

BLOCK: IV

Unit 1 : Sonali Deraniyagala: *Wave: A Memoir of Life after the Tsunami* (Background)

Unit 2 : Sonali Deraniyagala: *Wave: A Memoir of Life after the Tsunami* (Reading the Text)

Unit 3 : Sonali Deraniyagala: *Wave : A Memoir of Life after the Tsunami* (Critical Analysis)

Unit 4 : Marjane Satrapi: *Persepolis I* (Background)

Unit 5 : Marjane Satrapi: *Persepolis I* (Reading the Text)

UNIT - 1

Sonali Deraniyagala: *Wave: A Memoir of Life after the Tsunami* (Background)

Unit Structure:

- 1.1 Objectives
- 1.2 Introduction
- 1.3 Introducing the Author
- 1.4 A Brief history of Sri Lankan Writings
- 1.5 The Context of Sonali Deraniyagala's Memoir
- 1.6 Memoir Writing in Literature
- 1.7 Memoir Writing in Sri Lankan Literature
- 1.8 Summing Up
- 1.9 References and Suggested Readings

1.1 Objectives:

Sri Lankan Literature has contributed to a great extent to the ocean of Asian Literature. Initially Sri Lankan writers used Sinhala language but they published in Tamil, Pali and English also. The Sinhala writers, poets, essayists, non-fiction writers, playwrights, even the Sri Lankan Diaspora authors have immensely contributed in their own ways to the literature of Sri Lanka since ancient times. The present unit is about Sri Lankan Literature with special emphasis on Memoir writing in the post-Tsunami time in Sri Lanka. As a prescribed text you will be made familiar with the memoir writing of Sonali Deraniyagala, who is mostly known as a memoir writer and an economist. By the end of the unit you will be able to

- *be familiar* with the life and literary world of Sonali Deraniyagala.
- *understand* the context of the memoir written by Sonali Deraniyagala,
- *explore* the merit and significance of the memoir.

1.2 Introduction:

The history of Environmental writings saw its origin and developments since time immemorial. It is interesting to find that environmental narratives are being used by world organizations to create awareness about natural disasters and destructions. The Hollywood movies such as *2012* have not only commented on various natural disasters but also have created awareness about human- nature conflict and man-made disasters. Hollywood survival films like *The Impossible* (2012: directed by J.A. Bayona) has narrated the disaster of 2004 tsunami, about the loss and crisis of a family during tsunami. The movie was based on the experience of Maria Belon and her family in 2004 Indian Tsunami.

You will find it interesting to learn that the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has recently published a series of Tsunami Story Books from the Asia-Pacific region to make children aware about the natural disasters, the community heroes who fought bravely during the time of crisis and emotional management. A few examples of such stories are “Durie, the Tsunami Teacher”, “Surachat, the fisherman who survived the tsunami”, “Li’ona: Driving to Save Lives from Tsunami” to mention a few.

The life changing disasters and its impact have been reflected in children’s literature as it has been mentioned in case of UNDP initiative. Two important children’s narratives on the 2004 Tsunami disaster are mentioned here. One is a picture book by Jana Liaz known as *Elephants of the Tsunami* (2005) which was about the tragedy of tsunami and the second book is *Surviving Disasters: Chika and the Angry Ocean* (2014) by Suroopa Mukherjee. A few more works about the impact of Tsunami are worth mentionable here. Gail Langer Karwoski’s *Tsunami: The True Story of an April Fool’s Day Disaster* (2006), *Tsunami Kids: Our Journey from Survival to Success* by Paul Forkan and Rob Forkan, Emma Carroll’s *The Somerset Tsunami* (2019), Peg Kehret’s *Escaping the Giant Wave* (2003) are written about massive earthquakes and tsunami that followed. Among many such writers is the name Sonali Deraniyagala from Sri Lanka who has written her only

narrative on her tragic and traumatic experiences in the Indian Ocean Tsunami in 2004. Her memoir *Wave* is an account of her progress of grief and her miraculous survival amidst crisis. In the next few sections you will learn more about her career and personal life which will enable you to understand the text *Wave* as a memoir.

1.3 Introducing the Author:

Sonali Deraniyagala was born in 1964 in Colombo, Sri Lanka and works at the SOAS University of London. Professionally, Sonali Deraniyagala is an economist who teaches at the University of London and Columbia. Her parents were Edward Pieris Deraniyagala and Gemini Deraniyagala. She was married to economist Dr. Stephen Lissenburgh. The writer was on her vacation at Sri Lanka's Yala National Park in December, 2004 when she lost her family during the massive outbreak of tsunami. She was at her Aunt's house in Colombo after the massive destruction. There she was trying to survive her grief and pain. It was a traumatic experience for her to live without her family. To overcome the tragedy she even made suicidal attempt and became alcoholic.

She was not a regular writer but she wrote occasionally. The memoir *Wave* was written by her as advised by her therapist after the devastation in Sri Lanka that brought the ecliptic moment in her life. She had no other way but to write the memoir to overcome the painful memories. She was one among those victims who lost their lives of near and dear ones during the massive tsunami disaster in Sri Lanka. Deraniyagala lost her family, two sons, her parents, her best friend in the Indian Ocean tsunami.

1.4 A Brief history of Sri Lankan Writings:

In the South Asian context, Sri Lankan Literature plays a significant role. Formerly known as Ceylon, Sri Lanka is rich both culturally and traditionally. During the reign of Ashoka Maurya (c. 269-232 BC), Buddhism overpowered Ceylon. The language and literature of Ceylon was influenced by the sub continental literature and language. For instance Sanskrit's influence can be mentioned. The Indo-Aryan and the Dravidian

language pervaded the literature of Sri Lanka. Ceylon, when fell under the grip of European Colonialism, Christianity began to influence the trend of literature. So far as earliest Sinhalese literature is concerned, glossaries, Buddhist Pali texts were available. Important hagiographic text at that time was the Amavatura (“Flood of the Ambrosia”) by Gurulugomi and the text was about the life of the Buddha and his nine virtues. Gurulugomi was known for his Classic diction and style. It is known that after the 12th century , literature began to be composed in Sinhala. The reign of King Parakramabahu is significant in this context.

Stop to Consider:

Story telling or oral tradition prevailed in Sri Lanka in the past and literature of that time was drawn towards the Buddhist Parables and Jataka stories. Sri Lankan literature has significantly focussed on the development of local literary works emphasising on historical events, Kings and their kingdoms. Ancient literary sources such as Visuddhimagga (compiled by monk Biddhagosa in the 4th century A.D), Sannasa (ancient literary works in the form of royal grants), Inscriptions (Stone engravings in Sri Lanka such as the Galpotha Inscription, Rajagala Inscriptions), Dipavamsa (ancient literature work in 320 A.D concerning socio-cultural aspects of the ancient community, their ruling patterns, trade practices etc.), Mahavamsa (the longest historical record that incorporated the stories of Kings’s invasions, successions, conquests etc.) influenced the writings of Sinhala literature.

In Sri Lanka, the Sinhalese enjoys the majority while the Tamil speaking serves the minority. As the globalization of commerce and culture took place, the ethnic communities of the country gave emphasis on using English language along with Sinhala and Tamil.

Among the prominent Sri Lankan Tamil authors are Eelattu Poothanthevanar, Neelaavanan, Pottuvil Asmin.

Sinhala writing is rich in historical content and many Sri Lankan writers have written in Sinhala language to promote the country's rich cultural and traditional heritage. Notable among them are Gunadasa Amarasekara, Chandraratna Bandara, K. Jayathillake (writer of *Charitha Thunak*) Munidasa Kumaratunga, Nahagama Sekara, W.A. Silva (writer of *Kalae Handa*) and Martin Wickramasinghe (Writer of *Viragaya* and *Gamperaliya*). So far as Sinhala poetry is concerned Gurulugomi, Gunadasa Amarasekara, Eric Illayapparachchi are well known writers. In the realm of Sinhala poetry, an important name is Mahagama Sekara known for her poems like “Bodima”, “Nomiyemi” and so on.

Sri Lankan Diaspora writings have immensely contributed to the genre of English writing. Important writers include Michael Ondaatje, Shyam Selvadurai, Romesh Gunesequera, S.J.Sindu and Jayadeva Uyangoda. Michael Ondaatje's famous literary works are *The English Patient*, *The Cat's Table*, *Anil's Ghost*, *In the Skin of a Lion*. A few more important Sri Lankan English writers include Punyakante Wijenaikē, Jean Arasanayagam and Tissa Abeysekera.

Self Assessment Questions:

1. Name a few Sri Lankan Sinhala writers. What language did they use for writing?(40 words)

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2. What were the major ancient literary sources in Sri Lankan Literature?(50 words)

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3. What do you mean by Sri Lankan Diaspora writing? Mention the name of a few major writers. (60 words)

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1.5 The Context of Sonali Deraniyagala's Memoir:

It was on 26th December, 2004, the world witnessed a major earthquake known as the Sumatra-Andaman earthquake with a magnitude of 9.1-9.3 Mw, epicentre at the west coast of northern Sumatra, Indonesia along the Indian Ocean coastline areas. This was one of the deadliest and most violent natural disasters in history. The massive Tsunami that followed caused destructions in fourteen countries and killed an estimated 227,898 people and 516,150 were found missing. Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Tamil Nadu, Thailand are worst affected areas. In the history of earthquakes, one can take into account the Great Alaskan earthquake (1964), the Great Chilean earthquake (1960) and 2002 Sumatra earthquake, 1700 Cascadia earthquake in North America. In Sri Lanka, the island was hit by a Tsunami two hours after the earthquake. It is recorded that approximately 35000 people were killed by the massive tsunami accompanied by destruction of buildings and houses. If you listen to the song "12/26" by Kimya Dawson, you can learn about the victim's perspective on the crisis.

Stephen Robert Kuta, a British poet and historian published a collection of poetry *Paint the Sky with Stars* on the tragic tsunami Boxing Day of 2004 where he collected poetry written by people who had been affected by the tsunami.

The island was hit by a small brown coloured flood that carried debris and destructed parts. The waves were 41 ft high in Yala, 16 ft at North Beach of Beruwala, 20 ft at Galle port. The earthquake and the tsunami adversely affected the ecosystems of the countries causing damage to biodiversity. Besides, the massive tsunami left a great impact on the economic front of the affected countries. The coastal fishing communities, tourism sectors had been worst affected. This massive environmental crisis received the humanitarian attention of the world communities.

Sonali Deraniyagala was at her vacation on Christmas holidays with her family in Sri Lanka by the Indian Ocean at Yala in December 2004 when the disaster took place. as she was an academician, she used to

travel between London and Colombo frequently. The family resided at a resort at the Yala National Park, which was a beautiful place for tourists. That was a place that her children loved very much that was remote, beautiful and exotic. The ocean was not very close to their hotel which was blue and calm and beautiful. During one of her talks at the Clinton School of Public Service University of Arkansas on 4th November, 2013 she recalled her experience during the tsunami in 2004 and expressed that the book *Wave* was not meant for a book. It was for herself because her friends and relatives wanted her to be busy with something important to forget her painful memory. That was her first entry into the literary world. She started writing about the waves three years after the disastrous experience. She calls it ‘impossibly unreal experience’ that she wanted to express in words.

Swarnapali Liyanage, a Sri Lankan poet recently after the tsunami composed a poem called “Ode to Tsunami” where she compared the tsunami as monstrous, and most cruel. Hence the terrible experience was shared by many other Sri Lankan Writers in the post tsunami time. They all expressed the horrors of the devastation and loss.

Roaring anger through great seven seas
Erupted as spiteful giant water columns
Swept off fragile nations to oceans
You! The most cruel catastrophe of all
Turned suburbs along seaboards to graves (Liyanage lines 1-5).

1.6 Memoir Writing in Literature:

Memoir writing is categorized as a non-fiction and is considered as a sub genre of autobiographical and biographical writing. The word Memoir is originally derived from the word ‘memoire’ that means ‘reminiscences’ and ‘memory’. Two of the notable ancient memoir writings are *The Gallic Wars* by Julius Caesar and *The Confessions of St. Augustine* by St. Augustine. Memoir incorporates segments of one’s life experiences and the memoirist puts forward his or her own

observations and perspectives on life. The memoir is written using memory and hence the narrator is often considered as the unreliable narrator. Memoir uses first person narrative where the narrator himself or herself tells and narrates the events and stories from his or her own perspectives, voice and point of view. In most of the cases, the protagonist is the first person narrator but there might be multiple voices in between. There are various forms of first person narration. They can be perceived in interior monologue, autobiographical account, memoir, diary, and stream of consciousness writings. One prominent example of first person protagonist narrator in Western Literature is Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* (1847). Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* was also written from the perspective of the 'I' figure Ishmael.

To understand more about the first person narration, you should also try to understand the nature of narration that is there in the narrative-whether the narrator is a reliable, unreliable, unreliable omniscient narrator or frame narrator. In case of the first person omniscient narration, the narrator who is also the character of the narrative knows about the thought process of other characters in the narrative. In frame narratives, there are narratives within narratives. One significant example of such frame narrative is Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*.

Stop to Consider:

In contrast to fictional first person narration, a memoir is based on factual events and happenings. It is autobiographical and the memoirist uses the liberty to choose his own story telling technique. The element of drama, dialogue, plot, setting is present in a memoir and the success of the memoir depends a lot on the way it is written, *i.e.* the style of the memoir.

Earnest Hemingway was another important memoir writer in American Literature whose *A Moveable Feast* (1964) recounts his experience as an expatriate in France. A few more examples of memoir in the history of literature are mentioned below:

1. American Author Tobias Wolff's *This Boy's Life: A Memoir* (1989).
2. American Author E. Lynn Harris's *What Becomes of the Broken hearted* (2003).
3. Haitian author Edwidge Danticat's *Brother, I'm Dying* (2007).
4. Charles De Gaulle's *Memoires de guerre* (1954-59; War Memoirs, 1955-60).

Let us learn about a few important characteristic features of Memoir writing.

- A memoir is a factual account.
- A memoir can be written for propagating propaganda.
- Memoir is about anecdotes of one's life. Such anecdotes are illustrated for forming some kind of arguments.
- There are different types of memoir writing based on the context: memoirs related to childhood, event, travel, family experiences.

The autobiographical memoir is about one's own life and one recent example of such memoir is Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* published in 2009. Susanna Kaysen's memoir book *Girl: Interrupted: A Memoir* published in 1994 is another example of memoir based on author's own experience. When we talk about memoir based on events the memorable work by Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1845) must be mentioned where the writer shares his experiences about his visit to the wood from where he did not come out for long two years. Sonali Deraniyagala's memoir *Wave* can be categorized as a memoir based on event and family experiences. Another example of such memoir would be Jon Krakauer's *Into Thin Air: A Personal Account of the Mount Everest Disaster* (1999) which was written about the tragedy during a storm on the summit of Mt. Everest. Edwidge Danticat's autobiographical memoir *Brother, I'm Dying* published by Vintage is another recent book on family experiences. Thus you can see that there are various kinds of memoir writings in the history of literature and they vary according to their themes and style of writings.

Self Assessment Questions:

1. Discuss the context of Sonali Deraniyagala’s memoir *Wave*. (100 words)

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2. Define Memoir as a literary genre. Mention the characteristic features of a memoir. (100 words)

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3. Give examples of different types of first person narration in literature. What are its different forms? (100 words)

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1.7 Memoir Writing in Sri Lankan Literature:

The confessional and first person narrative mode was used by many Sri Lankan writers to reflect on the history and politics of the country. The traumatic experience of the people during Sri Lanka’s conflict ridden period, the mass killing, devastation following the cross fire between military and the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam), the massive loss and displacement after Tsunami have found expression in various war narratives and memoirs. Sri Lankan war narratives and stories and testimonials are first person narrative accounts. The autobiographical account in Sunila Galappatti’s *A Long Watch: War, Captivity and Return in Sri Lanka*, Nayomi Munaweera’s *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* are about traumatic war experiences in Sri Lanka. The difference between the autobiography and a memoir is that an autobiography will make you better understanding the significance of a memoir.

Stop to Consider:

It is important to mention here that memoir writing is often considered as the sub genre of biographical and autobiographical writing. A Memoir is basically an account based on ‘reminiscences’ and ‘memory’. When magic realism enters a memoir, it becomes a fictionalized version of memoir. Yet there are differences among memoir, biography and autobiography. A biography deals with the entire life of a person while an autobiography is an account of one’s own life and experiences. An autobiography can take the form of diaries, memoirs or journals also. An autobiography can be religious, intellectual, or even fictionalized. On the other hand, a memoir incorporates a segment of one’s life, about a particular situation or incident that brings a turning point to one’s life. Here are a few notable biographies in literature

- Thomas Malory’s *Morte d’Arthur* in the Middle Age
- The first modern biography James Boswell’s *The Life of Samuel Johnson* (1791)
- Lytton Strachey’s *Eminent Victorians*

A few notable autobiographies:

- Anne Frank’s *The Diary of a Young Girl*
- Benjamin Franklin’s *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*.
- Nelson Mandela’s *Long walk to Freedom*
- M. K. Gandhi’s *The Story of My Experiment with Truth*

➤ **Michael Ondaatje’s *Running in the Family*:**

This work of Ondaatje was written in the form of a memoir. The work was a wonderful combination of magic realism and fictionalized memoir. The memoir was about the writer’s return to Ceylon (Sri Lanka) in the 1970s. History and fiction have found their expression in the book. Themes such as search for identity, family, sense of community are incorporated in the memoir. Like most memoirs here we also come across an unreliable narrator because the narrator speaks from his memory.

➤ **Shirani A. Bandaranayake’s *Hold Me in Contempt: A Memoir:***

Shirani A. Bandaranayake was the first and only woman Chief Justice in Sri Lanka and her work state the significance of femininity and power. The memoir recounts her six years of experience as the first Woman Chief Justice of Sri Lanka.

In the post war period many writers have taken initiative to encourage memoir writings. One such attempt was made by Shyam Selvadurai in Sri Lanka.

➤ **“Write to Reconcile” project and Sri Lankan writings:**

In 2012, Shyam Selvadurai inaugurated a project called Write to Reconcile in association with the National Peace Council of Sri Lanka. The forum was set up to bring together writers from Sri Lanka who are interested in writing fiction, memoir, poetry on themes like trauma, memory, reconciliation, peace in the post war period in Sri Lanka.

Stop to Consider :

Representation in Popular Culture: Movies and Documentary on Tsunami

- A documentary *Children of Tsunami: No More Tears* (2005)
- A television miniseries *Tsunami: The Aftermath* (2006)
- An Indonesian movie *Hafalan Shalat Delisa* (2011)
- A Spanish film *The Impossible* (2012)

1.8 Summing Up:

In this introduction to the background of Sonali Deraniyagala’s memoir, you were made briefly familiar with the history and development of memoir writing as a genre. As you read the memoir you have to apply and interpret the contextual elements in the text. In the next two units you will be able to understand the text from its various critical perspectives and themes. You can explore a few more memoir write ups to have a thorough understanding of the genre of memoir writing.

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UNIT - 2

Sonali Deraniyagala: *Wave: A Memoir of Life after the Tsunami* (Reading the Text)

Unit Structure:

- 2.1 Objectives
- 2.2 Introduction
- 2.3 Significance of Sonali Deraniyagala's *Wave* as a Memoir
- 2.4 Reading Sonali Deraniyagala's *Wave: A Memoir of Life after the Tsunami*
- 2.5 Theme and content of the Memoir
- 2.6 Language and Style
- 2.7 Summing Up
- 2.8 References and Suggested Readings

2.1 Objectives:

In the present unit you will be able to understand the nature of the memoir, the themes and the writer's experiences. The previous unit on the background of the text will help you contextualize the tragic experiences of the writer. It is very important to be familiar with the context of a text to comprehend the themes of the text. Hence, it is expected that by the end of this unit you will be able to

- *read* the memoir from the perspectives of the writer,
- *summarize* the events of the memoir writer,
- *understand* the themes and style of narrative.

2.2 Introduction:

In the previous unit you have already been made familiar with the setting of the memoir. Here in this section you will learn about the tragic incidents that took place in Sonali Deraniyagala's life after the massive tsunami swept away her whole family.

Michael Ondaatje writes,

The most powerful and haunting book I have read in years. Sonali Deraniyagala has brought back to life in this stunning memoir all those she lost, so much so that we will never forget them or their lives (Daraniyagala).

On 26 December, 2004, Yala, Sri Lanka Sonali Deraniyagala was on her trip with her near and dear ones. She was at a national park, Yala, on the south-eastern coast of Sri Lanka by the side of the sea shore.

Before going to the narrative, you should learn about the geographical location and condition of the place Yala. Sonali Deraniyagala was at the Yala National Park during the earthquake and tsunami.

The place Yala National Park is known as the second largest national Park in Sri Lanka nearby the Indian Ocean. It was designated as a wildlife sanctuary in 1900 and the place is rich in Sri Lankan elephants, leopards and aquatic birds. During the tsunami many people lost their lives and caused severe damage to the park. The tsunami waves were 20 feet high at that area and affected the grassland, forest and wetlands of the park.

Sonali Deraniyagala begins her memoir with the incident that took place at Yala, Sri Lanka on the morning of 26th December, 2004. The tsunami struck the resort by the beach where the family of Deraniyagala were present. They were on a holiday trip. Sonali Deraniyagala was with her husband, Steve, their parents and children Vikram and Malli.

2.3 Significance of Sonali Deraniyagala's *Wave* as a Memoir:

Let us briefly discuss the significance of the memoir, *Wave*:

1. A Literary Document on the massive Natural Disaster in Sri Lanka.
2. A writer's autobiographical account on post-disaster recovery and struggle for life where the first person narrator is both the speaker and protagonist of the incidents.
3. A story of survival and recovery.
4. The unreliable narrator's confession and response to a time of crisis.
5. Important as an environmental narrative.

6. The memoir is significant for its quest motif, psychological dilemma and introspective approach to life.
7. Story of survival in disbelief. Terrified by the memory. Problem of memory. Defence on her part to forget the past.

As you read the memoir, you will find that the writer frequently ponders over life questions and survival. Her sense of awe, anxiety, stress and helplessness has been clearly revealed through the gripping narrative and we as readers are being captivated by the documented sense of life moments in the writer's life.

Stop to Consider :

The narrative is said to be written in a stream of consciousness style. In an interview with Miwa Messer, the Director of the Barnes & Noble Discover Great New Writers program, Sonali Deraniyagala stated that by writing, she was able to tolerate remembering. She began writing accidentally when her therapist, Mark Epstein suggested and persuaded her to write. Gradually writing became her survival. Thus the memoir gives you the scope to understand the nature of tragedy that happened to the writer and the way she overcame the crisis.

SAQ:

1. Briefly discuss the themes and narrative style of the memoir *Wave*. (200 words)

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2. Discuss the significance of the memoir as a subjective account of Sonali Deraniyagala. How does the writer attempt to overcome her personal trauma? Discuss in the context of the memoir. (250 words)

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2.4 Reading Sonali Deraniyagala: *Wave: A Memoir of Life after the Tsunami*:

This is how Deraniyagala begins her narrative: “I thought nothing of it at first. The ocean looked a little closer to our hotel than usual. That was all” (3).

The writer was unaware of the impending danger and it was only her friend Orlantha who first saw the rising waves and alerted them about the unusual movements of the sea foams. She shouted in awe: “Oh My God, the sea is coming in” (4). Orlantha taught violin lessons to Malli, the narrator’s son. She once told the writer: “What you guys have is a dream” (4). She was staying at the same hotel and she was happy to meet Sonali Deraniyagala’s family and her children.

In the narrative you will see later on that what Orlantha predicted as a dream turned out to be a nightmare because Daraniyagala had to lose her entire family after the devastating tsunami and all her dreams were shattered.

The family never expected such a horrific turn in their lives. That day was quite unusual for them. The sea gradually turned wild and the foam turned to waves.

This was a really terrible situation for the family. At first she thought that the waves will recede but her prediction was not proper. After seeing the extra large waves and the foams coming towards them, she decided that she has to come out of that. Sonali Deraniyala was never familiar with the word ‘Tsunami’ or ‘Tidal wave’ by that time and so the words sounded strange for her. She just thought about her children Vik and Malli and dragged them out of the hotel room quickly without saying anything to them. She could spare no time to stop for her parents in the hotel room. They rushed to a nearby jeep that they came across on their way out from the hotel room. She did not know anything about the owner of the open jeep. When she came out of the hotel she saw that the waves had receded. Her friend Orlantha could not be seen anywhere there. Her father Anton came through the incident. Orlantha’s mother, Beulah, however fell down from the jeep and Anton jumped out to save her. At this hour, the writer began to panic

thinking about her parents. She thought that she should have knocked at their room before rushing out of the hotel. Vikram, her son started crying and Steve, his brother assured him that they would be ok and would join them. However, soon the jeep was under water and they all remained scattered. The jeep turned over them and they remained as the helpless witness to the terrible incident. It was a painful moment for them and they experienced something horrific and breathtaking moments.

She murmured: “If this is not a dream, I must be dying. It can be nothing else, this terrible pain” (9). She was still consciously thinking that it must be a dream when they were only falling and falling. So she was quite convinced that things would be ok soon. As she went through the situation she regained her spirit and consoled herself that she must remain alive for her children. She was in extreme pain and her chest was hit by the metal in the jeep. Here the writer mentions that life must go on and she must survive amidst all odds. She says: “Vik and Malli. I can’t die. For them, I have to stay alive...I don’t want it to be over, we have much more to do, so much. Yet I had to surrender to this unknown chaos. I could sense that” (9).

The writer predicted that it must be some apocalyptic time that was on their way. People around them shouted, “*Muhuda goda gahala. Mahasona*” (12) which means that the ocean had flooded. Here Mahasona is known as the demon of grave-yards.

The writer was tossed around and began to wonder whether it was the apocalyptic moment, end of time. She somehow saved her life by grabbing a tree branch. She vomited blood and was extremely tired. She was rescued by some people. That was what happened to her during the massive tsunami. She thought: “What is this knocked-down world? The end of time?” (11).

She knew that she had to prepare for any kind of situation. Her parents were missing. Her children were not seen around her. She was under complete confusion and stress and she was not willing to be disappointed. She still believed that there is hope and she decided to look for her family. She constantly thought about her family and wished that they must be alive. She thought: “I won’t find them, I must prepare for this. But if they were

there, they would be worried about me. I wished the jeep would speed up...I'd never heard shrieking like this before. So wild, wretched, it frightened me, rattled the wall i was holding on to" (17-25).

When Mette , her companion called her to go to the mortuary, she was spellbound and could not prepare herself for it. She wrote: "I could not even think the thought, what if Vik and Mal are there? Even though it hovered in my head" (25). Finally she decided to go to Colombo in search of her family. Mette took the responsibility to take her to Colombo.

One of the important aspects of the memoir is the importance of forgetting and notion of survival. Detachment is essential for survival but the writer the more she wanted to detach, the more she got trapped into memory. She could not stop thinking about the traumatic incident and her loss. She was in a confused state of mind and could not decide anything for herself.

She has written her experience in the following way: "I must stop remembering. I must keep them in a faraway place. The more I remember, the greater my agony. These thoughts stuttered my mind" (44).

The devastation and loss experienced by the people was beyond description. The writer could not tolerate the unstable situation in her life and went through severe depression and anxiety. She became grossly addicted and was in a painful situation. She wished to overcome her pain by drinking alcohol and other such narcotics. She expressed:

"Each night I hoped to die from my frenzied drinking. And it diluted my terror of getting to sleep...Each night I dreamed of fleeing, of running from something, some nights it was water, some nights it was churning mud, other nights I didn't know what. In these dreams always one of them died. Then I 'd wake up to face my real nightmare" (46-47).

She even developed suicidal tendencies and looked for ways to kill her own self. Her friends took her to short trips away from Colombo to help her overcome the trauma.

Stop to Consider:

It is important to mention here that memory plays a very important role in memoir writing. Even though the writer selects his incidents and plots, it is his memory that combines the entire narrative into a chronological set of events. The narrative works back and forth and grabs the attention of the readers by focussing more on the details and characters of the memoir. A memoir is a non-fiction. So there is little scope for fiction or imagination. Michael Ondaatje wrote,

The most powerful and haunting book I have read in years. Sonali Deraniyagala has brought back to life in this stunning memoir all those she lost, so much so that we will never forget them or their lives.

On 26 December, 2004, Yala, Sri Lanka Sonali Daraniyagala was on her trip with her near and dear ones. She was at a national park, Yala, on the south-eastern coast of Sri Lanka by the side of the sea shore.

Before going to the narrative, you should learn about the geographical location and condition of the place Yala. Sonali Deraniyagala was at the Yala National Park during the earthquake and tsunami.

The place Yala National Park is known as the second largest national Park in Sri Lanka nearby the Indian Ocean. It was designated as a wildlife sanctuary in 1900 and the place is rich in Sri Lankan elephants, leopards and aquatic birds. During the tsunami many people lost their lives and caused severe damage to the park. The tsunami waves were 20 feet high at that area and affected the grassland, forest and wetlands of the park.

Sonali Deraniyagala begins her memoir with the incident that took place at Yala, Sri Lanka on the morning of 26th December, 2004. The tsunami struck the resort by the beach where the family of Deraniyagala were present. They were on a holiday trip. Sonali Deraniyagala was with her husband, Steve, their parents and children Vikram and Malli. Here lies the liberty of the narrator to move back and forth to introduce her thoughts and observations on the events and happenings.

In Sri Lanka, July- December, 2005:

The narrator informs us about her childhood home in Sri Lanka in Colombo. During Christmas and summer, they used to visit their home in Colombo and their children were excited. However, when she went her home after the traumatic experience, she found that her home did not have the brass plate with her father's name on it. As she visited her place memories of her past days came to her mind and she recalled those beautiful days of her past with her children and parents. That was the place where her boys Vik and Malli packed their Christmas presents. Things, however, changed after the wave. What she saw was emptiness in the house and experienced silence. This was something unexpected for her because she never wanted that barrenness. The place reminded her of her association with her parents and boys. She could remember the way they lived happily together before the waves hit the land:

“I stared at the empty space on the wall where the nameplate used to be. They must be still in that room, surely. It's impossible they are not...The house I entered was transformed, empty and vast, bereft. Just a few pieces of furniture remained, repositioned, displaced” (55-56).

The hotel Yala Safari Beach Hotel, where the family was present during the tsunami was also at a devastated condition. After the wave she visited the place for the first time with Steve's father and his sister. She became very emotional when she saw a piece of Vikram's clothes, Malli's outfits: “Dust, rubble, shards of glass. This was the hotel. It had been flattened” (61).

There she witnessed the sea eagles and her boy Vik enjoyed the company of the eagles very much. But Vik was not there. The writer expressed her emotions at the sight of the eagles: “I could not make this real. This wasteland. What has this got to do with me? I thought. This was where I was last with my family?” (61).

She recalled that the waves were more than thirty feet high and moved through the land at twenty-five miles an hour. What she saw was beyond her comprehension and she stood helpless. The hotel was not in earlier

shape. She walked down to the sea alone one day. It was in June. She stared at the waves and they were quite close. She was frustrated and shouted in anger: “I stood there taunting the sea, our killer. Come on then. Why don’t you rise now? Higher. swallow me up” (63).

Two years after the massive disaster, Deraniyagala returned to London and her home. It was a painful and traumatic experience for her as she started recounting the memories of her family. She did not know how to adjust her life after the devastation and without her family. She wished to distance herself from her native place in order to overcome the loneliness and anxiety. However, she failed to do so and made her life more miserable. Memories continued to haunt her wherever she went. Initially, she was reluctant to go to Yala again but as time passed and when she made her visit after she lost her family, she understood that she must learn to cope with the situation. In 2005 when she paid her visit to the hotel she saw the ravaged landscape of the site. she found her husband, Steve’s Research Reports that was published in 2003. She could not resist her emotion and sobbed. However, after this she was no longer afraid to visit Yala. She wrote:

“I kept going back to Yala, obsessively, over the next months. I searched, dug about, scratched my arms on rusted metal. I pounced on fragments of plastic, did this come from one of our toys? Is this Malli’s sock?” (64).

Here you find that the writer has tried to adjust herself by ignoring her fear and frustration. She was in a trance like situation and entered the jungle because she wanted to see the changes that happened to her place. She wrote: “My surroundings were all deformed as I was. I belonged here” (64).

She feels that her surroundings and she herself have faced the same traumatic situations. Her sense of belonging with her surrounding and her love for the land is depicted here. However, as she went inside the jungle she witnessed that the jungle has started reviving. The fresh green shoots, the new vines climbing around tilting pillars, the tiny pink and white flowers carried the message of renewal. The family used to love such wilderness and spent

quality time with nature. But things changed after the tsunami. The writer started to resent such renewal. She wrote: “I resented this renewal. How dare you heal” (65).

Yet this was a healing experience for her. She felt much better and calm after her visit to the ravaged landscape at her place. Here the writer brings an analogy between her mental situation and condition of her surrounding nature. Nature was healing her landscape and so did she. She kept on searching for her family members, the things that they used. She was learning to live through memories.

Even though she was healing, she was desperate and restless. Her sense of frustration increased when they rent out their house to a Dutch family. She in fact began to harass the Dutch family. She was angry when she heard the news that the house would be rented. She smashed her head on the wooden frame of the bed after hearing the news. Like this incident, she did many frenzy stuff out of frustration and despair at home. When she visited New York, she attempted to stay away from the painful memory and she was healing.

SAQ:

Q.1. What life lesson do you get from the terrible incident that took place in the writer’s life? (about 450 words)

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Q.2. Where was the family of the writer when they were hit by the Tsunami? Narrate briefly about the experience of the writer inside the hotel. (about 450 words)

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Q.3. Discuss how the narrator attempted to tame her pain? Why did she say that she must stop remembering? (about 450 words)

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Q.4. Discuss how the narrator experienced the nightmare after the wave in Sri Lanka. Was she under depression? (about 450 words)

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Q.5. As I stood in the dark of that room, fragments of our last days here kept flaring up, unbidden. (pp.58)

What did the writer think and recall when she stood before the dark room at her childhood home place? (about 450 words)

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Q.6. Narrate the experience of the writer when she visited her home after one year following the wave. (about 450 words)

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Q.7. Remembering and forgetting are important aspects of the writer's life after the devastation in 2004. How does it affect the life span of the writer? Give instances. (about 450 words)

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Q.8. "If I distance myself from them, and their absence, I am fractured." Discuss the significance of the statement made by the writer in the context of the memoir. (about 450 words)

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Her London Days after the Tsunami in 2006- 2009:

She was in a room at the Royal Society where they used to attend lecture “Stephen Lissenburgh Memorial Lecture”. Things changed and her husband Steve was not there. The lecture hall, the ICA bar at the Royal society revived her memory with her husband in London. She was afraid to remember that she was back home. She wrote: “This is the first time I’ve come back to England, and it is now almost two years since the wave. But the reality of being here eludes me, I can’t focus. I am dazed. And I want to stay this way” (77).

She was constantly in between dream and reality. She imagined that her husband was with her in the car, at the Bar and along the English countryside. She felt the presence of her children Vik and Malli around her. She was healing herself by remembering and forgetting her traumatic past. “I wanted all traces of it erased” – this is how she felt when she came across the things such as the piece of pyrite Vic played at his playroom. Initially she thought like that but later she understood that those things were preserved for her. She said to herself that the house was real. The things that she found there served as images for her memory. Steve’s T-shirts, the boy’s shoes, Clifford the Big Red Dog, the yellowed Guardian newspapers, print out of tickets at the Peacock Theatre, pile of un- opened Christmas presents, Vik’s favourite eagles, the whales- all those images brought lively memories for her. Their absence continued to haunt her memories. However, when she was in the house her memories made her feel as if things had been the same, lively as ever and that her sons were alive too. She was in illusion.

The writer was in New York too after the Tsunami. She was in utmost pain and distress. She could not face the new city; she could not tolerate the happy scatter of the children that came out of school. She was again overpowered by intense grief and despair. She in fact did not wish to forget her painful past, the memories of her children and family. Out of desolation, she cried: “How I have fallen. When I had them, they were my pride, and now that I’ve lost them, I am full of shame” (101).

She began to blame herself for all the misfortune that fell down on her family. Here you can read her account on Steve's family when she was in Colombo in 2010. She felt the same guilt and blamed herself for the untimely demise of her husband, Steve. Steve's work diary for 2004 was with her and she did not have the guts to open it. Steve wrote about their life and experience in Colombo in the diary. She was convinced that her husband's family must blame her for the death of Steve. But nothing of this sort happened and instead her in-laws supported her. She read the diary and she could remember the last few weeks of their stay on the island.

Stop to Consider:

Problem of Confessing:

Sonali Deraniyagala thought and talked a lot about her family but she never wanted to reveal her tragic past before everyone. She also said that she did not confess before all because she was still in disbelief what had happened in her life. She felt shrunken when somebody asked her about her family. She wished to escape those people and their questions about her family.. This was her problem of confessing. She wrote, "I think I also don't confess because I am still so unbelieving of what happened" (106).

As you read the memoir you will find that the writer is constantly struggling between fear and reconciliation. She wanted to forget in order to remember again because she could not escape her memories.

She writes: "These five years I've been so fearful of details. The more I remember, the more inconsolable I will be, and I've told myself. But now increasingly I don't tussle with my memories. I want to remember. I want to know" (128).

Such yearning for the past and willingness to revisit the past gave her strength to survive amidst pessimism. She did not wish to distance her family by simply forgetting. She wanted to be alive through constant remembering. This reflects on the fact that she grew stronger as time passed and she learnt how to survive amidst chaos.

Again, she says: “May be yearning for them more freely gives me some relief. When I tried to tame my ache for them, especially here in this house, it didn’t ease my pain” (131).

She began to fantasize about her children. She imagined that after five years her children must have grown up. She looked at her child, Vik’s friends and they have grown up too. As she writes: “I am immersed in another reality. Our life as it would be today. When I’ve trespassed here through the years, I’ve kept my projections imprecise” (207).

She wanted to avoid those places but could not. When her boy’s birthdays approached, she became more emotional and sad because there was none for celebration. She kept on revisiting the old homes to relive her past, to imagine more about her children and family.

One more important aspect of her journey through the places after tsunami was that nature was her constant companion. Nature enlivened her spirit and encouraged her to feel fresh and bright amidst sadness and agony. For instance, when she was in Miami in 2011, the peaceful place and its calmness soothed her aching heart. Moreover, she wanted to be alone on the days of the anniversary of the wave and her boy’s birthdays. She could not decide whether it was a myth or reality because she could not convince herself that her family was no more with her.

Stop to Consider:

Remembrance for Survival:

Deraniyagala’s experience in New York in 2012 again revealed that she was constantly tussling between past and present. She travelled through memories trying to adjust her journey. Even after seven years, she could hear the footsteps of her children in the apartment and their chattering. She wrote, “Their chatter plays with my thoughts no end. And I am sustained by this, it gives me spark” (205).

She understood that it would be impossible for her to distance her family from her memory and that she could recover herself only by keeping them near. She wrote, “If I distance myself from them, and their absence, I am fractured” (208).

The narrative ends with the narrator's telling of her experience of hearing her children seven years after the tsunami laughing at their garden in London. She writes: "For I am without them, as much as I am on my own. And when I hold back this truth. I am cut loose, adrift, hazy about my identity. Who am I now?" (208).

Sonali Deraniyagala said that she wrote because she wished to remember her family the way she liked and to bring back her family to thoughts. Though it was a moment of agony to remember the past, she chose to write to excavate her memory and details about her life. She thought that it would be better and easier for her to express through remembering and writing than remaining in agony and pain. She started to organize her pieces of memory about her lost family and felt the need to write about them.

Check Your Progress:

Q.1. "I wanted all traces of it erased. Then later I needed the assurance that it was there for me, preserved as we left it." Discuss the context of the statement made by the writer. What things are being meant here for preservation?

Q.2. "My memory of the house is immaculate. But I feel expelled from there. I lost my dignity when I lost them, I keep thinking." Why did the writer feel expelled and lonely? Discuss her pathetic experience at her home in Colombo years after the tsunami.

Q.3. "Expressions, gestures, mannerisms, pronouncements all overwhelm me, coming at me fast, each a reflection of Vik and Mal." Discuss the statement in the light of the memoir. Can we say that the memoir is a mixture of memory and imagination? If yes, justify.

2.5 Theme and Content of the Memoir:

Sonali Deraniyagala's narrative, as it has been praised by the noted novelist Michael Ondaatje, is a brave and frank memoir. It is a narrative on human struggle for survival. The tragedy taught the writer to boldly disclose the horrific moments of her life. It would not have been possible for her to survive had she not been able to take her memory back to her joyful days

with her family and friends. From the moment of trauma to her recovery was a breathless experience for the writer. She reluctantly embraced life after years of isolation and alienation from her own life. It took time to rediscover herself. Thus you can sum up the narrative in the light of themes such as- Story of struggle and survival, memoir as a therapeutic account, Role of memory and importance of remembering. You can also explore the theme of love and family bonding in the memoir because it was the love for her family that Sonali Deraniyagala could remember her pleasant past. The narrative can be examined from a post-apocalyptic perspective or as a disaster narrative. This is in fact a factual document written in the form of a prose elegy and autobiographical account.

2.6 Language and Style:

Story telling is an important element of personal narration. In memoir writing also story telling plays an important role. Memoirs are written from the first person's perspective or point of view. The events narrated by the author are selected by the author himself for the sake of the theme of narrative and it is based on factual account. The nature of the narrative is chronological. However, as it has been mentioned in the previous unit a memoir differs from an autobiography because its focus is narrower than the autobiography. The writer can choose a persuasive style, descriptive or expository style to narrate the stories of his/her life. In a memoir, the writer may use symbols, metaphors, flashbacks, imagery, dialogue etc to develop the narrative. The style of the narrative depends a lot on the purpose of the narrative.

2.7 Summing Up:

The unit concerning the background of Sri Lankan writing and Sonali Deraniyagala's time of crisis will enable you to contextualize the prescribed memoir. You have been introduced to the thoughts and observations of the memoir writer in this unit and such an introduction to the text will give you the scope to explore more on the content of the memoir. It would be best if you compare this memoir with other memoirs composed by other writers in terms of thematic content and writing strategies.

2.8 References and Suggested Reading:

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UNIT - 3

Sonali Deraniyagala: *Wave: A Memoir of Life after the Tsunami* (Critical Analysis)

Unit Structure:

- 3.1 Objectives
- 3.2 Introduction
- 3.3 Critical Reception of the Text
- 3.4 Critical Study of the Text
- 3.5 Nature of Deraniyagala's Memoir
 - 3.5.1 A Therapeutic Account
 - 3.5.2 Role of Memory in Memoir writing
 - 3.5.3 Memoir differs from Diary
 - 3.5.4 Characterization in the Memoir
- 3.6 Summing Up
- 3.7 References and Suggested Readings

3.1 Objectives:

The present unit will introduce you to some of the critical observations made by a few critics. By the end of the unit you should be in a position to–

- *understand* the objectives of the memoir,
- *explain* the content critically,
- *comment* on the thematic and literary merits of the memoir.

3.2 Introduction:

Sonali Deraniyagala, as it has been stated in the previous unit, was a survivor. She was a daughter, a mother and a wife who boldly faced the hurdles of life after the accidental demise of her family members during the Indian Ocean Tsunami in 2004. It is interesting to note that Sonali Deraniyagala has never been a writer. Her memoir tells us about her inner experiences,

feelings and observations on life after the shock she received during the tsunami. The memoir is the evidence of her survival story that has inspired many to live through traumatic situations.

3.3 Critical Reception of the Text:

In a review on the memoir *Wave* by Sonali Deraniyagala published in *The Guardian* on 3rd April, 2013, William Dalrymple writes that the book is one of the most moving books about grief and a fine book about love. When the massive tsunami hit across the shores of the Indian Ocean, William Dalrymple was with his family in the sea area in Bombay. However he and his family narrowly escaped the natural disaster as they changed their plan at the last minute and moved to the west for spending holidays. After reading Sonali Deraniyagala's *Wave*, the writer sensed the horror of the situation she endured during the crisis. He commented that the book was possibly the most moving he had ever read about grief, while also noting it as a very fine exploration of love. The writer reflected on grief as the black hole left in our lives when we lose someone irreplaceable—a child, a parent, a lover.

It was a tragic incident in Deraniyagala's life which took an unexpected turn in her life. A matter is called a tragedy when there is a bad news, an accident, reversal of fate, loss of life, fall of fortune and so on. A tragedy often entails nostalgia, agony, sadness and dilemma. The grief experienced by the memoirist, Sonali Deraniyagala was a result of her personal loss, the bad news that she received about the death of her family members.

Cheryl Strayed, in her review of the book *Wave*, remarked that it was the most exceptional book about grief. She noted that Deraniyagala takes readers deep into her unfathomable loss through prose that is immaculately unsentimental and raggedly intimate.

Strayed has designated her as a brave writer for fearlessly delivering her deepest traumas through writing. According to her, the miracle of the book lies in its writer's potential to allow the readers to experience the traumatic experience without 'smothering' them in sorrow. The book is praised for its truthful account and stroke of hope across the narrative.

Joanna Connors in the account on Sonali Deraniyagala's *Wave* published on 7th April, 2013 in Advance Local Media opines that in the book Deraniyagala has taken us through her grief like a guide to a tour. According to her, the remarkable part of the memoir is that she refuses to sentimentalize her experience and she boldly makes her confessions about thoughts and actions.

Harpreet Kaur in the article "Psychological Reverberations of a disaster: A Study of *Wave* by Sonali Deraniyagala" has focussed on the psychological reverberation on Sonali Deaniyagala's life in the light of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder syndrome. Sonali Deraniyagala was a survivor of the massive oceanic disaster in 2004. When she consulted a psychiatrist she was advised to express herself to overcome the traumatic experience. Her recovery would not have been possible unless she expressed herself. Her suicidal thoughts, her hysterical attitudes towards people were a result of her traumatic experiences. Thus, Kaur opines that resilience and support played an important role in her recovery process. Thus, the memoir has received wide attention from readers.

3.4 Critical Study of the Text:

As it has been mentioned in the first unit on the background to the text, many books, memoirs, movies were composed on life experiences of people for various objectives. They can be termed historical narratives because they are written about people's life history either in fragmented form all full length autobiographical form. A literary text may work like a historical document as in the case of war narratives, holocaust narratives and tsunami narratives. Sonali Deraniyagala's *Wave* stands as a witness to such historical context that was ravaged and distorted by time. The memoir presents the recent Indian Ocean tragedy from the point of view of a victim who survived miraculously. Thus, *Wave* stands as a memoir and a literary document of a critical time in the twenty first century.

The memoir is significant for its quest motif and introspective approach to life. Written in a frank discursive style, the memoir recounts the tragic experiences of a family during the tsunami in 2004 and destruction that

followed. The narrator herself is the protagonist and speaker and she fluctuates between past and present in search of her lost faith and identity. Her family was her strength and it was her love towards them that enabled her to survive through remembrance. She began to live in her own imaginary world where she imagined her association with her family. One can enter into the inner world of Sonali Deraniyagala, know about her observations, approach to life, her complex psychological dilemma after reading the narrative in *Wave*. The ups and down that she faced after her loss has been revealed through the memoir. Deraniyagala thinks that she needed to cover up to survive and that she must admit her reality:

“I am also split off from myself when I don’t reveal. It’s like I’m in a witness protection scheme, I’ve often thought of my life in New York. I needed this, a cover-up, when I was stunned...I suspect that I can only stay steady as I traverse this world that’s empty of my family when I admit the reality of them, and me” (208).

The quest motif that has been mentioned here is her quest for lost self to exist in the world. She travelled to the place of disaster in order to search for the lost life, their memories. She survived in the hope that her family, her children will come back and join her. Thus, this is also a story of survival in disbelief that her family is dead and no longer with her. The writer was under the process of recovery but it would be difficult to say whether she actually recovered from her trauma or was in a trace like situation. In his short introduction to *Tragedy*, Adrian Poole has stated that in Modern tragedy, new forms are found for the living dead which has been interpreted by him as a ‘vision of death- in- life’. According to him:

“The idea of a ‘living death’ looks like a modern complement to the old belief in ghosts, the hauntings, the revenants, the undead. It’s a vision of death-in-life, a life so drained of meaning, value, purpose and joy that it seems like death, being dead before you are dead. It’s a version of hell on earth, more inert, more soundproof, more blank than others” (Poole 39).

Here Poole has referred to the images of silence, imprisonment, madness in one's life. Deraniyagala's grief and loss paralysed her life after the wave and her life was in a like 'living death' situation. She did not know how to live without her family. Finally, you will see in the narrative that she almost negotiated her life and learnt to survive through memories of her family. She was continuously in search of her lost family and she found them in her memories when she looked back and began to remember her past.

Sonali Deraniyagala's *Wave* indeed presents a current environmental discourse and that is global warming and its impact on the ocean. The writer thought that the time must be apocalyptic as it swept away everything that came on its way. The memoir can be analysed from a post-apocalyptic perspective also. You may be familiar with apocalyptic fictional narrative that deal with existential catastrophe, natural disaster, warfare, climate change and many such contemporary incidents. On the other hand post-apocalyptic fictions takes into account the time frame after such catastrophic incidents, the aftermath of disasters, the survivor's account, their psychological trauma etc. Mary Shelley's *The Last Man (Apocalyptic)*, Richard Jefferies's *After London (Post-apocalyptic)* and Jack London's *The Scarlet Plague*. A climate catastrophe and its impact on a family is clearly been emphasised in the narrative of Deraniyagala. The end of twentieth century has witnesses the disastrous impact of climate crisis starting from flood, earthquake to massive tsunami. Sonali Deraniyagala's personal account has become a literary evidence of the critical time in Sri Lanka. Her memoir is significant for its depiction of the contemporary environmental crisis and nature's role in her recovery. Nature is shown as both destructive and constructive. You can explore more on this when you read about her experiences in Colombo after the wave.

A prominent theme in the memoir is love and attachment. It was the power of love that healed the trauma of the writer. Her joyous memories of her family were great sources of inspiration for her. However, you will find that detachment was essential for her survival. But the more she wanted to detach, the more she got trapped into memory. She could not stop thinking about the traumatic incident and her loss. Memory was her way to survival and

she chose to remember her joyous past. She knew that it was pointless to cherish her children's personalities and their passions as they are no longer alive. Yet the yearning for the children eased her pain. She writes: "Maybe yearning for them more freely gives me some relief" (132).

Gradually she learnt to adjust herself with their absence. She writes again: "By knowing them again, by gathering threads of our life, I am much less fractured" (132).

Now the question might arise as to- How did she heal herself? How did she learn how to adjust? The answer would be her love and attachment towards her family and also the inspiration from nature to revive and restore her sense of life.

Nature has the potential to heal. The family of Sonali Deraniyagala enjoyed a close association with nature. The two children Vik and Malli loved to live amidst natural sites. In the memoir, Deraniyagala explains that nature has been a constant companion and healer for them. In the narrative the power of nature is also displayed -the creative and the destructive. Nature has the power to swipe away everything. It also has the great power to heal and restore life. After the massive tsunami destroyed her world, Sonali Deraniyagala compared her life to a 'ravaged landscape'. She says: "My surroundings were as deformed as I was. I belonged here" (64).

After the traumatic incident, Deraniyagala kept on visiting her place at Yala in search of her family. Memories continued to haunt her life and she was in a trance. She expressed her family's love for wilderness. The wilderness was related to her family. She remembers: "I'd walk on the beach following the footsteps of a solitary peacock, and allow in snatches of us. I could see Vik and Malli catching hermit crabs on this beach" (65).

One of the important aspects of the memoir is its stream of consciousness style of writing. Her confessional mode has been well expressed by such an approach. May be due to depression and anxiety, she thought she was to be blamed for whatever misfortune happened to her family. She was constantly in between hope and despair in the years that followed after the

disaster. She writes about her experience in Colombo after the unfortunate incident at Yala: “In those early days I convinced myself that Steve’s family must blame me for bringing him here, getting him killed” (154).

In the above statement you see that Deraniyagala’s sense of guilt was immense and she thought as if she were to be blamed for all the misfortune. However, her family and in-laws continued to support and encourage her during her time of crisis and that inspired her to face the reality.

3.5 Nature of Deraniyagala’s Memoir:

In this section, let us discuss about the nature of Deraniyagala’s memoir, its significance as a first person narration.

3.5.1 A Therapeutic Account:

Sonali Deraniyagala’s confessional mode of writing can be perceived in the memoir. The fear of detail, the sense of guilt after losing her entire family, the trauma that followed the natural crisis all these have been frankly disclosed by the memoirist. This is the writer’s autobiographical account on the Indian Ocean Tsunami tragedy. The memoir can also be termed as a therapeutic account of a victim. Now, you must have some idea about the nature of tragedy. Tragedy as a genre needs detailed elaboration. If you explore the history of literature you will find that there were Greek Tragedies, Senecan Tragedy, Shakespearean Tragedy, Nietzschean Tragedy and so on. In classical tragedies, one of the main characteristic features is the tragic flaw in characters. In Shakespearean tragedies for instance you will find this notion of tragic flaw. Take the example of the character Hamlet in William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and the character Othello in *Othello*.

Stop to Consider:

Classical Tragedy and Tragic Flaw:

Classical tragedies follow three unities- unity in time , place and action. Greek Trgedian Aeschylus is known as the father of Classical Tragedy. In Classical Tragedies, the protagonist belongs to a higher status whose

life becomes a tragedy because of his own flaws or mistakes in his own character known as **tragic flaws** in the form of pride or hubris. The presence of peripetia (Reversal of fortune in the protagonist) and anagnorisis (from ignorance to knowledge), suffering, tragic flaws is what constitutes a classical tragedy. Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, *Antigone*, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Othello* are some of the examples. In modern tragedies also we find the presence of tragic flaw in characters and circumstantial influences. But modern tragedies are more realistic than the classical narratives. One prominent example is Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*.

However, in case of the present memoir you find that tragedy is due to some natural disaster which was something unavoidable and uncontrollable, an incident caused by act of God or *damnum fatale* such as earthquake and tsunami. The narrative is a factual account realistically presented using flashbacks in the form of a memoir, a personal narrative. The whole narrative is elegiac in nature where the protagonist laments for the loss and traumatic experiences. Even though we know that elegy is a kind of poetical form that expresses speaker's sense of loss and grief, the memoir too exhibits the grief of the protagonist in a realistic way. Here too the memoirist expresses her admiration for the dead and consoles herself. Thus we can also read the narrative of the memoir as a kind of disaster narrative in the form of a prose elegy. In such narratives, retelling plays an important role in the composition of a therapeutic account.

The writer mentioned in an interview with Miwa Messer that she began writing accidentally, as advised by her therapist, Mark Epstein. Writing was essential for her survival and mental recovery. She had to write to express and unravel her memory in order to recover herself. Here you can explore terms such as Bibliotherapy or Book Therapy or Therapeutic Storytelling. Bibliotherapy or Book therapy is known as creative art therapy, a form of supportive psychotherapy meant for self-help intervention. Such a creative attempt is suggested by health professionals for recovery of the troubled mind. Though in case of a memoir one only details on factual account, the

role of imagination also plays its part. The protagonist narrator of the memoir, as you have seen in the case of the memoir *Wave*, does remembering and forgetting through flashbacks and tries to re-imagine her past days with her family. Hence bibliotherapy has been effective in her case as she could roam around her past and the present through memories. Gillie Bolton’s remark in this regard will be useful for you to understand more about the role of creative writing in one’s life.

“Sometimes we write to survive, perhaps to gain some sense of control during turbulent times. Sometimes we write to remember, perhaps to cope with life transitions that always involve loss. Sometimes we write for discovery, perhaps inspired by person or place and seeking to grow” (7).

In the book *Write Yourself: Creative Writing and Personality Development*, Bolton has mentioned that creative and focused writing has received attention and importance as therapeutic agent in clinical theories, particularly narrative, humanistic and cognitive-behavioural approaches. Sonali Deraniyagala’s memoir can be explored as a therapeutic narrative with a purpose. Besides this, Nature also played its role as a therapeutic agent or factor in transforming the world of the writer. Nature was her constant companion and reminder of her family. As it has been mentioned earlier the family of Deraniyagala had a close association with nature. She mentioned that her life was shattered like the ravaged landscape in Yala. However, it was the same surrounding that eased and healed her pain. She could remember the good old days with her family. She writes: “We loved the wilderness. Now slowly it began pressing into me, enticing me to take notice, stirring me from my stupor, just a little. And here I found the nerve to remember” (65).

SAQ:

1. Can we categorize and explain Sonali Deraniyagala’s memoir *Wave* as a post-apocalyptic narrative? Justify your argument. (100 words)

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2. What is the nature of tragedy in the memoir? (100 words)

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3. Define Stream of Consciousness. Can we call the narrative of Sonali Deraniyagala as a stream of consciousness narrative? (100 words)

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3.5.2 Role of Memory in Memoir writing:

One of the most significant aspects of the memoir is the role played by memory. Memory is both destructive and constructive in its impact on the person. As you will explore in the memoir, the writer was overwhelmed by her memory of the past. After the traumatic experience during the massive tsunami, she was haunted by her past memories. She was depressed and suicidal thoughts almost paralysed her life. She became addicted and lost control of her life. She had to consult a psychiatrist following her traumatic conditions. She says to herself: “I must stop remembering. I must keep them in a faraway place. The more I remember, the greater my agony” (44).

That is where the importance of forgetting plays its role. However, surprisingly enough the same remembering process helped her in her recovery process when she started thinking about her lost family in a positive way. She began to live in a trance like situation which enabled her to survive amidst chaos. She started to express herself by remembering her past. Gradually she learnt how to live through memories. She understood that she could keep her family near her through memories and that she would be fractured in their absence. It was through her memory that she could rediscover herself and her family. Hence memory had both a positive and negative impact on Sonali Deraniyagala after she faced the traumatic situation. In the following few words Deraniyagala expresses her thoughts about remembering and memory:

“These five years I’ve been so fearful of details. The more I remember, the more inconsolable I will be, and I’ve told myself. But now increasingly I don’t tussle with my memories. I want to remember. I want to know” (128).

In the above lines, Deraniyagala has mentioned about the role of memory in her life.

Stop to Consider:

Pay attention to the following themes of the memoir:

- A writer’s autobiographical account on post- disaster recovery and struggle for life.
- A narrator’s confessions and response to a time of crisis.
- Love and Care is never lost.
- Trauma and Survival.
- Role of Memory and Forgetting.
- Story telling as a strategy to look at the past.

In an interview with Miwa Messer, Sonali Deraniyagala mentioned that she wrote to recapture her life before the wave. That she wrote to explore and unravel her memory of the past family experiences. The writing became her survival eventually. Here you can see that forgetting the bewildering memories and haunted past was her only way to survive. Initially she could not tolerate remembering but as time passed she decided to revisit the places where she once lost her family. She constantly had the fear of detail and could not express. However, writing gave her the scope to remember her joyous past with her family. Thus remembering and forgetting plays an important role in the narrative.

3.5.3 Memoir differs from Diary:

An important question here is- how does a memoir differ from a diary? As you know by definition, they are both personal narratives and belong to the same category. However, they differ in terms of their structure and style of writing style. Let us learn a bit about diary writing as a genre of writing.

The diary as a form came out as a need to keep records in commerce and administration. Such accounting served both internal and external purpose i.e used for business management and kept as an evidence (Lejeune: 51). This form of account book is probably thought to be the model for keeping the personal records. As Phillippe Lejeune has mentioned in his book *On Diary*, in the fourteenth century, the first “family books” of the Florentine merchants were published. After that all communities felt the need to keep record of their official deeds, laws and decisions and the important dates etc and this is how the genre of diary writing developed. Many “collective journal” records from Antiquity have been lost due to the use of fragile media. It is important to mention here that in Rome, most heads of the family kept two types of journals—one the account books (used for keeping income and expenses) and the other chronicles where they recorded their household events. Hence you can see that the diary writing and journals were different forms of personal writings in Antiquity.

3.5.4 Characterization in the Memoir:

The family of Sonali Deraniyagala finds the maximum elaboration in the memoir. The memoir comes under the category of family memoir and event memoir. Hence the memoir surrounds round Sonali Deraniyagals’s life. The main characters in the memoir are Sonali Deraniyagala’s husband Steve, her parents her two children Malli and Vik. You have to pay attention to the fact that Sonali Deraniyagala has explained her life after the tsunami from the point of view of a mother and a wife. The relationship between her and her husband, mother-son-daughter relationship has been explored in the memoir.

During the massive tsunami, Deraniyagala lost her husband, her two children and her parents. She regretted that she failed to protect her parents because she had to protect her children. She writes: “We were leaving my parents behind. I panicked now. If I had screamed at their door as we ran out, they could have run with us” (7).

In 2010, Sonali Deraniyagala again paid a visit to her home Colombo especially to collect details about her parents after the wave. She gives a detailed account of her days in Colombo with her parents, the way they used to celebrate summer holidays in July every year. One significant aspect of the memoir is the power of storytelling by the narrator. The narrator gives us a glimpse of her past days in Colombo through small anecdotes and accounts. Here you may find that the memoir is not chronologically written because the memoirist has chosen a few stories of her life. You must understand this memoir is a kind of Sonali Deraniyagala's therapeutic account. She could write only those things that she could remember. Memory was her only road to her joyous past.

Sonali Deraniyagala's husband Stephen Lissenburgh was a British policy Researcher and an economist. She regretted at times that she could not save her husband. She narrated things and memories related to Steve, his parents, his childhood days, his first night in Sri Lanka and the family's constant visit to London and Colombo. She thought that she must be blamed for the misfortune that happened to her family. However, her in-laws never blamed her and instead helped and supported her. She constantly thought about her husband and children. She was reluctant to believe that her family was no longer alive. She kept on visiting the places at Yala Park and Colombo in search of her lost family. Memories continued to haunt her. Every little things she saw of her husband and her children, she was overwhelmed by memories. From the narrator's account we come to know about the family and their life styles. They both worked together for research papers and projects. The family travelled to forests, beaches and went to Yala many times. Their children loved the forest and birds. They used to spend quality time amidst nature. Surprisingly enough, they used to stay at the same hotel at Yala. As she has mentioned in her memoir, Vik bought a checklist of Yala birds, Deraniyagala found those booklets in a bag with Steve's diary. Steve used to keep diaries where he recorded the daily affairs. After the disaster, Sonali discovered the diary and it was a painful moment for her. She remembered her joyous past time when she went to London and Colombo with their children when they both had sabbatical. You will find in the narrative that Deraniyagala was desperate to see the pair of white-bellied sea eagles near the Yala hotel after the wave. She did not dare watch them initially but

later she felt the need because they were her son, Vik's eagles. Those eagles reminded her of her son's childhood days.

Sonali Deraniyagala regretted very much for her inability to save her family. She thought that she could have avoided the trip to Yala. She writes: "I've berated myself continuously for bringing my family back to Sri Lanka that December. What was the need?" (156).

There are other characters like Orlantha and her father Anton, her neighbouring friends in the hotel at Yala. She was the one who alerted Sonali Deraniyagala about the rising waves. During the tsunami Orlantha could not be traced and her father was disappointed after he failed to find her.

There were many people who helped Sonali Deraniyagala during her time of crisis. One such person was the jeep driver, Mette who used to drive her family to Yala. Mette was there for her help who decided to take her to Colombo.

As you go through the narrative you will find that the memoirist has narrated her experiences after the massive tsunami through flashback storytelling. She gives a detailed account of her family characters and their role in her family. At times she imagines as if she were with her husband and children in Colombo home after the waves. She could imagine their presence and her sense of dreaming of her family gave her the courage to live for them. For instance, when she visited the Mirissa Coast in 2011, she imagined that Vik and Steve, her husbands were sitting. She writes: "And earlier, as the new heat of day warmed my bench on this wooden boat, their absence crowded me. Up front by the bow, that's where Steve and Vik should be sitting. Malli should be leaning his head on this rail" (82).

You will come across many such instances where the narrator imagines the presence of the lost family. This is how she wished to live in close association with her family. Sonali Deraniyagala remembered that she watched *The Blue Planet* with Vik, the way Vik was struck by the wonder of the blue whales.

The narrator tried to remember and collect every detail that was related to her family. She was desperate for the detail as she wished to remember as much as possible. She wrote in the memoir: “I want every detail. I want to take in all this blue whale magic, may be more so because Vik can’t. I search the ocean as he would” (184).

So as a mother, she wished to fulfil the dreams of her son, Vik though he was no longer with her. She was in this sense living in a parallel world of her children. This explained her dilemma, ser sense of anxiety and inner struggle for peace and identity. She continued to play her role as a responsible wife and mother after she learnt how to live through her memories. This is what makes this memoir a frank and bold one. It would be essential for you to look at the writer’s perspectives on the crisis and the way she has responded to it to grasp the essence and objective of the memoir.

SAQ:

Q.1. Critically examine the personal narrative of Sonali Deraniyagala’s *Wave* as a discourse of despair and hope. (about 350 words)

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Q.2. Briefly write about the characters in the memoir? How did the writer reflect on her lost family members? (about 350 words)

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Q.3. Define Tragedy and Elegy. Do you consider Sonali Deraniyagala’s memoir as a tragedy or elegiac? Justify your answer. (about 350 words)

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Q.4. The role of memory is an important aspect in the memoir. Do you think her memory actually led her towards her recovery? (about 350 words)

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Q.5. How does a memoir differ from a diary? Discuss about the autobiographical nature of the two narratives. (about 350 words)

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Q.6. Comment on the conclusion of the memoir. Did the writer reconcile with her past? (about 350 words)

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Q.7. "I am also split off from myself when I don't reveal." How did the writer struggle to protect her identity after she felt expelled and dissociated from her life? explain the context. (about 350 words)

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Q.8. "I am immersed in another reality. Our life as it would be today." What did she mean when she mentioned about another reality? Which world did she refer to? (about 350 words)

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Q.9. Narrate the experiences of the memoirist at the Mirissa coast in 2011. How did she remember her association with her husband and family? (about 350 words)

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Q.10. Why did the writer convince herself that her husband’s family would blame her? How the sense of guilt overpowered and shattered her faith on love? Explain the context. (about 350 words)

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3.6 Summing Up:

In this unit you have been made familiar with some of the critics who have opined and commented on the narrative of *Wave* how the memoir has been received by its readers. One of the major segments of the unit is the critical analysis part where you introduced to the thematic significance of the memoir. The critical study will help you understand the text in the more comprehensive way.

3.7 Reference and Suggested Reading:

Biedermann, Zoltan & Alan Strathern. *Sri Lanka at the Crossroads of History*. UCL Press: 2017

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Cheryl Strayed’s “Washed Away” - Review

<https://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/24/books/review/wave-by-sonali-deraniyagala.html>

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UNIT- 4

Marjane Satrapi: *Persepolis I* (Background)

Unit Structure:

- 4.1 Objectives
- 4.2 Introduction
- 4.3 Introducing Graphic Narratives
- 4.4 Tools of a Graphic Text
- 4.5 Narrative Technique
- 4.6 Author's Biography
- 4.7 The Politics of Satrapi's Location: A Historical Context
- 4.8 Reading *Persepolis I* as a Graphic Memoir in Asian Writing
- 4.9 Summing Up
- 4.10 References and Suggested Readings

4.1 Objectives:

This unit attempts to provide a background to Marjane Satrapi's text *Persepolis-I* along with familiarising the readers with the genre of graphic narratives. After going through this unit, you will be able to –

- *understand* how to read the panels and texts of a graphic narrative,
- *critically analyse* the impact of the author's historical position in the text,
- *learn* the usage of narrative devices and techniques in a graphic text,
- *connect* the text with the larger corpus of Asian and World Literature.

4.2 Introduction:

Persepolis I: The Story of Childhood is a prominent masterpiece of graphic memoir authored by Marjane Satrapi, originally published by L' Association in French. It is the precursor to her second book *Persepolis II: The Story*

of a Return. The storyline in the image-text and the written-text follows the adolescent years of a young Marji and her narrative of the tumultuous times in Iran during the Islamic Revolution of 1979 and her eventual migration to Austria for higher studies. Written and illustrated during the early years of the 21st Century, *Persepolis* is a work of memory from the author's childhood which further enhances the layered character of the narrative. The books can be seen as bildungsroman or the coming-of-age Satrapi as she navigates her life from the age of 10 to 24. The icon that is presented on the cover of the book itself introduces the readers to the young protagonist of the novel, in accordance with the Western perspective of Iranian women, in an attempt to subvert it in her autobiography.

Satrapi grapples with various issues like those of personal identity, violence, cultural transitions and ideological crisis during Iran revolution. She weaves together an intricate narrative of personal experiences with reference to the larger socio-historical context through the images and the word texts in the panels. The popularity of the text ensured its translation and publication around the globe in several languages like Hindi and English making it a part of world literature. The book was adapted for animation films and plays soon after its publication. Visual culture had been a highly sought 20th century mode of storytelling which has been incorporated in the novel. In this graphic memoir, Satrapi uses a monochromatic colour palette of black and white for the images to depict her experiences from memory.

4.3 Introducing Graphic Narratives:

Graphic Narrative is a cross-discursive genre – an amalgamation of literary text and artistic sketch. It is a multi-layered text that brings together art and language through verbal and visual structuring. Unlike a conventional literary text, graphic narratives sometimes may not have one single author as some authors like to collaborate with artists too. It came up as a serious literary genre in recent times when *Modern Fiction Studies* was published in 2006, which is a complete edition dedicated to graphic narratives capturing the epoch of visual culture. Graphic texts have a prominent visual characteristic which enables them to not just tell but show as well. The text in such narratives

is composed of several narrative devices like words, images, balloons, panels and gutters. The representation of time in graphic fiction is materialised through the use of space. There is an interdependence of words (texts) and images (art) as they complement each other as each device pledges allegiance to the experience of the whole and contribute to the meanings of the graphic text.

Graphic narratives are also seen as sequential art as they aim to tell a story by placing the frames in a sequence just like Eisner says, “Sequential art is the act of weaving a fabric”. Both the word texts and the art are welded together to tell and show a story. It is also a more inclusive genre as it challenges the domination of one over the other. One of the most popular examples of a graphic narrative is Spiegelman’s *Maus*, where the author portrays his characters in a heavily politicised and satirical manner. Graphic narratives expands the literary field through its medium of word-text and image-text. It allows fluidity in the text and counters the fixities. The writing of graphic narratives includes conceptualizing the ideas, arranging the image texts accordingly, constructing the sequence in which the narration is supposed to follow, and composing dialogues. It limits the imagination of the reader as everything is depicted in the presence, absence and focalisation of the images.

Graphic narratives which solely deal with the personal narratives of the authors and are autobiographical in nature are called “Perzines” and are guided by the author’s observations, opinions and perceptions.

Stop to Consider:

In the late 20th Century, particularly during the 70s, there had been a rise in the consideration of comic studies in academic disciplines. The popular belief is that comics are weekly or monthly periodicals which cater for children or teenagers only whereas graphic novels are longer comic narratives which are directed towards more mature readers. However, that is not the case always. Graphic novels are sometimes published in serialised format which later get organised together. The term “graphic novels” isn’t much different from “comics,” but it’s worth noting that books designed as graphic novels can tell longer stories on serious topics of the world.

Check Your Progress:

1. What is a graphic memoir?
2. How does storytelling in graphic fiction include showing as well as telling?
3. When did graphic narratives come into the scene of the literary genre?

4.4 Tools of a Graphic Text:

Balloons- Balloons in graphic texts are used to include words within the panels and can be of different types- thought balloons, dialogue balloons and story balloons.

Thought balloons are used to depict the thoughts of a character.



Fig.: Thought balloon

Dialogue balloons are used to show the words that are spoken by a character in graphic fiction texts.



Fig.: Dialogue balloon

Story balloons are incorporated in a graphic text for the narration of the story progression and timelines.

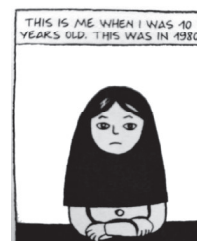
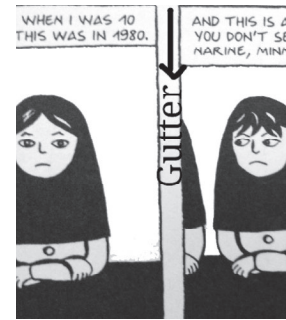


Fig.: Story Balloon

Gutters- The space between two frames in a graphic novel is called a gutter. These are usually of uniform breadth to make the transition smoother and are used to represent a lapse of time from one panel to the next. However, the conscious use of different-sized gutters can add to the

understanding of the text. Since each panel represents a certain idea that the artist puts forward, the gutter gives the readers ample time to absorb the information from the panels and make meaning out of it through associations. Gutters are also used to organise the panels around it in sequence.



Panels/Frame- A panel in graphic novels is the bordering lines that confine within itself an idea that the artist and the author want to represent. It not only contains but also separates one idea from the next through its borders and lines. The position of the panels and the focalisation inside of them enrich the storyline by projecting what the creators want to portray. Each panel should encapsulate a coherent idea, ranging from a full paragraph to a single word, ensuring that it effectively



communicates the intended message or concept. There are different panel types like close-in single headshots, character or object close-ups, distant shots to depict a wider action and establish scenes, action shots, silhouette shots etc.

There are many ways to tell a story through the shape and lines of the panels. If there is a difference in the borders of subsequent panels, it could be used to denote to the readers the change of location. Different border styles in the panels can also be used to indicate characters entering a new realm, experiencing a different state of existence, or signifying temporal transitions such as memories or premonitions. For the depiction of the works of memories or premonitions, the artist may choose to use wavy or broken-up lines as such alterations provide the readers with a sense that the particular scene is different from the typical storyline.

Sometimes framing is altogether avoided to accentuate or focalize the standalone actions that are being sketched. An example of that can be seen in the seventh chapter of *Persepolis I*, named “The Heroes” where the

torture scene is drawn without any frames to focalize the violence that was perpetrated on the bodies. Panels are sometimes even overlapped to show multiple actions happening at the same time.

Icon- In graphic narratives, an icon represents a place, person or thing which has significant importance to the story of the text. Icons are often used as recurrent symbols that stand for certain themes or concepts or can be visual elements that embody the narrative weight. The use of icons is deliberate to convey specific and complex ideas to evoke a response from the reader further enhancing the overall visual storytelling of the graphic novel.

Self-Assessment Question:

What are the different tools in graphic narratives that distinguish it from other modes of writing? Give valid reasons in support of your answer. (100 words)

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4.5 Narrative Technique:

Marjane Satrapi employs a documentary style of presenting her autobiography through a process of recollections of her childhood experiences. She presents to her readers, a subjective history that stands as a counter-discourse to the larger state discourse that attempts to provide a forced objectivity in their narratives. The adult Marjane recounts the stories of her past as she experienced them as a child. These memories are filtered creatively by the author. The images that she decides to depict in the text are heavily dependent on the authorial intention. The first chapter itself shows the construction of the adult author looking back at the transition and the second panel is a representation of that. Her artistic output is heavily influenced by German Expressionism.

The nature of memory is very fluid, unorganised, elusive and can only be recollected partially. Satrapi organises and fills in the gaps through a deliberate and fictionalised representation in the visual form of graphic narratives, even when presented in a documentary form. She uses free indirect discourse as an effective medium to convey the thoughts of the characters while also enabling them to speak for themselves. There is a polyphony of contradicting voices in the text voicing different ideologies and their clashes.

For the sketches, Satrapi uses the monochromatic colours of black and white to transcend the larger binaries at work. She also uses light and dark colours to depict various emotions in the text. She uses a half-light and half-dark colour scheme to portray the emotions of people experiencing negative emotions of regret, loss of innocence, pessimism and pain as shown in the chapter called “The Water-cell”.

Her deliberate use of iconography and focalisation brings to light the conflict of thoughts that she wants to present like in the first and second panels of the first chapter, “The Veil”. There is an assertion of the image that she creates in an attempt to build up an identity. There is a conflict of selfhood, informed by the word text, as she is not happy with the transition as evident from the separation of herself from the other girls of her age, as just a trace of herself remains in the second panel, which is focalized. Satrapi is inspired by the artistic style of the Parisian cartoonist David B, who illustrates black and white pictures in his graphic narrative “Epileptic”, based on his brother’s disease. Her memoir is a sequential narrative that follows an episodic chronology.

Self-Assessment Question:

How does the narrative techniques used by Marjane Satrapi, in her graphic memoir *Persepolis*, allow her to effectively deal with the themes of the memoir? (about 150 words)

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4.6 Author's Biography:

Marjane Satrapi was born in Rasht, Iran in the year 1969. She is an artist, director, cartoonist and writer who rose to popularity after her seminal works *Persepolis* and *Radioactive*. Her works explore the gaps between the Eastern perspective and the Western discourses and the depths of which she explores from her personal experiences as a little girl in Iran. Before the Islamic Revolution in Iran, Satrapi enjoyed a liberal lifestyle under the government which promoted Western ideals. Her father was an engineer and her mother was a clothing designer. Both of them followed Western ideologies and supported leftist causes and that was how they brought up their daughter as she grew up in Tehran. She attended a French school which swiftly turned into an Islamic institution under the aegis of the new government, after the Islamic revolution in 1979, as she recounts in the first chapter. Due to her family's lifestyle and Westernized way of living, they drew a lot of attention from the Iranian authorities and moral police because of which they had to send Marji away to Austria to complete her studies in 1984. Her migration and eventual heartbreak led her to live a life of isolation and alienation until she returned to Tehran at the age of nineteen.

She wrote both the volumes of *Persepolis* in French and published them in 2000 and 2002 respectively. She later came out with the translation for both volumes. The third and fourth volumes of *Persepolis* came out in French in 2003 and were later merged into *Persepolis 2: The Story of a Return* in English which was again published in 2004. She further documents the narratives of the lives of Iranian women through the anecdotes of her grandmother, mother and other female relatives in her graphic fiction called *Embroideries*. Marjane Satrapi gives a voice to the Iranian women's experience after the revolution through the lenses of a child as opposed to the biased Western projection of the Middle East and the state-sponsored discourses. She does not attempt at homogenising the experiences of all women in Iran and she also discusses, in her text, about women who were more eager to adapt to the new Islamic changes in the nation while she herself could not.

Details of her life, as it unfolded during the regime, had been documented through the various panels in her text. During such turbulent times, she suffered the loss of many family members, friends and acquaintances over time due to persecution, murders and arrests without valid reasons. Living in a constant state of fear as a girl who is not matured enough to understand the politics of the world, Marji grows up forming her own ideologies and outspoken nature. One of her most cherished relatives was her paternal uncle Anoosh with whom she shared a very close and special bond. Anoosh was a political prisoner and had to remain in exile for many years in the Soviet Union because of his relation to the Minister of Justice of Azerbaijan's People's Government, Fereyduh Ebrahimi. She admired him greatly and both enjoyed a special relationship but Anoosh was arrested by the new government and later sentenced to death. He got her deeply interested in Marxist philosophy as illustrated in the chapter called "The Sheep". He was allowed only one visitor during his time in jail and he chose to spend his precious hours with his niece Marji. This loss greatly affected young Marji as she chose to devote a significant portion of the book to her uncle and their relationship.

Brought up in a household where she was always taught to uphold her personal values and be strong-willed enough to defend her rights, she started to get into trouble with the government authorities and raised a few eyebrows while growing up and this led her parents to send her off to Vienna to complete her education. Her disregard for the strict moral codes of conduct directed by the Islamic government and her penchant for Western cultural goods like skirts, rock band posters and music could have gotten her in a lot of trouble. Her parents prepared for her to go stay with a family friend named Zozo while abroad where she attended Lycée Français de Vienne in Austria. She stayed in Austria throughout her high school often moving from one place to another according to the changing circumstances. She was homeless for around 3 months and she had to live on the streets until she was hospitalized due to Bronchitis. Soon after her recovery, she returned back to Iran and finished her education in Tehran with a specialization in communications. After a short-lived marriage, she permanently moved to Europe to pursue further studies and realised that Iran could never be a safe home for her.

At a time when Western discourses seemed to drown out the voices of the Middle East with propaganda, Satrapi arose as a critical figure who could put forward a legitimate reality in front of people. By putting her memoir in a graphic format, she challenges the established hegemonic discourses and allows people a closer peek at her culture in contrast to the existing stereotypes that persist. She reveals the harrowing details of what happened during the fundamentalist regime poignantly through her medium of choice.

Self Assessment Question:

How has the form of graphic narrative allowed Marjane Satrapi to subvert the discourses of Iran for the West? (about 150 words)

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4.7 The Politics of Satrapi’s Location in *Persepolis*: A Historical Context:

Persepolis is set against the backdrop of the Iranian revolution of 1979 when Islamic fundamentalists, under the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini, took over the Shah regime. The adjustments from this shift in power were still fresh when the Iran-Iraq war began in 1980. The geopolitical location of Iran in world politics informed a lot of the things that quickly escalated to war in the Middle East. In the 20th Century, at the epoch of the great cold war between the USA and the Soviet Union, the struggle for power made Iran’s position a desirable asset. After the First World War, Iran suffered massive economic struggles and felt the void of power.

It was Reza Khan who took the military route to form a sense of nationality within the country by toppling the reign of the Qajar Dynasty and formally establishing the Pahlavi Dynasty in Iran in 1925. Under his reign, Reza Shah led many economic reforms in the country, the cornerstone of which was the Trans-Iranian Railroad system which linked the Persian Gulf to the Caspian Sea. Historically, in Iran, education and law were governed by the clergy but the new Shah changed the existing systems and brought out many

reforms within these sections as well under which he established hundreds of schools and made education compulsory for all Iranian citizens. The University of Tehran was established around this time in 1938. While he did bring modernisation to the country and took up several developmental projects, he also limited the powers of the citizens by denying them all shares in political and social activities.

During the Second World War, the Persian Gulf and the oil resources of Iran proved to be formidable allies to the British Navy. Despite the Shah's insistence on being neutral, his strong allyship both technologically and culturally was seen as problematic which led to Iran's occupation by the Allied forces. Reza Khan was forced to abdicate the throne and the Western superpowers replaced him with his son, with whom they had friendly connections. Mohammed Reza Pahlavi took the help of the British forces to make the USSR withdraw its forces from the northern territories of Iran. As the British controlled most of the oil resources in Iran, Mossadeq through his formation of the National Front Party nationalised the oil industry after becoming the Prime Minister under Reza Pahlavi's Presidency. He became a hero to the people and the face of democratisation in the country that was soon thwarted by foreign intervention. The economy of Iran faced heavy consequences because of the political unrest during the 1950s.

The White Revolution initiated by the Shah in 1963 took the country by storm as land reforms were initiated, private sectors started buying enterprises owned by the state, forests started getting nationalised, and Literacy Corps was established which aimed at eradicating illiteracy. The revolution also granted women the right to vote, increased the legal age of marriage and led to improvements in women's rights in child custody and property matters. The modernisation brought about by the massive reforms in Iran was seen as a threat to culture by the clergy and one particular leader arose to form a resistance against the revolution named Ayatollah Khomeini. Khomeini, backed by the religious sect led an uprising against the White Revolution in the year 1963 which was soon quelled by the authorities. He was exiled from Iran in the following year.

The 1970s decade saw a prominent rise of oil industries in the country which led to an oil boom inviting many opportunities for investment from foreign countries. The influx of wealth however didn't reach the masses proportionately. Despite major developments in the country, the divide between the rich and the poor increased with unequal distribution of funds that accelerated social problems leading to mass discontentment with government policies. The National Front led public demonstrations against the Shah urging his government to return to the constitution of 1906. Khomeini had been working with the people from exile and ultimately returned to Iran in 1979 after the Shah fled the country in 1978. The dissent grew in force due to the growing economic disparities and foreign policies which only benefitted those in power. The intervention of the West further led to military coups and that's when the head of the state was taken over by the fundamentalist Shia regime. With the Western and modern ideas seeping in through the culture of Iran and its governance, the fundamentalists reacted against it by clutching closer to their traditional and orthodox lifestyles and ultimately imposing it upon the people of Iran. Some welcomed the return to their culture but the rest, like Satrapi's family who had leftist ideals, felt trapped after they took over. Initially, the leftists also backed the revolutionaries because the intellectuals felt the impact of growing Americanization as a threat to their culture. The Shah was so immersed in his allyship with Western forces that he failed to realise the regional problems and acted as a dictator.

The story of *Persepolis* dates back to 1980 when the fundamentalists were hard at work making people comply with the new changes in the regime while they were on the brink of war with Iraqi forces under the regime of Saddam Hussain. The rise of the Shia sect in Iran, a bordering nation to Iraq, was threatening the rule of Saddam Hussain due to their clash in religious ideologies regarding Islam. The Iraqi population was already a Shia majority and was started to get influenced by Khomeini and his revolution in Iran. This led to an armed conflict between the two countries when Iraq invaded Iran and the war dragged on for 8 long years with no major gains and a stalemate in the context of the military but caused both countries severe economic devastations and loss of lives among other things.

Marjane Satrapi deliberately chooses to name her text *Persepolis* as a tribute to the ancient cultural heritage of her country before it came to be known as Iran.

Self Assessment Question:

How does the politics of location inform her memoir? (about 100 words)

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4.8 Reading *Persepolis I* as a Graphic Narrative in Asian Writing:

The 20th century was a time replete with new curiosity around visual culture which also provided a space for new and innovative modes of storytelling to prosper. With the various political and economic repercussions of the various wars in a modern, more interconnected world where everything is interlinked, there was a newfound interest in the Middle East especially in the West due to its geopolitical location.

Marjane Satrapi published the first volume of her graphic narrative at a critical point in history around the time of the 9/11 attacks when the mystery and unfamiliarity of the Middle East propagated fear and curiosity in the hearts of many. Western knowledge about the Middle East was largely dominated through texts like the *Arabian Nights* which was the basis of most of their prejudices and helped in the construction of the “Other”, in post-colonial terms. *Persepolis I* as a graphic narrative was almost guaranteed success due to the choice of medium and the targeted audience. Its rollout in several translations helped its popularity around the globe, making it a distinct text in the corpus of world literature. *Persepolis I* acted as a major graphic memoir that helped in the production of knowledge about a country which played a major role in geopolitics. The flat style of her drawings was influenced by the classical Persian images of miniatures for instance the tulip design in her pages. Hillary Chute notes that Marjane’s drawing has a perspective that locates her style in the Iranian revolution. She brings cultural murals and art in symmetrical bodies.

Satrapı explores the arena of life writing as a concept through her memoir *Persepolis I* where she deals with ‘post memory’ to deal with the memories of war and trauma. Her text illustrated the cultural significance of Persia and the modern developments that took place over the years. She chooses to start the text with the chapter titled “The Veil”, focalizing the single eye. The veil was a cultural symbol associated with the Islamic fundamentalists. Marji grew up in a liberal upper-class household where she was taught the significance of her freedom of expression. With the imposition of the veil, she found herself isolated from the rest of her classmates as shown in the first panel where she remains alone as only a nuanced trace of hers is left in the second panel. She finds herself stuck between the allure of liberal ideologies of the West and the acceptance of her culture. The focalization of the panels on her friends represents the repressive change that is brought about in all of their lives individually and communally. Unlike the other girls, Marji refuses to identify herself with the veil as she could not accept the change. There is a conflict, enhanced by the gutter, between her and the other girls who do not question this imposition. Marji’s rejection of the veil is because of how it threatens her freedom of choice and expression.

There is a sharp contrast between how the girls interpret the veil and its political connotation of it becoming a cultural symbol that threatens the freedom of women in Iran after the revolution as shown in the 5th panel of the chapter. As the word text suggests, the veil is a “monster of darkness” for them. Marjane Satrapi arranges her graphic narrative in a linear way; the word text tells us the story of the plot and the conflict emerges out of the images. The panels reveal the intent of the storyteller. The icon of the text draws on Western stereotypes about the exotic nature of Asia, particularly the Middle East in this case, and she builds on its contradiction with the reality of women in such countries by asserting her identity. The “eye” of the chapter is linked with her selfhood, and the “I” is the subject representing her experience by using the tools of graphic narration. The exercise of her power and authority is reflected in the panels.

George W. Bush referred to Iran as the “axis of evil” in one of his speeches to justify their intrusion into rich lands filled with oil reserves. Satrapi’s work

was written before that speech but she did mention it in a couple of her interviews along with in the introduction of *Persepolis* that her book is a response to the “one-dimensional representation of Iran as a terrorist nation”. As Babak Elahi states, “In response to this ideological framing of Iran, Satrapi reframes its people as ‘individuals with lives, hopes and dreams’”. She indulges in a mission to reframe Iran’s subjectivity in response to the Orient’s stereotyping of the other. Through her visual storytelling, she attempts a reconstruction of the identity of Iranian people by deconstructing the Western notions about it first and presenting the complexities of it.

Stop to Consider:

Edward Said in his book *Orientalism* discusses the process of knowledge production and depiction of Eastern cultures in usually a stereotypically negative way. This contributes to the construction of the East in a damaging light, proving them to be inferior to Western cultures and in desperate need of emancipation that can only be brought by the white masters. Their so-called “barbaric” nature can only be rectified through the civilization brought about by the West, thereby justifying their intrusion into Eastern political matters and disguising their true exploitative intentions.

Self-Assessment Questions:

1. How has the form of graphic narrative contributed to the inclusion of *Persepolis-I* in the corpus of world literature? (about 100 words)

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2. What are the various tools employed in graphic narratives? How is space and time represented in graphic novels? (about 200 words)

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3. Discuss the role of memory and authorial intention in the writing of memoirs such as *Persepolis*. (about 150 words)

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4. Discuss the significance of the publication date of *Persepolis I*. (about 70 words)

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5. How have the panels in the first chapter projected Marjane's story and the transition of her country? (about 150 words)

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4.9 Summing Up:

Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis I* is a graphic memoir that recounts the experiences of young Marji's life during the Iranian revolution of 1979. By illustrating the conflicts and plot in the panels, Satrapi shows the distinct realities and complexities of identity formations. Her memoir acts as a counter-narrative to establish hegemonic discourses about the East and the state-sponsored narratives. Her subjective history remains in stark contrast to the national history of Iran.

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UNIT- 5

Marjane Satrapi: *Persepolis I* (Reading the Text)

Unit Structure:

- 5.1 Objectives
- 5.2 Introduction
- 5.3 Graphic Narratives
- 5.4 Reading *Persepolis: The Story of Childhood* as a Memoir
- 5.5 Subjective Historicity in *Persepolis I*
- 5.6 The Iconography in *Persepolis I*
- 5.7 Issues of Identity in *Persepolis I*: A Postmodern Text
- 5.8 Analysis of the Symbols
- 5.9 Thematic Concerns
 - 5.9.1 Violence
 - 5.9.2 Migration
 - 5.9.3 Class Hierarchy
- 5.10 The Condition of Women in Iran
- 5.11 Summing Up
- 5.12 References and Suggested Readings

5.1 Objectives:

This unit is an attempt to read *Persepolis I* as a graphic narrative while discussing its thematic concerns through the medium. After going through this material, you will be able to –

- *understand* how to read a graphic memoir through the tools provided by the author,
- *analyse* the symbols presented by the author in the images of the text and interpret the various conflicts,

- *identify* the issues of identity, violence, and gender in the context of marginalisation in *Persepolis I*,
- *discuss Persepolis I* as a counter-narrative to hegemonic discourses.

5.2 Introduction:

Today, it's important more than ever that people know: what is this "axis of evil"? You are completely reduced to a very abstract notion. But the 70 million people [of Iran] are human beings, they are not an abstract notion. They are individuals with life, love, hopes. Their life is worth the life of anybody else in the whole world (Wood 55).

Marjane Satrapi's graphic memoir *Persepolis* is a seminal work of literature, published in the early 21st century. The above-mentioned quotation is from one of her interviews in Bitch Magazine where she talks about the purpose behind writing her work. It is to present the sharp contrast between the homogenizing Western perception of Iran as the "axis of evil"- a terrorist nation and the actual reality of lives, the complex individualities that breed there like any other nation. A visual narrative, the text tells the story of 10-year-old Marji who navigates her life in the midst of loss, trauma of war and violence while growing up. She gives a voice to the marginalised Iranian women through her work while dismantling the established perception of them. The hybridity of the narrative allows her to show and tell her story through image texts and word texts. She has structured the memoir in a way that enables her and the readers to make meaning of the past lived experiences through a revisitation of her own self. For the writer, this is an exercise in post-memory to revisit her traumatic past and make sense of it to deal with the events.

5.3 Graphic Narratives:

Graphic narratives are an amalgamation of visual and written texts that allow for the creation of a hybrid text. The term "graphic novel" was coined by Will Eisner to define a collection of comics in a book-length narrative. In these texts, the visual and the textual narrative are presented to show the

similarities and contrasts between the two, making it a viable option for satire and political commentary to avoid censorship. One of the most prominent examples of a graphic narrative is Spiegelman's *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* which is comparable to Marjane Satrapi's book *Persepolis*, with its minimalist drawing style and political commentary. *Maus* is a non-fiction graphic narrative that revolves around the holocaust through the stories of a few survivors. Meeting Art Spiegelman shortly after Satrapi's departure to France inspired her to work on her graphic narrative.

“I wanted to tell my own story in *Persepolis*, but I also wanted to express how it feels when the country you grew up in out of the sudden totally changes, your right become under pressure of the right of God, the state, and the majority” (Vuylsteke, 2015, pp. 1–3).

The purpose of Satrapi while writing the story was to create her own voice at a time of social and political turbulence in her country. As an author, Satrapi had to rearrange and harmonize the narratives to make meaning out of them according to her purpose. But graphic narratives allow the readers to be free of the narrative flow. Even though the writer structures it in a certain way, there's flexibility in reading it. A graphic narrative can be read from top to bottom, vice versa, from right to left or whichever way the reader sees fit.

The way Satrapi was able to tap into the universal experience of a child growing up and the emotions she goes through makes it relatable to a wide-ranging audience and shows that the binary between the “self” and the “other” is actually unnatural. The universality of the text appeals to readers across the globe, with its circulation in different languages making it a part of world literature.

Check Your Progress:

How has the form of the graphic narrative allowed Satrapi to record her experiences and express them as a subversive text?

5.4 Reading *Persepolis: The Story of Childhood* as a Memoir:

Persepolis: The Story of Childhood is a multi-layered memoir organised in an episodic form that tells us about events and stages in the life events of Marjane Satrapi from the past. The text deals with 10-year-old Marji until she has to leave Iran for Vienna at the age of 14 years old. It's an adult writer creating meaning from her past events and experiences that she had as a child during a time of political unrest in her country. While recollecting her memories in the panels of the first chapter, it is adult Marji's interpretation of 1979 that is seen through the usage of terms like "capitalism", because a child would not know what it meant. Memoir writing tends to create the voice of the self, through the means of revisiting one's own self, to deliver certain ideas. It represents the everyday life of people even when there are certain problems of fictionalisation.

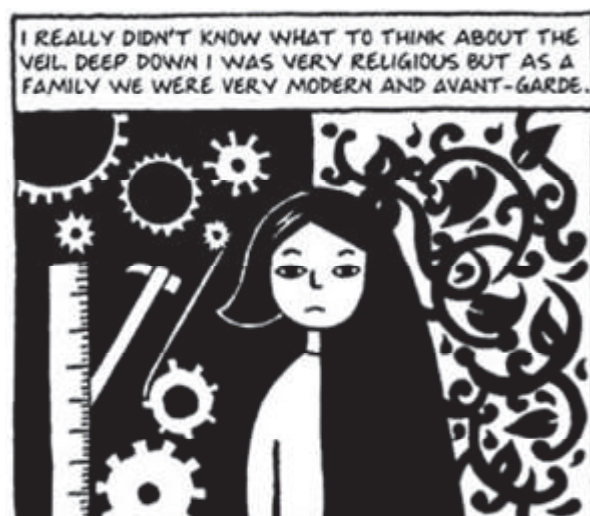
After the post-structuralist movement of the late 20th century when grand narratives were done with, memoir writing arose as a popular genre in the last three decades. It's the primacy of individual narratives over the metanarratives of history and state-sponsored discourses that aids its popularity. However, individual truths can also be fabricated and since memoirs provide a one-sided adult perspective, it often leaves room for the narratorial voice to be unreliable. Added to that is the fluid nature of memory which is dynamic in nature and does not provide a coherent picture every time. Memory is always in a state of flux and can change as we often tend to not remember things exactly the way they happened. It is mutable in nature and since the writer has to rely on a changing memory, it leads to a lot of inventions and touch-ups. The gaps in memory must be filled in by the author, to make meaning out of the content, in a way that suits her purpose.

As Amy Malek points out in her essay, "Memoir as Iranian Exile Cultural Production: A Case Study of Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* Series", *Persepolis* can be read as a cultural production of the Iranian diaspora that blends together the cultural history of Iran with Western genres from a place of liminality which leads to its success in the world book market. To quote Hamid Nacify about the state of exile, it is "a process of perpetual becoming, involving separation from home, a period of liminality and in-betweenness

that can be temporary or permanent, and incorporation into the dominant host society that can be partial or complete.”. Exile can be a state of power, as Bhabha talks about the power of the liminal space in his works. So, Satrapi’s unique position in exile gives her the space to subvert the authoritative narratives and question them.

The first chapter reveals the changes in education in schools and the experience of a little girl during the Islamic Revolution. When she dreams about the veil, a symbol of repression, and becoming a prophet she creates a self of her own, separate from the one that is forced upon them by the state as shown in the panels. Her dream of becoming a prophet emerges from her liberal middle-class upbringing that always taught her the freedom of expression. The panels in the first chapter show the sudden change from a French non-religious school to the binaries that were created between the boys and the girls, and “us” vs “them” after its transformation to a religious school. Anything Western and modern was seen as a threat to the Persian culture which needed to be eliminated in the new system of governance. However, the “us” was not a united whole, instead, there were divisions within since not everyone welcomed such a change happily like Marji’s family.

There was a division even within the self as shown in the 19th panel of the first chapter where Marji is illustrated to be stuck in a binary between her Persian culture and her liberal upbringing.



The panel is divided into two parts, one showing the capitalistic wheels of production while the other half showing the Persian hand paintings on tiles which are recurrent in their architecture and crockeries etc. The artistic patterns are found in the traditional art of Turkey and Iran. She uses her illustration in the panels to introduce the conflict of the self through such focalisation. The writer distances herself from the subject of her narrative through the “I” so that she can provide an interpretation of the experiences. There is a temporal and spatial journey that the narratorial voice travels through to the past so that she can read it from her present.

The writing of memoirs includes choosing certain events over others as the time that has passed is written and interpreted by the writer and presented by the narratorial voice through the process of selection. There is always a choice involved in the subjective selection of events that brings in several connotations according to the purpose of the writer. Memoirs and autobiographies are usually taken as real truths about a person’s life but follow a structure according to the writer’s intent and ideology. Satrapi comes from a position of privilege as she belongs to an elite middle-class family and was aware that her memoir would be popular because she was writing about something that Western readers had a vested interest in. She provides them with a window to the Middle East, something which the West was already looking for.

Check Your Progress:

Discuss Marjane Satrapi’s graphic narrative *Persepolis I* as a memoir.

5.5 Subjective Historicity in *Persepolis I*:

Marjane Satrapi writes as one of the many women writers of Iran, writing on Iranian diaspora. The storytelling of the memoir happens at three levels—a child’s story about her childhood experiences, a nation’s story and a writer’s lived experience. The writer chooses not to include any specific dates of the revolution, which is a hallmark of historiography. Just like the other sources of Iranian historiography like letters, journals and oral sources, Marjane Satrapi too has a similar pattern in her memoir.

There is a thin line that separates the history of a nation and the subjecthood of individual citizens which the author plays within the text. She skilfully brings in a documentary style in her personal narrative, with a fusion of fictionalisation, which threatens the stability of the historical accuracy of the text. She confuses the strict separation between genres and disciplines. However, in an interview, she stated that she does not create fictional narratives. Her comics are inspired by true stories because it's the real people and stories that fascinate her so she would not want to invent someone who does not exist. But you do have to find ways to make documentary styles interesting by taking certain creative liberties and arranging the stories. To quote Amy Malek, "In order to write a memoir about her own life as well as the experience of her country, Satrapi had to frame her narrative in a way in which she could emphasize both important moments of truth and self-reflection in her life, as well as important moments of national self-reflection in the history of Iran."

Satrapi's choice of the title tells her readers "'Persepolis' was the capital of ancient Persia" about her engagement with history and politics and allows the readers to delve deeper into the distinctions between the public life and private life. She gives us an account of the public in terms of the revolution's consequences. She provides an insider's perspective of the unfamiliar accounts being from a family in Tehran during the revolution. There is a juxtaposition of two simultaneous voices in the text that talk about private and public history.

The media in Tehran was also controlled by the state during the times of war as seen in the chapter "The Cigarette". Marji was two years into the Iran-Iraq war during this time and shows the contradicting stories that she's been hearing from different media outlets. The news channels in Iran claimed to have shot down 13 Iraqi aeroplanes but BBC reported that it was actually two of Iran's planes that were being shot down by the Iraqis. Even though it was young Marji on the panel absorbing all this information from her older friends, this was, in fact, a piece of deliberate information provided by the writer to show the discrepancies.

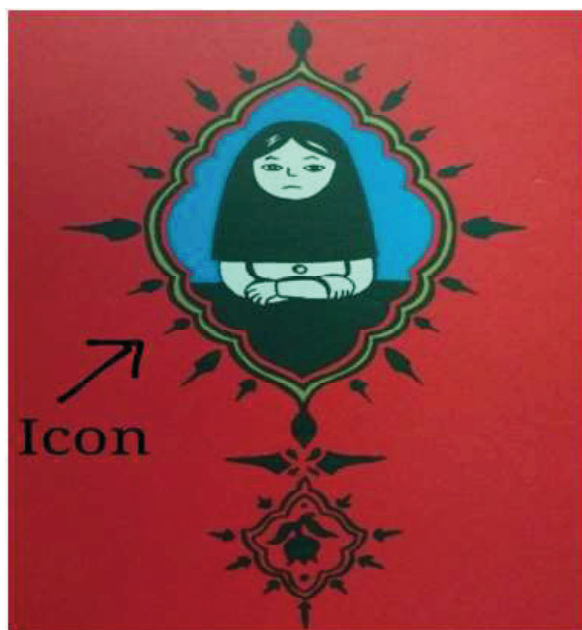
History is a dynamic and ever-changing phenomenon that goes through several processes of ideological changes and knowledge production. There are multiple perspectives that inform the larger history-making process, but mostly gets dominated by a few voices only from people in positions of power. That's when individual subjective histories play a crucial role in dismantling the dominant narratives. The purpose of the writer here becomes didactic to separate herself from the Western concept of the Iranian woman.

Stop to Consider:

The text makes it clear that it's not just the West who is involved in the process of creating the East but the Orient is also looking at the Occidents at the same time. The West had imbibed their way of living and culture through means of capitalisation and globalisation to other nations. As compared to those standards of living, anything in the East always remains pre-modern or not modern at all.

Despite writing against the Western misconceptions about the East, Satrapi doesn't totally dismiss the Western readers while retaining her own culture and maintains a dialectical relationship between the East and the West in her book.

5.6 The Iconography in *Persepolis I*:



The icon that Marjane Satrapi uses for the cover of *Persepolis* is the black bird image of an Iranian woman which is a representation of the Western perspective of them. She questions and challenges the representation of Iranian women by the West by showing the difference between the image in the text and the icon on the cover of the first chapter. She subverts this image and challenges it in the second panel itself. The deep-rooted image in Western narratives is extremely difficult to denaturalize as she also presents the impossibility of writing herself and projecting herself differently from the icon.

The face that starts the memoir is alien to Western readers because it is the “other”. She uses the image to help the readers collectively identify with the already established notion of Iranian women in their imagination only to then begin to systematically subvert it. The West looks at Iran as the ‘other’ to the ‘self’ which is inferior to them while the ‘self’ of the West is a higher cultural entity. The ‘other’ is always looked down on in terms of the exotic, barbaric and animalistic by homogenising them. Satrapi is aware that she is the ‘orient’ in the eyes of the West and that is how she presents the vilified image of the exotic other in the icon of the text. She defamiliarizes the image of the Iranian woman by rejecting the imposition of the customs by the fundamentalists while also taking part in the revolution.

The first chapter unveils the icon of a singular eye with the title of the chapter, positioned just above the first gutter to align the readers with the author’s vision. Satrapi defines her book as a text of witness so the icon of the eye in the first chapter is symbolized as a way to look back at her childhood with the readers and witness the events from a subjective, one-sided point of view. It presents us with the dilemma of seeing yet not seeing the subject of the text as shown in the first and second panels of the first chapter. The act of writing the text is an act of never forgetting her history to go back to her past and reclaim the roots of her identity.

The icon of the wheel in the text represents the wheel of revolution in the text as is symbolized in the second chapter of the book. The word text in the fourth panel says “The revolution is like a bicycle. When the wheels

don't turn, it falls" implying that the wheels of the revolution weren't turning in Iran and were only smothered with a lot of confused and disarrayed people on it, evident from the image text in the next panel.

Self Assessment Question:

How has the iconography in *Persepolis* been used to suit the purpose of the writer? (100 words)

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5.7 Issues of Identity in *Persepolis I*: A Postmodern Text:

The issues of identity form the core of the text as Satrapi critically deals with the creation of her multiple selves in the book. There is the self of the adult writer who is looking at a child growing up in Iran and how she wants to project her childhood phase. To do so effectively, the writer has to split from the subject as Marjane so that the writer can critically analyse the narratorial voice of Marji, the child. In postmodern theory, the multiplicity of self is a central argument that realises that people do not have one wholly homogenous self. They can be several people, all at once. As a postmodernist text, *Persepolis* deals with plurality and fluidity in terms of the self.

The many selves of Marji also include her Eastern and Western selves. In the first panel of the first chapter, there is an assertion of the image that she creates, the readers are asked to look at her in terms of the veil because, during the time of the first panel in 1980, the Shia regime declared Iran as an Islamic state and the veil swiftly became the symbol of repression for women in Iran. The second panel shows a conflict with her selfhood as she

is not happy with the transition. Unlike the other girls in the panel, she finds it difficult to accept the veil which is focalised through her trace. The last panel of the chapter, “The Veil”, shows what she wants to be in contrast to the first introduction. The larger frame shows her multiple selves, different from that of the little veiled girl at the start of the text.

In Iran after the revolution, there were only two types of identities available for its people; to choose between the binaries of the fundamentalist person and the modern person. Satrapi talks about the two different kinds of women’s dressing that became a staunch symbol for their ideological leanings in the chapter “The Trip”. One panel is divided into two sections that portray the conflict between the ideologies by the way the women are dressed in each of them. The fundamentalist woman is represented through a veil and a long dress that covers the whole body called “chador” while the modern woman is represented by a woman without a veil, a long jacket and pants. The word text says “You showed your opposition to the regime by letting a few strands of hair show”.

The next panel talks about the two different types of men as well. The fundamentalist man has a beard, as Islamic laws dictate that they’re more or less against shaving, and their shirt hangs out whereas the progressive man is either a clean-shaved man or with a moustache and his shirt is tucked in. Within the strict confines of such binaries, Marji forges her own identity by merging both as shown in the chapter “Kim Wilde”. There is a merging of the Eastern and Western Marji in a panel where she wears her denim jacket, Nike shoes, and Michael Jackson button which are all symbols of the West along with her headscarf that maintains her Iranian identity.

By responding to the grand narratives of outsiders and the national narratives through her personal themes and exploration of her experiences in regard to the self, she makes the text postmodern. In the process of presenting her past self, she also creates a self in the text itself while writing and illustrating it.

Self-Assessment Question:

What makes *Persepolis* a postmodernist text? (100 words)

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5.8 Analysis of the symbols:

The Veil: The veil plays a significant role in terms of symbolism in *Persepolis* that has been established in the cover page of the text. The Western representation of Iranian women has always been associated with the veil to show the oppressed nature of Middle-Eastern society and is a frivolous attempt at homogenizing the experience of all women in Iran. Satrapi tries to subvert the image of the black bird that Western discourses project on them.

At the same time, Marjane Satrapi also criticises the mandatory religious laws after the Islamic revolution that began to force the veil upon women. She however also presented a picture of the past before the revolution when such restrictions were not there. The veil represents the stark change between the era before the revolution and the era afterwards. It also attempts to demarcate the lines between the religious sect of the population and the ones with Western beliefs of liberalism. However, Satrapi does away with such binaries when she is illustrated to be wearing her veil with her Western outfits blurring the lines between such distinctions.

The Cigarette: The cigarette was an act and symbol of dissent from young Marji against the “dictatorship” of her mother when she was a teenager. Her rebellious nature is already foregrounded which will later be the reason that she had to leave Iran. Her outspoken and rebellious nature made her an easy target in Iran for the fundamentalists which is why she had to be exiled to Austria at the age of 14.

There is a juxtaposition between the visual narrative and the textual narrative in the panels in which she smokes the cigarette. The word texts talks about the repressiveness of the regime and its tightening grip over the people while the image text shows her smoking. This symbolizes her act of protest against her mother and in extension, the authoritative regime of fundamentalist Iran. She realised that from now she was indeed a grown-up who needed to take actions guided by her own choices and ideologies. The symbol of the cigarette effectively shows the intertwining nature of the private and public life of Marjane Satrapi, amplified by her narrative construction.

The Key: The chapter on the key is a representation of something that happened in Iran during the war with Iraq. The plastic key that was painted in golden colour was a part of the national grand narrative to send young boys into the military to fight a war they did not want. The government spread misinformation about the key on religious grounds saying that it was a key to paradise for those who die in the name of their country which was only targeted towards the poor people in the country like Nasrin's son. They were used as scapegoats and the irony of the myth was that they died with their keys around their necks in a minefield. Satrapi uses the tool of a mirror image in subsequent panels to show how the privileged young teenagers could enjoy in parties during those times and how in contrast to that the poor teenagers had to die in a minefield because of the state-sponsored propaganda.

Satrapi efficiently gives a subjective treatment to the theme of revolution, history and politics in the text by providing the everyday narratives of the martyrs as a counter-narrative to the official narratives of the state about these martyrs. She lets the little stories reveal the grand narrative of the state.

The Posters, Nike Shoes and Michael Jackson Button: Marji has from time and time again tried to establish her identity against the forces of fundamentalist oppression through certain symbols. These cultural icons of the West like the posters, Nike shoes and Michael Jackson button, which her parents get her upon her request, become a means of protest for Marji.

The sneakers, posters, and shoes become symbols of resistance for her against the fundamentalists and an outlet for her protest and anger. Despite government censorship, she tries to get things which are smuggled into the country as an act of revolt.

Check Your Progress:

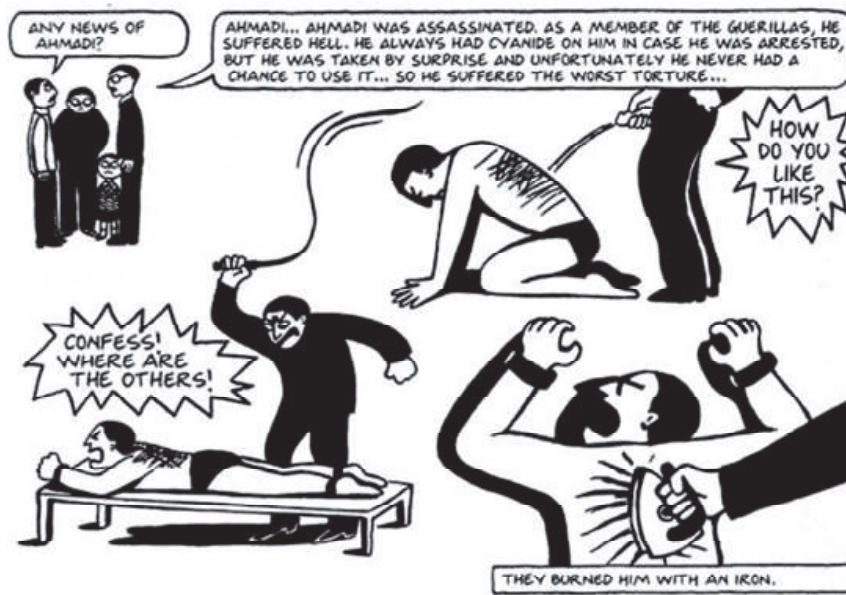
Discuss some of the symbols that Satrapi uses in *Persepolis* to enhance the complexity of her text and deal with the thematic concerns of her text.

5.9 Thematic Concerns:

5.9.1 Violence:

The theme of violence in *Persepolis* is rampant throughout the text with depictions of mutilated and dead bodies. Writing a memoir based on the time of revolution and war, the text is a witness to all the violence that has taken place on the bodies of people, not just emotionally and mentally. Talking about the depiction such violent scenes, Satrapi says, “I write a lot about the Middle East, so I write about violence. Violence today has become something so normal, so banal- that is to say, everybody thinks it’s normal, but it’s not normal to draw it and put it in colour- the colour of flesh and the red of the blood and so forth- reduces it by making it realistic.”

The cinema hall massacre introduces the theme of violence in the text with images of a trapped audience inside a burning cinema hall. The almost full-page image of the massacre shows anonymous dead bodies with “their faces shown as hollow skulls fly, burning up from their seats as sizzling, screaming ghosts.” This visual imagery of brutal murder is enough to haunt the readers, a fraction of what it was like for the real people who had been living in terrorized fear and witnessed such trauma. Satrapi views her culture as being seeped in the fear of violence and retribution due to its violent history which she tries to bring out in her pages.



In the chapter “The Heroes”, she shows the violence on the bodies of the political through the panels where several appliances and cable wires were used as torture methods. These panels did not have borders around them to distinguish them from the other panels and alert the readers about the unnatural severity of these things. She also illustrates the symmetrically dismembered body parts of Ahmadi, based on what she heard from the adults by using her imagination.

5.9.2 Migration:

Many of the Iranian people had to leave their homes behind due to the increasing conflicts in the nation which was threatening their safety. They had to leave for exile and migrate to other parts of the world, mostly in European countries. Satrapi uses her special position that places her outside the confines of her nation to write her history from her liminal space giving her a third place to write her memoir from. To quote Malek, “She has questioned previous authorities and identities, such as the negative images of Iran that have often been incorporated into second-generation diaspora collective consciousness while creating via exile culture new spaces and creative frontiers from which to examine the exilic condition. Other artists have created autobiographical graphic novels and other writers have created

Iranian memoirs, but it is the successful mixture of the two that is most significant.”

Her migration has become a part of her identity formation and helped by giving her a space to form her ideologies and opinions regarding the purpose of her text. By bringing in the themes and narratives of exile and persecution, she gives a voice to the marginal section of society in her text. The second generation of the Iranian diaspora finds her work as a way to reconnect to their roots because of their loss of cultural identity brought forth by migration and exile.

5.9.3 Class Hierarchy:

The instilled class hierarchy in Iran is critically examined by Satrapi in her text. Coming from a position of privilege of growing up in an upper-class household, Satrapi shows the juxtaposition between the lives of the poorer section of society as opposed to hers.

She chooses to write about the narrative of her maid where she pretends to be a daughter of the house instead of a maid and how she had to write and read letters for her because she understands the class hierarchies between them. She is aware of her position vis-a-vis their maid.

She also presents the reality of the state-sponsored grand narratives of martyrdom in the chapter of “The Key”. Only teenage boys coming from poorer backgrounds were given the key and brainwashed with the myths of paradise. So, while they were getting blown apart in minefields, Marji and her friends were enjoying parties. Such juxtaposition is shown brilliantly through the use of mirror framing of the panels.

The mere fact that Marji could go to Austria when it was no longer safe for her in Iran comes from a position of privilege because not everyone could afford to move out to better places in fear of terror. She skilfully depicts how in situations of war and revolution it is only the marginal and poorer sections of the society that suffer the most while people in positions of power make the decisions that benefit them.

5.10 The Condition of Women in Iran:

While giving a voice to the oppressed in her text, Satrapi makes sure that she doesn't homogenise the experiences of women in her text. She portrays different archetypes of women be it Western, Iranian, Conformist, Liberal, upper class, lower class and everything in between. She attempts to dismantle the confinements of the icon that the West represents Iranian women to be. She starts the text with the distinction of the veil separating the men and the women in Iran after the fundamentalist regime came to power, however, she also makes sure to inform her readers that things were not always the same in Iran by jumping back in time to show that The Shah promoted education and rights for both genders during his modernisation era and gave women the liberty to pursue equal opportunities as men.

Through the upbringing that she received from strong women around her like her mother and grandmother, she was able to get out of the strict confines that her society at the time relegated women's status to and formed her identity as an independent woman. Despite the oppressive nature of the mandatory veil, she subverts those strict codes of conduct by wearing Western clothes along with the veil merging her different selves into one.

Check Your Progress:

1. Discuss some of the thematic concerns of *Persepolis*.
2. How has Marjane Satrapi represented the West in *Persepolis*?
3. Discuss Satrapi's treatment of history and politics in *Persepolis*.
4. How do you analyse the graphic narrative of *Persepolis* as a historical text in terms of political narratives?
5. How does Satrapi treat time, memory and its representation in her memoir?
6. Why were graphic narratives and memoirs popular in the 20th century scene of writing?

5.11 Summing Up:

Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* is an autobiographical masterpiece that is brought to the readers through the medium of graphic narrative. With her critical understanding of history and politics, she was able to successfully curate a narrative that documents the life of an Iranian woman, during the decades following the revolution. She reveals the systematic injustices that plagued the society at the time while dealing with the themes of war, violence, class distinctions and memory. She presents the problems of creation of the self and identity just like any other person going through life making it a representation of a universal experience. By questioning the existing norms, exploitation and power relations, Satrapi creates *Persepolis* as a counter-narrative to established discourses on Iran.

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