4 Desai's Narrative Style

13.5 Critical Reception of Desai's *Clear Light of Day*

13.6 Let us Sum up

13.7 Further Reading

13.8 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

13.9 Possible Questions

13.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- reflect on the life and works of Anita Desai, a preeminent Indian novelist of her generation
- form an idea of Desai as a major exponent of Indian English Fiction
- discuss the important aspects related to the novel *Clear Light of Day*
- discuss the plot, characterization, themes, and narrative technique in Desai's *Clear Light of Day*
- make an assessment of the reception of the novel since its publication

13.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit deals with Anita Desai's novel *Clear Light of Day.* Anita Desai is the author of several novels. She wrote *Clear Light of Day* in 1980. In this novel, she wove the history of Delhi with a middle class Hindu family. Bimala or Bim is a history professor, feels betrayed by her sister Tara and replays her memory in a decaying family mansion in Old Delhi. It is difficult for Tara to understand why Bim does not what to change herself from her sterile existence. *Clear Light of Day* is often considered one of the most successful works of the author, and is praised for "its highly evocative portrait of two sisters caught in the lassitude of Indian life" (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*). You will note that, through the consciousness of Tara and Bimala, Desai also examines the Hindu Muslim riots in 1947 following the Partition. By the time you finish reading this unit, you will be able to appreciate Desai's acumen as an Indian novelist who is conscious about Indian life, history and society.

13.3 ANITA DESAI: THE NOVELIST

Read the following sections carefully to gain some ideas about the life and works of Anita Desai.

13.3.1 Her Life

Anita Desai was born Anita Mazumdar in Mussoorie, on June 24 1937 in Delhi to a German mother (Toni Nime) and a Bengali father (D. N. Mazumdar). She grew up learning multiple languages, speaking German at home and Bengali, Urdu, Hindi and English at school and elsewhere. She grew up surrounded by Western literature and music, but at the same time, she also learned the Indian culture and customs. She wrote her first story at the age of seven and published her first story at the age of nine. She did her B.A. in English at Miranda House, Delhi and was awarded her degree in 1957. She married the businessman Ashvin Desai at the age of twenty-one, and had four children with him. Her daughter, Kiran

Desai, is also an author and her novel *The Inheritance of Loss* won the Man Booker Prize in 2006.

Desai spoke German as a child, picking up from her parents who spoke to each other in German. Her childhood encompassed the years of the Second World War that she experienced through the anxiety of her mother, a German, especially for her family and home there. Her mother never visited Germany thereafter, and nor did Desai herself until she was an adult (Tandon 2008: 10-11). She has lived in Kolkata (then Calcutta), Chandigarh, Delhi and Pune, all of which figure at different times as the backdrop in her fiction. Anita Desai considers herself as someone who, because of her hybrid situation consequent to being the daughter of an Indian father and a German mother, can take simultaneously an insider as well as an outsider's view on Indian life and culture: "I see India through my mother's eyes, as an outsider, but my feelings for India are my father's, of someone born here" (Ostberg, 2000).

Though Desai had written short stories even before her marriage, her career as a novelist began only in 1963 with *Cry, the Peacock*. Desai has taught at Mount Holyoke College, Baruch College and Smith College. In 1993, Desai joined the Massachusetts Institute of Technology as a creative writing teacher. She is, moreover, a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and also of Girton College, and of Clare Hall, Cambridge University. She also writes for the *New York Review of Books*.

Desai has won a number of awards in her literary career, starting with the Winifred Holtby Memorial Prize in 1978 for *Fire on the Mountain*. She won the Sahitya Akademi Award in the same year for the same novel. Three of her books – *Clear Light of Day*, *In Custody*, and *Fasting, Feasting*–were shortlisted for the Booker Prize. In 1983, she won the Guardian Children's Fiction Prize for *The Village by the Sea: an Indian family story*. She also won the Neil Gunn International Fellowship in 1994 as well as the Alberto

Moravia Prize for Literature (Italy) in 2000. She was awarded the Benson Medal of Royal Society of Literature in 2003, as well as a Fellowship by the Sahitya Akademi. Recently in 2014, she was awarded the Padma Bhushan by the Government of India. In 1993, Merchant Ivory Productions adapted her novel *In Custody* into an English film by the same name, starring Shashi Kapoor, Shabana Azmi and Om Puri. It garnered much critical acclaim.

Though Desai spends most of the year outside of India, she does not consider herself part of the Indian diaspora. At the same time, she considers herself lucky that she left India quite late in her life, since leaving the country has made her more distant from it as time passes. As she confesses, "I can't really write of it with the same intensity and familiarity that I once had" (Desai quoted in Tandon 2008: 13). Yet at the same time, she also admits that she cannot feel at home in any other place or society (Tandon 2008: 13).



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: How does Anita Desai consider her hybrid background?

Q 2: Name some of the important novels written by Desai.

Q 3: How does Anita Desai consider her displacement from India?

13.3.2 Her Works

Anita Desai has to her credit a number of important novels written in English. This makes her an important exponent of Indian Writing in English in the post independence era. Writing in English, as Desai asserts, had come spontaneously to her: "I can state definitely that I did not choose English in a deliberate and conscious act and I'd say perhaps it was the language that chose me and I started writing stories in English at the age of seven, and have been

doing so for thirty years now without stopping to think why." (Desai quoted in Tandon 2008: 9)

Desai has been regarded as belonging to the tradition of the psychological novel, and is seen by many as introducing this manner of writing in the modern Indian English novel (Tandon 2008: 9). She indicates her awareness of the feminist movement in India, and how it has influenced her writing. However, at the same time, she is also aware that her novels may not strike as typically feminist: "The feminist movement in India is very new and a younger generation of readers in India tends to be rather impatient of my books and to think of them as books about completely helpless women, hopeless women. They find it somewhat unreal that the women don't fight back, but they don't seem to realize how very new this movement is." (Desai quoted in Tandon 2008: 9)

Again, Desai argues that another reason why her novels might not conform to the feminist ideals is her realistic way of writing that refuses to idealise: "Women think I am doing a disservice to the feminist movement by writing about women who have no control over their lives. But I was trying, as every writer tries to do, even in fiction, to get at the truth, write the truth. It would have been really fanciful if I had made Bim and Tara [in *Clear Light of Day*] modern-day feminists". (Desai quoted in Tandon 2008: 9)

Her novels are characterised by "her focus on the inner lives of characters and her concern with people previously marginalised in Indian fiction, primarily women, children and the elderly" ((Tandon 2008: 11). The marginalization and oppression of Indian women were the themes of her first novel, *Cry, the Peacock* as well as the later *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*. *Fire on the Mountain* was appreciated for its poetic symbolism and use of sounds while at the same time being criticised for relying too heavily on imagery at the expense of plot and characterization (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*). *Clear Light of Day* has been considered, on the other hand, as the author's most successful work, is praised for "its highly evocative

portrait of two sisters caught in the lassitude of Indian life" (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*). The autobiographical nature of the novel is attested to by the novelist herself as expressed in the following lines:

Desai considers *Clear Light of Day*, her most autobiographical book, because she was writing about her neighbourhood in Delhi, although the characters are not based on her brothers and sisters. What she was exploring in this novel, she has said, was the importance of childhood and memories as the source of a life. She had wanted to start the book at the end and move backwards, into the characters' childhood and further, into the childhood of their parents etc., but in the end: "When I had gone as far back as their infancy the book just ground to a halt; it lost its momentum. It told me that this was done, that I couldn't carry it further. But I still have a sense of disappointment about that book, because the intention had been different". (Ostberg 2000)

Baumgartner's Bombay (1988) explores German and Jewish identity in the context of a chaotic contemporary India. Other novels by Desai include *In Custody* (1984; film 1994) and *Journey to Ithaca* (1995). *Fasting, Feasting* (1999) takes as its subject the connections and gaps between Indian and American culture, while *The Zigzag Way* (2004) tells the story of an American academic who travels to Mexico to trace his Cornish ancestry. Desai also wrote short fiction—collections include *Games at Twilight, and Other Stories* (1978) and *Diamond Dust, and Other Stories* (2000)—and several children's books, including *The Village by the Sea* (1982). *The Artist of Disappearance* (2011) collected three novellas that examined the collateral abandonment and dislocation wrought by India's furious rush toward modernity. (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*)



LET US KNOW

The following is a complete list of Desai's major works.

Cry, The Peacock (1963)

Voices in the City (1965)

Bye-bye Blackbird (1971)

Where Shall We Go This Summer? (1975)

Cat on a Houseboat (1976)

Fire on the Mountain (1977)

Games at Twilight and Other Stories (1978)

The Peacock Garden (1979)

Clear Light of Day (1980)

The Village By The Sea (1982)

In Custody (1984)

Baumgartner's Bombay (1987)

Journey to Ithaca (1995)

Fasting, Feasting (1999)

Diamond Dust and Other Stories (2000)

The Zigzag Way (2004)

Hill of Silver, Hill of Lead (2005)

The Artist of Disappearance (2011)



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 4: In what ways, can the works of Anita Desai be perceived?

Q 5: Do you agree that Anita Desai is connected with the feminist movements in India?

Q 6: Do you think that *Clear Light of Day* is an autobiographical novel?

13.4 READING THE NOVEL: *CLEAR LIGHT OF DAY*

Read the followings sections which should help you to read the text of the novel in terms of its different aspects.

13.4.1 The Storyline

The novel is divided into four sections, with the middle two sections progressively taking the reader back to the family history framed by the events in the present that the first and last sections dwell on. It deals with the Das family, more specifically, the four children: Bim, Tara, Raja and Baba.

Part I opens with Tara coming on a regular visit to India from Washington with her diplomat husband, Bakul. They stay in Old Delhi with Bim and Baba, elder sister and younger brother of Tara's, respectively. This visit coincides with the marriage of Raja's eldest daughter, and thus, paves the way for the re-emergence of some painful memories and conflicts, especially Bim's estrangement from her other brother, Raja, with whom she hasn't had much contact for a number of years. The Old Delhi house holds a number of memories for Tara, including her childhood days and the two decades after India's independence. As Tara and Bim go into their past, old rivalries between the two sisters re-emerge, though by now, both have changed somewhat. Tara wonders how Bim can continue to stay in the old run-down house, taking care of their autistic brother, Baba. The family is as is 'petrified,' which both attracts and repulses Tara. She at one point even wants to escape with Bakul to the refuge of the more modern New Delhi where Bakul's relatives live. Other circumstances also add to the already mounting tension:

The family's "petrified" state particularly becomes a subject of reflection and occasional discussion among its members because Bim refuses to attend Moyna's wedding (Raja's eldest daughter), which is to take place in Hyderabad. Bim holds it against Raja that he abandoned her and Baba after their parents' deaths; and that he also missed his true calling of being a poet, as he had earlier vowed

to Bim, and merely became a fat, rich man. Bim herself, of course, has devoted her life to looking after others: Raja during his deadly illness in 1947, the alcoholic Aunt Mira, the retarded brother, and everyone else who needed care (including Hyder Ali Sahib's dog, Begum). (Hashmi 56)

Part II centres primarily on events surrounding Bim during the time when the four were children. It is in this section that the early and sudden death of their parents is recounted. While their neighbours are kind and affectionate, they cannot give them the security of a family. Again, Raja falls seriously ill with tuberculosis and it is Bim who takes up the responsibility of nursing him to health. Bim is forced to care for Baba and Mira Masi as well. Aunt Mira, who had earlier taken care of the children after the death of their parents (and even before, since they would leave their children behind to mingle with their circle), turns increasingly towards alcohol and soon is left to Bim's care. Bim is thus propelled to take the responsibility of the entire household and ultimately accepts this as her destiny. On the other hand, Raja lives a different life, idealising Hyder Ali, their Muslim neighbour who lived across the street until the summer of 1947. Afterwards, he marries Benazir, the only daughter of Hyder Ali, and moves to Hyderabad after inheriting the latter's property after his death. Tara also marries and stays abroad with her husband, and soon becomes immersed in her duties as a diplomat's wife and in the job of raising her daughters. Bim is thus the only one who is forced to stay back on account of their brother, Baba, who cannot depend on himself in his state of mind. However, the two sisters have some affinities in that "[i]n both sisters' lives, unhappiness and boredom in their house are distinct memories, relieved only by the presence of kind and affectionate (though perhaps not always the best) neighbours" (Hashmi 56).

Part II regresses even further in time to the early childhood of the Das siblings. Bim and Tara have contrasting experiences in school: while Bim loves school and becomes the head girl, Tara

hates going to school and cannot adjust to its life. She envies Bim but at the same time feels guilty about it. Towards the end, Tara, through her appreciation of the daughters of the Misra family (their neighbours) who marry early, reveals her desire to live a 'normal' domestic life that will take her away from her dysfunctional family. On the other hand, Bim states her desire to remain single and plans to remain at her home with her aunt and brother, attend college, teach, and become independent and self-reliant. Another important strand in this part is the birth of Baba and the family's realization as he is growing up that his mental development is slower than that of other children of his age. Again, background to the presence of Mira Masi in the earlier sections is given as she is invited to the Das house not only to give her shelter after her husband's death but also as a caretaker of the children. Aunt Mira grows particularly fond of Baba who she realizes is the one in the utmost need of support.

Part IV, the concluding section of the novel, brings us back to the present. Bim and Tara talk at length about their brother, Raja. While initially Bim seems to resent her brother for abandoning their family, she gradually comes to accept her brother as he is. Tara also expresses her guilt over abandoning the family like Raja by marrying Bakul and leaving with him. She shows her concern for Bim who realizes that her remorse is genuine. The novel then ends with a note of reconciliation between the two sisters who reaffirm their closeness to each other.

13.4.2 Major Themes

The following are some of the important themes of the novel *Clear Light of Day.*

Women's Lives

Desai in her novels usually seems to portray Indian women as passive and marginalised characters (through her female protagonists) who face challenges from the mores of a patriarchal society. In this novel too, the central female characters Bim, Tara

and Aunt Mira, are to a great extent similarly subordinated by the dominant male member—Aunt Mira by her husband's family and later on her sister's; Tara by her husband and Bim; by having to take upon herself the responsibility of caring for Baba. The novel explores how these women negotiate with circumstances and ultimately find out different ways to assert their existence. The most obvious instance of this is Bim who enters the academia as a teacher of history in a Delhi college. Pushpa Naidu Parekh, in her essay "Redefining the Postcolonial Female Self: Women in Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day*" argues that Desai's representation of women contests certain "early feminist definitions of Third World women as a 'homogeneous' group" (Parekh: 273). In her reading, "Bim and Tara represent two identities, among others, that define the postcolonial middle-class Indian woman: She is often the traditional woman who has found her own avenues to change and modernization, the elite woman who has liberated herself in the borrowed world of alien language and culture, or sometimes, both identities in one" (Parekh: 273). Bim, ostensibly more like the Western ideal of a strong, independent and empowered woman who is educated and is a professional, is however imprisoned in the changeless past, "playing out the roles of caring sister, surrogate mother, and daughter in a family whose members are either slowly disintegrating or dispersing" (Parekh: 277). On the other hand, Tara, the passive, isolated, shy, fearful and insecure sister, is the one who escapes from the oppressive atmosphere of the house and what it represents: "decay, decadence, insanity, illness, and stasis" (Parekh: 277). However, her movement towards "affirmation of faith and preservation of self" is made through the more traditional mode of marriage. Thus, both Tara and Bim incorporate past and present, change and tradition. Neither one is herself "better" than the other; rather, they emphasize the connections between past and present and effect the breakdown of essentialist categories such as "traditional" and "emancipatory". (Parekh: 277)

Through this, the novel contests the simplistic equation made between women and nation, in which women and 'womanly' ideals mirror the nation as a feminine entity. The disruption of this connection in the novel, as Hena Ahmad argues, is made from "a position of rootedness in the nation, within national spaces, by taking women's issues, in a sense beyond the nation" (Ahmad: 88). This is proved by the very fact that Desai writes from a cosmopolitan and also by the fact that national rootedness in the construction of Indian femininity is precisely what is rejected in the novel.

Partition

Clear Light of Day is also about the Partition that looms large as the backdrop of the novel and even comes to the foreground in Section II. However, what Desai centers in the novel are not the larger momentous effects of the Partition, but the very private and everyday impact of the event on people's lives. Kamila Shamsie describes this in her introduction to the novel as the novel's "sidelong view: glancing allusions and attention to tiny details which echo and reverberate, rather than directness" (Shamsie: ix). She cites an example in Raja's decision to pursue Islamic Studies at Jamia Milia Islamia due to his love of Urdu. However, his father does not allow him to do so since he fears that he will come under fire from both Hindus and Muslims due to this decision. As a result, Raja settles down to pursue English Literature instead, which, ironically, is seen as a more viable and neutral option, even though the nation has only just won its freedom from British Rule (Shamsie: ix). Shamsie also argues that though the Hyder family and Raja are ones who most obviously relate to the Partition, there are also other stories that resound with the terrible effects of the event:

Mira Masi's spiralling descent into alcoholism in '47 can be seen as a reaction to the madness of the world outside, and there is a rejection of post-Partition India in Bim's own insistence on staying within Old Delhi where 'whatever happened, happened long ago – in the time of the Tughlaqs, the Khiljis, the Sultanate, the Moghuls – that lot.' This is not a novel of people who are forced to

leave their homes by Partition, face violence because of it; it is an altogether subtler tale of how Partition changed the world of Old Delhi. (Shamsie: ix)

At the same time, however, the novel does not seek to return nostalgically to a past which is now lost, as the first three chapters regressively going back to childhood through adolescence might suggest. Rather, the novel stages a recovery through the last chapter, which brings the narrative to the present both Bim and Tara realize that their present situations are more responses to their private emotional struggles consequent to the disintegration and changes brought about in their family subsequent to the Partition. This confrontation with their private, hidden insecurities enable both of them to come to terms with their circumstances and with themselves, thereby allowing them to attain psychic independence.

Sense of the Past

As the preceding topic shows, the past is strongly present in the novel and determines the way of life and opinions of the central characters of Bim, Tara and Baba. The setting of the novel in Old Delhi and the house itself are signifiers of how the past constantly intrudes upon these characters. In fact, this theme is clearly enunciated in the first section itself when Bim talks about her and Baba's rootedness in Old Delhi and their avoidance of the newer portion of the city:

"That is the risk of coming home to Old Delhi," she announced in the hard voice that had started up the prickle of distrust that ran over the tips of the hairs on Tara's arms, rippling them. "Old Delhi does not change. It only decays. My students tell me it is a great cemetery, every house a tomb. Nothing but sleeping graves. Now New Delhi, they say is different. That is where things happen. The way they describe it, it sounds like a nest of fleas. So much happens there, it must be a jumping place. I never go. Baba never goes. And here, here nothing happens at all. Whatever happened, happened long ago – in the time of the Tughlaqs, the Khiljis, the

Sultanate, the Moghuls – that lot...Here we are left rocking on the backwaters, getting duller and grayer (sic), I suppose. Anyone who isn't dull and grey (sic) goes away – to New Delhi, to England, to Canada, the Middle East. They don't come back." (I)

Tara also feels the changelessness of the house and its inhabitants, but at the same time, as she goes back to her childhood there, does not really want any change in the house itself. She however is baffled by the fact that Bim doesn't force Baba to do away with his old customs and that neither does Bim herself change in her behaviour and deliberately casual way of life. Bim however, does not want to be reminded of her past and would rather not inhabit her memories, which show how much she is entrapped by the past. Another material evidence of such an intrusive presence of the past is the gramophone and the 70s records that Baba is so fond of playing and that constantly jars on Tara's ears (I). Bim however confesses that though the noise used to disturb her it doesn't anymore; she has got used to and resigned to the inevitability of its presence. The same might be said of the past in her own life. Tara on the other hand seems to have moved on with her life and adapted herself with modern ways of living that the car and New Delhi symbolize. However, as she comes back to the old house it gradually emerges that this change in her is only in name; she has actually not changed from the passive and unconfident girl she was in the past, always under the shadow of Bim and Raja. Her desire to stay in the house and not go to New Delhi itself suggests this desire to come back: "Tara is happy in the dull, monotonous surroundings of her home; in fact, it is the 'passive pleasure of having returned to the familiar'. (Sharma: 110)



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 7: How does Anita Desai address the issues related to women in the novel?

Q 8: In what ways, is *Clear Light of Day* about the Partition?

13.4.3 Major Characters

In this section, let us have a short discussion of the major characters of the novel.

Bim:

Bimla, or Bim as she is more frequently called, is the second of the Das siblings in the novel. She frequently makes pertinent but cutting comments on the more conservative or traditional views held by Tara. For example in Section I, upon noticing Tara's expression of disapproval at her "extravagance of affection" for her cat, she says: "I know what you're thinking...You're thinking how old spinsters go ga-ga over their pets because they don't have children. Children are the *real* thing, you think." However, the novel focuses mostly on Bim and her life has in the years following India's independence. The other characters become relevant through the manner in which their connections to and interactions with Bim are spelt out in the course of the novel. Bim is a professor of history, and her personality has always been strong and decisive, though she does not care much for convention. She stayed unmarried partly in order to take care of her younger brother. At the same time, however, she is shown to be constantly preoccupied with her family's past and with her own role as a martyr who sacrifices her desires and aims in life for her family. In a way, therefore, she is a little like Baba, who is thoughtlessly occupied with his 1947 record collection; both of them in their own ways are trapped in the past. We see through Bim how difficult it can be to forget the past and move forward when one is forced to inhabit a place full of the relics of that past, the most telling object of which is the gramophone rescued from the abandoned hone of Hyder Ali.

Tara:

The third of the Das siblings. Her relation with Bim is characterised by a state of constant friction and a sense of rivalry, while with Baba she feels concerned, sad and guilty. As the novel

begins, Tara, now a wife and mother, comes with her husband to her childhood home in Old Delhi where her sister Bim and brother Baba still live. Tara's visit to India this time is due to a special event: the wedding of her brother Raja's oldest daughter. Tara creates the appearance of being happy with her official duties as the wife of a foreign diplomat and the mother of her sophisticated daughters. However, it is while in her childhood home that her insecurities regarding herself come to the fore, as she realizes that she has not been able to mould herself into the accomplished and elite wife that Bakul has tried to transform her into. At other times, she also expresses the anxieties of bringing up her daughters in a culture that seems alien to her but which her children adapt to very well. By the end of the novel, however, Tara is able reconcile herself with her past and consequently becomes more independent from her husband who has always tried to shelter and dominate her.

Raja:

The oldest of the siblings. During their childhood, it was Raja who was closest to the Hyder Ali family through his love of Urdu. Again, as children, he and Bim were quite close making Tara feel jealous and a bit left out. He is cast a s a very intelligent and clearheaded person with high ambition. He seems to be the only one of the siblings who has been able to move on from the past. He is married, has five children and is successful in his career. In fact, it is to the wedding of his oldest daughter that Tara comes with her husband. At the same time, he escapes responsibility of looking after his younger sibling, especially Baba, and is also insensitive towards Bim.

Baba:

Baba is the youngest of the Das siblings. He was born with a disability (he is autistic) which became apparent as he grew up since his development was significantly slower than other children of his age. He became the most favoured child for Mira Masi, in contrast to his subordinate position earlier because of his disability.

She took care of him and taught him some basic skills so that he could do some things for himself, like feeding himself and playing with pebbles, something that he continues to do even as an adult. After the death of Mira Masi Bim becomes his caretaker and the two of them remain in the family home while the others move on with their lives elsewhere. Though Baba is the only one of the siblings who appears not to have changed at all, due to his disability, it also becomes evident that this has nothing to do with his everyday life in the sense that he is constantly aware of what goes on around him.

Aunt Mira:

Mira is the sister of Bim, Raja, Tara and Baba's mother. After her husband's death, she is mistreated by his family but she finds relief in her sister who takes her into her family. She lives the remainder of her life in old Delhi bringing up her sister's children. Even after their parents die, she continues to take care of them, providing the love and care the children needed along with a stable home for the children to grow up in. Her special attention is towards the youngest of the siblings, Baba, since it is he who is the most dependent on her and makes her feel wanted. As much as their aunt provides them with the semblance of home, it the children too who provide the same kind of support to her. She turned to alcohol especially after Raja and Tara left the household, since alcohol seemed to provide her with a way to drown her fear of being left alone again in life. It is her alcoholism that finally results in her death.

Hyder Ali:

Hyder Ali is the head of the wealthy Muslim family staying near the Das family in Old Delhi. He is the landlord of the house the siblings live. He welcomes Raja, the oldest of the four Das children, into his house, though after some initial reluctance, and later comes to regard him almost as family, especially with the latter's love for Urdu. He is also very generous and allows Raja to borrow many books from his library. Raja marries one of his daughters later on and inherits Ali's wealth.

Bakul:

The husband of Tara. He stays with his wife and family in Washington. He is in the Foreign Service and works as a diplomat in the Indian embassy. They come to Delhi every three or five years. Bakul is cast as a flat character who is marked by his complacence and authority as Tara's husband. He would not even pour out his tea but waits instead for someone else to pour it out for him. He pays much attention to custom and appearances even at the cost of his wife's desires. He is thus seen as extremely self-centred, thinking that his standard of life is superior to that of the Das family. He doesn't like staying in Old Delhi and prefers to visit his family in New Delhi, which for him is more modern and progressive. He does not like Bim because of her intimidating, strong personality, which is ironic since he wanted Tara to be more like her elder sister. What appealed in Tara to him was her beauty that was much above Bim's, who had average looks. However, he felt that he had to get Tara out from Old Delhi to show her what the real world was like and to bring her up to his level of sophistication.

13.4.4 Desai's Narrative Style

Desai uses the technique of flashback in order to unravel the memories of the characters in the novel. It starts with the characters in adulthood in Section I where Tara has come back with her husband to her old home in old Delhi. They plan to go to Hyderabad we see both Bim and Tara's past experiences, and the narrative also coordinates their past with their present. This emphasizes the interconnectedness of the past and the present at any given point; it also emphasizes the non-applicability absolute binaries like tradition/modernity, past/present, professional/domestic, and so on in the process of identity-formation.

Again, in this novel, Desai exhibits the acute observation that is so characteristic of her. See, for instance these lines from the very first section: As she stared, a petal rose and tumbled onto its back and she saw uncovered the gleam of a - a pearl? a silver

ring? Something that gleamed, something that flashed, then flowed - and she saw it was her childhood snail slowly, resignedly making its way from under the flower up a clod of earth only to tumble off the top onto its side- an eternal, miniature Sisyphus. (I)

Here, the rose petals and the snail come alive through the immediacy and concreteness of detail, which is then given a literary turn with the mention of Sisyphus.

Another of Desai's characteristic techniques in her fiction is the heavy use of symbols. In the above extract, for example, the snail does not merely represent the animal, but evokes Tara's childhood as well; it thus becomes a metaphor of that phase of her life "childhood snail". Similarly, though in a more involved way, the house and the gramophone serve as signifiers of stasis, decay, decadence and unwillingness to change in the characters themselves. The car is also indicative of the pull and impact of modernity that is also associated with New Delhi.

13.5 CRITICAL RECEPTION OF ANITA DESAI'S *CLEAR LIGHT OF DAY*

Clear Light of Day has been termed by Desai in an interview as "the most autobiographical of all my books because it's the house and the garden and the neighbourhood I grew up in" (525). In the same interview, she says that it was "an experiment" in that she wanted the narrative to go back in time from old age to childhood. However, she could not sustain this for long and had to come to the present after all at the end, which is the reason why she considers this novel slightly disappointing (525). The novel has been one of Desai's most popular novels, and commentators (like those mentioned in the above sections) have focussed on Desai's sensitivity towards the ennui and passivity the middle-class Indian woman who chooses not to engage herself in a profession finds herself in. At the same time, later criticism of the novel, such as that by Hena Ahmad and Pushpa Naidu Parekh, have looked at the novel as breaking the stereotype of women embodying the national imaginary. Other studies (e.g., Kajali Sharma) have

praised Desai on her ability to construct a powerful and evocative, and at the same time, symbolic landscape in the novel, particularly through the depiction of Old Delhi.



13.6 LET US SUM UP

From this unit, you have learnt that Anita Desai is an important exponent of Indian English fiction. Her novel *Clear Light of Day* seems to be highly autobiographical. In this novel, she wove the history of Delhi with a middle class Hindu family. This novel tells the story of two sisters Bimala and Tara in which Bimala replays her memory in a decaying family mansion in Old Delhi. You must have understood by now that this novel mostly deals with women's lives. Besides, the novelist also takes into consideration how the memories of the Partition and the Sense of the Past influence the psyche of the individual in the present. Although she never calls herself a feminist, Desai is very conscious of the predicaments of the helpless women in the Indian society.



13.7 FURTHER READING

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Sharma, Kajali. (1991). *Symbolism in Anita Desai's Novels*. Abhinav Publications.

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13.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: Anita Desai was the daughter of an Indian father and a German mother… …thus, she could take simultaneously an insider as well as an outsider's view on Indian life and culture… …she wrote: "I see India through my mother's eyes, as an outsider, but my feelings for India are my father's, of someone born here".

Ans to Q 2: *Fasting, Feasting… … Fire on the Mountain… …Clear Light of Day… … In Custody… …Cry, the Peacock* and so on.

Ans to Q 3: Desai does not consider herself to be part of the Indian diaspora… …she also feels lucky that she left India quite late in her life… …she has confessed: "I can't really write of it with the same intensity and familiarity that I once had"… …she also admits that she cannot feel at home in any other place or society than in India.

Ans to Q 4: Anita Desai has to her credit a number of important novels written in English… …she introduced the tradition of the psychological

novel in India… …she indicates her awareness of the feminist movement in India, and how it has influenced her writing… …her novels are characterised by her focus on the inner lives of the marginalised characters primarily women, children and the elderly.

Ans to Q 5: Both yes and no… …her novels may not strike as typically feminist… …she talks about helpless women, but also states that feminism is a new movement in India… …besides she writes realistically without idealising… …She states: "Women think I am doing a disservice to the feminist movement by writing about women who have no control over their lives. But I was trying, as every writer tries to do, even in fiction, to get at the truth, write the truth."

Ans to Q 6: Desai considers *Clear Light of Day* her most autobiographical novel… …she is writing about her own neighbourhood in Delhi… …but the characters are not based on her brothers and sisters… …she is exploring the importance of childhood and memories as the source of life.

Ans to Q 7: Desai portrays Indian women as passive and marginalised… …they always face challenges from the mores of a patriarchal society… …the novel explores how these women negotiate with circumstances and ultimately find different ways to assert their existence… …Bim and Tara represent two identities—Bim is strong, independent and empowered, while Tara is passive, isolated, shy, fearful and insecure.

Ans to Q 8: The novel is about the Partition… …Desai's concerns in the novel not on the larger effects of the Partition, but on the very private and everyday impact of the event on people's lives… …Raja's decision to pursue Islamic Studies at Jamia Milia Islamia University due to his love of Urdu… …but his father does not allow him to do so since he fears that he will come under fire from both Hindus and Muslims due to this decision…. … Hyder family and Raja are the ones who most obviously relate to the Partition.



13.9 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: Do you think that Anita Desai is obsessed with the idea of the Past? In what ways, does Anita Desai use the Past in *Clear Light of Day*?

Q 2: Would you like to call Anita Desai a feminist writer? Illustrate with reference to what she herself states about her own oeuvre.

Q 3: How would you like to consider the character of Bim in Desai's *Clear Light of Day*? Why does she remain unmarried?

Q 4: Discuss the theme of Partition as implied by Desai in the novel *Clear Light of Day* in the light of Raja's decision to pursue Islamic Studies at Jamia Milia Islamia University and his father's dissent.

Q 5: Comment on Anita Desai's use of flashback as a narrative technique in the novel *Clear Light of Day*. How does Desai use the memories of the different characters in the novel?

Q 6: Discuss Anita Desai's contributions to Indian English fiction with reference to the major themes she often engages herself with.

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UNIT 14: AMITAV GHOSH: *THE HUNGRY TIDE* (PART I)

UNIT STRUCTURE

14.1 Learning Objectives

14.2 Introduction

14.3 Amitav Ghosh: The Novelist

14.3.1 His Life

14.3.2 His Works

14.4 The Storyline of the Novel *The Hungry Tide*

14.5 Critical Reception of Ghosh

14.6 Let us Sum up

14.7 Further Reading

14.8 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

14.9 Possible Questions

14.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- reflect on the life and works of the Indian author Amitav Ghosh
- form an idea of Ghosh as a major exponent of Indian English Fiction
- discuss the importance of his novel *The Hungry Tide* and narrate the story in your own words
- make an assessment of the reception of Ghosh as an Indian author

14.2 INTRODUCTION

In this unit, you will be introduced to Amitav Ghosh and his novel *The Hungry Tide.* Born in Kolkata and now a resident of New York, Amitav Ghosh has been one of the most renowned *Indian* English authors of recent times. A recipient of the coveted Padma Shri Award by the Government of India in 2007, Ghosh has by now established himself as one of the most versatile of the "post Rushdie" generation of expatriate Indian authors writing in English. Together being a social anthropologist, his fame also lies in being

a historian, a fiction writer and a journalist. As a writer, Ghosh travels and remaps the world drawing connections across the boundaries of modern nation states. His creative engagement with historical and political realities and truths, redrawing of cultural and political lines that both divide and unite, make him the writer he is. Since his childhood days in Calcutta, Ghosh got the chance to visit a number of South East Asian countries including Sri Lanka, Iran and Bangladesh, because of his father was serving in Indian Army following which their family had to move in and out of India several times. Thus, many of Ghosh's fictional works are autobiographical in the sense that they reflect on his personal life history. Ghosh, who often seeks to assert his national identity, and resists being called a Commonwealth or postcolonial writer, has written his fictional works on India mainly to tell stories about how globalisation affects international movements of labour. This unit shall serve as an introduction to Amitav Ghosh—the author and his novel *The Hungry Tide* that tends to focus on a 'micro' culture within the region namely, the Sundarbans or the 'tide country". However, Ghosh, in this novel, also dramatises the last phase of the refugees struggle in the Sundarbans.

14.3 AMITAV GHOSH: THE NOVELIST

The following is a discussion on the life and works of Amitav Ghosh.

14.3.1 His Life

Amitav Ghosh was born in Calcutta in July 1956. He did his schooling from the Doon School, Dehra Dun. After doing his BA in History, from St. Stephen's College, Delhi University, in 1976, he obtained an MA Degree in Sociology in 1978. Then, he went to St. Edmund Hall, Oxford and in 1979, obtained a diploma in Social Anthropology. He also spent some time at Tunis where he learnt Arabic. He was awarded his Oxford D. Phil. in Social Anthropology for his thesis on "Kinship in Relation to the Economic and Social Organization of an Egyptian Village Community" in 1981. It needs mentioning that his pursuit of Social Anthropology and his

subsequent visit to Egypt to do field work for his doctoral thesis had a shaping influence on him as a writer.

Ghosh has by now established himself as one of the most versatile of the "post Rushdie" generation of expatriate Indian authors writing in English. Although his popularity rests mainly as a fiction writer, it is very difficult to label and categorise his works. Together being a social anthropologist, his fame also lies in being a historian, a fiction writer and a journalist. It is not an exaggeration to state that Ghosh is the most cosmopolitan among the Indian English writers. As a writer, he travels and remaps the world drawing connections across the boundaries of modern nation states. His creative engagement with historical and political realities and truths, redrawing of cultural and political lines that both divide and unite, make him the writer he is.

Ghosh's own father Lieutenant Colonel Shailendra Chandra Ghosh was a civil servant who fought in the Second World War and took part in the Burma campaign in 1945. Since his childhood days in Calcutta, Ghosh got the chance to visit a number of South East Asian countries including Sri Lanka, Iran and Bangladesh, because his father was serving the Indian Army following which their family had to move in and out of India several times. Thus, many of Ghosh's fictional works are autobiographical in the sense that they reflect on his personal life history. Ghosh, who often seeks to assert his national identity and resists being called a Commonwealth or postcolonial writer, has written his fictional works on India mainly to tell stories about how globalization affects international movements of labour.

Products of the Bengal Renaissance, Amitav Ghosh's fiction are marked by a rational explanation of established notions of society, which is quite apparent in the early novels. However, Ghosh also makes historical consciousness a part of his career as a writer. His later novels are characterised by strong themes that may be roughly identified with Postcolonialism but could also be labelled as historical novels. In a sense, Ghosh is writing 'metanarratives' against history's 'grand narratives' to use Lyotard's terms. As Novy Kapadia states,

the major influences on him were the stories of his father, the World War II (1939-1945), and the Indians in British Indian army fighting against the Germans or the Japanese. From his father, Ghosh learnt that the Indian officers and soldiers had ambivalent feelings about serving the colonial army. Many of them even realised that without the support of the Indians the British would not have been able to rule the subcontinent. This aspect of historical reality fascinated Ghosh, and it helped him construct the concept of freedom and its different connotations in the modern world as reflected in a novel like *TSL* (10). The departures and arrivals of the characters should necessarily influence their identity and history in most of Ghosh's fictions. Incidentally, the Far East like Combodia and Burma, have always been an obsession with Ghosh because of some personal reference points (16). Central to Ghosh's works is also the idea that the 'non porous nature of modern borders which is brought to the forefront when contrasted with the inclusiveness of older communities where no concept of nationality with all its modern trappings of passports and visas existed.



LET US KNOW

Amitav Ghosh's sensitivity towards issues of political and cultural significance, can be seen in his rejection of the Commonwealth Writers' Prize in 2001 for his fifth novel, *TGP* (2000), Because, as the author tells, this had happened without his knowledge, and promptly he withdrew the novel from the competition mainly on the grounds that it was based on a disputed aspect of the past instead of the realities of the present day (Ghosh 2002, 35). He also stated that the term "Commonwealth" was not an appropriate attribute for a cultural and literary group that included many other languages and realities beside those represented by the English language.

Ghosh's first three novels clearly show his experiments with a diversity of forms and genres –for example Magic Realism and

the Picaresque in *The Circle of Reason* (1986), family history in *The Shadow Lines* (1988), and a combination of detective and science fiction in *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1996). *The Shadow Lines* won the Sahitya Akademi Award, India's most prestigious literary award. His next novel *The Glass Palace* (2000) embraces the genre of a realist and historical novels of the 19th century. However, his experiences in Egypt following his field research would eventually shape into one of his most important works *In An Antique Land* (1992). Ghosh's fictions have exhibited a remarkable geographical spread, taking in India, the Gulf Region and Algeria for *The Circle of Reason*; India, Bangladesh and London for *The Shadow Lines*; India and America for *The Calcutta Chromosome*, and Burma, India and Malaya, for *The Glass Palace*. But, the scope of his novel *The Hungry Tide* (2004), which we are discussing in this unit, is much limited compared to Ghosh's other novels, as it centers on the Sundarbans, the natural ecosystems of a small and highly particular area of India near Bengal. He also wrote a novella named *Countdown* (1999) on India's Nuclear Policy. His recent works of fiction are *Sea of Poppies* (2008) and *River of Smoke* (2010) the first two novels of his supposed IBIS trilogy—an epic saga, set just before the Opium Wars that foreshadows the colonial history of the East. The third, *Flood of Fire*, completing the trilogy, has been published in 2015, which has attracted many positive reviews. Ghosh stated that what interested him most is "the Bay of Bengal, the Arabian Sea, the Indian Ocean, and the connections and the cross-connections between these regions."

Ghosh has also penned prose-collections like *Dancing in Cambodia, At Large in Burma* (1998), and *The Imam and the Indian* (2002) on different themes like fundamentalism, history of the novel, Egyptian culture and literature. His writings appear in newspapers and magazines in India and abroad. His most-recent non-fiction book *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016) exhibits his concern on why modern literature

has failed to address issues of climate change, and how radical transformation due to nature has become 'unthinkable'.

Ghosh currently lives in Brooklyn, USA. So far, he has been conferred various prestigious positions. He has been a Fellow at the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta. He joined as Distinguished Professor in Comparative Literature, the faculty at Queens College in the City University of New York in 1999. Since 2005, he has also been visiting professor to the English department of Harvard University. He has been a journalist too. In 2007, he was awarded the Padma Shri by the Government of India. Ghosh has recently purchased a property in Goa and it is assumed that he is returning to India.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: Is it possible to categorise Amitav Ghosh's works?

Q 2: Make a list of the novels written by Amitav Ghosh.

14.3.2 His Works

In the previous section, you have got some ideas regarding the works of Amitav Ghosh. In this section, we will discuss his works in some detail.

To speak of the novels first, *The Circle of Reason* (1986) is his first novel. Ghosh in this novel adopts a very unique form of the Indian Raga by dividing it into three sections entitled –Satwa (Reason), Rajas (Passion), and Tamas (Death). This novel also represents the two most important preoccupations of Ghosh as a writer: colonial experience and displacement of people across the world. Himself being a victim of the Partition of Bengal, Ghosh makes the Bengali village of Lalpukur, the locale of the novel. Mainly written for non-Western readers about India and Bengal in particular, Ghosh suggests that one cannot rationally solve human problems if the history of the people of a particular place is ignored. This novel is

one of his earliest attempts to examine the cobwebs of relationships of the Indians across the world—a theme that he cares to incorporate in detail in his later novels.

The Shadow Lines (1988), is set in postcolonial India. One of Ghosh's finest novels, it won the prestigious Sahitya Akademi award in 1989. In this novel, he beautifully blends Indian nationalist history, and postcolonial identity. The novel centers on a Hindu narrator's family, which fled from their ancestral home in Dhaka to Calcutta during the riot that erupted after the formation of East Pakistan in 1971. The time span in TSL is important as they exhibit actual influences on the writer. This novel traverses a time span from 1981 to the 1960s and 1940s. Ghosh's adherence to exact dates makes his portrayal of India much more authentic. In this novel Ghosh also shows how the different cultures and communities are becoming antagonistic. This is a major issue in contemporary India. Novi Kapadia writes that historical events like the Freedom Movement in Bengal, World War II, the Partition of India, the communal clash erupting in East Pakistan after the Hazratbal incident in Sri Nagar in 1964 etc. have provided Ghosh with the raw materials against which he studies the historical truths like the meaning of nationalism and political freedom in the modern world.

One way to look at the novel *In An Antique Land* (1992), although its form cannot be readily identified, is to examine the ways Ghosh makes a connection between historiography, ethnography and philology with the representational strategies of fiction. This becomes obvious in the way the narrator searches for medieval documents in Cairo as well as in various museums in the West. The narrator, who may be identified with Ghosh himself, brings along anthropological fieldwork in Egypt and India, the history of a Hindu slave of a Jewish merchant in the 11th century, and Ghosh's own diary written during the fieldwork. However, the book also acts as a travelogue. You will find it interesting to note that the narrator sometimes appears to be a historian and sometimes an

ethnographer, during 1990s, which provides a critique of colonialism and its continuing impact. However, the main purpose of Ghosh, in this novel, is to draw attention to today's political problems between Hindus and Muslims, or Jews and Arabs, caused by the ruptures brought about by colonialism and the all-invading power of modernity.

His third novel *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1996) is also based in Bengal and Calcutta to be more precise, as the title of the novel itself suggests. Bringing together advanced computer science, religious cults and the parallel world of the Victorians and the contemporary Indians, this novel tells the adventure of the Calcutta-born researcher Murugan who is engaged with the history of Malaria Research conducted by the Nobel winning British scientist Sir Ronald Ross, the army doctor in Imperial India during1998. The Calcutta born scientist Murugan, is almost sure that Ronald Ross, who was awarded the Novel for his malaria research in Calcutta, was never the 'lone genius', as he believed that there is a secret history behind the research that had been erased from colonial records. Murugan's search for truth not only reveals many secrets of the city of Calcutta, but also proves Ghosh's inclination towards the "Subaltern Studies" group. This novel thus provides room for an alternative historiography the malaria research itself.

Ghosh's next novel *The Glass Palace* (2000) can be read as a historical novel, which employs the form of a family saga to tell an epic narrative about Burma and India of the late 19th century. Ghosh's interest in history is clearly visible in the way he discusses how the Indians were engaged as workers, coolies and sepoys under the British troops in Burma, a colonial hub under the British. Moreover, the setting of Burma along with India was also important because Burma invited many ambitious Indians with many lucrative opportunities. This novel is autobiographical to a great extent. What makes this novel an extraordinary book is that the history of colonialism is described through the eyes of the common and ordinary people or the 'subaltern'? Ghosh's interest in an alternative

historiography is clearly seen in the revisionist approach that he adopts to narrate particular historical events in this novel.

Mainly written in the form of a travelogue, this novella *Countdown* is based on Ghosh's experiences of the grief and sorrows and the horror caused by the nuclear explosion in the mind of the people after his visit to Pokhran, Pakistan and Siachen. This novella can be further seen as a satire on the state policies, which care little for the peace and prosperity of the common people. This book opens with the aftermath of the nuclear explosion on 11th May, 1998 at Pokhran, which the author visits three months later.

Sea of Poppies (2008) is the first book of Ghosh's projected IBIS trilogy and is based on the Opium War one of the most crucial events in world history. Once again, this novel confirms Ghosh's art of storytelling in the form of history. This novel highlights many of the previous concerns of Ghosh as a novelist—such as the movement of people from one place to the other, crossing of geographical boundaries, impact of economic pressures on the common lives of the people, questioning the past and so on. *River of Smoke* (2011), the second part of Ghosh's IBIS trilogy, begins from where the previous novel ends. From the details of the changing lives of Indian migrants in Mauritius, the novel traces the fate of other characters from IBIS and describes the opium trade in China. It is set in Fanqui town, a famous place for the local Chinese traders, an year before the first Opium War.

However, Ghosh has also written some very important non-fictional prose collections. Many of such writings serve the purpose of enlightening the readers about what he has to say directly or indirectly about his fiction. For example, the book *The Imam and The Indian* (2002) is a collection of eighteen essays written at various phases of his career which according to the author "are arranged instead in accordance with the circumstances of their writing" (vii). This book is even more interesting as it has helped in reading his novels in a more systematic manner, as he claimed, his nonfictional

works signalled the 'gestation' of the novels. This can be verified by yet another self-proclamation, which reads like this: "Readers who persevere with these pieces will discover that despite the differences in form and diction, they share with my fictions certain characteristic subjects and concerns, most notably my patterns of work" (x). Similarly, his other non-fictional work, *Dancing in Combodia and Other Essays* that comprises five essays, deals with a variety of issues which Ghosh the anthropologist-turn-novelist brings alive more formidably. Mainly a study of different societies, this book presents a compelling account of the people in those societies. For example, his novel *The Glass Palace* can be supplemented with a reading of the essay "At Large in Burma" available in this collection.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 3: What is the significance of Ghosh's novel *The Shadow Lines*?

Q 4: In what ways, are Ghosh's non-fictional works important?

14.4 THE STORYLINE OF THE NOVEL *THE HUNGRY TIDE*

The novel begins with 42 year old Kanai Dutt, a translator in an office based in New Delhi, standing on a railway platform in Calcutta and observing Piyali Roy. When they finally meet in the same railway berth, it becomes clear that both are heading towards Canning in the Sundarbans. Kanai had been there for a few months back in 1970s when he was a schoolboy and was sent to live with his aunt and uncle. Then he befriended Kusum—a girl in her mid teens. What motivates him to conduct the visit relates to his aunt Nilima who told him that his uncle Nirmal had left a journal and none but Kanai should open it. Although the journal had been written probably around 1979, the year Nirmal died, it had only recently been discovered somewhere in the house. Piya or Piyali Roy, had been born in Calcutta, but had moved to the United States when she was only one year

old. She does not know Bengali. Now she is a student of Cetology at the Scripps Institution of Oceanography in California. On this trip to India, she is interested in observing the marine mammals, which are unique to the Sundarbans. She is heading towards Canning, which is the last station to go to the Sundarbans. Kanai, on the other hand, is heading towards Lusibari, the farthest island of the region, where his aunt Nilima runs an NGO called the Badabon Trust.

After arriving in Canning, Piya heirs a dubious guide and a 'guard' provided by the Government. However, soon she gets fed up with these two men, and approaches a poor fisherman called Fokir who, she hoped, could direct her to the dolphins she wishes to study. In the process, she falls into the river and is saved by Fokir from the salty vegetation filled water. Fokir does not know English but both manage to do their best to communicate.

Gradually, we learn that the Badabon Trust, now run by Nilima Bose, and the high school established by her husband Nirmal, were actually built over the site of a commune established by a British idealist and visionary named Sir John Daniel Hamilton. The house is called "Lusibari" or "Lucy's House" named for Hamilton's wife Lucy who died suddenly on her way to India. Hamilton had bought ten thousand acres of the Sundarbans and invited the poor people to come and populate the place on one condition that there would be no caste system, and no tribal nationalisms. Although these people were mostly farmers, they decided to become fishermen in a place of crocodiles, tigers, snakes and dangerous tides. These people arrived in Sundarbans in three waves – in 1920s, in 1947 after Partition, and in 1971 after the Bangladesh war. Nirmal and Nilima Bose who arrived in Lusibari in 1950, 11 years after Hamilton's death, were to take over the management of Hamilton's estate, which almost fell in the last 11 years. Nilima established a "Woman's Union" which by 1980s developed into the Badabon Trust. Kanai learns that Kusum, his childhood friend, had been abandoned by her mother who had been tricked to work in brothels. To save the child from similar fate, the Woman's Union raised Kusum who later married Rajen, a poor man crippled by an accident in Calcutta. They bore a son whose name

is Fokir. But just four years after his birth Rajen falls in front of a train and dies.

Kusum tells Fokir the story of Bon Bibi, a good spirit who fights with the evil spirit Dokkhin Rai for control of the forest and waterways. The story of Bon Bibi relates to a man named Dhona who is seduced by Dokkhin Rai into offering a young lad named Dukhey as food to Dokkhin Rai who sometimes also takes the form of a tiger. However, Bon Bibi saves Dukhey at the last moment. Kususm, in a way, wanted Bon Bibi to take the place of Fokir's father. Her father had built a little temple on the island of Garjontola in Bon Bibi's honour. This story had a lasting impact on the minds of Fokir and Kusum's grandson Tutul who frequently visited that place. But, Kusum also admits sadly that Bon Bibi had not helped her years before when her own father could not be saved from a tiger. Finally, Kusum abandons Fokir as she had been told by her friend Horen that Dilip, who had forced her mother into prostitution, was now hunting for her.

Nirmal writes his journal, for which Kanai is sent for in the present. He tries to warn Nilima of the danger caused by the influx of the Bangladeshi refugees who had fled to Morichjhapi from the resettlement camp in central India to which they were forcefully sent. Morichjhapi was a tiger reserve and the Indian Government considered the refugees to be destroying the natural habitats of wild animals. Nirmal however empathises with the refuges. Kusum takes Nirmal to Garjontola and during that time, he was protecting Kusum from Dilip. Horen proposes marriage to her, but the next day, she is killed in a massacre perpetrated by the Government against the 'squatters'. He son Fokir was only five years old at that time.

However, the event narrated in the journal had happened a good many years before the immediate present with which the novel begins. At present Fokir is an adult and is married to Moyna who is an educated woman. Now she wants to go to nursing schools. When Kanai meets her for the first time, he admires Moyna for her determination and ambition. Piya heirs Fokir to take her out into the water so that she can observe the dolphins, and this continues for several weeks. During one such visit to the water, Horen and Kanai accompany them, but soon Kanai senses that a cyclone

is approaching. They also know that Piya and Fokir had gone out in Fokir's small boat. As the storm approaches, Horen decides that he can no longer wait for them and return to Lusibari. Meanwhile Fokir moves towards Garjontola, with the hope of Bon Bibi's intervention on behalf of the poor, they climb the highest mangrove tree and tie themselves to the trunk. The storm is soon upon them hitting them repeatedly with full force followed by a massive tidal wave. Although it subsides eventually, Piya sees that Fokir has died in shielding her from the lashing. As he was dying, he was whispering his wife's and son's names to Piya.

Fokir is cremated. After a few days, Kanai returns to New Delhi, and Piya reads the letter he had left to her. In the letter, he admits that he understands himself poorly, and wishes her happiness. He has left her a full translation of the Bon Bibi legend so that she can better understand Fokir's spirituality and his struggle for life. He also wants her to understand that in different ways, she was loved by both Fokir and Kanai. She too understands that she was drawn towards both of them. Piya leaves for a month but returns to work at the Badabon Trust. She plans to raise money and tries that Nilima's dreams live long—first by financing a house for Moyna and college education for her son Tutul. Piya also thinks of using the Badabon Trust for conservation of endangered dolphins in consultation with the local fishermen. She can very well remember Fokir because of her GPS, which recorded all that happened in the waterways in Sundarbans. She starts calling Nilima's house her 'home'. Kanai decides to write down from what he remembers from reading Nirmal's journal. Finally, the book ends with the haunting presence of the spirit of Fokir.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 5: What are some of the revelations at the end of the novel?

Q 6: What is contained in Nirmal's journal for which Kanai makes a visit to Lusibari?

14.5 CRITICAL RECEPTION OF GHOSH

Amitav Ghosh has often been hailed as an important Indian English novelist after Salman Rushdie. Most of his fictional works have won prestigious awards. *The Circle of Reason* won the Prix Médicis étranger award—one of France's top literary awards. *The Shadow Lines* won the Sahitya Akademi Award and the Ananda Puraskar. *The Calcutta Chromosome* won the Arthur C. Clarke Award for 1997. *The Glass Palace* won the International e-Book Award at the Frankfurt Book Fair in 2001. In 2005, *The Hungry Tide* was awarded the Crossword Book Prize, which is a major Indian award. His novel *Sea of Poppies* was shortlisted for the 2008 Man Booker Prize. This novel was however the co-winner of the Vodafone Crossword Book Award in 2009, as well as co-winner of the 2010 Dan David Prize. *River of Smoke* was shortlisted for the Man Asian Literary Prize 2011. As already mentioned, the Government of India awarded him the civilian honour of Padma Shri in 2007. He also received, together with Margaret Atwood—the Israeli Dan David Prize. Ghosh has received the lifetime achievement award at Tata Literature Live, the Mumbai LitFest on November 20, 2016.

Ghosh's works have been translated into more than 30 languages. Besides, his essays have been published in *The New Yorker, The New Republic* and *The New York Times.* He has taught in many universities in India and the USA, including Delhi University, Columbia, Queen's and Harvard University.



14.6 LET US SUM UP

By this time, you must have understood that Amitav Ghosh is an important exponent of Indian English fiction. Ghosh, in his novel *The Hungry Tide* deals with the region namely, the Sundarbans or the "tide country". Besides, having a substantial amount of ideas regarding the life and works of Amitav Ghosh in this unit, you must have also realised that the novel *The*

Hungry Tide is an important addition to Indian English fiction. You must have learnt that the 'Subaltern concerns' and locatedness are the two most important thematic aspects of Amitav Ghosh's career as an Indian English novelist.



14.7 FURTHER READING

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Websites and Electronic Resources:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amitav_Ghosh

14.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: Not possible… …although he is popular as a fiction writer, it is very difficult to label and categorise his works… … Together being a social anthropologist, his fame also lies in being a historian, a fiction writer and a journalist.

Ans to Q 2: *The Circle of Reason* (1986)… …*The Shadow Lines* (1988)… …*The Calcutta Chromosome* (1996)… … *Countdown* (1999)… …*The Glass Palace* (2000)… …*In An Antique Land* (1992)… …*The Hungry Tide* (2004)… …*Sea of Poppies* (2008) and *River of Smoke* (2010).

Ans to Q 3: *The Shadow Lines* (1988), is about postcolonial India… …it won the prestigious Sahitya Akademi award in 1989… …in this novel, he beautifully blends Indian nationalist history, and postcolonial identity… …the story centers around a Hindu narrator's family which fled from their ancestral home in Dhaka to Calcutta during the riot that erupted after the formation of East Pakistan in 1971.

Ans to Q 4: Ghosh's no-fictional prose collections serve the purpose of enlightening the readers about his fictional works… …his *The Imam and The Indian* (2002) help in reading his novels in a more systematic manner… …his other non-fictional work, *Dancing In Combodia and Other Essays* deals with a variety of issues which Ghosh the anthropologist-turn-novelist brings alive more formidably.

Ans to Q 5: Kanai returns to New Delhi, and in a letter admits that he understands himself poorly… …he also wants Piya to understand that in different ways, she was loved by both Fokir and Kanai… …Piya too understands that she was drawn towards both of them… …Piya also thinks of using the Badabon Trust for conservation of endangered dolphins in consultation with the local fishermen… …she can very well remember Fokir because of her GPS which recorded all that happened in the waterways in the Sundarbans.

Ans to Q 6: The journal vividly describes the Morichjhapi incident… …he warned Nilima of the danger caused by the influx of the Bangladeshi refugees who had fled to Morichjhapi from the resettlement camp in central India… …Morichjhapi was a tiger reserve and the Indian Government considered the refugees to be destroying the natural habitats of wild animals… …the Indian Govt. perpetrated a massacre against the 'squatters'.



14.9 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: Discuss in detail Amitav Ghosh's contributions to Indian English Literature with particular reference to his fictional works.

Q 2: Explain the importance of the *The Hungry Tide* as an Indian English fiction.

Q 3: What are the major preoccupations of Amitav Ghosh as a novelist? Do you think that he has been successfull in extolling the idea of 'Indianness' in his fictional works?

Q 4: Write a note on the non-fictional works of Ghosh. In what way do they help in understanding Ghosh as a writer?

Q 5: Comment on the critical reception of Amitav Ghosh as an Indian English writer.

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UNIT 15: AMITAV GHOSH: *THE HUNGRY TIDE* (PART II)

UNIT STRUCTURE

15.1 Learning Objectives

15.2 Introduction

15.3 Reading the Novel

15.3.1 Major Themes

15.3.2 Major Characters

15.3.3 Ghosh's Narrative Style

15.4 Critical Reception of the Novel

15.5 Let us Sum up

15.6 Further Reading

15.7 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

15.8 Possible Questions

15.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- make a list of the important aspects related to the novel *The Hungry Tide*
- discuss the plot, characterisation, themes, and narrative technique in *The Hungry Tide*
- comment on the significance of the novel as an important addition to Indian English fiction.
- make an assessment of Amitav Ghosh as an Indian English writer with reference to the novel *The Hungry Tide*

15.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit will take you to a discussion of the various aspects of Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Hungry Tide*. From you reading of the previous unit, you have learnt that the incident of Morichjhapi massacre that took place in 1978-79, when the government of West Bengal forcibly evicted

thousands of Bengali refugees who had settled on the island, forms one of the backgrounds for the novel that you are studying. The novel is set in the Sundarbans the immense labyrinth of tiny islands in the Bay of Bengal. For the settlers here, life is extremely dangerous with possibilities of attacks by tigers, unrest and eviction by the Government. Many a times, without warning tidal floods rise and surge over the land, causing devastation everywhere. In this place of vengeful beauty, the lives of three characters belonging to different worlds collide—Piyali Roy, Fokir and Kanai Dutt. Piyali is a young marine biologist, an Indian American in search of a rare, endangered river dolphin, *Orcaella brevirostris*. Her journey begins with a disaster, when she is thrown from a boat into crocodile-infested waters. Rescue comes in the form of a young, illiterate fisherman, Fokir. Although they don't understand each other because of their different languages, Piya and Fokir are powerfully drawn to each other, sharing an uncanny instinct for the ways of the sea. Piya engages Fokir to help with her research and finds a translator in Kanai Dutt, a businessman from Delhi whose idealistic aunt and uncle are long-time settlers in the Sundarbans. As the three of them launch into the elaborate world of the Sundarbans, they are drawn unawares into the hidden undercurrents of this isolated world. As you finish reading the unit, you will learn that the novel explores topics like humanism and environmentalism, especially when they come into a conflict of interest with each other.

15.3 READING THE NOVEL

The following sections will guide you to read the novel in terms of the various aspects. Ghosh's main concern in the novel is the placing of an individual against a broader historical and geographical backdrop. The book is divided into two sections: "The Ebb" and "The Flood", and is mostly set in the Sundarbans which stretches across coastal India and Bangladesh, from the Hooghly River in West Bengal to the shores of the Meghna in Bangladesh. It is also the home of the Bengal tiger which has killed thousands of people, but which is also an endangered species.

15.3.1 Major Themes

Ghosh in this novel provides a realistic depiction of the Sundarbans situated on the islets of the Ganga Delta lying in the Southern part of Kolkata or the Bangladesh frontier. Besides providing a pictorial idea of the Sundarbans, this novel also deals with history as a recurring theme as Brinda Bose has argued: "Ghosh's fiction takes upon itself the responsibility of re-assessing its troubled antecedents, using history as a tool by which we can begin to make sense of – or at least come to terms with—our troubling present". The following are some of the important themes of the novel.

Morichjhapi Massacre:

The novel helps in discovering the role of Amitav Ghosh as a novelist, a journalist and a historian. It dramatises the last phase of the refugees struggle in the Sundarbans. After the Partition, they had moved to West Bengal in search of better life. In the 60s, they were pushed inland from their deltaic origins into central India. Dandakaranya was conceived as a long-lasting solution to their problem. However, ironically enough, it increasingly turned out to be 'banishment' rather than rehabilitation. The refugees felt alienated, and between 1965 and 1978, more than 12,000 families deserted the settlement. The West Bengal government managed to send many of these refugees back, but about 25,000 managed to return to West Bengal and build a settlement on the island of Marichjhanpi. The West Bengal government was averse to the idea of old refugees returning back to the state and deeply unhappy with this development. It was declared that the Morichjhapi settlement was an illegal encroachment by 'deserters' on forest land in an area earmarked for the protection of endangered tigers. The refugees were given an ultimatum to evacuate the island by 31st March 1979; when that proved futile, the government started an 'economic blockade' that severely affected the refugees; and the state police

finally cracked down in mid-May 1979. In the *Hungry Tide*, the Morichjapi Massacre is traced through a witness, Nirmal, and his diary to his nephew (Kanai). In *The Hungry Tide*, Kanai reconstructs, via his uncle's journal, the revolt of a group of resettled refugees from the then East Pakistan, their creation of a short-lived community in the Sundarbans with visible utopian-rationalist features, and the bloody retaliation of the authorities. Kusum, Fokir's mother, is part of that revolt, and dies in the course of its repression.

The Sundarbans:

In his essay "The March of the Novel through History" Ghosh stated that a novel must always be set somewhere. It must have its setting, and within the evolution of the narrative this setting must, classically play an important role. Most interestingly, *The Hungry Tide* is one of the novels in which the lived sense of place becomes very prominent. The narrator personifies Sundarbans as "the trailing threads of India's fabric, the ragged fringe of her Sari, the achol that follows her, half wetted by the sea" (6). The narrator further tells: "At no moment can human beings have any doubt of the terrain's hostility to their presence" because "every year dozens of people perish in the embrace of that dense foliage, are killed by tigers, snakes and crocodiles. Those that survive face not only frequent cyclones but the sight of ebb tides that becomes the source of the birth to a forest every day, before swallowing it again." (8) Ghosh is interested in what is called imaginary geographies and the selection of the Sundarbans for the setting of the novel is connected to that interest. The Sundarbans are placed as 'borderless', a 'utopia', where one's familiar markers of identity are constantly shifting. According to Hamilton, "it was possible to tell who was who, and what their castes and religions and beliefs were". Besides, in that place, there were no borders "to divide fresh water from salt, river from sea."

Subaltern Concerns:

Being the contemporaries of the "Subaltern Studies" group one can find traces of "Subalternist" concerns in this novel in

Ghosh's attempts to produce an alternative historiography about India and about those excluded from the grand narratives of history. You will note that the term "Subaltern" was first deployed as a critical term by the Italian communist thinker Antonio Gramsci. In his use, it refers to the non-elite classes, including the proletariat. In India, the term "Subaltern" was shaped by its discussion around the late 1970s and early 1980s by a group of Marxist historians who later became known as the "Subaltern Studies Group". These historians adapted Gramscian ideas about hegemony, subordination and "subalternity" within a discourse designed to contest the dominance of elitist historiographies of colonial India. Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak are the most prominent members of the Indian group. The narrators of Ghosh aim towards critiquing the ideological underpinnings of the Indian nation-state, through an evaluation of its colonial past and postcolonial present, and a reconsidered approach to the slurs in Indian political history. The Subaltern figure Fokir is at the heart of the novel and the ethical interpretation of the novel focuses on his place, or lack of place, on the scheme of things often determined by state authorities in Calcutta and New Delhi.

Use of Mythology:

One way to look at Amitav Ghosh as an 'Indian' writer is his use of Indian mythology. The novel presents an interesting example of Ghosh's use of mythology that helps to explain the notion of Indianness in his novels. Here, Ghosh seeks to find out why Indian myths and legends are so rooted in the psyche of an Indian people. The reference made here is to Goddess Ganga and the legend of her descent from heaven. References made to the tearing off Ganga's torrents by Lord Shiva exemplify such rootedness. Ghosh's preoccupation with the idea of Indianness in this novel can be best examined in terms of his re-interpretation of Hindu mythology and legends, and their connections to the creation of the Sundarbans. As Kanai, the Delhi based reporter, reads through the pages of his Bengali script:

"In our legends it is said that the goddess Ganga's descent from the heavens would have split the earth had Lord Shiva not tamed her torrent by tying it into his ash-smeared locks. To hear this story is to see the river in a certain way: as a heavenly braid, for instance, an immense rope of water, unfurling through a wide and thirsty plain. That there is a further twist to the tale becomes apparent only in the final stages of the river's journey—and this part of the story always comes as a surprise, because it is never told and thus it is never imagined. It is this: there is a point at which the braid comes undone; where Lord Shiva's matted hair is washed apart into a vast, knotted tangle." (6)

However, like it is typical of all Ghosh's novels to re-interpret facts and established ideas, *THT* presents an interesting parallelism between mythology and geology. In addition, this is where Ghosh is at his best while rationally explaining certain aspects of life and society in terms of Indian mythologies. Once again, we find Ghosh hinting at the idea of circularity when Nirmal utters these lines:

"Look at the size of their heroes, how immense they are….heavenly deities on the one hand , and on the other, the titanic stirrings of the earth itself— both equally other worldly, equally remote from us. Then there is the way in which the plots go round and round in both kinds of stories, so that every episode is both a beginning and an end, every outcome leads to other. And then of course there is the scale of time yugas and epochs, Kaliyuga and the Quaternary. And yet mind this—in both, these vast durations is telescoped in such a way as to permit the telling of a story." (180)

Nirmal further relates Ganga to an incarnation of Vishnu and God's missteps. He begins like this: "May be I would start with the story of Vishnu, in his incarnation as a divine dwarf, measuring out the universe in three giant strides: I would tell them about God's missteps and how an errant toenail on one of his feet created a tiny scratch on the fabric of creation. It was this pore [of Ganga]." (181) Then again to express that the tide country is better explained by

myth than geology, Nirmal states: "'Look comrades, look', I would say. 'This map shows that in geology, as in myth, there is a visible Ganga and a hidden Ganga: one flows on land and one beneath the water. Put them together and you have what is by far the greatest of the earth's rivers'" (181). Following his interests with location and history, it can be assumed that in almost all his major fictional works, Ghosh implicitly or explicitly argues that history can irrevocably alter the lives of the common people and in the context of India, it has been done so alarmingly. Colonial history has already brought in such alternations.

Human Communication:

Ghosh's novel takes as its task the exploration of a vast field of human communication, testing both its possibilities and its limits as the characters seek to cross multiple barriers – the barriers of language, religion and social class, those between human beings and nature, between traditional and cosmopolitan India, between urban and rural, between India and the wider world. The tension between global and local is articulated through the characters, with, for most of the novel, globalisation embodied by the Americanised Piya with her hi-tech GPS device, local identity symbolised by Fokir, and Kanai, the Delhi-resident, part-globalised modern entrepreneur, shifting uncertainly somewhere in between. Thus, one of the major elements in the plot of the novel is the growing relation between Kanai and Piya, another being Piya's developing understanding of Fokir.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: What ideas of the Sundarbans are expressed by Amitav Ghosh in the novel *The Hungry Tide*?

Q 2: What do you mean by the term 'Subaltern'? Do you think that *The Hungry Tide* is an example of Ghosh's inclination towards the Subalternist concerns?

Q 3: Do you agree that the use of Indian mythology help in defining Ghosh's Indianness in this novel?

15.3.2 Major Characters

Let us in this section quickly have a look at the major characters of the novel.

Kanai

Kanai is a representative of the highly educated urban Indian generation. He is a translator by profession and is expert in six languages. He is an interpreter, and runs his bureau to serve 'expatriate' communities, which is a group of people usually emerging in Amitav Ghosh's novels. But his importance in the novel also lies in his being the nephew of an elderly women popularly called by the local people as Mashima ('great aunt') who had established the Badabon Trust—a non-governmental development agency. This agency became instrumental in building up modern infrastructure including a school, hospital and other welfare activities. As the novel starts, Kanai is on his way to the Sundarbans to examine the newly recovered notebook written by his dead uncle Nirmal who had been a poet scholar and a revolutionist. Significantly, being a translator, Kanai offers to act as interpreter for Piya, who only knows English and has no means of communication with the local Bengali speakers whose knowledge and lore are vital for her research. Nirmal's written records are presented to the reader *translated* (from Bengali into English) by Kanai who also *mediates* between Piya and Fokir. Thus, Kanai's role in the development of the plot of the novel is very important. Kanai is a proud and arrogant and not above using his status to get his own way. He tries to be always in control of the relationships of his life. Nilima describes him as "one of those men who likes to think of himself as being irresistible to the other sex. Unfortunately, the world doesn't lack for women who're foolish enough to confirm such a man's opinion of himself, and Kanai seems always to be looking for them."

Piyali Roy:

She is a principal figure in the novel. The daughter of Bangla parents who had immigrated to Seattle, Piya is a cetologist by profession and her particular field of expertise concerns the fresh water river dolphins, which are to be found in the great waterways like the Indus, the Mekong, the Irawaddy, and the Ganges. She is the daughter of an Indian immigrant to the US, so naturally, she has very little contact with India, her ancestral country. However, she is drawn to her parent's native Bengal in order to conduct a survey of the marine mammals in the Gangetic delta. The novel opens with her meeting Kanai. After the course of incidents, she decides to come back to the Sundarbans and extend all necessary help to the Badabon Trust. With an official permit, she's forced to use a government-approved guide and guard, but she finds herself at their whims until events land her in the small boat belonging to Fokir, who is fishing for crabs with his son. Fokir brings Piya to Lusibari, where the paths of Piya, Kanai, and Fokir all merge.

Fokir:

Fokir first appears as the saviour of Piya from the two dubious 'guides'. Fokir is perhaps the truest soul in the novel. He is an illiterate man, but possesses more knowledge of the river and its wildlife than all the outsiders who don't understand him. Piya feels an affinity for Fokir and his life, which matches the rhythms of his environment. Kanai, attracted to Piya and envious of Fokir, decides to accompany them on a trip up the river to study the dolphins. The three of them embark on a trip into the heart of the tide country, which will bring lasting change to all of their lives. He is a representative of the Subaltern figure who is very honest, but also complex. Fokir is at the heart of the novel and the ethical interpretation of the novel focuses on his place, or lack of place, on the scheme of things often determined by state authorities in Calcutta and New Delhi.

Nilima and Nirmal:

In 1950, 11 years after Hamilton's death, Nirmal and Nilima Bose arrived in Lusibari. An year before their arrival, Nirmal had attended a conference of the Socialist International held in Calcutta. Nirmal was then teaching at Ashutosh college and Nilima was his student. They were to take over the management of Hamilton's estate, which almost fell in the last 11 years. Nilima established a "Woman's Union" which by 1980s developed into the Badabon Trust. Nirmal writes his journal, for which Kanai is sent for in the present, in the village of Morichjhapi the year after his retirement as a headmaster. In the journal, he researches his own life, which he takes to be a big failure. He also reassesses his marriage, which according to him, is overshadowed by his wife Nilima's dedication to the Badabon Trust and her dismissal of his leftist ideologies. When the novel begins, Nilima is a 76-year-old woman, and still runs the charitable organisation called the Badabon Trust.

Bon Bibi:

According to this story the twins, Bon Bibi and her brother Shah Jongoli, were born in the holy city of Medina to a Sufi Faqir Ibrahim through the intervention of Archangel Gabriel. Gabriel forecasted that they had been chosen for divine mission, that they were to travel from Arabia to the "country of eighteen tides"–atthero bhatir desh—in order to make this region fit for human habitation. Subsequently, both set off for the mangrove forest of Bengal dressed in the simple ropes of Sufi mendicants. However, the jungle of the 'the country of eighteen tides' were under the command of the demon king Dokkhin Rai who kept within his power every living being in the island and who was antagonistic to human. With the arrival of Bon Bibi, there began a battle in which the demon king was defeated and the merciful Bon Bibi divided the island into two parts—one for herself and the other for Dokkhin Rai to maintain a balance between human settlement and wilderness. Thus, Bon Bibi became the

tutelary deity of the island. (THT, 103). Bon Bibi is not physically present in the novel. However, her presence is felt everywhere.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 4: What role does Kanai play as a character in the novel *The Hungry Tide*?

Q 5: Explain the significance of the story of 'Bon Bibi'.

15.3.3 Ghosh's Narrative Style

The novel *The Hungry Tide* is told from the perspective of two main characters—Kanai Dutt, a Delhi businessman, and Piya Roy, an American scientist who has come to the Tide country to study the rare Irrawaddy dolphin which lives in the rivers of the tide country. Amitav Ghosh in this novel uses narrative techniques like alternative narrative strands, the use of flashback and memory, insertion of textual fragments that offer alternative avenues into a forgotten history. For most part, as Anshuman Mondal writes, the narrative time frame only extends over some thirty to forty years and, in contrast to his preoccupation with the diasporic conditions prevalent in his earlier novels, the action is concentrated on one geographical area—Sundarbans. The notebook Nirmal left behind allows Ghosh to inlay the narrative with an account of the forgotten incident in the history of postcolonial India—the Morichjhapi massacre of 1979. The use of the 'tide' as a metaphor is important. The tide comes twice daily those results in the constant reshaping of the land and uprooting of everything permanent. Thus, this can be seen as an apt symbol of the ebb and flow of history and the uprooting of the populace due to reasons more than one. This style of writing is unique to Amitav Ghosh.

Perhaps, Amitav Ghosh is at his best with the use of storytelling a technique in this novel. The character called Nirmal writes in his letter to Kanai: "To think of all the years when I had

nothing but time and yet wrote not one word. And now like some misplaced, misgendered Scheherazade I am trying to starve the night off with a flaying, fleeting pen…" (148). Once Kanai starts reading Nirmal's diary, many stories, of the 'subaltern' like Kushum, start gaining narrative space. This novel is also an excellent example of oral storytelling represented by the story of Bon Bibi. Ghosh has tried to express why certain stories are so important in the daily life of the common people of the tide country or the Sundarbans. The story of Bon Bibi, which is a superstitious story, finds its place in the common parlance of the people of the 'tide country', which has been used as the central metaphor in the novel.

Amitav Ghosh is usually considered a writer of postmodern fiction, because his stories travel throughout time and space. In *The Hungry Tide*, he traverses between the Morichjhanpi incident from Nirmal's point of view, and the present day travels of Piya Roy, Kanai and Fokir. This time-travel is vital to the story and created an intricacy of sub-topics and plots. Another trait of Ghosh as a novelist, as reflected in *The Hungry Tide,* is the research he undertakes in mixing fiction and fact to the extent that they stand undifferentiated. Touching upon various topics such as refugees, freedom, war etc. to the life of the common people in the Sundarbans, the absence of language in communication, development, women trafficking and much more, Ghosh takes the reader through a whirlwind of events and emotions. He includes the myths of the people who are living in the Sundarbans to explain the nature of living in a country whose shape is determined by tide and extreme weather. This is what makes the narrative style of the novel so unique.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 6: Comment on Ghosh's narrative style in *The Hungry Tide.*

15.4 CRITICAL RECEPTION OF THE NOVEL

In the blurb of the Harper Collins edition of *The Hungry Tide,* it is stated, “Amitav Ghosh has discovered another new territory, summoning a singular, fascinating place, another world, from its history and myth and bringing it to life. Yet *The Hungry Tide* also explores another and far more unknowable jungle: the human spirit. It is a novel that asks at every turn: what man can take the true measure of another?” Besides, there are several praises for the book. It has been stated by *India Today* that what remain permanent, in terrifying beauty, are the river and the forest, and it is their overwhelming presence that provides *The Hungry Tide* a dark, elegiac elegance. *The Telegraph* remarked, “Ghosh’s storytelling is at best tempting the reader on as if with an unsolved mystery, focussing dramatically on edgy exchanges between unusual individuals, blending tale into tale in a vast seeming narrative close to the Bengali tradition of the river novel.” Similarly, *The Pioneer* had remarked, “He is a writer who looks, listens and tells the story. If you want to see the Sundarbans painted in words, and read a bit of its history, myth, and the story of an American Indian in search of the rare river dolphins, an impromptu translator and logical guide, then grab a copy of *The Hungry Tide*.” Such reviews help in claiming that the novel *The Hungry Tide* is an important addition to Amitav Ghosh’s oeuvre, as well as to Indian English Fiction.



15.5 LET US SUM UP

From this unit, you have learnt that the main intention of Amitav Ghosh in *The Hungry Tide* is to explore the Morichjhapi Massacre of 1979 in the Sundarbans, and the history of the riverine dolphins *(Orcaella brevirostris)* which are integral part of the island’s history and ecology. In order to do so, Ghosh provides a realistic depiction of the Sundarbans situated on the islets of the Ganga Delta lying in the Southern part of Kolkata or the Bangladesh frontier. However, the narrative continues through an intensified tension between the global and the local, the global being

represented by the American Piya, with her hi-tech GPS device, and the local by Fokir who represents the repressed histories of the Sundarbans. This novel is one of the remarkable examples of Ghosh's discussion of the plight of the 'divided' communities residing in different parts of India.



15.6 FURTHER READING

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Website and Electronic Resources:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Hungry_Tide

http://www.reviewsofbooks.com/hungry_tide/review/

15.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: In his essay "The March of the Novel through History" Ghosh stated that a novel must always be located somewhere… …in this novel the lived sense of place becomes very prominent… …Ghosh is interested in what is called imaginary geographies and the selection of the Sundarbans for the setting of the novel is connected to that interest… …The Sundarbans is placed as 'borderless', a 'utopia', where one's familiar markers of identity are constantly shifting.

Ans to Q 2: The term "Subaltern" was first deployed by Antonio Gramsci to refer to the non-elite classes, including the proletariat… … In India, the term was shaped by its discussion around the late 1970s and early 1980s by a group of Marxist historians… …Yes… …Ghosh's Subalternist concerns can be traced through his attempts to produce an alternative historiography about those excluded from the grand narratives of history… …

Ans to Q 3: Yes… …Ghosh's use of mythology in this novel helps to explain the notion of Indianness… …Here, Ghosh seeks to find out why Indian myths and legends are so rooted in the psyche of an Indian people… …several references are made to Goddess Ganga and the legend of her descent from heaven.

Ans to Q 4: Kanai is a translator by profession and a polyglot… ….he is an interpreter, and runs his bureau to serve 'expatriate' communities… …he is also the nephew of an elderly women popularly called by the local people of Sundarbans as Mashima ('great aunt')… …Kanai offers to act as interpreter for Piya, who only knows English and has no means of communication with the local Bengali speakers… …he also presents Nirmal's written records to the readers in English… …Kanai's role in the development of the plot of the novel is very important.

Ans to Q 5: Bon Bibi is the deity of the of Sundarbans… …archangel Gabriel sent her with her brother in a divine mission from Arabia to the "country of eighteen tides"–atthero bhatir desh—in order to make this region fit

for human habitation… …the region was already under the command of the demon king Dokkhin Rai who kept within his power every living being in the island… …there began a battle between both party and the demon king was defeated and the merciful Bon Bibi divided the island into two parts—one for herself and the other for Dokkhin Rai to maintain a balance between human settlement and wilderness.

Ans to Q 6: Amitav Ghosh uses alternative narrative strands such as the use of flashback and memory, insertion of textual fragments and so on… …the narrative time frame extends over some thirty to forty years… …Nirmal's note book allows Ghosh to inlay the narrative with an account of the forgotten of postcolonial India—the Morichjhapi massacre of 1979… …the use of storytelling as a unique technique to unfold the narrative.



15.8 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: Discuss the characters of the novel against Ghosh's concern over the repressed history of the people of Lusibari.

Q 2: Read the text of *The Hungry Tide* and comment on the ending of the novel. What do you think about the death of Fokir?

Q 3: Do you agree that the 'hungry tide' serves as a metaphor in the novel? Discuss with reference to the text of the novel.

Q 4: Do you think that Fokir is more admirable than the other characters in the novel? Elaborate.

Q 5: What are the narrative strategies used by Ghosh in this novel? What purpose do the use of flashback and memory serve in the novel? Discuss.

Q 6: What is 'Indian' about the novel *The Hungry Tide*? Discuss Ghosh's use of Indianness as an important theme of the novel.

Q 7: In the novel *The Hungry Tide*, the Morichjapi Massacre is traced through a witness, Nirmal, and his diary to his nephew Kanai. Discuss.

Q 8: Do you think that by including an American-Indian woman who feels often out-of-place, Ghosh is trying to help the readers in unfolding the story of *The Hungry Tide*?

Q 9: What is your reaction to the story Kanai discovers about Nirmal and his past? Comment on the differences in perspectives between Nirmal and his wife Nilima about their shared past?

Q 10: Did the events of the storm at the very end of the book take you by surprise? How did you feel about the novel's ending?

*** ***** ***



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