

**BLOCK: II**

**Unit 1 : Haruki Murakami: Introducing the Author**

**Unit 2 : Haruki Murakami: “Birthday Girl” (Reading the Text)**

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## UNIT - 1

### Haruki Murakami: Introducing the Author

#### Unit Structure:

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#### 1.1 Objectives:

Haruki Murakami has been popularly known as one of the prolific writers of the literary world. The readers are drawn to his literary works because of his amazing combination of dream and reality- two world views. His fan readers went into frenzy when his latest book *The City and its Uncertain Walls* was published after the pandemic. The most important quality of his works is that they are openly political and cosmopolitan in nature. The present unit is an attempt to introduce you to the genius of Japanese literary world and his excellent literary career as a writer. By the end of the unit you will be able to–

- *be familiar* with the literary world of Murakami,
- *understand* the significance and literary merits of his works,
- *analyse* the characteristic features and themes of his writings.

## 1.2 Introduction:

Haruki Murakami was born on 12 January, 1949 in Japan's Kyoto city. He spent his early years in Kyoto-Osaka-Kobe which was famous for its ancient cultural and political traditions and mercantile practices. His father, Chiaki was from a Buddhist priest family and his mother Miyuki belonged to an Osaka merchant family. Murakami's parents were both high school teachers of Japanese language and literature. However, Murakami was neither influenced by antique traditions nor affected by Japanese literary traditions in most of his literary endeavour. Introvert by nature, Murakami was a voracious reader from his childhood who used to listen to his parent's discussion of the eighteenth century poetry and medieval war tales at home. When Haruki was 12 years old, his parents subscribed to two libraries of world literature. There he got enough opportunity to delve into the world of books and showed great interest in reading Tolstoy and Dostoevsky. Murakami could not make a good impression among his school teachers because he was much more interested in reading novels, listening to Jazz and visiting cafes and cinemas. From his school days, Murakami wrote for the school newspaper and his reading list included novelists like Ross MacDonald, Raymond Chandler, F. Scott Fitzgerald and Kurt Vonnegut. Murakami showed his early interest in French and Russian literature but gradually inclined towards American English language. Murakami was inclined towards American way of life and literary tradition through his association with American music. Jay Rubin, one of his popular translators wrote about Murakami,

His encyclopaedic knowledge of jazz and other facets of American popular culture are immediately apparent in his work, though he does not invest these references with weighty symbolic significance. (Rubin 2002: 17)

Jay Rubin writes that Murakami was criticised for being a-historical and apolitical. But his writings can be read as a psychological history of post-post-war period in Japan (Rubin 2002: 17-18). This may not be true because recently in 2022 at the age of 73 years, Haruki Murakami has broadcast a special radio programme calling for peace through music

concerning the war between Russia and Ukraine. He stated, “A war in Ukraine which no one has desired has begun. Can Music end war? Probably not. But surely, music can make listeners feel like ‘I have to stop war.’” This is indeed a commendable effort on the part of the writer to make political interventions.

### 1.3 Literary Works of Haruki Murakami:

Murakami is mostly known as a novelist, essayist and short story writer. His books are widely popular in Japan and abroad for which he has been awarded with many rewards. His writings can be categorized as picaresque, surreal, post modern and they are written about different human situations. His notable works are:

*Norwegian Wood* (1987), *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle* (1994-95), *Kafka on the Shore* (2002), *1Q84* (2010), *What I Talk About When I Talk About Running* (2007), *Men without Women* (2014), *Killing Commendatore* (2017), *The Elephant Vanishes* (1993), *First Person Singular* (2020), *The City and Its Uncertain Walla* (2023).

#### **Stop to Consider:**

Murakami was a fellow at Princeton University in Princeton, New Jersey. He was at Tufts University in Medford and also at Harvard University in Cambridge. It was through his *Norwegian Wood* that he came to the spotlight as a writer. The book narrates the story of loss and sexuality. For his book *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* (1955), he was awarded the Yomiuri Prize. The book infuses the realistic and the fantastic content and incorporates the themes of power, alienation, violence etc. The book brought a turning point to his life that changed his perspective on life. Collective Trauma became an important theme in his life. After years of living in the United States, Murakami returned to Japan after the Kobe earthquake and the Aum Shinrikyo gas attack. The two incidents inspired him to write his no-fiction *Underground* and the short story collection *After the Quake*.

#### **1.4 An Overview of Japanese Literary tradition:**

Japanese Literary tradition shares a close association with its neighboring literary traditions of other Asian countries such as China and India. In fact, Indian Literary traditions share a significant part with Japanese and Chinese Buddhist literature and Culture.

**(A) The influence of Chinese Civilization and Literature :** Japanese literature has been deeply influenced by the ancient Chinese civilization and literature. Noted historian W.G. Aston writes,

What Greece and Rome have been to Europe, China has been to the nations of the far East. Japan, in particular, is very deeply indebted to it. There is no department of Japanese national life and thought, whether material civilization, religion, morals, political organization, language, or literature, which does not bear traces of Chinese influence. (Aston: 3-4)

**(B) Influence of Buddhism :** Apart from Chinese literature and cultural influences, Japanese history and literature have also been influenced by Buddhism and its humanizing influences. According to historian W.G. Aston, Buddhism exerted a softening and humanizing influence upon Japanese history and culture and held a position similar to that of Christianity in the Western World (Aston: 4). Buddhism came to Japan in the middle of the sixth century and made progress after the seventh century. The Imperial Prince Shotoku Daishi was known as the real founder of Buddhism in Japan. He died in A.D.621.

However, Aston writes that the Japanese literature always marks the national character and originality even though it borrows from different sources. Aston states that the Japanese have the habit of modifying extensively everything that has been borrowed and adopted and carry the index of originality and nationality (Aston:4). Aston praised the literature of Japan as the literature of a 'brave', 'courteous', 'light hearted', 'ingenious', 'inventive'( Aston: 4). Tracing the history of migration, Aston says that the Japanese has been mainly a 'continental race' distinct from the Chinese and immigrations from Korea to Japan carry the evidence of such a continuation of movement. During the ancient

times, in the archaic period, two important developments took place. One is the introduction of art of writing and Chinese literature and culture to Japanese history and literature and secondly, the propagation of Buddhist religion (Aston: 6).

**(C) Archaic Period :** The archaic period is significant for setting the platform for the development of Japanese Literature. As it has been stated earlier, in this period an introduction to Chinese history and literature was made and art of writing was developed. It is important to mention here that Japan did not have a writing system of its own before the introduction of Kanji. So you can learn here that the earliest Chinese language and literature first became the model for Japanese literature. So far as ancient Japanese literature is concerned, oldest relics are available in the form of songs known as Kojiki and Nihongi, Norito or liturgies etc. Now, what are the thematic concerns of such old lyrics and songs? Such songs are mostly associated with some historical and archeological interests such as ascribed to prominent personalities like Mikados or Jimmu Yenno, founder of Japanese Monarchy in 660 B.C. However, they lack imagination, proper form and higher qualities (Aston: 7). Another literary work that is known in early Japanese literature is Norito or prayers, available in the form of prose work and they were presented before the deities of the Shinto religion. Their writers were not known.

**Stop to Consider:**

***Kanji* as the first model of Japanese writing system:**

These are adapted from Chinese characters and are part of the earliest Japanese writing systems. *Kanji* is known along with two indigenous kana syllabaries - *hiragana* and *katakana*. During the archaic period in the 8<sup>th</sup> century CE. *Kanji* was imported and developed as the first model of writing. In Kanji scripts, two or more kanji are written together forming compound characters. (See [www.britannica.com](http://www.britannica.com))

**(D) Nara-Period Literature (Eighth Century):** The period began with the establishment of Nara as the capital of the Mikado's Government in A.D. 710 and continues till A.D. 794. After the Nara period the capital was shifted to Nagaoka, in Yamashiro. During this time, the authority of the crown was extended under the Chinese political influence. There was a great dissemination of learning and people began to study the Chinese masterpieces of antiquity. Under the authority of Mikado Tenchi (662-671) schools and Govt. Universities were established with special emphasis on the subjects like history, Chinese classics, law and arithmetic. Besides, the educationists put interests on subjects like art of architecture, painting, medicine etc. The earliest literary works of this period include:

The *Kojiki* (A.D.712), a historical account that includes records of Japanese mythology and folk songs

The *Nihon Shoki* (720), an ancient chronicle written in Chinese language

The *Manyoshu* (759), an anthology of ancient poetry.

It is significant to mention here that the Nara period is mostly known for its poetical works and so it was called the golden era.

**(E) Heian Period : 794-1185:** The Heian period is known as the classic age of Japanese literature. During this time, the central political power was at the Heian capital, now known as Kyoto. This period was marked by introduction of vernacular cultural forms (written in Kana ) and Chinese based literature and culture (court based literature). For instance, *Nihon ryoiki* (Records of Miraculous events in Japan by the priest Kyokai. Sugawara no Michizane (845-903) known for his Chinese prose and poetry made great contribution to the literature of this period. The Kana writing in the form of waka gained popularity.

It is important to mention here that the women writers who were closely related to the imperial court made immense contribution to the development of Japanese vernacular literature. Among them were Murasaki Shikibu (known for *Genji monogatari*), the mother of

Michitsuna. The emergence of *setsuwa* (anecdote collection) can be seen in this period and first of its kind was *Konjaku monogatari shu*. Among the aristocratic people the prominent forms were *waka* and the *monogatari*. The Heian literary diaries were also written during the period such as *Tosa nikki*, *Murasaki shikibu nikki* etc.

**(F) The Medieval Period (1185-1600):** The Kamakura-Muromachi period began in 1185 when the military government *bakufu* was established. During this period writers of the samurai origin became prominent. Among them were Imagawa Ryoshun and Hosokawa Yusai. One characteristic feature of medieval literature was that much of the works were produced by groups not individuals. Medieval recluse literature by Saigyō, Chōmei and Kenkō, Medieval women's diaries, medieval warrior tales are significant literary products.

**(G) Edo-Period of Literature: 1600-1867:** The transition from medieval to early modern period is a significant even in the history of Japanese literary tradition. This saw the development of new vernacular and Sinitic literature. One of the prominent features of Edo literature is that it shows an interplay between literature and culture. The high literature included *waka*, *kanshi*, *monogatari* and other related genres. Till the seventeenth century only limited quantities of handwritten manuscripts were available and most of them belonged to the aristocrats, educated priests and the samurais. Woodblock printing was extensively used in the Edo period while in the latter half of the century typography was introduced to the Japanese people. In this period we see the rise of *haikai* as a poetical form. Matsuo Bashō, Yosa Buson, Kobayashi Issa are prominent contributors. The nineteenth century is also significant for the development of *kanshi* (Sinitic poetry) and *kanbun* (Sinitic prose).

**(H) The Modern Period: The Meiji Period: 1868 to 1945:** The 260 years of long Tokugawa system was replaced by the Meiji government in 1868 and the word Meiji literally meant "enlightened reign". The Meiji restoration inspired a variety of social, political and religious reforms. The period 1870s to the 1900s was the time of great economic and political shift in Japan. Japan emerged as an industrial



nation-state. Following the victories in the Sino- Japanese War (1894-95) and the Russo- Japanese War (1904-05) the country witnessed major developments in educational systems, media, literacy and practices of writing. In the 1880s, the government adopted Western administrative, legal and commercial practices and also promoted Westernization and modernization of Japanese literature and culture. This Meiji period was popular for the translated fictions and political fictions. Examples of such translations are Nakamura Masanao's translation of Samuel Smile's *Self Help* and John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*.

**(I) Postwar literature :** 1945 and after: Post-war literature in Japan was deeply influenced by the war period that lasted till 1945. After Japan's surrender Japan was governed by the Allied Occupation forces from 1945 to 1952, till its sovereignty.

Sharalyn Orbaugh opined,

In the case of Japan the pervasiveness of the militarist rhetoric, the wholesale devastation of the cities by explosive, incendiary and atomic bombs, and the psychic and material repercussions of unconditional surrender created a situation in which echoes and influences of the war and its aftermath resonated strongly for several decades (Orbaugh 737).

In the year 1945, when the news came out about Japan's surrender to China and the allies a poem was published in the newspaper Asahi composed by Takamura Kataro (1883-1956), a leading Japanese free verse poet and the name of the poem was "Ichioku gokyu" (The Lamentations of One Hundred Million). The poem was about the changing course of Japanese history. Besides, he wrote several poems after the Pearl Harbor and supported Japan's imperialist turn. It is significant to mention here that majority of the writers in the war period in Japan extended their cooperation towards war affair and imperial turn (whether out of enthusiasm or fear not known) because the state had its control over media and speech. However, those attempted to

raise voice against government's agenda were either sent to jail or silenced. Takamura Kataro had to face confrontation and he had to withdraw himself from the literary world. In 1945, an important incident took place when five hundred political prisoners were released. Among them were members of the Japanese Communist Party. This was followed by a revival of the Communist Party. Amidst such a political scenario, many writers initiated a new Japanese Literary trend in the twentieth century. Miyamoto Yuriko (1899-1951) and Nakano Shigeharu (1902-79) founded an important journal Shin Nihon bungaku (New Japanese Literature). The members of the New Japan Literature Association (Shin Nihon Bungaku Kai) joined the proletarian Japanese literary movement. Later, however, the association had a rift with the Communist Party. After the war, in the first few years Japan witnessed the flood of variety of Kasutori or Pulp magazines. One such magazine was *Riberaru* (Liberal). In that era, writers like Nagai Kafu, Hayashi Fumiko, Hirabayashi Taiko, Ishikawa Jun a and also Noma Hiroshi, Takeda Taijun were writing on various entertaining and liberal ideas prevalent at that time. One very significant aspect of their writings was that they explored through their writings about liberating desire and sex. However, such obscenity in literature was not encouraged by the authorities and the guilty were punished legally.

Many writers such as Nagai Kafu, Masamune Hakucho wrote about the disrupted and ravaged cities after the war. Many women authors wrote after the war period. Among them were Hirabayashi Taiko (1905-72), Hayashi Fumiko (1903-1951) and Sata Ineko (1904-98). Hayashi Fumiko is known for the famous short story "Hone" published in the post war period. The story was about a middle class war widow and impact of war time on her life. Hirabayashi Taiko's short stories included "Otete tsunaide", "The Blind Chinese Soldiers". Some of the notable works of Taiko are: *Himitsu* (Secret ,1967), *Kuroi Nenrei* (The Black Age, 1963), *Diary of the End of the War* (1946).

**Stop to Consider:**

**The Third Generation of New Writers (Dai-san no shinjin):**

After the war a new set of writers emerged in Japan, born around 1920s that became part of Modern Japanese Literature. Among the prominent writers was Shusaku Endo whose literary works had been translated into many different languages. Female authors also made their debuts at that time among whom were Aya Koda, Ariyoshi Sawako. In 1955, Endo won the prestigious Akutagawa Prize for *White Men*.

In the year 1950, the outbreak of the Korean War brought out the interdependence period between Japan and America due to the presence and influence of the US Military bases in Japan. This is in fact an important shift in the history of Japan because Japan's economic development received a boost when the USA began to work for the infrastructural development in Japan. This was called an 'economic miracle' which continued till the 1960s. The economic and social recovery paved the ground for many literary productions in the post Korean War period. Prominent female writers of this period were Enchi Fumiko, Koda Aya and Ariyoshi Sawako. It is significant to mention here that a good number of women writers such as Oba Minako and Takahashi Takako of the 1960s and 70s chose a realist mode of writing that also included "magical realism". In and around 1970s the First Generation of Writers made their debuts among whom were Kanai Mieko, Tsusima Yuko. It is not surprising that a decade and a half of war followed by nearly seven years of foreign occupation should have a large influence on any nation's subsequent literary production. Kanai Mieko wrote in realistic fashion showing concern over gender and familial roles, self-mutilation etc. Her writing was significant for its non-Japanese context and art forms. She chose nameless archetypes and nameless locations for her novels and realistic fictions. Here an important connection can be seen between Haruki Murakami's approach to fiction and Mieko's interpretation of characters and plot. Both were interested in cosmopolitan approach to literature that were not confined to a geographical boundary. Both were concerned with human experiences and manners and behaviours.

**Self Assessment Questions:**

1. Write briefly about the important historical developments in literature in Japan. (50 words)

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2. Briefly discuss the contributions of a few major writers of the post-war period in Japan.(100 words)

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3. How did the Korean War impact the literary production in Japan in the twentieth century? Was Haruki Murakami affected by the wave of Korean War? (100 words)

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In the post war time Zainichi literature began to flourish under the influence of Korean language and heritage. The form of the literature was autobiographical mostly in ‘I-novel’ (shishosetsu) style. Such writings basically dealt with existential issues such as identity, people’s place on earth, human relationship etc and this were because people at that time were struggling for a kind of negotiation between Korean and Japanese identity and existence. Question of citizenship was a major issue at that time and the Zainichi writers expressed about hybrid identity, language, culture and post colonial impact. Melissa L. Wender in her article “ Postwar Zainichi writings: Politics, Language, and Identity” writes,

In 1945, when the war ended, approximately 2 million Koreans remained in Japan, but their numbers soon shrank, since many hastened to return home, and roughly 600,000 ended up staying. (Shiraine: 756)

Thus, there was a cultural ambivalence in Japan following the Korean war and that was one of the main forces behind the upsurge of Zainichi

literature. Ri Kaisei was one of the major Zainichi writers who won the Akutagawa Prize for “Kinuta o utsu onna” (Woman Who Beats the Fulling Block, 1972).

### **1.5 Significance of Haruki Murakami as a Post-war Japanese writer:**

Jay Rubin writes that Murakami has been known as the first genuinely “post-post-war writer” who is well familiar with the American Popular Culture (Rubin: 17). Murakami’s works were criticized as a-political and a-historical but as Rubin has mentioned, his works can be read as a psychological history of post-post-war Japan. His *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* and *After the Quake* are historically significant.

#### **1.5.1 Themes, Style and Forms of Murakami’s Writings:**

On being asked by an interviewer, Alfred A. Knopf about his inspiration behind other-worldly, dreamlike quality in his writing, Murakami replied,

Writing a story is like playing out your dreams while you are awake. It’s not about being inspired by your dreams, but about consciously manipulating the unconscious and creating your own dreams. I think I am graced with the ability to do that.

Murakami selected the live accounts from people’s lives as a story teller and presented them in his unique non-fictional pattern. In some of his writings, you will find mythical elements. For instance the Oedipus Myth is evident in his novel *Kafka on the Shore*. For him myths are like ‘reservoir of stories’.

Haruki Murakami once said that originality is a living and evolving thing, whose shape is extremely difficult to pin down. According to Murakami,

The component is not the quality of the materials - what’s needed is magic. If that magic is present, the most basic daily matters and the plainest language can be turned into a device of surprising sophistication (Novelist as a Vocation).

In the above quotation, Murakami has stated that writing exhibits a kind of magic that transforms the simplest reality into an extraordinary creation.

Haruki Murakami composed a story collection known as *First Person Singular* that is 'I' narrative. This 'I' in his narratives is largely cosmopolitan in nature. The characters in his works are mostly nameless and he addressed them as a pronoun. In one of his interviews, writes Marta Bausells, Haruki Murakami expressed that he felt uncomfortable writing in the third person. He said, "I wanted to stand at the same level as my characters. It's democratic." The art of storytelling and productive distancing in his narrative are significant aspects of his writing and such features in his writings make him an unconventional and unique writer in the Japanese literary tradition.

So far as themes are concerned, Murakami has put forward his bold and clear observations on basic human needs, desire, passion, mistakes, errors, crisis of identity, existential anxiety, human conscience, subconscious states and behavior. Some of the themes are taken from his own life such as his love for game, music, cats and also obsessions. An element of suspense, mysticism and absurdity is present in the narratives of Murakami. Readers are drawn towards the mystic characters of Murakami and they dwell between dream and reality. In his stories the quest motif is evident whether it is quest for self or quest for the unknown desire. In many ways Haruki Murakami's approach to literature is post modern. The juxtaposition of past and present, dream and reality, mysticism and facts indeed place him as a skillful postmodern writer. The absurd, surreal touch can be observed in his writings. In fact Franz Kafka was one of his favorite writers. However, Murakami himself declared that he did not have a firm understanding of postmodernism.

At any rate, what I'd like to be is a unique writer who's different from everybody else. I want to be a writer who tells stories unlike other writers.

Haruki Murakami wrote for all common people and used simple language to meet the commonplace themes. However, he knew that writing simply was also very difficult. Murakami was interested in the writings of the

American writers such as Raymond Carver, Kurt Vonnegut and Richard Brautigan who were known for their simplicity in writing prose. John Irving was another writer who influenced Murakami. From Irving, Murakami learnt about the contact between literary fiction and popular fiction.

### **1.5.2 Cultural Neutrality in Haruki Murakami:**

To understand the amazing literary features of Haruki Murakami let us focus on a few more important statements made by Wakatsuki. According to Wakatsuki, one of the distinctive features of Murakami's works is its 'cultural neutrality' at a global purview. Such impartiality and neutrality enables the readers of Murakami to feel at one with the characters. His use of globalised icons such as Colonel Sanders, McDonald, Johnie Walker add to the cosmopolitan significance of his works.

Murakami's characters constantly move between two worlds - the inner and the outer self, the physical and the metaphysical, between modes of 'consciousness' and 'unconsciousness', 'real' and the 'unreal' forming an interaction between self and the other (Wakatsuki : 5). In his short stories and novels you will come across this interaction and quest for some kind of reconciliation. Some of his remarkable works in this context are Killing Commendatore, Kafka on the Shore, The Wind-Up Chronicle, Colourless Tsukuru Tazaki and His Years of Pilgrimage.

### **1.5.3 Quest for identity and sense of belonging:**

The issues of Westernization and internalization, perennial Nihonjinron themes, reflect Japan's constant struggle with the West as the paradigmatic model of advanced civilization (Wakatsuki 46).

As it has been stated earlier, Haruki Murakami is unconventional in his approach to his literary world and he introduced a new sense of 'Japaneseness' that welcomed thoughts and beliefs beyond geographical and cultural boundaries. Murakami, however, was unique in his approach to literature because he reflected both on Westernized and non-Westernized cultural artifacts. Thus it is evident that quest for identity

and sense of belongingness find a prominent place in the writings of Murakami. Murakami's writings are translated into over 50 languages and that establishes his reputation as a global writer. He wrote in Japanese language and his translators such as Jay Rubin have done a commendable job in introducing the writer to the world of readers. Murakami's distancing from Japaneseness and embracing of everyday commonplace cosmopolitanism placed him as an experimental writer in the Post-war period and words like 'Anyone', 'No Place' began to be applied by cosmopolitans (Wakatsuki: 18). In this regard it is important to learn about the 'Myth of Japaneseness' and 'Nihonjinron Discourse.'

#### **Stop to Consider:**

##### **The *Nihonjinron* discourse and Japaneseness:**

The question of belongingness and identity has been a major matter of research for scholars across ages and for that it is important to understand the notion of 'Japaneseness' in Murakami. Here comes the discourse of the *Nihonjinron* that significantly influenced the cultural identity of Japanese society. It signifies an 'essentialist conception of Japanese cultural identity' that deals with 'theories of the Japanese' concerning climate, culture, economy and society etc. the tradition of the discourse of literature began with the Meiji restoration in the late nineteenth century and it valorised and promoted the uniqueness of Japanese cultural assets and identity challenging the cultural superiority of the Western narratives of civilization. Examples of *Nihonjinron* writings: Ruth Benedict's *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture* (1946), Kanzo Uchimura's *Daihyoteki Nihonjin* (1908), Inazo Nitobe's *Bushido* (1908)

#### **1.6 Murakami's Short Stories:**

##### **(A) *First Person Singular* (2020):**

There are total eight short stories in this collection where the writer has explored the world of Jazz, baseball and expressed his enthusiasm for childhood memories and imagination, all written from the point of view



of his own perspectives. He was a master story teller and his craft of writing has inspired many writers to think over creativity.

The book *First Person Singular* is significant because here the writer has chosen simple life events for exploration and observation. Some of the important stories of this book are “Cream”, “On a Stone Pillow”, “Carnival”, “First Person Singular” and “Confessions of a Shinagawa Monkey”.

**(B ) *Men without Women: Stories:***

The stories in this book deal with Murakami’s acquaintances and characters such as doctors, actors, bartenders whose stories are incorporated with a touch of humour and pathos. The work is remarkable for his observations and perspectives on human relations, existence and identity.

**(C ) *Blind Willow, Sleeping Woman:***

The book was published in 2006 and consists of 24 short stories written between 1980 and 2005. The stories of this collection were translated by Philip Gabriel and Jay Rubin. The collection consists of stories like “Blind Willow, Sleeping Woman”, “New York Mining Disaster”, “The Mirror”, “Hunting Knife”, “A Perfect Day for Kangaroos”, “Man-Eating Cats” and “The Seventh Man”.

**(D ) *Birthday Stories:***

My short stories are like soft shadows. I’ve set out in the world, faint footprints I’ve left behind. I remember exactly when I set down each and every one of them, and how I felt when I did. (“Blind Willow, Sleeping Woman” by Haruki Murakami, pp.8)

The Haruki Phenomenon can be best experienced through reading his Birthday stories. Murakami selected a few birthday stories written by a few noted writers and edited a book. The stories were written by writers like Russell Banks, Denis Johnson, William Trevor, Daniel Lyons, Lynda Saxon, Lewis Robinson, Claire Keegan, Paul Theroux, Andrea Lee and many others. The birthday stories written by such writers incorporate human life experiences, trials and tribulations. The stories are significant for all types of readers because of the commonality and universality of

the experiences. One can easily draw parallel between the storyline and real life experiences. We share our own birthdays with others without our knowledge. Our experiences some times are same with others and that is how we share similarities in terms of experiences.

The themes of some of the birthday stories edited by Haruki Murakami have been briefly highlighted so that you can explore the ideas inherent in those birthday stories. The short stories that he selected for his edited book were: Russell Bank’s “The Moor”, Denis Johnson’s “Dundun”, William Trevor’s “Timothy’s Birthday”, Daniel Lyon’s “The Birthday Cake”, Lynda Sexson’s “Turning”, David Foster Wallace’s “Forever Overhead”, Andrea Lee’s “The Birthday Present”, Paul Theroux’s “A Game of Dice”.

Two important themes in Murakami’s short stories are: sense of identity and belongingness. Whether it was human relationship or human’s relation to the world, the quest for identity has been a matter of major concern for Murakami. Human’s sense of alienation and loneliness, confusion amidst chaos, difficulty in making the right choice - all these themes are reflected through his short stories. “The Ice Man” is about loneliness and existential anxieties. The story “A Folklore for my Generation” incorporates questions of reality. Murakami himself enjoyed an ambivalent position in the literary world because of his inclination towards both western and non-western cultural artifacts. As it has been mentioned, Murakami’s cosmopolitan approach to literature was one of the major factors behind his universal success as a writer.

**Check Your Progress:**

1. Mention some of the themes of Haruki Murakami’s Birthday stories. (60 words)

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2. What do you mean by *Nihonjinron Discourse*? How does it relate to Haruki Murakami's way of writing? (40 words)

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### 1.7 Summing Up:

As you go through the narratives of Murakami you will experience his own way and philosophy of approaching his literary world. We as readers enjoy his stories and other narratives due to their universal context and literary content. To understand Murakami's uniqueness as a post war writer, it would be better to explore his time and the traditions of writing in the Japanese context. The present unit reflects on some of the important aspects of Murakami's writings which will enable you to understand and analyze his literary works.

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## UNIT - 2

### Haruki Murakami: “Birthday Girl” (Reading the Text)

#### Unit Structure:

2.1 Objectives

2.2 Introduction

2.3 Murakami as a Writer

2.3.1 How to Understand the Literary World of Haruki Murakami

2.3.2 The Haruki Phenomenon

2.3.3 Everyday Cosmopolitanism in Murakami’s Writings

2.4 The Writing Style of Murakami

2.5 Reading “Birthday Girl”

2.6 Summing Up

2.7 References and Suggested Readings

#### 2.1 Objectives:

The present unit will introduce you to the world of Haruki Murakami in general and familiarize you with the story “Birthday Girl” in particular.

By the end of this unit you will be able to

- *assess* Murakami as a writer,
- *learn* about aspects of Murakami’s writings. *analyse* the characteristic features and themes of his writings, and
- *interpret* the Story “Birthday Girl”.

#### 2.2 Introduction:

Haruki Murakami is a prominent literary figure in Asian Literature in the contemporary world known for his unique literary endeavour and cosmopolitan approach to literary world. Murakami’s works such as novels, non-fictions and short-stories have been translated to more than 15 languages in 18 countries. It is surprising to know that Murakami’s

eight-volume *Complete Works* was published in around 1990 when he was only at the age of 30. Some of his novels were marked as best sellers in the post-World War II period.

### **2.3 Murakami as a Writer :**

Haruki Murakami is worldly famous as a unique, unconventional Japanese literary figure whose works have inspired many in the Post-War period. His important fictional works are: *1Q84*, *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, *Wind/ Pinball*, *A Wild Sheep Chase*, *The Strange Library*, *Sputnik Sweetheart*, *South of the Border*, *West of the Sun*, *Norwegian Woo*, *Kafka on the Shore*, *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*. His best short stories are included in *Men without Women*, *The Elephant Vanishes*, *First Person Singular* and his edited book *The Birthday Stories*.

Chikako Nehai, one of the renowned critics of Haruki Murakami has mentioned that Murakami lived through the period of the zenkyoto counterculture movement in the 1960s. The movement influenced the writings of Murakami to a certain extent but he never directly mentioned about it. This happened when he was at the University of Waseda and he was in support of the spirit of the movement. There was a massive students uprising and they protested against issues like capitalist economy, the Vietnam War and the presence of the U.S. military in Japan. Strict regulations were imposed on them and they were not in favour of the demonstrations. However, the failure of the movement led to loss of self expression. What was surprising for his contemporary writers was that Murakami never referred to the word 'revolution' in his writings and remained quiet. Murakami made only indirect and subtle references on the topic for which Murakami was often criticized by the Japanese critics as irresponsible. Here you should understand that Murakami was aiming at some distancing effects which lead to the fact that Murakami was unconventional in his approach to the movement. Murakami believed in the role of *monogatari* (story telling/ narrative)

for self reflection. Murakami was interested in first person narration of characters and the 'I' narratives in his works emphasized on the character's individual and internal voices. Haruki Murakami was part of the tradition of Japanese Naturalists but Murakami was unique in this regard for his 'I' narratives were different from traditional first person narratives of Japanese literature. Chikako Nehai further states that the realistic fiction in Japanese literature shifted from confession to social criticism in the post-war period. In the post war period most Japanese writers were concerned with the impact and criticism of the Second World War and nationalism. Murakami was unconventional in his approach to literature and he believed that for a realistic writing one should use one's own vocabulary and way of writing. Murakami used simple language and themes about common people's lives and when you read Murakami's stories you will find that they seem to be open-ended. They are open for all types of common readers and the readers are drawn towards the narrative. Traditional Japanese writings valorized difficult writing and they were thematically about Japan's social, political and economic contexts. Murakami was exceptional because he wrote as the cosmopolitan writer.

Murakami's wilful distancing from Japanese literary tradition indicates his search for a different approach to literature, which is exemplified by his process of forming his own style of literary language. (Nehai: 23)

**Stop to Consider:**

It is important to understand the two terms 'watakushi' and 'boku' to learn about the distancing effect in Murakami's writing. The word 'watakushi' is related to 'I- Novel' or realist novel (watakushi shosetsu). The term 'boku' refers to the nameless protagonists in Murakami's early works. Murakami was an excellent story teller and he used first person narration to present his characters in a democratic and cosmopolitan way.

### 2.3.1 How to understand the literary world of Haruki Murakami:

One of the most popular authors of the twenty first century, Haruki Murakami is known for his unique literary style and plot mechanism. Murakami belonged to Japanese literary tradition but surprisingly he transcended the territory of Japanese domain of literature and took a more cosmopolitan world view of literature. One of the best translators of Murakami's works, Jay Rubin says, "You don't go to Murakami for views of society but of the human brain".

Stephanie Hegarty published a news article titled "Haruki Murakami: How a Japanese writer conquered the world" on 17<sup>th</sup> October, 2011 where she comments on Haruki Murakami's approach to literature in the words, "His main channel for communicating his opinion on the state of the world, remains his books." Further, she adds:

"Classic Murakami themes are here in the new novel - love and loneliness, alternative and surreal worlds, enigmatic characters and people who seem impassive but are stirred by deep emotions. Not for the first time, questions are raised about free will and cult religion".

Murakami is an internationally renowned writer and he has been awarded with several prestigious national and international awards. In 1979, he received the Gunzo Award for his best first novel *Hear the Wind Sing* which is the first book in his trilogy "Trilogy of the Rat" and it was followed by *Pinball, 1973* (1980) and *A Wild Sheep Chase* (1982). All these works have been translated to the English language. The epilogue to his trilogy was *Dance Dance Dance* (1988). In 1985, Murakami was awarded with Tanizaki Prize for his work *Hard Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World* (1985). Murakami was greatly influenced by Western Literature and this work of Murakami exhibits his indebtedness towards American Detective fictions, Western Science fictions and cyberpunk narratives.



Paul L. Thomas in his introduction to the jointly edited book *Haruki Murakami: Challenging Authors* writes,–

Although Murakami appears as puzzled by his path to being a professional writer as many readers and critics are of his style and use of genre, his novels, stories and non-fiction reflect an eclectic blend of his Japanese heritage and his fascination with music, literature, and sports from the U.S. (Thomas and Strecher X).

Hence, you will find in Murakami this amazing conglomeration of Japanese and Western literary inputs. When we read about the literary style of philosophy of Haruki Murakami the phrase that becomes important is ‘the Haruki Phenomenon’. Let us learn about this important literary philosophy which will enable you to understand the stand and strategy of Murakami.

### **2.3.2 The Haruki Phenomenon:**

The Haruki Phenomenon is a way of thinking that incorporates ideas of identity and existence. Murakami’s fictions have been universally acclaimed and embraced by world readers because of the nature of universality in terms of themes and literary representations. Tomoki Wakatsuki, a writer and a critic has designated Haruki Murakami as a cosmopolitan writer, that is belonging as a “Citizen of the World”. To quote Wakatsuki,

It is my argument that Murakami signifies a cosmopolitan identity, and his commitment as a writer is to belong to the World as an individual. The idea of cosmopolitanism originates in the ancient Greek philosophy urging us to become “a citizen of the world” (Thomas and Strecher 1).

It is important to understand Murakami’s representation of characters as cosmopolitan characters. In the writings of Murakami you will come across questions of identity, existence, reality, illusion and so on and the readers are invited to speculate over those open ended questions.

### **2.3.3 Everyday Cosmopolitanism in Murakami's writings:**

Wakatsuki terms Haruki Murakami's cosmopolitan phenomenon as everyday cosmopolitanism and calls it new "Japaneseness" that promotes a sense of belongingness beyond borders and boundaries. Wakatsuki identifies this new Japaneseness in the writings of Murakami and explains in the cultural context of the world around.

Today, the ever increasing inter-connectedness of the world effected by processes of globalization undoubtedly finds a strong connection with cosmopolitanism. Due to people's increased mobility via travel, short-term and long-term migration as well as displacement, everyday cosmopolitanism has become commonplace. (Thomas and Strecher: 2)

The Murakami Phenomenon is what popularized the writings of Haruki and placed him among the best read novelist in the world. Murakami has been an inspiration for many and one remarkable recognition in this regard is the establishment of the Haruki Murakami Research center at Tamkang University, Taiwan in 2014 dedicated to Murakami studies. It is important to mention here that there is a rise in the younger generation of writers known as Murakami Children that surely affirms the fact that the works of Haruki Murakami were greatly read and circulated by the young generation.

According to Wakatsuki,

Increasingly, people are becoming "cosmopolitans", and this is where we see the development of the Haruki Phenomenon intimately linked to the idea of everyday cosmopolitanism. Rather than encountering an exotic Japan through Murakami's writings, readers outside of Japan enjoy engaging with the stories themselves (Wakatsuki 2).

Here, as Waktsuki mentions, the readers embrace the new 'Japaneseness' of Murakami that allows the readers to experience the sense of belonging beyond national or cultural borders. Now it is interesting to note that Murakami's popularity across the world was

disseminated through his translators. They played a crucial role in establishing the Haruki Phenomenon (Wakatsuki 4).

Haruki Murakami, though he was often criticized for his Un- Japaneseness, he was never indifferent to his social responsibilities. His ‘Jerusalem Speech’ in Barcelona not only confirmed his cosmopolitanism but also placed him as one of the responsible writers of his time. He critiqued the Israeli bombing in Gaza in his speech and called for common understanding and peace among people. Murakami received the Jerusalem Prize for the Freedom of the Individual in Society in 2009. In Barcelona, he received another award known as the International Catalunya Prize in 2011 where he gave his speech on solidarity during the time of crisis and catastrophe. Here he made a direct reference to the nuclear power plant accident in Fukushima following the massive tsunami. He also voiced against the use of atomic bombs and called for a world without nuclear power. It is noteworthy here that Haruki Murakami translated Marcel Theroux’s work *Far North* (2009) and Tim O’ Brien’s *The Nuclear Age* (1985) which were written on nuclear issues.

**Self-Assessment Questions**

1. What is meant by the Haruki Phenomenon? (60 words)

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2. How does Haruki Murakami differ from the traditional Japanese writers in terms of his approach to literature? (80 words)

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3. Discuss the significance of Haruki Murakami as a post-war Japanese writer. (80 words)

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## 2.4 The Writing Style of Murakami:

Haruki Murakami in his introduction to the book *Blind Willow, Sleeping Woman* writes:

To put it in the simplest possible terms, I find writing novels a challenge, writing short stories a joy. If writing novels is like planting a forest, then writing short stories is more like planting a garden (1).

Murakami was not the first writer to adopt the *boku* or the nameless 'I' narrative. It was his unique way of using the *boku* technique to arouse curiosity, to express the strangeness of everyday life. Jay Rubin, one of his famous translators mentions that Murakami chose to call his fictional persona *boku* in his narrative which is more 'democratic', less part of the Japanese society (Rubin: 37). Rubin further describes the nature of the *boku*, the character in Murakami's writings. He is the kind of individual that is trusted by all, and a fascinating character for all. The nameless characters that we find in Murakami's short stories are a reflection of the *boku*, his experience in the world. That is what makes Haruki Murakami's writings so unique and universal.

## 2.5 Reading "Birthday Girl":

Haruki Murakami shares his own birthday experience through his introduction to the compilation of Birthday stories.

I was given life in this world on January 12, 1949, which means I belong to the baby boom generation. The long Second World War had at last come to an end, and those had managed to survive looked around them, took a deep breath, got married and started making children one after another... I was one of the nameless, numberless children produced during that period (Murakami 1).

Murakami was born in the post World War II time which caused great devastation across the world. He experienced the Cold War period when Japan witnessed rapid economic growth and development.

Murakami narrates, “Delivered in the burnt-out ruins left after the intense bombing raids, we in Japan matured with the Cold War and the period of rapid economic growth, entered the flowering of adolescence and received the baptism of late ‘60s counter culture” (Murakami 1).

In the lines above, Murakami has narrated the bitter atmosphere in Japan during the World War II and its aftermath. During the time of prosperity, Japan witnessed tremendous technological and scientific progress. But as he has himself mentioned, he was neither ‘idealistic nor imbued with rock’n’roll’ and protested against the rigid world. It is interesting to find here that Murakami could detach himself from being influenced by those historical events and cultural changes. He says, “Looking back now, however, I have to say in all honesty that these events do not seem to have had any special effect on the way I balance happiness vs. unhappiness or hope vs. despair in my life” (Murakami 2).

However, many birthdays I may have counted off, however many important events I may have witnessed or experienced firsthand, I feel I have always remained the same, I could never have been anything else (Murakami 2).

It is important to mention here that Murakami was often criticized for remaining detached from his literary tradition of writing. Instead he adopted a more cosmopolitan approach to life and literature. Any reader can identify himself or herself in the narratives of Murakami. Murakami in fact, writes for all, the common perspective and for common people.

As forewords to his birthday story, Haruki Murakami mentions that the story was written specifically for inclusion in the anthology. He begins with a question to the readers,

Do you remember what you were doing on the day you turned 20 (or 21, the more important birthday in many countries)?

Like all other people, Murakami also observed his birthday. His birthday was on January 12 in the year 1969. That day he was waiting on tables in a coffee shop after lectures. Nothing special happened till the very end of the

day even though he wanted a day off. He further adds that like him the birthday girl of his story also was lonely and busy doing her own duties. Murakami then draws the attention of his readers towards a twist in the life of the birthday girl at the last minute of the day of her birthday: “She waited on tables as usual that day, her twentieth birthday.”

The story begins with the line above indicating a Waitress’s birthday. We are not introduced to the girl in detail initially and the narrative begins abruptly. The story is written by Haruki Murakami and was translated by Jay Rubin. Murakami showed some interest in editing an anthology on various birthday related stories after he went through the short stories of William Trevor and Russell Banks and he himself contributed a birthday Story “Birthday Girl” in the edited volume published in 2002. He felt almost haunted by the two readings and started working on his own anthology. During the process he was surprised to see that it was indeed difficult to trace the birthday stories. As he mentioned, it was an arduous task to edit his own anthology.

In his introduction which he subtitled as “My Birth Day, Your Birthday” to the volume he stated the objectives of the literary endeavour,

Finally, as editor ( and, in one case, as author), I hope you find at least one story in the thirteen contained in this volume, whether happy or not, that gives you real pleasure and makes you want to spend part of your next birthday re-reading it (Murakami 12).

The subject of the birthday stories include happy and dark stories. Some birthday stories are gloomy and the writer wants the readers to ponder over ‘the strange, unsettled feelings’ experienced in the stories (Murakami 10).

Murakami’s “Birthday Girl” is significant for its frame narrative style and psychological exuberance.

### **Stop to Consider:**

#### **What is a Frame Narrative?**

According to Britannica, a frame story is a unifying story where one or more tales are related. Significant writers who used such narrative include Geoffrey Chaucer, G. Boccaccio (*The Decameron*), Don Juan Manuel. Chaucer's *The Prologue to the Canterbury Tales* is a classic example of frame narrative in the poetic form.

The protagonist is a girl and her name is not mentioned. She herself is the narrator of her story. At no point the narrator's identity is revealed in the story. The protagonist narrates about what happened to her on her 20<sup>th</sup> birthday. On her 20<sup>th</sup> birthday, the protagonist wanted a day off but could not get it because her co waitress could not attend to her shift due to her illness that night. The other girl apologized for not being able to help her. The birthday girl, however, did not mind and consoled her. This is how she responded,

Don't worry about it. I wasn't going to do anything special anyway, even if it was my birthday (Murakami 189).

Here we notice that the two waitresses shared a close bonding and they were sympathetic and compassionate to each other. In fact, her birthday was not a matter of celebration for her that day and she was not at all disappointed because she was already disappointed by her boyfriend's indifference towards her. She almost broke with her boyfriend after a heated argument that turned serious.

The restaurant where the two girls waited was a reputed one. It was a well known Italian Restaurant in the Tony Roppongi district of Tokyo. Its high reputation was due to its delicate cuisine and relaxed dining atmosphere. The restaurant was visited by good number of actors and writers.

On the day of her birthday, she was asked to deliver food to the owner's house. The manager of the restaurant could not deliver the food as he was not well that day. In the text you are informed about the appearance of the manager.

It is surprising that none but the manager had seen the face of the owner. So the girl was a bit nervous because it was her maiden visit to the owner's house. There was something very strange and unusual about the owner. The character is not fully revealed to the readers by Murakami. The narrator writes, "He never, ever showed his face in the restaurant, though. The only one who saw him was the manager" (191).

He was getting home delivery from his own restaurant and the manager usually did the work. It was the busiest time of the restaurant as the narrator mentioned. It was a weird experience for the girl when she did it for the first time for the owner in the absence of the manager on the day of her birthday.

It was 17<sup>th</sup> November, a rainy day. The manager was preparing for the dinner for his owner. At 7.30 evening the manager suddenly fell ill and he was taken to the hospital immediately. It was raining non-stop that day. He asked the girl to take the dinner up to room 604 at eight o'clock for the owner. She took the trolley into the lift and after reaching pressed the doorbell. The door was opened by a skinny old man in a dark suit and a tie. The girl found him to be well dressed. The girl informed the owner about the sudden illness of the manager and requested him to take the dinner meal.

The narrative then leads you to a conversation between the owner and the waitress girl. The narrator gives a brief description of the owner's room. The apartment looked more like a workplace than a residence. The waitress girl found it strange at first the way the old man responded to her request for dinner. He had been very polite and kind towards her.

He replied: "Ah yes, of course. Yes, of course, if you wish. That's fine with me" (196).

When the girl wanted to get back to her work after serving him, he politely requested her to stay for five minutes. She blushed at his request and waited there showing respect as he was the owner. When the owner came to know that it was her 20<sup>th</sup> birthday, he greeted her cordially.



She thanked him and that was the first wish she received on her birthday. The owner was excited to celebrate her birthday and insisted her to bring ‘a little toast’ and ‘a token drink’ for celebration.

The old man opened the cork of the bottle and took a glass of wine wishing on her birthday. He said that the moment of birthday celebration comes out once in a lifetime and so must be celebrated. The owner expressed his gratefulness to the waitress for taking the trouble to deliver his dinner as a ‘kind-hearted fairy’. He expressed her wishes out of gratitude, “Happy Birthday. May you live a rich and fruitful life, and may there be nothing to cast dark shadows on it” (198) .

The waitress was very surprised to hear his wishes but could not resist his request. She politely responded to his request to sit on the sofa. He then expressed his willingness to offer her a special birthday gift. The waitress was reluctant to receive any gift from him because she thought it to be her duty to follow the instructions as the employee of the restaurant. To her utter surprise, the old owner expressed his desire to grant her wish as a kind of birthday gift. She was totally spellbound by the word ‘A wish’. However, the old man asked her to choose her wish carefully as he made it clear to her that she won’t be able to take back her wish once it was uttered. The waitress was at a loss. It is important to mention here that the waitress was telling about the incident in front of the narrator. In a frame narrative the narrator controls the narrative flow and you will find here that the narrator intervenes in between the narrative. Here we are informed about the waitress’s impression on the surprising questions of the old owner of the restaurant. The waitress said to the narrator that she could not completely trust the words of the old man. Though she was confused, she thought that it did not matter to her whether she believed the man or not. She simply decided to play on the situation and accordingly she made her wish. The old man was surprised too after hearing her wish because it was something unusual for a girl of her age. He however asked her again if she had an alternate wish. She replied, “I still don’t really know what life is all about. I don’t know how it works” (202).

The old man agreed with a smile and granted her wish. The strange part of this story is that the writer never reveals to the reader what kind of wish it was that was granted by the old man. The waitress was then asked by the old man to go back to her work. This left the waitress in confusion because she could not understand the reply and thought she was dealing with some ‘mysterious fluff’. That was the first and last day she saw the owner.

She resigned from the job after New Year because she did not feel better to go near the place. She felt as if she was in a kind of illusion on the day of her 20<sup>th</sup> birthday. She said, “It’s as though something happened to make me think that things happened that never really happened at all. But I know for sure that they did happen” (204).

She was in between dream and reality as she could not convince herself about what exactly happened on her 20<sup>th</sup> birthday. The narrator when asked her about the wish, she replied, “You’re not supposed to tell anyone what you wish for, you know” (204).

However, the narrator still wanted to know whether her wishes were fulfilled and whether she regretted for making the choice. The waitress girl replied that she still needed to wait for the results as she had a life to live. She further replied that she had been busy with her family life and she had nothing much to wish for. She said and laughed aloud cheerfully, “No matter what they wish for, no matter how far they go, people can never be anything but themselves. That’s all” (206).

The waitress then asked her companion about her own wish and she insisted that she must have only one wish. The narrator then replied that there are many wishes that need to be fulfilled and hence could not be thought of anything. The waitress girl then replied that it was because the wish had already been made. This is how the story of the birthday girl ends. The readers are left with an open-endedness as to whether things that the waitress narrated had actually happened to her or not. There are many questions concerning life and meaning in the narrative. You will notice that the characters of most of Murakami’s stories are

nameless and the writer informs the readers about those characters through their actions, behaviours and response.

**Self-Assessment Questions**

1. Define frame narrative. Discuss the “Birthday Story” as a frame narrative. (150 words)

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2. Who was the birthday girl in the narrative and what exactly happened to her on the day of her 20<sup>th</sup> birthday in the restaurant? (60 words)

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3. Briefly write about the manager and owner of the restaurant. What kind of relation did they have? (60 words)

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4. Discuss the short story “Birthday Girl” as a typical Murakami birthday story. (200 words)

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**2.6 Summing Up:**

As a contemporary Asian writer, Haruki Murakami has been a successful and influential post-modern writer. His novels and short stories have been adapted by Japanese Directors such as Kazuki Omori and Simon McBurney. Murakami’s texts attempt to open up the riddles of life through storytelling narratives and invite audiences and readers to experience the inner world of the characters-their struggle for survival,

inner conflicts, and levels of crisis and so on. To have a comprehensive understanding of Murakami, one has to experience the logic of imagination and thoughts in the texts.

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## UNIT - 3

### Bao Ninh (Introducing the Author)

#### Unit Structure:

- 3.1 Objectives
- 3.2 Introduction
- 3.3 Placing Bao Ninh in Vietnamese Literature
- 3.4 Publication History and the Settings of *The Sorrow of War*
- 3.5 A Brief Note on Vietnamese Literature
- 3.6 Summing Up
- 3.7 References and Suggested Readings

#### 3.1 Objectives:

Here, in this first unit, you will be given some basic ideas related to the author Bao Ninh and the novel *The Sorrow of War*. We are also trying to have a glimpse of the brief history of Vietnamese Literature placing Ninh in its preview. We will also try to know Ninh's other works. Thus, by the end of this unit you will be able to:

- *have* an idea of the nature of Bao Ninh's writing,
- *understand* the settings and narrative technique of the novel *The Sorrow of War*,
- *have* a basic idea of the history of Vietnamese Literature.

#### 3.2 Introduction:

A Vietnamese author, Bao Ninh is also a novelist, short story writer, and essayist whose primary language of writing is Vietnamese. The real name of Bao Ninh is Haong Au Phuong. From 1969 to 1975 Bao Ninh served the nation as a soldier of the Vietnam People's Army and participated in the Vietnam War. Ninh joined the Glorious 27<sup>th</sup> Youth Brigade at the age of seventeen. He is one of ten survivors of the Brigade of five hundred. Ninh as an author got popularity with his first novel

*The Sorrow of War*. His other works are: *Hanoi at No Time* (2003), *Rambling While Stuck in Traffic* (2005), *Are Old Stories True?* (2009), *Selected Writings* (2011), and *Short Story* (2013). Ninh's writings are autobiographical in nature. Bao Ninh received the prestigious Independent Foreign Fiction Prize for his novel *The Sorrow of War* in 1994.

### **3.3 Placing Bao Ninh in Vietnamese Literature:**

To understand Bao Ninh's space in the Vietnamese literary scenario, we should have an understanding of the colonial past of Vietnam, the Vietnam War, and the traumatic impact of war on the natives.

Once, Vietnamese literature was primarily composed of ballads, poetry, myths, and legends, heavily influenced by Chinese literary traditions. This was the scenario of Vietnamese literature before the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, the socio-political events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century changed the entire landscape of the Vietnamese tradition of literature and culture. Modernist tendencies crept into Vietnam with French colonialism that became prominent after the brutal Vietnam War. The upheavals in the socio-political context demanded new voices and themes to represent the changing scenes of the society. In this junction appeared Bao Ninh, with his powerful voice leaving an indelible footprint in the Vietnamese literary history.

Ninh is different from his contemporaries in this regard that he served the nation as a soldier before he decided to be an author. Born in 1952, Ninh's adolescence coincided with the escalation of the Vietnam War. At just 17, he joined the North Vietnamese army, serving in one of the war's bloodiest campaigns. His firsthand experience of war became the source of the subject matter for his most important work, *The Sorrow of War* (1991)

Ninh was different in his treatment of war from all of his other contemporaries. Before him, the Vietnamese authors depicted battles with heroic idealism. Ninh challenged this romantic and unrealistic

tradition of glorifying heroes of brutal wars. Ninh's novel *The Sorrow of War* is a deeply personal, fragmented narrative told by Kien, a war veteran haunted by guilt and loss. It's not a story of glorious victories but a raw, emotional journey through the physical and psychological effects of war. The novel destroys all the romantic beliefs related to war and presents an authentic picture of devastation and human loss.

Bao Ninh's works also challenged the state-constructed narratives of war. The hidden agenda of the state for promoting nationalism and patriotism is mercilessly criticized by Ninh. He revolutionized war literature by portraying the hypocrisy and corruption related to war. This is the reason for which *The Sorrow of War* had to face a ban in Ninh's state for fifteen long years.

Ninh's innovative style employed stream-of-consciousness, flashbacks, and dream sequences, reflecting the fractured nature of the protagonist's psyche. This stylistic boldness resonated with Vietnamese audiences who recognized the emotional authenticity of his portrayal. *The Sorrow of War* became a bestseller, translated into multiple languages, and won prestigious awards, including the Independent Foreign Fiction Prize in 1994.

While war is the backdrop, Ninh's work delves deeper, exploring themes of memory, survival, love, and the weight of individual choices. He challenges simplistic notions of heroism and victimhood, forcing readers to confront the moral complexities of the conflict.

Ninh's subsequent works, including short stories and essays, further explore these themes. He does not shy away from criticizing aspects of Vietnamese society or confronting uncomfortable truths about the legacy of the war. This willingness to challenge received narratives solidifies his position as a critical voice in Vietnamese literature.

Ninh's significance goes beyond individual literary merit. He bridges the gap between pre-war and post-war Vietnamese literature. He carries the weight of wartime experiences while embracing stylistic innovation and thematic complexity. His work opened the door for a new generation

of writers to explore war's enduring impact and grapple with Vietnam's evolving identity.

While unique, Ninh's work echoes elements of earlier Vietnamese writers like Nam Cao and Nguyen Huy Thiep, who wrestled with the psychological ramifications of war. Internationally, comparisons are drawn to Remarque's "All Quiet on the Western Front" and Tim O'Brien's "The Things They Carried", both exploring the psychological impact of war on individual soldiers.

Despite acclaim, Ninh hasn't been immune to criticism. Some argue his focus on individual trauma risks overshadowing the collective experience of the war. Others critique his portrayal of women's roles, highlighting a potential blind spot. These debates showcase the ongoing dialogue surrounding his work and its lasting impact.

Bao Ninh occupies a crucial space in Vietnamese literary history. He constantly raises his voice against humans and human values. He challenges established narratives and offers a unique point of view of war. His style of presentation and selection of unique subject matter blend with historically associated facts to attract a readership of international scale. Ninh's voice remains one of the most powerful of all the voices who critique war by destroying the romantic beliefs foregrounding the lasting effects on humanity.

#### **3.4 Publication History and the Settings of *The Sorrow of War*:**

*The Sorrow of War* was originally written in Vietnamese in the form of a short novel. *The Sorrow of War* that we have in English is a new version of the original Vietnamese Novel *Than Phan Cua Tinh Yeu* (*Identity of Love*) written by Bao Ninh published in 1991. The title shows that in his original novel *Than Phan Cua Tinh Yeu* importance was given to the love relationship of the protagonist. The original novel emphasized the impact of war on human relationships. However, the title of the novel was changed when it was translated and rewritten in English to *The Sorrow of War*, emphasizing more on the overall devastating impact of war on human life.



Our novel *The Sorrow of War*, however, is not a direct English translation of the novel *Than Phan Cua Tinh Yeu*. A translator named Phan Thanh Hao made a direct translation of *Than Phan Cua Tinh Yeu* into English and gave the title *Ridding the Devils*.

Again based on *Ridding the Devils* Frank Palmos wrote *The Sorrow of the War* which was published in 1994. *The Sorrow of War* is completely a newer version of the work *Than Phan Cua Tinh Yeu*. Later on, *The Sorrow of War* has been translated into 14 different languages.

#### **Acclamation and Acceptance:**

- *The Sorrow of War* was judged the Best Foreign Book of the Year in 1994 by the British newspaper *The Independent*.
- *The Sorrow of War* is listed as one of the best 50 translations of the previous century in the year 2010 by the British Society of Authors.
- In 2016 *The Sorrow of War* got the Shim Hun Literary Prize.
- In 2018 *The Sorrow of War* won the Asian Literature Award.

#### **The settings of *The Sorrow of War*:**

In simple words, the setting refers to the time and places the author selects to write about. *The Sorrow of War* is primarily set in several places in Vietnam. The story covers a time frame of the Vietnam War ranging from 1969 to 1975, and slightly after the Vietnam War. However, the actions of the novel go back to the year 1955 with the memory of the main character. The places involved in the plot are Hanoi, some other nearby places in Hanoi, and the dense forest of Vietnam where most of the battles were fought. The landscape depicted in the novel represents the brutality of war, chaos, and challenges that the characters face. Guerrilla warfare, ambushes, and the description of relentless violence build up the atmosphere for most of the novel. The settings of the novel are closely connected with the experience of the central character and narrator Kien, a North Vietnamese soldier. The

harsh reality of the life of a soldier such as the training period in the camps, trenches, injuries, deaths and operations in the battlefields, and dehumanizing acts related to the war are also explored in the settings of the novel. A powerful presence of the situation of gloom, despair, fear, frustration, and hopelessness conditioned by death and unimaginable violence exists throughout the novel.

Apart from the description of war-related actions the novel focuses equally on the scenes of post-war Vietnam, especially the devastated city of Hanoi. Along with the description of the physical environment, the story of the novel equally emphasizes on reflections of the emotional and psychological scars of the characters, and the survivors. In the later part of the novel, the central character Kien's struggle to reintegrate into the civilian society after his return from the war is focused.

Throughout the narrative, the author creates an atmosphere in which a sense of place both vivid and haunting emerges as a powerful character that shapes the lives of the other characters of the novel. The overall settings of the novel *The Sorrow of War* not only serve as the basis of the backdrop of the action but also echo the inner upheaval of the characters' minds affected by the violences of war.

#### **Stop to Consider:**

##### **Vietnam War:**

The Vietnam War was one of the most prominent armed conflicts of the 20th century. The war was fought officially between North Vietnam and South Vietnam. North Vietnam was supported by communist forces like the Soviet Union, China, and several other communist states. On the other hand, South Vietnam was backed by anti-communist forces like the United States and other countries making the scale of the war larger and longer than its expected magnitude. The war then became a proxy war between the United States of America and the Soviet Union. The Vietnam War officially began on 1st November 1955 and ended on 30th April 1975.

The Vietnam War resulted in a huge loss of life, with millions of Vietnamese civilians and soldiers, as well as tens of thousands of U.S. troops, killed or wounded, making the war a bad example of brutal armed conflicts in human history. Moreover, the war caused widespread destruction in Vietnam, with villages, cities, and infrastructure ravaged by bombings and fighting. Millions of Vietnamese were displaced and left homeless as a result of the conflict. The Vietnam War had a lasting psychological impact on innocent civilians, veterans, and their families, leading to the recognition of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other mental health issues among veterans. The civilians of Vietnam went through psychological trauma after the war.

The Vietnam War was a complex and multifaceted conflict that had profound consequences for Vietnam, the United States, and the world. Rooted in historical grievances, ideological differences, and Cold War dynamics, the war exacted a heavy toll in terms of human lives, suffering, and environmental destruction. Its legacy continues to shape global politics, military strategy, and the collective memory of those who lived through it. As a cautionary tale of the dangers of foreign intervention and the complexities of modern warfare, the Vietnam War remains a pivotal chapter in world history.

### **3.5 A Brief Note On Vietnamese Literature:**

The history of Vietnamese literature is rich and versatile ranging over centuries. Vietnamese literature has been influenced by cultural evolution, colonial influences, and developments of the contemporary period. In this part of the unit, we are going to discuss the key periods, genres, and some important literary architects that designed the shape of Vietnamese literature up to the present day.

#### **1. Ancient Literature (Before 10<sup>th</sup> Century):**

Like the literature of any other language, Vietnamese literature also has its roots in folklore. The oral tradition, with myths, legends, and folk tales passed down through generations is the origin of the written

literature of the later periods. One of the prominent works of the earliest literary works in Vietnam literature is "Kieu" (The Tale of Kieu) by Nguyen Du, written in the 19th century but based on older folk tales. The subject matter of this epic poem of Vietnamese literature depicts the struggles and resilience of its protagonist, Kieu. This epic is still popular in Vietnam.

### **2. Chinese Influence (10th to 19<sup>th</sup> Century):**

Vietnamese literature was under Chinese rule for many centuries. This led Vietnamese literature to receive significant influence from Chinese literature and Culture. The Chinese influence is evident in Vietnamese writings. Mainly the Classical Chinese poetry, Philosophical writings of Confucius, and historical chronicles of China were translated and adapted into Vietnamese. Notable works from this era include "Truyen Kieu" (The Tale of Kieu) mentioned earlier and "Luc Van Tien" by Nguyen Dinh Chieu, which reflects themes of patriotism and moral integrity.

### **3. Colonial Era (19th to Mid-20th Century):**

Vietnam was once under colonial rule and exploitation. Vietnam was a part of the French colony from 1800 to 1954. The Vietnamese literature of this period reflects the sentiment against colonization and exploitation. Appreciation of nature, a reflection of socio-political and economic issues, a voice for freedom, a call for struggle, and a consciousness for national identity, etc began to emerge as themes in the works published during this period of Vietnamese literature. The writers of this period were influenced more by the styles and themes incorporated by the Western writers. Some prominent authors of this time include Nam Cao, whose works often depicted the hardships of rural life, and Vu Trong Phung, known for his satirical and critical portrayals of social issues.

### **4. War and Revolution (Mid-20th Century):**

The Vietnam War (1955-1975) is one of the most significant events in the history of Vietnam. It had a profound impact on the socio-cultural-economic landscape of the country. The devastation of war also had a strong impact on Vietnamese literature. Writers such as Bao Ninh, author

of "The Sorrow of War," and Duong Thu Huong, known for "Paradise of the Blind," captured the human cost and moral complexities of the conflict. Their works provide poignant insights into the experiences of soldiers, civilians, and the psychological toll of war.

### **5. Socialist Realism (1975-1986):**

Following the reunification of Vietnam and the acceptance of the Socialist policy by the Vietnamese government, literature also started to reflect socialist ideals. The Vietnamese literature also glorified the Communist Party and its works and agendas. The Government enforced Socialist policy and the writers were expected to promote revolutionary themes and uphold party ideology. While some authors complied with these directives, others subtly critiqued the system or explored themes of individuality and human struggle within the constraints of censorship.

The Doi Moi reforms of 1986 brought about significant changes in Vietnamese society, including the loosening of state control over the economy and increased openness to foreign influences. This period also witnessed a renaissance in Vietnamese literature, with writers exploring a broader range of themes and experimenting with diverse styles and forms. Authors like Nguyen Huy Thiep and Duong Thu Huong continued to garner international acclaim for their bold critiques of contemporary issues and societal norms.

In recent years, Vietnamese literature has become more diverse and dynamic. Now it tries to reflect the complexities of modern Vietnamese lives. Writers are engaging with global themes, exploring identity, globalization, environmental concerns, and the impact of rapid socio-economic changes. The rise of digital platforms and social media has also democratized literary expression, allowing aspiring writers to reach wider audiences and experiment with new forms of storytelling.

### **6. Notable Authors and Works:**

- Nguyen Du: *Truyen Kieu* (The Tale of Kieu)
- Nguyen Dinh Chieu: *Luc Van Tien*

- Nam Cao: Various short stories depicting rural life and social injustices
- Vu Trong Phung: *Dumb Luck* (So Do)
- Bao Ninh: *The Sorrow of War* (Noi Buon Chien Tranh)
- Duong Thu Huong: *Paradise of the Blind* (Nhung Thien Duong Mu)
- Nguyen Huy Thiep: *The General Retires* (Tuong Giai Ngan Hu)
- Le Luu: *Beyond Illusions* (Vuot Qua Dam Me)
- Nguyen Phan Que Mai: *The Mountains Sing* (Nguoi Ke Chuyen Tinh Cam Doi Lua)

Thus, Vietnamese literature has evolved through various historical and cultural influences, reflecting the nation's complex identity and enduring spirit. From its ancient roots in oral tradition to its contemporary expressions in digital media, Vietnamese literature continues to inspire, challenge, and illuminate the human experience. As Vietnam navigates the complexities of the modern world, its literary tradition remains a vital source of insight, inspiration, and cultural pride.

#### **Stop to Consider:**

##### **Stream of Consciousness:**

The stream of consciousness is a technique of writing that tries to focus on reflecting the happenings in a character's mind, depicting the thoughts, feelings, and perceptions. This literary technique tries to represent the thoughts of the characters as they appear in the mind in a continuous and uninterrupted flow. It helps the readers to peep through the character's consciousness, letting them experience the narrative from within the character's perspective. This technique has been applied by authors across different literary periods, but its application reached a greater height during the modernist era, especially in the works of James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and William Faulkner.

**Check Your Progress:**

- Q.1. How do you think Bao Ninh's experience of war as a soldier helped him write a novel like *The Sorrow of War*?
- Q.2. How do you think the works of Bao Ninh are different from traditional war narratives?
- Q.3. Why do you think Ninh selected the stream-of-consciousness technique to write the novel *The Sorrow of War*?

**3.6 Summing Up:**

In this unit, we have learned about the the author Bao Ninh and Vietnamese literature. We came to know how with the manifestation of the personal experiences of the battlefield a former soldier became an established author. The first-hand experience that he gathered on the battlefield being a survivor helped him become one of the most powerful authors of the contemporary period to raise his voice against war. This unit also provided you with some information on the Vietnam War, a summarized history of Vietnamese literature, and a note on the stream-of-consciousness technique that is applied by Bao Ninh in his novel *The Sorrow of War*. Overall, this unit has prepared you with the background knowledge to form a base before going to the actual text and understanding the themes and aspects related to the text.

**3.7 References and Suggested Readings:**

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## UNIT - 4

### Bao Ninh: *The Sorrow of War* (Reading the Novel)

#### Unit Structure:

- 4.1 Objectives
- 4.2 Introduction
- 4.3 What Happens in *The Sorrow of War*
- 4.4 Introducing the Important Characters
- 4.5 Summing Up
- 4.6 References and Suggested Readings

#### 4.1 Objectives:

In this unit, the students will be acquainted with a brief outline as well as with the important characters of the novel. At the end of this unit, the students will be able to–

- *understand* the story of the novel *The Sorrow of War*,
- *know* the important characters of the novel,
- *learn* about the characters of the novel.

#### 4.2 Introduction:

In this unit, we are going to present a brief overview of the story of the novel and discuss its important characters. It is worth mentioning here that the narrative of *The Sorrow of War* follows the stream of consciousness technique. We will discuss the stream of consciousness technique and how it is applied by the author in detail in the next unit. It will be a better idea for students to read the original text so that the real beauty of reading a novel, that too a novel written in a very modern style can be enjoyed.

### **4.3 What happens in *The Sorrow of War*:**

In this part of our discussion, we are going to provide you with a summary of the story of the novel *The Sorrow of War*. However, we suggest you to go through the original text of the novel to derived the pleasure of reading. Here is the summary–

*The Sorrow of War* depicts the narrator cum protagonist Kien’s life and struggle. Primarily the story focuses on two aspects of the life of the narrator. First, it depicts his experience as a soldier in the Vietnam War and secondly his relationship with his beloved Phuong. Kien was once a North-Vietnamese soldier who fought bravely for the motherland and became a witness of the war. Even after he was on the winning side, he failed to find happiness in the post-war period. The war has changed Kien’s life to such an extent that his psyche is permanently affected and disturbed by the violence and loss that he has seen during the war. Kien is constantly haunted by the horrible memories of war. To escape from the tormenting memory of the Vietnam War Kien starts writing a novel with a fragmented structure that begins in 1975, soon after the war is over.

After the war, Kien became a member of the Missing in Action Body Collecting Team that was formed to collect the remains of the soldiers who went missing on the battlefield during the war. This gave Kien another chance to go back to the jungle where he engaged in gun battles against the Southern-Vietnamese Soldiers and the Americans. The jungle is famous by the name the Jungle of Screaming Souls. He spent ten years in the Jungle of Screaming Souls as a soldier and witnessed numerous deaths. While on the mission of collecting the remains of the soldiers he was inside the Jungle of Screaming Souls, he heard the bizarre howls at night. The howls remind him of his experience of wartime in which he and his fellow soldiers were camping in the same jungle.

Kien remembers the days he spent in the jungle as a troop leader. When the brigade of Kien was camping in the jungle he started sensing the existence of apparitions in and around their camp but soon came to

know that the apparitions were not evil spirits but three beautiful young girls from a nearby farm. Three of the soldiers from his brigade developed romantic relationships with those farmer girls. In the army, such advancements are strictly prohibited. Kien could have stopped the romantic adventures of the three soldiers. But he did not want to be a barrier in lives of soldiers while experiencing some happy moments amidst the frustrating time of war.

It so happened that one day all three girls went missing and when Kien and his fellow soldiers carried out the search operation, they came to know that the three girls had been kidnapped by the South Vietnamese soldiers. Kien and his troop tracked the South Vietnamese Soldiers, killed three, and caught four of them alive. By then the South Vietnamese soldiers had raped and killed the three girls. Knowing that they had killed the three women, Kien decided to give them a death sentence. He ordered the South-Vietnamese to dig their graves and go inside those graves. Just after the South-Vietnamese completed digging Kien was ready to shoot them. But suddenly, he remembered his beloved Phuong and put off the decision of executing the soldiers.

While in the jungle for the second time as a member of the Remains-Gathering team, Kien gets the chance to live his memory. He was a member of the 27<sup>th</sup> Glorious Youth Brigade. He left university classes to join the Brigade. At the end of the war of 1969, it happened that only 10 out of 500 soldiers of the Brigade survived, one of whom was Kien. The memories of his fellow soldiers and their brutal deaths started chasing him. He was also badly injured in the war but somehow managed to survive after a prolonged treatment.

Kien recalls the happy time he spent with his beloved Phuong. Both of them have been close to each other since their high school days. Kien also knew that Phuong had a strange closeness with his father. It could be felt that the relationship between Phuong and Kien's father was closer than that of the relationship between Kien and Phuong. Both Kien's father and Phuong believed in the same ideologies. Both claimed to be

free spirits who were not moved by the idea of wartime patriotism that was defined by the North Vietnamese.

Kien's father was a painter who was not interested in the style of art that was in demand during that time. Communists of his time believed that artwork should be accessible to the common man too. But Kien's father did not abide by such concepts of art. Kien's father left the museum where he worked and opened his studio in the attic. Kien's mother left Kien's father years ago. Now Kien's father stays home during the day. He spent the day in his studio and indulged in excessive drinking which led him to a fragile health. Frustrated, Kien's father burnt down all his paintings just before he killed himself. Phuong was the helper and the only witness of that event. But Phuong did not let Kien know about it for many years.

Phuong mentioned the event just before the day when he left for military training. Both Kien and Phuong were lying on the bank of the lake in Hanoi, escaping the task of digging trenches given by the school. They skipped the task and spent the day happily swimming in the lake. On that day Phuong wanted to be physically intimate with Kien but Kien was not mentally prepared to engage in sexual relations with Phuong. Phuong criticized Kien for having unusual devotion to his upcoming life as a soldier. Years later when Kien remembers that day he felt ashamed for his inability to make love to Phuong. He realized that he was driven by some superficial ideologies that were taught to the soldiers while preparing them for war.

While leaving for training the soldiers were allowed to meet their family members one last time before boarding the train. Kien wanted to meet Phuong. When he reached the building where Phuong lived, he came to know from a neighbor that Phuong's university was evacuating and Phuong had probably gone to the University. Kien again rushed back to the train station and this time Kien found Phuong with another man. Phuong was going somewhere. But seeing Kien Phuong did not board the train. She was very happy. They decided to rent a taxi to return to

their building. But then the anti-air raid sirens started ringing. The driver of the cab took shelter somewhere instantly. They had no option but to return to the station again, as Kien was on the verge of missing the train. On the way to the station, both of them laughed, talked, and had a very good time together though it was short-lived.

When they reached the station they found that the train had already left. Both of them decided to catch the train at the next station so that Kien could reboard the train. Even in the next station, they could not manage to board the train where the soldiers were there. Somehow they boarded the cargo train which was running behind the train carrying the soldiers. Both of them were alone on the cargo train. They came close, but this time also Kien failed to make love to Phuong. Phuong seemed to be disappointed with the behavior of Kien.

During that journey, however, more serious incidents happened. The American bomber blew the train off where the soldiers boarded and Kien, luckily missed that train. The cargo train where Kien boarded with Phuong, was also damaged considerably. Both of them remained unhurt. Amidst the hue and cry Kien got separated from Phuong. Phuong was then caught by a group of men who raped her. Kien saw her as she was blood-stained. She was internally injured and was not even able to stand up.

There was another large man in the group who wanted to have her in his custody so that he could rape her again. He was the person who stopped the other criminals while raping her. Kien fought with the large man and knocked him down by hitting his head with an iron pipe. Out of jealousy and anger, Kien called Phuong a 'whore.' Phuong was so weak this time that she lost the desire to go to a safer place. Kien managed a bicycle and both of them found a safer place at last.

Taking some rest and gathering strength, both of them had gone to an abandoned school in a nearby hamlet in search of a shelter. Phuong told Kien how complex their relationship had become. She also said that

she could not sense any better future for their relationship. Being tired of them, they soon fell asleep there but waking up Kien found that Phuong was missing. When he searched for her Kien saw a camp of the North-Vietnamese soldiers. He rushed to the camp and approached a group of soldiers if he had seen a girl named Phuong. They made fun of his curiosity, telling him that Phuong had already had sex with several soldiers of the camp. Kien did not take the joke easily. He pulled out his gun and pointed it towards the man who was joking. There were also some armored trucks near the camp where Kien searched for Phuong, but he did not find her there either.

Kien was about to commit suicide by getting no clue about Phuong. He was about to pull the trigger of his gun pointing at his head. Just then American planes started hovering in the sky and gunfire started. Suddenly Kien saw Phuong near a stream. She was naked and bathing in the stream. She was not even interested in the gunbattle that was going on and was trying to dry her clothes. At that moment Kien made a strange decision for no specific reason. He did not go towards her but rather took the direction of the highway which would lead him to the battlefield where he was supposed to be.

With a haunting memory of the experience of violence returning from war Kien again met Phuong. Phuong by then became a sex worker. Kien was also a psychologically different person then. Phuong decided to leave Hanoi. At first, Kien was a bit disturbed by her decision to leave Hanoi. But he let her go. Kien then concentrated on writing the novel on his experience of war. His drinking habit worsened; still somehow he managed to complete the novel. A Mute girl from the same building fell in love with Kien. He left the manuscript of the novel in her custody and left Hanoi too, without even letting the Mute girl know about his departure. The Mute girl kept the manuscript of the novel with her for a long time and delivered it to the second narrator who was also a former soldier. He published the novel.

**SAQ**

Q.1. How is a plot different from a story? (about 150 words)

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**4.4 Introducing the Important Characters:**

In this section, we will discuss the novel’s main characters which are closely linked with the development of the plot. These are, however, only small notes. For a fuller understanding of the nature, motif, and deep psychological aspects of the characters, there is no alternative to reading the text.

- **Kien:**

Kien is the protagonist of the novel *The Sorrow of War*. He is also the narrator of the novel. His father was a frustrated painter. When he was a small kid, Kien’s mother left his father and married a poor poet.

“His father died in the childhood  
His mother left him all alone  
Like a plant his growth is good  
In times of war, he’s on his own  
So the boy creates his very own man  
Not mourning the fate of a lonely orphan.” (p-122)

Kien decided not to complete his university education but to join the Glorious 27<sup>th</sup> Brigade as a soldier in the Vietnam War. He fought for the nation for ten years and became one of the only ten survivors of the brigade of five hundred soldiers. Kien was also badly injured in the war. Still, he somehow managed to save his life by crawling through the mud for one day and night. Though he was on the Victorious side, his traumatic experience of the war continued to haunt him. Kien realized

the futility of war. He became the eyewitness of the loss and sorrow of war that it brought to the lives of the common people. Kien is the witness to the loss and change that was brought about by the violence of war.

After the war, Kien returned home to Hanoi and decided to be a writer. He starts writing a novel based on his experience as a soldier in the Vietnam War. Kien believed that he had seen more killings and more deaths than any contemporary writer. In his novel, Kien narrates the stories of all the people surrounding him who were being impacted by war and experienced loss and pain. After completing the novel Kien keeps the manuscript in the custody of the Mute girl. Kien had profound love and sympathy for Phuong but their lives had been changed with the war. They could not become lovers again. Phuong became a sex worker. Leaving the manuscript of his novel Kien left Hanoi for good never to return. Kien is the mouthpiece of the author in criticizing the war and the politics behind nationalism. Kien's character represents humanity and the importance of values in the middle of the violence of war. Through the lenses of Kien's character the futility of glorification of war and war heroes is portrayed in the novel.

- **Phuong:**

Phuong is the beloved of Kien and a multifaceted character. She lived in Hanoi. Both Kien and Phuong were in the same school named Chu Van An School. They had been lovers since they were teenagers. Their love relationship is an important aspect of the plot of the narrative.

“Kien and Phuong became inseparable, like a body and its shadow. They cling to each other as if there were no tomorrows as if there were no time to lose and every moment should be spent together.” (P. 127)

Phuong was also affected by the violence of war. She was raped by a group of people when both Kien and she were separated in a hue and cry caused by an air attack by the Americans. For a moment when she was detached from Kien, she was captured by a group of criminals who raped her. That incident changed the relationship between Kien and Phuong. Although Kien saved her from being raped again, Kien



could not accept her like before. He left for war leaving her behind on a battlefield, without even letting her know that he was leaving.

Phuong supported Kien during his difficult times. After the war, returning to Hanoi, Kien was trying to become a normal civilian, he was struggling hard to forget the memories of the war. Phuong understood his struggle and supported him the way she could. Her love and care for him remained the same even though several years rolled over and both of them changed individually.

Phuong was a free-spirited girl. She did not care what others thought and spoke about her. She was not bothered by the expectations of the society. The idea of patriotism and sacrifice for the nation did not attract her even during wartime. She emerged as a skeptic who does not abide by the prejudices of society. Phuong was bold and wanted to live a carefree life. She wanted to live in the moment, opposite to the character of Kien. Kien confessed that in his life he had never come across a girl like Phuong. Whenever, he experienced some closeness with any other girls like the nurse in the hospital to which he was admitted after being injured on the battlefield, Hoa, the fellow soldier, and the Mute girl; in his mind Kien drew comparisons between Phuong and them. He was searching for a girl like Phuong throughout his life.

Phuong had a strange relationship with Kien's father too. The relationship of Kien's father and Phuong was strange and it was similar to that of the lovers. Phuong was present when Kien's father burnt the paintings which were the result of his hard work of several years.

At the end of the novel, it is shown that Phuong and Kien could not manage to stay together as a couple. They had immense love and care for each other, but could not afford to become lovers like they were before the war. Phuong became a sex worker and left Hanoi for good. Kien became an impatient civilian continuously haunted by the memories of war. In the novel, Phuong stands as a symbol of love and hope. She represents the inherent goodness of human beings.

- **Kien's Father:**

Kien's father was a frustrated painter who was left by his wife when Kien was a child. He had a different style of painting that separated him from the contemporary style of painting. His paintings were abstract and symbolic. Moreover, his style of painting did not match the communist ideals that art should be understood by everyone. According to the communist ideals of Vietnam, even the illiterate and working-class people should understand paintings. Kien's father was not interested in changing the style of art according to the demands of that society. He lived in a false dream to his last days of life that one day his paintings would be popular. Kien's father worked in the museum. One day suddenly he left the museum because the Party members criticized and dismissed him from his job, accusing him of suspicious malcontent, a righteous deviationism. Then he started using the attic of the building as a studio and confined himself indulging in careless drinking day and night. He burnt all his paintings before he took his own life.

Kien's father's character is a mixture of contradictory traits making him a character of complex mindset. He appears to be a loving father and at the same time, likes to stay alone with his own, which creates a distance from Kien. As an individual, Kien's father was both an example of inspiration and a reason for his suffering. Kien's father was never an ideal family member. He wanted Kien to be happy but liked to keep himself separated from Kien. He was an introverted and self-centered man, staying busy with his work and thoughts.

Kien's father did not want to compromise his principles. His works were not praised by the authorities. Still, his father believed in his style of painting and spoke freely about his ideologies. He was both a confident and a brave-hearted man. His character is a representative of the lives that are distributed by the internal politics of a country. The most important reason for Kien's father's disillusionment and disparities is the clash of his ideology with political ideology.

- **Kien's Mother:**

Kien's mother is an important character in the novel, though the author has not given the readers much information about her. Kien's mother is described as an artistic, and graceful woman. She had deep love for nature. It is also inferred that Kien's father could not understand her mind and for that reason she had to leave him. Kien's mother was a loyal Party member and she inspired Kien to be one such member as well. The deepest sense of patriotism, rebellious spirit, and artistic attitude in him was like her mother. Kien does not have many memories of her mother. He only had some photographs of her that he preserved for years. Those photographs were the only source of his memories with his mother. Her second husband was an impoverished poet. Kien did not see his mother once she had left home. He visited his stepfather before he went to join the war. But his mother was already dead by then.

Kien's mother had a strong impact on the growth of his psychology. Kien's mother represents the peace and beauty of the pre-war period that was destroyed by the violence of war. Her departure from the family and subsequent death in her second husband's home symbolizes the loss of the traditional beauty and simplicity of Vietnamese society by the effect of wartime ideology.

Kien's mother is presented as an embodiment of unattainable love and loss. All his life Kien longs for his mother's love and affection. Kien's mother's influence shaped his ideology. Though sometimes he feels that she is an ideal woman, Kien makes his mother responsible for his careless childhood. With the absence of her in Kien's life the author lets the readers feel her importance in the development of his psychology. Kien could not understand the mysterious nature of her mother. He was surprised by her choice of leaving his father for an impoverished poet.

- **Kien's Stepfather:**

Kien's mother left her first husband and married a pre-war poet. Unlike his biological father, Kien's stepfather is presented as a more composed, gentle, and relaxed man who is well in control of his life. He represents

the intellectual and romantic spirit of the pre-war period of Vietnam. Kien's stepfather was a romantic poet whose love for beauty and deep imagination created a contradiction between war violence and harsh reality.

He went on hiding from the 'anti-intellectual atmosphere of the state ideologies that came with communism'. Leaving the politically motivated society he decided to live a life of seclusion and anonymity. He carried the impression of the political and ideological conflicts of the past. He is an example of the suppression of intellectual freedom by the political force in pre-war Vietnam. Kien met him only once in a place named Chem, a suburb of Hanoi. Kien visited his stepfather before he went to war. Kien felt deep sadness and a sense of loss in the expressions of his stepfather. Kien found that his stepfather was suffering from extreme poverty. Yet, he has his ideologies. Kien seemed to be impressed by the personality of his stepfather. Kien was treated by his stepfather with proper care. Kien's stepfather did not stop him from going to war but said that 'human beings' objective on this earth is to live, not to kill.' The only meeting Kien had with his stepfather left a profound impact on his mind. When Kien came back from war and again went to visit his stepfather, he came to know that his stepfather died years ago. Kien's stepfather represents the innocence and intellectual beauty of pre-war Vietnam. He serves as a symbol of the human spirit, hope, and contentment even amid the complexities of life.

- **Hoa:**

Hoa was a 19-year-old Vietnamese girl soldier from the North working as a trail guide in Cambodia. She took the responsibility of guiding the injured soldiers of the 27th Brigade of Kien to a safe location. Kien depended on Hoa whom he believed at first. Unfortunately, Hoa lost the way and took them near the Crocodile Lake which was an insecure place for the soldiers. Angry Kien threatened to kill her for her serious mistake. But, he decided to give her one more chance. However, when Kien and Hoa again went into the woods for the landmark that Hoa was searching for, they found it. Both Hoa and Kien became good friends.

Kien also started liking her. The relationship between Hoa and Kien could not last longer. They came to know about the presence of the American troops nearby. Hoa decided to divert the attention of the American troops from the Brigade of Kien. For that, she shot the sniffer dog of the Americans and started running. Eventually, the Americans caught and raped her and took her life. Hoa stands for beauty and simplicity amid brutality and violence.

- **Can:**

Can was a fellow soldier of Kien. He was a deeply sensitive young man. Can's comrades used to appreciate him for his extraordinary skills. By nature Can was a reserved man. Both Can and Kien were close to each other and shared ideas. Profoundly disturbed by the violence of war, Can became frustrated with the life of a soldier. He realized that by choosing to be a part of the war he ultimately lost his peace of mind. He wanted to take care of his old and ill mother in his home rather than dying in a futile war. Can's brother who was also a soldier died in the battle earlier. Can planned to run away from the battlefield and told the plan to Kien and requested not to chase him. According to the law, the punishment for a runaway soldier was death. Ignoring the nature of punishment, Can ran away from the group. Nobody knew his whereabouts. Some days later his body was found in the forest. It was not known how he died.

Can's decision to leave the battlefield deeply affected Kien. Kien started doubting the necessity of wars after the discussion with Can, just before he left the brigade. Kien's realization of the purposelessness of war found a ground in the arguments of Can. Can's character reflects the human cost of the senseless violation of war. He stands as a symbol to prove that war is not only violence, heroism, and victory but also a path of loss and suffering of innocent civilians.

- **Lofty Think:**

Lofty Think was a very skilled soldier of Kien's brigade. He was feared and respected at the same time by his fellow soldiers. He was a mixture of different contradictory traits. He was tall and robust with a muscular

body. His physical stature was another reason he got extra importance in the brigade. Think was a brave-hearted soldier. He was always at the forefront on the battlefield.

As he was an introvert, he had no close friends. Think was an internally disturbed person. He was haunted by the memories of the murders he committed. Nightmares affected his sleep and he stayed impatient all day. The character of Think reveals how the war is not about physical valour. It affects everyone psychologically even if one is strong and able bodied like Think.

Think lacked compassion. He was a violent and brutal man, qualities that define a soldier. In one event of the novel, we come to know that he along with his friends killed an orangutan. Then, skinned the animal and ate the flesh. That incident is enough to show the brutal nature of Think. Another quality of Think was that he had a good knowledge of the forest. He could easily find food and shelter for his team when needed.

Think fell in love with a girl from the nearby farmer village of the Jungle of Screaming Souls. Her name was Ho Bia. Think secretly used to meet her at night when other soldiers were asleep. At first, Kien could not understand what Lofty Think and the other two soldiers were doing. Though falling in love is not encouraged in the Army, as a group leader Kien didn't pose trouble for the three soldiers who were deeply engaged in love with three farmer girls. Think died in a cross firing in a search operation of the three farmer girls who were being kidnapped by the enemy troops. All three innocent girls were raped and murdered by the enemy forces.

- **The Mute Girl:**

A dumb girl in the novel is referred to as the Mute Girl who lived in the same apartment where Kien lived in Hanoi, after the war. The Mute Girl is a significant character from the perspective of the development of the plot. She and Kien showed interest in each other. Kien read aloud in front of her the manuscripts of the novel that he had been

enthusiastically writing for years to document his haunting experience of war. Although she could not show verbal response, Mute girl carefully listened to the manuscripts of Kien. Kien at first wanted to burn the manuscript of the novel into ashes but later on, left it in the custody of the Mute girl. The Mute girl did not know where Kien had gone, leaving the manuscript pages of his novel.

The Mute Girl is a strange character. She appears to be sad, representing the dormant sorrow of the loss in war. She seems to be a voiceless witness of the war and suffering of the protagonist Kien. The Mute girl might be speechless but has a deep understanding of Kien's disturbed psyche. After Phuong, Kien finds the Mute Girl a trustworthy companion with whom he can share all his feelings and ideas. He was confident that the Mute Girl would not judge him or stop listening to his worries. The Mute Girl becomes the repository of Kien's anxieties and frustrations. She becomes a silent force behind Kien to continue the writing of the novel. She is humble and gentle. The interactions between them was based on non-verbal expressions, such as gestures, postures, eye contact, etc. This shows how deep their relationship and understanding of each other was. Her silence is not a sign of weakness, rather it becomes a symbol of tolerance for the violence and brutality that ravaged Kien's life. Kien's faith in the Mute Girl is exemplified in his decision to leave the manuscript in her custody. She stands to be worthy of Kien's faith because after keeping the manuscript for a long period she gave it to the right person to publish it. The Mute Girl might be speechless in the novel, yet her presence itself stands as a strong force of compassion and empathy.

- **Commander Quang:**

Commander Quang is a tragic figure who met a horrible death in the battlefield. The real horror of war is reflected in the novel with the graphic presentation of his death. Quang was the commander of the troop of Kien when he first joined the army in 1966. Before joining the army Quang was a fisherman in Ming Cai. Quan is described as extremely strong and healthy, well-built and tough, and a kind-hearted man as well.

On the battlefield of Hill 300, Kien was led by Quang. Kien stayed close to Quang for three days and nights of continuous fighting. As Kien was a novice at that time, Quang helped and protected him in several intense moments of the battle. Henceforth, an emotional connection between Kien and Quang developed.

During that battle, Quang had been hit by a shell that was dropped by one of the American helicopters. The shell exploded right at the feet of Quang, injuring him badly. The novel describes, “Quang’s belly was torn open, his intestines pouring out, but the frightening thing was that all his bones seemed to be smashed. His two sides had been flattened somehow, and one arm had been torn from the shoulder.” (p.90)

Quang was unconscious for a brief period. When he gained consciousness he shouted at the comrades not to bandage him. Rather, he requested Kien to shoot him for a quicker death. Later on, Quang pulled out a grenade from his pocket with the other hand and exploded it. Quang’s death shocked Kien. He understood the horrible reality of war for the first time with Quang’s death.

- **The Green Coffee Girl:**

Green Coffee Girls were sex workers who frequented Coffee houses in Hanoi in search of clients. The Green Coffee Girl that is mentioned in the novel was around nineteen. She is described as very thin and fragile. Incidentally, she met Kien. One night when Kien was walking in the Thuyen Quang park by the lake Kien found that a girl was being assaulted by a man. The man had a knife in his hand and was on the verge of thrashing it into her belly. Kien rescued the girl and after rescuing he came to know her as a Green Coffee Girl. Later, he recognized her as the sister of one of his fellow soldiers Vinh who sacrificed his life in the war. Kien remembered that he visited her house with the news of the death of her brother. She was only fifteen then. Her brother’s untimely death in war brought havoc to the family. Her blind mother died the same year her brother died. Then she stopped collecting garbage as the dumps no longer existed. Thus she was forced to be a sex worker to manage her living. She was thankful to Kien for saving her life. She offered to have physical



intimacy with Kien as a token of gratitude, which Kien politely rejected. She is an example of the evil impact of war on woman and the common man. The Green Coffee Girls represents the hardship and suffering of women of Vietnam during and after the war.

- **Tran Sinh:**

Tran Sinh was a classmate of Kien who joined the army after Kien. Sinh was also a poet when he was in school. He was wounded in the war and demobilized. Sinh was in hospital for months after being injured in the war. The doctors wondered how Sinh managed to survive with such an injury in the spinal cord. The doctors declared that his injury was very critical and there was no chance of his recovery. Sinh was sent home for his increasing paralysis. He became completely invalid and bedridden. Sinh died in silence. No one knew the pain and suffering that he was going through before death.

Tran Sinh emerges as a symbol of the suffering caused by the violence of war, even beyond the battlefield. His character exemplifies the treatment of war heroes by the state and the people. The pathetic reality of the act of heroism and bravery in war is shown with the suffering of Sinh's character.

“Sometimes I wish I could kill myself and end everything quickly. War has robbed me of the liberty I deserve. Now, I am a slave.” (P.75)

- **Tung:**

Tung was a soldier of the same troop as Kien. Tung was a guardsman. Tung went crazy and left the troop when the troop was based in the jungle near Crossroad 90.

Tung used to laugh terribly when he was attacked by madness. The continuous laughter of Tung scared the soldiers. Some of the soldiers suspected Tung of being touched by ghosts or ill spirits. But the real reason for the ghostly laughter was different. According to the doctors, Tung's madness was caused by a bomb fragment penetrating his brain.

- **The Truck Driver:**

The truck driver is an enigmatic character in the novel. He drove the Russian-built powerful Zil Truck to The Jungle of the Screaming Souls. Kien comes in contact with him when he becomes a part of the Missing in Action body collecting Team. The truck driver took Kien and his team to the jungle of the Screaming Souls. He understands the nature of the Jungle, and the causes of bizarre happenings and analyzes the nightmares of Kien. This is the jungle where Kien had spent one decade of his life losing almost all his comrades in the fruitless battles. The truck driver is in the beginning just a transporter of deceased bodies of the ones who went missing in the war. He had good knowledge of the geography and mystery of the Jungle of Screaming Souls. However, gradually he emerges to be a guide on the journey of Kien's self-discovery too. He has an intellectual and philosophical understanding of life and society.

The truck driver emerges as a contrast to Kien's melancholic and pessimistic nature. The driver expressed a deep-hearted empathy for Kien's suffering and trauma. His words often soothe Kien and give him an insight into the moments of depression in the process of collection of the dead bodies. The driver's philosophical depth of the mind and minute observations of life and society are discovered by Kien during their journey through the Jungle of the Screaming Souls. He seems to be more of a practical man than Kien. The driver has a better understanding of reality than Kien. Therefore, he is not haunted by memories.

The truck driver raises questions about Kien's concept of heroism and sacrifice. For him, the real courage is the struggle to protect oneself in the war. The driver does not adhere to the belief of sacrifice of the self by following the ideologies. The truck driver becomes a catalyst for Kien's self-discovery, reexamination of his prejudices, and a means to accept and adjust to the life he was going through after the war was over.

- **The Second Narrator:**

The second narrator is an unnamed former soldier. He had a little acquaintance with Kien before the war. On some occasions before the

war broke, both Kien and the second narrator talked to each other. After the war, the second narrator occasionally found Kien loitering around Hanoi and he also came to know about Kien becoming a writer.

Towards the end of the novel, we come to know that the Second Narrator receives the manuscript of the novel from the Mute Girl. He goes through every word of the manuscript and is deeply moved by the narrative. He understands the narrative from Kien's point of view, as both Kien and he shares the same type of experience of the same war. Kien and the Second Narrator witness the horror and brutality of war with their own eyes. The second narrator found the novel worth publishing and he took the responsibility to publish the novel.

The space occupied by the second narrator is relatively limited, yet his role is important. The second narrator helps the manuscript to go to print and thus paves the way for the reader. Without the existence of the Second Narrator, the novel would have died in the manuscript form with the Mute Girl.

He takes charge to show the violence and impact of war in society after Kien. The Second Narrator is important because he realizes the suffering and trauma Kien was going through. It is the Second Narrator who vehicles Kien's voice to the world.

The second narrator is also a brave-hearted man who must have a revolutionary attitude like Kien. Knowing that the novel written by Kien is going to challenge the official narrative of the state about war and question the idea of nationalism and patriotism, he decides to publish it. The second narrator believes that the novel written by Kien will let the readers understand the reality of war by breaking all the age-old prejudices of heroism and rightist discourse.

**SAQ**

Q.1. What are the differences between a hero and a protagonist?  
(about 100 words)

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Q.2. Do you consider Kien as the protagonist or a hero? (about 100 Word)

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**Check Your Progress**

Q.1. Do you think Kien, the protagonist of the novel is the author's representative voice? Why? (about 150 words)

Q.2. Can we consider the Mute Girl as an important symbol in developing the meaning of the narrative? (about 150 words)

Q.3. How does the role of other characters support Kien in building the ideological framework of his mind? (about 100 words)

**4.5 Summing Up:**

In this unit, a brief overview of the story of the navel has been provided along with the introductions to the major characters. It is hoped that by the end of the unit you have achieved your goal of knowing the story of the novel *The Sorrow of War* as well as familiarizing yourself with some of the major characters.

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## UNIT - 5

### Bao Ninh: *The Sorrow of War* (Themes and Techniques)

#### Unit Structure:

- 5.1 Objectives
- 5.2 Introduction
- 5.3 Important Themes of the Novel
  - 5.3.1 The Evil of War
  - 5.3.2 Scrutiny of Nationalism and Patriotism
  - 5.3.3 Role of Memory
  - 5.3.4 Love and War
- 5.4 Use of Supernatural Elements in *The Sorrow of War*
- 5.5 Interpretation of Vietnam War
- 5.6 Autobiographical Elements in *The Sorrow of War*
- 5.7 Use of Stream of Consciousness in *The Sorrow of War*
- 5.8 Use of Symbols in *The Sorrow of War*
- 5.9. Summing Up
- 5.10 References and Suggested Readings

#### 5.1 Objectives:

This unit is designed so that the students–

- *understand* different point of views of reading a text,
- *understand* the technique that is applied by the author while writing the text,
- *know* how different themes are associated with the text.

#### 5.2 Introduction:

In this unit, you will be provided with some of the aspects to understand the text. Though the main objective of the unit is to focus on the themes and techniques associated with the novel *The Sorrow of War*, we will

also try to understand some other related issues with the narrative at the same time. This will help us understand the narrative thoroughly and from multi-dimensional perspectives.

### **5.3 Important Themes of the Novel:**

Let us discuss some of the important themes of the novel, *The Sorrow of War*-

#### **5.3.1 The Evil of War:**

War is an unnecessary evil. The emphasis given to the word 'Sorrow' in the title of the novel 'The Sorrow of War' itself suggests war as evil. The plot of the novel is based on the Vietnam War, a true historical event. The time, the places, the contexts, and the impact of the war on the common man's life are realistically portrayed in the novel. The narrator Kien is the witness of all the loss and suffering caused by the war. He witnesses numerous brutal deaths that ultimately result in vain. The supreme sacrifice of the soldiers for the country becomes meaningless. Numerous brutal murders, killings of innocent civilians, rapes, and shattering of dreams, and relationships are portrayed in the novel by Bao Ninh. War is the only reason for such a catastrophe. The novel shows how unimaginably the lives of the common man and their relationships are permanently affected by the Vietnam war. The pathetic condition of the family members of the soldiers who sacrificed their lives in the war is also vividly portrayed with the help of different characters in the novel.

The plot of the novel portrays how selfishly a nation forgets the dead soldiers and carelessly treats the injured soldiers, who once vowed to die for the sake of the country. Kien, the narrator, gives a detailed account of both the mental and physical suffering of the soldiers who went to the battlefield with him.

With the manifestation of the change that came to the life of Kien, Ninh shows the differences between the pre-war and post-war lives of the common people. During and after the war hopes turn to despair and

people lose faith in each other. Kien, who is the mouthpiece of the author, is a symbol of the trauma of war in the post-war period.

Kien was on the winner's side. However, he could not enjoy the victory. After loss of lives and shattered dreams, victory doesn't have much meaning for him. The novel shows how a war has a lasting impact on one's psychology, body, and lives of people. When a war is on, every civilian is bound to be affected by the war, either directly or indirectly. Again and again, the novel proves that war gives nothing except death and miseries.

### **5.3.2 Scrutiny of Nationalism and Patriotism:**

The plot of the novel questions the idea of radical 'nationalism' and 'patriotism'. 'Nationalism' is the love for one's own country. Again, in plain words, 'patriotism' promotes the mindset of sacrifice for the nation. Both are in a way complementary to each other. Bao Ninh in the plot of *The Sorrow of War* scrutinizes 'nationalism' and 'patriotism' and the way both determines the lives of the people of a state. The narrative of Ninh realistically proves how hollow the idea of patriotism is. It reflects how the soldiers are being motivated to join the war hiding the brutal reality. The novel gives space to the opinion of the soldiers who lost their appetite for fighting. However, soon after reaching the battleground and experiencing horrible death, starvation, and the careless attitude of the authorities toward the army, the soldiers lost the essence of their love for their country. They realized that their sacrifice went in vain. Within a few days of the battle, soldiers realized that they were being made apparatus for earning thick popularity and power by the ruling party. The authorities left the soldiers in the Jungle of the Screaming Souls, where they lived month after month without proper ration. The helpless soldiers starved in the middle of the jungle for months and years to fight for the people of the country without the supply of food. The story of Can, a Vietnamese soldier of Kien's brigade, presents before us how the soldiers repented for ruining their lives by joining the war. Can lost his thrive and objective for fighting for his motherland and decided to run away from war. The punishment for a runaway soldier is only death penalty. Can wanted to help his old mother at home. Another



soldier named Tran Sinh who was injured on the battlefield lived a dejected life in loneliness. Bedridden Tran suffered from paralysis, caused by a bullet injury in his spinal cord. Tran dies in extreme poverty, pain, helplessness, and seclusion.

The soldiers on their return journey from the battlefield anticipated a warm welcome but the citizens didn't even know of their arrival in Hanoi. Spending most vital years of their youth in the middle of a dense forest fighting fearlessly for the nation, they reached their native places like strangers. They felt like outsiders. No one, not even the family members came to receive them. There was none to inquire about their experience in the war.

The idea of nationalism and patriotism is questioned by the character of Phuong. She was a free girl who was never touched by the idea of patriotism. Even during the time of war, she remained untouched by the feeling for the nation. Ninh destroys the idea that limits patriotism within the boundary of fighting for the county and sacrifice. Ninh critiques the notion of patriotism and shows how soldiers are not superheroes but ordinary men with fears and apprehensions.

### **5.3.3 Role of Memory:**

Memory plays an important role in the plot construction of the novel. Here, in the novel memory is not confined to just a remembrance of the things that happened in the past. Rather, memory in the novel emerges as a powerful force to determine the direction of the central character and narrator Kien's life and future.

Throughout the course of the narrative, the protagonist of the novel Kien relives his past. Kien is haunted by the traumatic memory of the Vietnam War in which he fought bravely but survived after being badly injured. As a soldier of the North-Vietnamese Army Kien spent ten years on the battleground. His experience of the Vietnam War becomes the memory that affects his present again and again. The barbarous acts and horrible deaths that he witnessed continue to haunt him even during

the postwar period when he struggles to live the life of a common man. The acts of violence, deaths, and destruction of the Vietnam War come to his mind again and again. His present is occupied by the experience of the violent past. The flashbacks that occur in Kien's mind are not mere leisure time recollections of the experience. It imprisoned him in such a way that he lost focus on any issues of the present life. Kien was transformed into an impatient and disturbed civilian. He suffers from emotional breakdowns and thrives to get rid of the haunting memory. He carries the war in his mind even though the war ended much before.

The memories of war disturbed the thought process of Kien. His capacity to understand reality has changed permanently. He becomes a cynical individual and distrustful of everyone. He was confused by the experience of war and failed to differentiate between reality and memory. He is trapped in the illusion that memory becomes the primary reality for him.

Memory for Kien is a constant source of pain and suffering. Despite that, it also serves as a means to experience his existence and identity. He relives his days with his father and Phuong. Even amid war, Kien remembers the pre-war happy days that he spent with Phuong. It gives him momentary relief from the pressures of the battleground. In such moments memories for Kien become an escape route from the tormenting present. The memories of pre-war happy days instilled melancholy in him when he was grounded in reality and well-controlled in his life and objectives. The memories of war devastated the entire plan and future of Kien's life transforming him into a restless soul. The dominant presence of the traumatic memories in the mind of Kien made it more difficult for him to cope with the present. The scar of the war was so deep in the psyche of Kien that he failed to believe in his present and future. Again and again, he fails to find the path to mental peace and calmness.

The memories of war have another impact on Kien. By reliving the experience of war with the help of memories Kien tries to understand the meaning of a war. Ultimately, Kien ends up believing that war is unnecessary and meaningless.

Kien's memory can be seen as a representative memory of the Vietnamese people as a whole. The trauma that Kien went through represents the suffering and traumatic experience of the innocent civilians of Vietnam. It is not only Kien who carried the experiences of war in his mind; all the peace-loving people of Vietnam experienced the same in the post-war period. Kien's memory is the same as the collective memory of the people of his country, which everyone wanted to get rid of.

It is also worth mentioning that to write his novel on his experience of war Kien handles his memory as an important tool. Memory becomes the base of the narrative that Kien was writing.

#### **5.3.4. Love and War:**

*The Sorrow of War* intricately juxtaposes the themes of love and war, presenting a play of emotions that echoes throughout the narrative. The novel inquires into the lasting effect of both the beauty of love and the violence of war on human beings, their relationships, and society as a whole.

One of the most striking aspects of the novel is that it continues to explore the two most heterogeneous elements i.e. violence and love with the portrayal of the central character Kien's life. Kien, the protagonist of the novel, goes through a period of trauma, haunted by the memory of violence, loss, and death resulting in the realization of the meaninglessness of war. The novel shows the display of grotesque violence and brutality of war. Love emerges as a soothing force and escape route for the innocent human beings from unimaginable despair.

Kien's relationship with Phuong is devastated by war and violence. Their relationship before the war was a natural relationship of love endowed with compassion and understanding. It was full of the bounty of promise, hope, and happiness. Their relationship goes through hardship during the war and is destroyed like that of any other common man's relationship. The hopelessness of war leaves a permanent scar on their once beautiful relationship turning it into pieces. Their dreams were shattered. The war brought a context that proved that the lovers were

governed by two different ideologies, Kien, a sincere patriot and hardcore nationalist and Phuong who does not care about these emotions. An ideological erupts from that point. Kien's mind is preoccupied with the idea of devotion to war and sacrifice for which he again and again fails to fulfill the emotional and biological requirements of Phuong. He failed to make himself ready to make love with Phuong on a couple of occasions because his mind was conditioned by the life of an ideal soldier. The novel establishes how love also becomes a casualty in war.

Kien's love for the motherland is in conflicts with his love for Phuong. These two different types of love relentlessly are at war in the psyche of Kien. When he is with Phuong, he is disturbed by the emotion of war. Again, Phuong's memory becomes an element of distraction on the battlefield. Here, patriotism, and love for one's own country emerge both as a motivation and illusion. Kien suffers and loses his way of solace in the conflict.

The violence of war consumes all human relationships including love has been exemplified in the novel in the relationship of Ho Bia, a farmer woman, and Tinh, a comrade of Kien. Along with two other women, she was kidnapped, raped, and killed by the South Vietnamese. Their love relationship was also cut short by the violence of war.

The memory of war chases Kien in the post-war period. The nation was at peace but Kien's mind was still a bloody battlefield. From time to time a sense of guilt and loss erupts like a volcano in his mind for which he fails to settle down in any relationship after the war. His relationship with the Mute Girl in the post-war period remained incomplete too. The Mute girl showed signs of attraction that Kien couldn't give adequate attention. He failed to recognize the feeling for her too because his psyche was occupied with the reflection of the violence of war.

*The Sorrow of War* is an exhibition of the entangled themes of love and war. With the projections of individual observation and experience, the author has transformed the narrative from a specific Vietnam War story to a universal expression of the ability of the human psyche to encounter the love and violence together.

**SAQ**

Q.1. How does war lead to misery and trauma? (about 150 words)

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Q.2. How do young soldiers experienced war in Vietnam? (about 150 words)

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**5.4 Use of Supernatural Elements in *The Sorrow of War*:**

*The Sorrow of War* incorporates several supernatural elements. This policy of Ninh to incorporate the supernatural and giving a gothic context enriches the novel providing multiple layers of meanings. The supernatural elements blur the difference between reality and imagination. Manifestation of the power of the supernatural helps the narrative’s exploration of the metaphysical world which is intertwined with the psychological realm of the protagonist Kien. The supernatural or surreal experiences that the narrator shows are a replica of his existential dilemma.

The narrator experiences the existence of supernatural forces in *The Jungle of the Screaming Souls*. The nature of the Jungle is unpredictable. The jungle itself emerges as an important character in the novel. It has a profound impact on the minds of the soldiers. As the name suggests the jungle of the Screaming Souls indirectly controlled the psyche of the soldiers who entered into it. There was no escape from the jungle. The rain, the mud, the cold, and the gloomy atmosphere of the Jungle gave an unreal experience to the soldiers that they had experienced never before. There were sayings that some ghostly streams existed in the jungle. People who drink the water of that stream suffer from different mysterious diseases and mental illnesses, ultimately resulting in death. The soldiers started losing interest in the war because of the unexpected hardships that the jungle brought before them.

The appearance of ghostly apparitions is another important example of the supernatural element that is incorporated into the narrative. Kien, the protagonist, is often haunted by the spirits of the dead soldiers who were his comrades during the war. After the war when Kien entered the jungle of the Screaming Souls second time as a member of the remains gathering team, he heard bizarre haunts at night that even affected his dream. He also heard a craze of laughter echoing from the other side of Hill 300. The truck driver of the remaining gathering team had a better knowledge of the Jungle than Kien. The driver told Kien that the jungle of the Screaming Souls looked empty but underneath it was not. It was crowded with ghosts; ghosts of dead soldiers. He also added that he had chats with the ghosts who came out of the grave to talk to him. Even, the driver mentioned that he met the ghost of one of his cousins who died in the jungle while fighting as a soldier. The truck driver told Kien that the spirits who sheltered in the jungle of the Screaming Souls possessed the ability to come to the dreams of the intruders of the Jungle. The spirits can communicate with the person in his dream. He also said that souls wanted to tell about the sufferings and loneliness of their lives after death. Thus, in the narrative, illusion, and reality are mixed to give the reader an experience of the complexity of human existence.

We found a mention of the existence of supernatural forces in Kien's home. From many neighbors, Kien got the information that his father's ghost appeared in the attic; however, he never encountered his father's ghost.

The description of the supernatural in the narrative symbolizes the unsolved problems and unfulfilled lives of the dead soldiers. The supernatural elements especially the ghosts became a metaphor of the past that kept disturbing the present conditions of the characters. The past is never dead in the novel. It is alive in the form of the supernatural.

The description of the dreams and hallucinations expands the scope of the supernatural to another level in the novel. The trauma and pain of Kien can be understood by his experience of nightmares and hallucinations. The seemingly surreal atmosphere created in the novel blurs the boundary between memories and present actions. It provides

the readers a lens to look into the disturbed psyche of an individual due to the brutal experiences of the war. The incorporation of the supernatural elevates the narrative of *The Sorrow of War* from a mere war story to a psychological novel. How the physical realities can shake the psychological realm of human beings is skillfully inferred by the use of the supernatural in the novel.

### **5.5 Interpretation of the Vietnam War:**

*The Sorrow of War* by Bao Ninh tries to reinterpret the Vietnam War from a new point of view. The narrative of *The Sorrow of War* challenges the narrative constructed by the authorities. The novel affects the grand narrative of the victors letting the readers offer lenses to understand the brutal reality of war.

Ninh recasts the events of the Vietnam War with fictional characters and destroys the romantic notions related to wars and war heroes, finally establishing an anti-war point of view by focusing on the haunting memories of the narrator Kien. We see Ninh's reinterpretations of history in his effort to subvert the traditional prejudices of the heroic narrative related to war. Ninh penetrated the deepest recesses of the psyche of the characters, especially the soldiers stuck on the battlefield, rather than glorifying insensible military actions. Parallel to the presentation of the psychological scars of the soldiers the author has also emphasized the reflection of the barbarous physical activities that nullify the popular prejudices related to war. The uncensored presentation of the ground reality of the war, army lives, bloodshed, inhumanity, lawlessness, and lives of the family members of the dead soldiers in the post-war period, and the concern for them presented in the novel destroys all the romantic myths related to war and heroism.

The narrator experienced that the Govt. did not continue the supply chain of food and weapons to the soldiers. Soldiers are left to fight on their own. Frustration crept among soldiers witnessing the careless attitude of the Govt. towards them. Apart from experiencing corruption and moral flaws among the Army men, Kien also experiences the

ignorance of the citizens. The soldiers returned to their hometowns after sacrificing important years of their youth. They were tired, injured, and frustrated. The soldiers expected a grand welcome on their return home. But nothing happened. No one knew that they returned with permanent scars on their body and minds.

The pathetic lives of the family members of the dead soldiers are also foregrounded by the novel. War had changed the lives of the family members of the dead and injured soldiers. They succumb to poverty and unending suffering. The authorities did not come forward to know about the status of the injured soldiers even. Some of them died in utter loneliness after suffering for years.

Furthermore, Ninh uncovers the complexities of Victor's side, exposing the internal conflicts and showing the losses. The North Vietnamese army won the battle which was glorified by the Govt. However, the internal conflicts within the army, soldiers' disillusionment, and despair, a common aspect of all the wars are not often discussed. Ninh's narrative focuses on this aspect as well.

One of the most important aspects of the novel is that it portrays the lasting impact of trauma on the psychology of human beings, with the help of the representative character Kien. Kien's suffering, nightmares, and haunting memories reveal the depth of the emotional scars. Kien experiences survivor's guilt and post-traumatic stress disorder. For this, Kien finds it difficult to live the life of a civilian after the war. Ninh emphasizes these aspects more in the novel to let the readers understand the unrevealed cost of a war. Overall, Ninh questions the justification of barbarism and brutality to attain victory in war, with the instance of the Vietnam War.

### **5.6 Autobiographical Elements in *The Sorrow of War*:**

Bao Ninh, the author of the novel, was a soldier who participated in the Vietnam War. He was a part of the Glorious 27 Youth Brigade, a North



Vietnamese Unit of Soldiers that faced a huge loss and death. His life and experience are represented in a literary way in the novel.

Kien, the narrator and protagonist of the novel, is a representative voice of the author. Kien's life is similar to that of the Ninh's. The role of Bao Ninh is well represented by Kien's actions, thoughts, and overall personality as well. Kien reflects on Ninh's life and experience as a soldier and provides the readers with a realistic picture of the brutality and violence of war.

An important autobiographical element that is evident in the novel is the portrayal of the physical and psychological trauma experienced by the soldiers. As a soldier, Bao Ninh witnessed numerous deaths, murders, destruction, and brutality at its worst, all in the name of war. Kien, the protagonist, is also a witness to the same. The vivid and graphic description of the combats, gun battles, injuries, and deaths narrated by Kien is a flow that comes out of the author's memory. Ninh's first-hand experience of war and its large-scale destruction is reflected by the character of Kien.

*The Sorrow of War* documents not only the physical realities of war but also explores the emotional and psychological toll of war that permanently devastates human beings, especially soldiers. Kien suffers from post-traumatic disorder, haunted by disturbing memories. He feels a deep psychological wound that never allows him to settle down in any place or activity. What Kien observes, feels, and expresses is a replica of the author's first-hand observation and feeling.

The central character of the novel Kien and his fellow soldiers experienced indifference from the people when they returned home. They returned from the battlefield leaving behind their fellow soldiers, taking injury, becoming disabled, sacrificing the most valuable years of their youth, ultimately giving the nation the taste of victory. There was no one to welcome them. There was no acknowledgment or recognition. The soldiers upon returning home started living lives in loneliness. Society was not interested in knowing their sacrifices. Bao Ninh's sense of alienation and loneliness is manifested in the character of Kien.

Bao Ninh, after wasting his youth in war, undergoing the phrases of trauma, pain, and suffering has realized the meaninglessness of war. The lasting impact that a war registers in the human mind and spirit is beyond imagination, and is another dimension of the novel that every reader will understand. Kien's realization when he goes through introspection reflects the author's discoveries regarding the profound loss carried out by war. Moreover, the similarity between Kien and Bao Ninh is overt in their efforts to escape the traumatic experience of war. Kien wrote a novel to document the painful memory of war which kept him chasing even after the war was over years ago. Likewise, Bao Ninh also documented his experience as a soldier in the Vietnam War in the novel *The Sorrow of War*.

Bao Ninh's personal experience of war is transformed into a powerful narrative under the title *The Sorrow of War*. Kien is the mouthpiece of the author in the novel. Kien realistically depicts Ninh's firsthand experience of the Vietnam War, one of the most violent periods in Vietnam's history.

### **5.7 Use of Stream of Consciousness in *The Sorrow of War*:**

Stream of consciousness is a technique of writing prominently applied by the writers of the 20th century, notably used by Virginia Woolf and James Joyce. Works written in this technique try to present the mental world of the characters, especially their thoughts in a non-refined manner. The stream-of-consciousness technique is useful to let the readers understand the characters' psychological realm, and complexity of thoughts as they occur naturally.

The stream-of-consciousness technique is different from the traditional narrative methods of systematic and chronological arrangement of actions and events, coherent syntax, or identical paragraph divisions. Rather, this narrative technique tries to reflect the intricate flow of thoughts in the characters' minds, memories, dreams, desires, sensations, etc as they naturally originate and process. The narrative that results

from this technique is often nonlinear and fragmented, lacking coherence. The works written in this technique often pose challenges for readers because to understand these works a reader needs to actively engage his/her intellect to gain a picture of the characters' emotional and psychological realm.

*The Sorrow of War* by Bao Ninh applies the stream of consciousness technique to give the readers a deep insight into the narrator cum central character Kien's psyche. Throughout the novel, the author tries to present Kien's experience of the Vietnam War in a series of haunted memories. The stream-of-consciousness technique helps in shifting the narrative between past and present. The chaotic and intricate flow of thoughts that arises in the mind of the narrator Kien is precisely documented with the use of the stream-of-consciousness technique. The frequent and unpredictable shiftings of the narrative among different temporal dimensions give the readers a picture of the impatient psychological world of Kien. After the war, Kien goes through a journey of deep introspection, and evaluation of self and human relationships both past and present.

The fragmented nature of Kien's identity, bruised spirit from the experience of the violence in war, the conflict of decisions that arise in his mind, and disjointed memories formed a mosaic of emotions that range from the feeling of helplessness, and despair to hope and love. The author skilfully documents the harsh impact of war on the common citizens of the society, with the help of the character Kien. Kien is the connecting thread of the people who were being affected by war. His varied experiences of people and their sufferings caused by the war get a vehicle in the form of a stream of consciousness technique.

The stream-of-consciousness technique brings the readers closer to Kien. People feel the instability and impatience of Kien. The readers travel with the emotional and mental journey of the protagonist. The boundaries between past and present gets dissolved in the process of narration.

**SAQ**

Q.1. Write a note on the stream-of-consciousness technique. Do you think the stream-of-consciousness technique is relevant for the author?  
(Word Limit 250)

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**5.8 Use of Symbols in *The Sorrow of War*:**

• **The Jungle:**

The jungle named ‘Jungle of Screaming Souls’ is the place where Kien and his battalion fought with the American and South Vietnamese troops. Except for ten, all the troop members were wiped away by the enemy forces. Kien revisits the jungle as a member of the Remains Gathering Team, to collect the remains of the in-action missing soldiers. The jungle itself emerges as a character in the novel. It has its unique character. The nature of the jungle is unpredictable. No one can predict when it rains, when the floor of the jungle is flooded, when storm starts, etc. The jungle is not easily penetrable. Once one is in, it is very difficult for him to come out of the jungle. The jungle stands as a trap for human beings. The jungle is full of uncertainties and dangers. It serves as a symbol of the brutality and violence of war. ‘The Jungle of Screaming Souls’ is full of supernatural elements that provide the soldiers with surreal experiences and hallucinations creating fear in the mind of the soldiers. The jungle is dense, impenetrable and unpredictable. It poses both physical and psychological challenges for the Vietnamese soldiers.

• **Rosa Canina:**

It was a white flower that blossomed in the Jungle of the Screaming Souls. Rosa Canina is referred to as ‘diabolical flowers’. The flower spread a perfume in the air, especially during the night fuelling erotic and obsessional

dreams. When the soldiers woke up in the morning the scent vanished but left with a feeling of smouldering passion, both painful and ecstatic. The locals said that Canina carried death in the place where it grows. The soldiers even The Rosa Canina is used as a symbol of death. The soldiers were intoxicated with death which they were unaware of.

- **The Mountain:**

The Mountain in the novel takes the role of an important symbol. It becomes a barrier to peace and happiness that is unattainable in the midst of war. The soldiers of Kien's brigade wanted to cross the mountain and faced heavy casualties. The mountain also stands as a symbol of the burden of the past and memory that Kien carried even after the war. Kien could not separate himself from the burden of past experiences that haunted him every moment of post-war life. The inescapable memory is also represented with the help of the mountain.

- **The Red River:**

The Red River flows through the Jungle of the Screaming Souls. As the name shows the Red River serves as a symbol of bloodshed and violence that is carried out by the war. The Red River also stands as an enduring haunting memory that remains alive in the consciousness of the narrator Kien.

- **The Mute Girl:**

The Mute Girl is speechless in the novel. She lives in the same apartment where Kien lived. The Mute Girl is a metaphor for unsaid sorrow and suffering caused by the war. The Mute Girl listens but doesn't react. She is composed and gentle. She is the repository of all the frustration of Kien. She represents the innocent civilians who are the worst victims of the war. Her dumbness is the representative of the voiceless existence of the common man. The Mute Girl is full a symbol of love, compassion and vitality of life. Her character is a symbol of the promise of peace and patience. She is in a good control of her feelings and instincts, unlike the narrator Kien. Her character shows the importance of calmness and composed mindset in the midst of chaos.

These symbols contribute to the novel’s rich and layered storytelling, providing readers with deeper insights into the psychological and emotional impact of war on individuals and society.

**Self-Assessment Question**

1. How does Bao Ninh subvert the romantic beliefs about war and heroism in his novel *The Sorrow of War*? (100 words)

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**5.9 Summing Up:**

In this unit, we have discussed various themes and issues related to the plot of the novel. Discussion on the use of the stream-of-consciousness technique is also done about the narrative technique applied by Bao Ninh. In the later part, some of the important symbols of the novel are also discussed. We hope that the students will read the novel thoroughly and may find out various other themes.

**5.10 References and Suggested Readings:**

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