

**Institute of Distance and Open Learning  
Gauhati University**

**MA in English  
Semester 4**

**Paper 18  
Contemporary Indian Writing in English - III**



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- Block 1:** Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*  
**Block 2:** Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting*  
**Block 3:** Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*  
**Block 4:** Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*

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Block Introduction

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## Block 1

### Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*

#### Block Introduction:

We have developed a method by which you can study the novels in your course; this method takes you through the 'background' matter made up of the author's personal life-story, the story of the novel against in terms of what it has meant for its readers through time, and then the 'inners' of the novel itself – its thematic patterns and the strategies of the novelist.

It has been often felt by critics, the New Critics in particular, that no proper critical study of a text can be made by referring to the author's 'intention' or her/his biography. For us in India, however, it is indeed important to know in advance as to who writes of *Kanthapura*. It is held up as a small Indian village in South India and if the narrator of the story in the pages of the book is an old grandmotherly woman who lived through the turbulent events related in the book, then the reader has to ask whether this is a translation or a novel originally written in the coloniser's language. That is how, probably, postcolonial criticism is born. Because the reader cannot leave this inquiry half-way but must proceed to probe further regarding the authenticity of the village represented here, the author's real-life or factual knowledge of such a community and therefore the whole complex process of fictionalisation. How does a writer, we might ask as proper postcolonial critics, who has lived in the western world and adopted the language with which a *Kanthapura* is born, authentically represent an Indian village community? Or, is it indeed the right sort of question?

There is no simple answer; or we could even assert that the answers are exciting and enriching for us. *Kanthapura* is probably one of the categories of novels which stand out in the Indian stock of literary milestones. Even if the famous 'Foreword' did not make its remarkable contribution to the history of Indian Writing in English, the story itself is a powerfully constructed one. If the student here makes the mistake of reading a commercial 'guide' to this great book, rather than to ingest what Raja Rao gives us, this will be

a crass lapse! The novel is indeed an *interminable tale*. There is no well-cut beginning or a clear ending. So we do away with ideas of symmetrical structure of what happened finally to whom and instead just let all the dialogues and all the reported events take a hold upon us. We are even allowed the scope to forget for a while who is telling the story. Perhaps this is what makes it really 'Indian'. It takes an extra effort to reconstruct both the layout of the village divisions and the exact course of events. Raja Rao lets the garrulity of the narrator take over the helm to a considerable extent. At the same time, he does not completely lose sight of the essential features. We could go so far as to say that *Kanthapura* was Raja Rao's recognition of the strength of the oral, story-telling tradition of such a community in India.

We could make many other comparisons with other Western novels and point out differences and similarities. The case of Marlow, in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, may yield some insights through a comparison. But this is not the place for such sophisticated analysis. We can consider Raja Rao's perception of Gandhi's movement in India. Is Moorthy a true Gandhian? That would lead us on to problems of the representation of history in the novel. What we can safely assert is that Gandhi's methods and influence aroused controversy even in the course of the nationalist struggle. *Kanthapura* stands as testimony to that controversy. That becomes a sobering thought for any reader who tends to read the novel only as poetic truth. Against a history of colonial oppression, poetic 'truth' can be thoroughly questioned. Again, that is what the postcolonial critic attempts to uncover – the politics behind the poetics.

So read on through our presentation which follows with the assurance that your needs as students have guided our method.

Unit 1 : Introducing the Author

Unit 2 : Introducing the Novel

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# Unit 1

## Introducing the Author

### Contents:

- 1.1 Objectives
- 1.2 Introduction
- 1.3 Biographical Sketch
- 1.4 The Works of Raja Rao
- 1.5 Placing the Work
- 1.6 Critical Reception
- 1.7 Summing up

### 1.1 OBJECTIVES

This unit is an effort to give you an overview of the life and writings of Raja Rao, one of the pioneers of what is better known today as Indian Writing in English. Attempts will be made in this unit to

- *familiarize* you with Raja Rao's literary oeuvre
- *acquaint* you with certain aspects of the writer's life and literary career
- *locate* the prescribed novel *Kanthapura* as a pioneering work within the gamut of Indian writing in English
- *evaluate* some critical responses towards Rao

### 1.2 INTRODUCTION

For students and scholars of Indian Writing in English, Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* is a key text. Many will agree that it heralded the beginning of the 'Indian Novel in English' in so far as its portrayal of experience of an Indian way of life and appropriation of the English language to create a new diction is concerned. Its publication in 1938 is one of the central events that inspired and generated a spate of 'Indian English Novels' to be followed by

his contemporaries as well as writers of the succeeding generations. No doubt, Raja Rao is placed alongside the other two stalwarts of Indian English Novels, namely R.K. Narayan and Mulk Raj Anand.

In this unit attempts have been made to acquaint you with the life of the writer and the works that he has produced. Rao's involvement in the nationalist movement is very well reflected in his first book, *Kanthapura*. It is an account of Gandhi's teachings of non-violent resistance to the British rule in India seen from the perspective of a small village in Mysore in South India and narrated in the style of the Indian vernacular tale and folk-epic. Located in the background of Gandhi's Civil Disobedience Movement, *Kanthapura* is the story of participation of an entire village in the freedom movement. It also demonstrates how the English language can be used to tell a typically Indian story without violating native speech rhythms.

In his writings, Raja Rao has evoked the spiritual depth of Indian culture. He used the medium of fiction to portray his patriotic, philosophical and literary concerns in a masterly way. Most of his literary works are about the common people of Indian society; his novels are the voice of an ancient and rich culture that speaks to a modern world.

### **1.3 BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH**

As I have already mentioned, Raja Rao is one of the triumvirate of the pioneering Indian novelists in English. Raja Rao was born on 8 November, 1908 in the state of Mysore in Karnataka (India), into a well-known Brahmin family. His father taught Kannada in Nizam's College. Rao lost his mother at the tender age of four which left a lasting impression on him. One could relate this loss to the recurring images of orphans in his works. Another influence on him at this young age was his grandfather with whom he stayed in Hassan in Harihalli.

Rao was educated at several Muslim schools like the Madrassa-e-Aliya and the Aligarh Muslim University. After matriculation in 1927, Rao studied in Nizam's college for his degree. Having studied English and History as his major subjects for graduation, Rao won the Asiatic Scholarship of the Government of Hyderabad and went to France to study in the University of



Montpellier where he learnt the French language and literature. Thereafter Rao went to Sorbonne in Paris where he researched the Indian influence on Irish literature. During 1931-32 Rao wrote four articles for the journal *Jaya Karnataka*, in Kannada. In 1931, Rao married Camille Mouly, a marriage which lasted for eight years; he later depicted the breakdown of their marriage in his novel *The Serpent and the Rope*. In 1939 Rao returned to India and participated in the Quit India Movement of 1942. Rao was also associated with different Bombay-based cultural organizations for propagation of Indian culture and values like *Chetana* and *Sri Vidya Samiti*. Rao's involvement in the nationalist movement gets reflected in his two early works: *Kanthapura* and *The Cow of the Barricades and Other Stories*. In 1947, Roy Hawkins of Oxford University Press, Bombay, published *The Cow of the Barricades and Other Stories*. Rao's spiritual experiences form the basis of his next two novels, *The Cat and Shakespeare*, published as *The Cat* in the 1959 summer issue of *Chelsea Review* and later in 1965 by Macmillan, and *The Serpent and the Rope*, published in 1960 by John Murray. In the year 1988, Rao published Gandhi's biography *Great Indian Way: A Life of Mahatma Gandhi* and was also awarded the prestigious Neustadt Prize for literature in the same year.

After the War, Rao spent much of his time in France and travelling throughout the world. He visited America in 1950 and later spent some more time living in an ashram. Rao settled in the United States and taught Indian philosophy in the University of Texas from 1966 to 1983. In 1969 Rao was awarded the Padma Bhushan, the third highest Civilian Awards in India. He died of a cardiac attack on July 8, 2006 at Austin, Texas at the age of ninety seven.

**Stop to Consider:**

Raja Rao significantly contributed to the University of Texas while serving as a faculty, and in retirement, by his continued involvement in the intellectual life of the community. The University, in recognition of his invaluable contribution, honoured Raja Rao at a one-day symposium, "Word as Mantra: The Art of Raja Rao", on 24<sup>th</sup> March, 1997. The symposium was organized by the Centre for Asian Studies in cooperation with the Harry H. Ransom Humanities Research Centre to honour Raja Rao as author, philosopher, teacher and mentor.

The symposium, “Word as Mantra”, honouring Raja Rao, also provided the Sahitya Akademi an opportunity to present Rao with its Fellowship (the highest honour conferred by the Akademi on any Indian writer and reserved for those who have achieved the greatest distinction in the world of letters). The then president of the Akademi, U. R. Anantha Murthy in his speech said that Rao’s concern “is with the human condition rather than with a particular nation or people. Writing, to him is sadhana, a form of spiritual growth. That is why he would go on writing even if he were alone in the world.”

Raja Rao is perhaps the first Indian who brings into the business of novel-writing (as seen in his novels like *Kanthapura*, *The Sepent and the Rope*, *Comrade Kirilov*, etc.) a wide intellectual culture—Vedas, Upanishads, Buddha, Sankara, the Holy Grail, Dante, Rilke, Paul Valery, Marx, Gide and so on. R. Parthasarathy in the essay “The Example of Raja Rao” (included in *Word as Mantra*) urges that Rao is “one of the most innovative novelists.... He has put the novel to uses to which it had not perhaps been put before by exploring the metaphysical basis of writing itself: of, in fact, the word”. Moving away from the European lineage of the ‘novel’, Rao has indigenized the genre by assimilating materials from the Indian literary tradition.

**SAQ:**

Would you consider Rao’s experience in the European countries as being relevant to his ‘Indian Writing’? What would be the nature of such ‘relevance’? (80+60 words)

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**1.4 THE WORKS OF RAJA RAO**

While *Kanthapura* is undoubtedly his most widely acclaimed work, Raja Rao has a number of literary works to his credit. Besides *Kanthapura*, he

has written a number of novels and short stories. His works blend philosophical and spiritual insights into the fabric of everyday life. Rao was awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1964 for his novel *The Serpent and the Rope*. He was also awarded the Neustadt International Prize for Literature in the year 1988. In the present section we shall have a look into some of his works apart from *Kanthapura* (which shall be discussed in greater detail in Unit 2 and 3 of this Block):

***The Cow of the Barricades, and Other Stories, (1947):***

*The Cow of the Barricades and other Stories* is a collection of stories which comprises some of the earliest works of Rao. Most of the stories that this collection includes were written in the 30s of the preceding century: “The Cow of the Barricades” appeared in 1938, “Javni” in 1933, “In Khandesh” in 1934 and “The True Story of Kanakapala, Protector of Gold” in 1935, “Narsinga” and “Companions” in the early forties. Stories like “Akkayya”, “A Client”, and “The Little Gram Shop” which were published in 1947 have earlier French versions. In terms of theme and treatment, most of the stories of this collection are related to his novels. For Shyamala A. Narayan, these stories depict “the wide range of Raja Rao’s writing in three decades, ranging from the purely social to the metaphysical”.

In most of the stories Rao has portrayed unforgettable women characters. Two such characters are Javni and Akkayya. In the later works of Rao such as *The Serpent and the Rope* and *The Cat and Shakespeare* women are not presented with such vividness and in such realistic terms. In his later works, the metaphysical concern predominates and women are important insofar as they are associated with the development of the hero’s character. However, in *Kanthapura* he depicts the rural womenfolk as taking an active and leading part in India’s freedom movement. The fate of the Indian women in *The Cow of the Barricade and Other Stories* is one of passive suffering regardless of their social status.

Many of the stories in this collection deal with widows and orphans. “Javni” is a widow while the narrator in “The Little Gram Shop” and the women in the same story – ‘Beti’ and ‘Rati’ are orphans. Narsinga in the story “Narsinga”

is also an orphan but he is looked after by the 'Master'. As in the novel *Kanthapura*, in some of the stories in this collection also, we see the influence of Gandhi on the people. The Master in "Narsiga" and the "Cow of the Barricades" are symbolic figures of Mahatma Gandhi. Here also Raja Rao shows how Gandhi appeals to the deep the religious feeling in Indians. In these stories, it is Rao's use of social realism which is highly successful. Different aspects of Indian life are presented in these stories. India's struggle for freedom is found in stories like "The Cow of the Barricades" and "Narsiga". A typical Indian folk tale, with a village grandmother as the narrator (a device also used in *Kanthapura*) is found in "The True Story of Kanakapala, Protector of Gold". Problems of the lower caste women (Javni), problems of wife-beating (Rati) and problems of the Brahmin widow (Akkaya) are very vividly depicted. The metaphysical dimension of India is presented in such stories as "Nimka", and "India: A Fable". Taking into account the variety of life that each story presents, C. D. Narasimhaiah says that even if Rao had not written any novels, "his short-stories by themselves would have assured him a permanent place in Indian-English fiction".

### ***The Serpent and the Rope* (1960):**

Published more than two decades after *Kanthapura*, *The Serpent and the Rope* is Rao's second epoch-making novel. In *The Serpent and the Rope* is a semi-autobiographical story of Raja Rao (the 'Serpent' in the title refers to 'illusion' and the 'Rope' to the 'reality'). The work dramatizes the relationship between Indian and Western culture. The Hindu concept of 'Karma', second birth, and eternity are brought within the fold of the tale. *The Serpent and the Rope* has layers of meanings in it; it is less about a story or plot and more about the search for meaning and wisdom. The spiritual quest is presented by two viewpoints—a Brahminical one and a Western one.

*The Serpent and the Rope* gave a new direction to the Indian Novel in English by philosophizing it. Since the rise of the novel in the eighteenth century, its philosophical bias has been toward the individual in an objective world. An entirely opposite view is expressed in *The Serpent and the Rope*: "India is perhaps the only nation that throughout history has questioned

the existence of the world—of the object” (R. Parthasarathy in “The Example of Raja Rao”). Philosophical debates are a part of both the Upanishads and Puranas and *The Serpent and the Rope* resembles both. Furthermore, going by the bulk of critical studies this novel has attracted, it could be well said that it is one of the influential novels written in Indian English literature.

### **Stop to Consider:**

One of the early texts of Indian writing in English can be seen through Sake Dean Mahomet’s, *Travels of Dean Mahomet*. This travel narrative of Mahomet was published in 1793 in England. In its early stages, it was influenced by the Western form of the novel. Early Indian writers used English unadulterated by Indian words. Another writer of historical importance is Bankim Chandra whose *Rajmohan’s Wife*, published in 1864 is often considered to be the first full-fledged novel in English. Next to it, *One Thousand and One Nights* by S.K. Ghosh and *Indian Detective Stories* by S.B. Bannerjee are other works of prose-fiction in English from Indian hands. Mention may be made of Toru Dutt’s novel called *Binaca or The Young Spanish Maiden* which was published after her death by her father in the columns of the ‘Bengal Magazine’. Ramesh Chandra Dutt wrote many novels in Bengali and two of them were translated into English by the novelist himself. These are: *The Slave Girl of Agra* and *The Lake of Palms*.

### ***The Cat and Shakespeare: A Tale of Modern India* (1965):**

An answer to the Hindu concept of Karma, Raja Rao’s *The Cat and Shakespeare* deals with metaphysical issues where there is a blending of Indian philosophy with western thoughts. The ‘Cat’ in the title is representative of the Hindu concept of ‘Karma’. The emphasis on Indian specificity is enhanced by the subtitle of the book ‘*A Tale of Modern India*’. This novel is an answer to the philosophical questions raised in the earlier novels. Rao here explores the Vedantic idea of the world being a play (‘lila’) of the Absolute, and the product is an invigorating comedy in which neither Shakespeare nor his language is spared. In this novel one does not find the communicative strategies of the earlier novels. Rao’s intent here is to express traditional lore. Both the languages, English and Sanskrit, are skillfully intertwined in the novel whilst making the Sanskrit rhythm mix with the sophistication of English. Rao’s craftsmanship in this novel shows the texture

of Indian life through this plain spoken and humorous tale. The novel basically centers around two friends. Govindan Nair is a sharp, down-to-earth philosopher and clerk, who deals with the difficulties and problems of day-to-day life with a remarkable sense of humour and zest. His unorthodox and unconventional ways of dealing with things is a constant cause of panic for his friend Ramakrishna Pai who is also the narrator in the novel.

*The Cat and Shakespeare* embodies complex metaphysical speculations on time, death and eternity and the text defies analysis and cogent elucidation. One of the most significant themes of the novel is 'Time' and its relation to 'Death'. Time is conceived of in the novel at several different levels and with several different degrees of complexity. Everything about the novel is a baffling challenge to the reader, who at the end of reading the novel finds himself provoked, dazed and bewildered at its elusive metaphysical meanings. The yoking of cat and Shakespeare remains a riddle. The narrative is complex and the story seems to move in uneasy jerks unfolding some strange experiences hidden in the obscurity of theme, plot and meaning.

***Comrade Kirilov (1976):***

Though originally written in English, it came to be first published in French in a translated version in *La Chatte et Shakespeare* Colman Levy, Paris, 1965. Comrade Kirilov is a sketchy tale by Raja Rao, depicting the life and ideology of the protagonist Padmanava Iyer. The attention of the novelist is more directed towards the evolution of the mind of the protagonist. Depiction of his mental states and opinion is what occupies a more dominant position than action, which is rather slow.

In Comrade Kirilov's journey from India to California and then to London and further to Moscow and Peking one could notice a questing soul who sets himself in search of reality across the world. This journey of Kirilov, is a journey of illumination as (in the course of his journey to various places) the reader finds discussions on various issues like Communism, History, Theosophy, sex, Gandhism, education in India, dialectics, democracy etc. which not only reveal but also form the texture of the novel.

Another important aspect in the novel that forms a kind of parallel plot is “Irene’s Diary”. This diary serves two very important purposes: one, it reveals the character of Comrade Kirilov from the perspective of Irene; and second, it takes the reader into a journey to Irene’s mind vis-a vis her husband.

Like *The Serpent and the Rope*, *Comrade Kirilov* is a spiritual autobiography. So instead of a chronological narration of events, the narrator takes us through introspection and enters the inmost thoughts and feelings and analyses human and social relations. Sometimes the continual philosophic digressions and discussions are lengthy and rambling, but what makes the book distinctive is still its philosophizing, its quotations from Sanskrit and its references to the myths and traditions of India. The comparisons and contrasts between different faiths and beliefs serve to emphasize that India is not only a country in the sense that England or Russia is but it is an experience, a metaphysic.

***The Chessmaster and His Moves (1988):***

This book won Rao The Neustadt Prize for Literature. It is the first volume of a trilogy in which Rao tried to explain the game of chess with life. *The Chessmaster and his Moves* comprises three books spread over seven hundred pages. The characters in *The Chessmaster and his Moves* are drawn from various cultures seeking their identities; its large cast of characters: Indian, European, African and Jewish, is remarkable. The story moves from France to London and on to the Himalayas and Bengal. In this novel, Rao uses the metaphor of the chess game to animate philosophical and psychological ideas. Sivaram Sastri, one of the characters in the novel is an Indian mathematician in France who meets Proust and recounts his love affairs and relationships. It is the story of an impossible love between Sivaram Sastri and a married woman. The story is full of uncertainties and the characters turn inward to seek meanings and answers to their questions, transforming the book into a metaphysical exploration. Sastri’s love for the French actress Suzanne, or her beguiling, effervescent friend Mireille, for instance, serves to underline the differences between the East and the West; while the latter seeks happiness in the world, the former is looking for freedom from the world itself.

Apart from novels and short-stories, Raja Rao has a number of non-fictional works in his oeuvre. *Changing India: An Anthology* (1939), *Wither India* (1948), *The Meaning of India* (1996), *The Great Indian Way: A Life of Mahatma Gandhi* (1998) are some of his prose works. Written in English, Rao's works give us an opportunity to look back not only at the times and situations in India during which the author lived, but also to acquaint ourselves with the ancient Indian traditions. R. Parthasarathy in the essay "The Example of Raja Rao" (included in *Word as Mantra*) urges that Rao is "one of the most innovative novelists...Moving away from the European lineage of the 'novel', Rao has indigenized the genre by assimilating materials from the Indian literary tradition. He has put the novel to uses to which it had not perhaps been put before by exploring the metaphysical basis of writing itself; of in fact, the word".

### 1.5 PLACING THE WORK

Raja Rao's first novel *Kanthapura* is a trend-setter; it demonstrates (we shall see how, in Unit 3 of this Block) the appropriation of the English language to tell a typically Indian story. *Kanthapura* presents the crucial political and historical events of the nineteen-thirties in India and the effects of these happenings in a village community. The novel focuses on the villagers of Kanthapura who participate in India's struggle for independence inspired by Gandhian principles. The immediate context in the novel is the Civil Disobedience Movement inspired by Gandhi and the participation of the entire village in the Movement. *Kanthapura*, was for the most part, written in a thirteenth-century French castle in the Alps, and published in London in 1938 by Allen and Unwin.

Rao's passion for rustic Indian life, his concern for the freedom movement in India and his endeavor to adapt the English language to tell a tale in the Indian mode and form of style—all go into the making of his first novel *Kanthapura*. His choice of a remote and interior village as the backdrop for action in the novel is also very significant. One might wonder why Raja Rao did not select an urban town for his purpose, as the urban areas directly felt the consequences of British decisions. There could be several reasons for it.



**SAQ:**

If we agree that *Kanthapura* set a trend in Indian Literature in English,  
How would we describe this trend? (80 words)

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For a reader interested in the way of life in the Indian villages, Rao's *Kanthapura* could furnish her/him with interesting insights. Villages had always formed India; long before the British came to India, the village had been the only existing form of a community. The villagers were integrated into several economic and social functions and due to division of labour, the different members of a particular village were required to perform a particular type of work. But, it also depended on the affiliation of the caste, which work the villagers had to do. Whereas members of the upper caste like the Hindus were in sophisticated positions like teachers or priests, other persons, who belonged to a lower caste, earned money, for instance, by weaving. In the rural area, workers had a particular working-place which separated members of different castes. Stratification into castes determined the members' social position. Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* is therefore divided into five districts, namely in a "Brahmin quarter", a "Pariah quarter", a "Potter's quarter", a "Weaver's quarter", as well as a "Sudra quarter". From this point of view, it results that every caste group has a particular social environment and an area in the caste-ridden traditional, rural society where its members live and work.

In the years after the beginning of British Imperialism, the rural community provided orientation and steadiness in times of rapid changes and disorder. The British, however, regarded India as "underdeveloped", precisely because India was mainly rural. Furthermore, being considered to be the opposite of the city, the village took on an increasingly important role. In contrast to the city—associated with immorality and perfidy—the village, however, featured authenticity and naturalness, because the members of the society, their traditions and 'Indian' values remained just as they had existed before the enforced influence resulting from the British rule. Another

reason for Rao's choice of the village setting is in consonance with his Gandhian loyalties. Gandhi locates his politics in the villages of India where the majority of Indian population resides. Rao treats the history of the freedom movement at the level of hostility between the village folk and the British colonial authority at a time when colonialism had become intensely heavy-handed in its response to the Civil Disobedience Movement. *Kanthapura* is a tale of how the independence movement becomes a tragic reality in a tiny and secluded village in South India.

So far as the style and form of the novel is concerned Rao makes a deliberate attempt to follow the traditional Indian narrative technique and it is an Indian sensibility that informs the telling of the tale. The novel has the flavor of an epic as it delightfully emerges through the eyes of an old woman who comments with wisdom and humor. In fact both the spirit and the narrative technique of *Kanthapura* are primarily those of the Indian Puranas, which may be described as a popular encyclopedia of ancient and medieval Hinduism, religious, philosophical, historical and social. Rao, at the outset, describes his novel as a "Sthala-Purana"—the legend of a place. The Puranas are a blend of narration, description, philosophical reflection, and religious teaching and the style is usually simple, flowing, and digressive.

Rao makes a highly innovative use of the English language to make it conform to the Kannada rhythm. In keeping with his theme in *Kanthapura* he experiments with language following the oral rhythms and narrative techniques of traditional model of writing.

**Stop to Consider:**

**The Narrator in *Kanthapura***

Consider the narrator in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and the narrator in Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*. In the former, Marlow's consciousness has been developed by the novelist and he is an integral part of the narrative and its narration. Compared to Marlow, Achakka barely has a consciousness and we do not know much about her except that she is an old woman from Veda Sastri's family. In this case, the narrator or the story teller could have been any one, if not Achakka. Another feature in this kind of narration is that the actual incidents (for instance wiping out of the village) acquires newer and different nuances and dimensions

as it is told and retold. Moreover, in *Heart of Darkness* the audience, which constitutes a specific group, is also elaborately introduced. Whereas in *Kanthapura* the audience is implied until towards the end when the new-comer is mentioned.

The emotional upheaval that shook Kanthapura is expressed by breaking the formal English syntax to suit the sudden changes of mood and sharp contrasts in tone. While the intuitive borrowing from language takes place at one level in the novel, at another interconnected level, the “real” India is constructed by enshrining the novel in Gandhian ideology. It is a highly original style. The author’s “Foreword” to the novel also spells out the postcolonial cultural agenda: “The telling has not been easy. One has to convey in a language that is not one’s own the spirit that is one’s own. . . yet English is not really an alien language to us. It is the language of our intellectual make-up-like Sanskrit or Persian was before— but not of our emotional make-up. We are all instinctively bilingual, many of us writing in our own language and in English. We cannot write like the English. We should not. We cannot write only as Indians.”

Rao’s novel is significant as a cultural tract which rewrites true history against the “inauthentic” historical accounts compiled by Europeans, and because it effects a cultural revival through the use of indigenous themes and motifs. Rao is also alive to the fact that religion has the potential to move people beyond dormancy—to display active political energy to the extent of sacrificing their lives. *Kanthapura* evokes a sense of community and freedom, construed as a spiritual quality which overcomes all bounds and crosses all barriers.

In order to allow an easy interchange between the world of men and the world of gods, between contemporaneity and antiquity, Rao equips his story with a protagonist whose role it is to enthruse the villagers into joining the political cause of India’s struggle for freedom without reservation. The tension between these two often contradictory levels of writing—the mythic/poetic and the political/prosaic—is the defining characteristic of the novel. As will be seen, this tension is both strength and weakness to the narrative; on the one hand enhancing its sheer readability as a story, and on the other hand blurring readers’ understanding of the realities of the Indian Independence struggle.

*Kanthapura* was highly praised by the English writer E. M. Forster whose masterwork *A Passage to India* (1924) criticized British imperialism. However, Rao's India is not a certain geographical or historical entity, but more of a philosophical concept and a symbol of spiritual calling.

## 1.6 CRITICAL RECEPTION

Ever since its publication, *Kanthapura* has generated a spate of critical writings around it. This shows the richness and depth of the text that could arouse such variegated responses from different quarters. For instance, talking about Raja Rao's influence in the gamut of Indian English writing, Braj B. Kachru says, "...Rao's *Kanthapura* provided a liberating mantra in the formative writings of India Writing in English". Regarding the influence of Rao's work in the minds of the Indian reader, C.D. Narasimhaiah says, "*Kanthapura* had built a strong base amongst undergraduates, most of who hailed from villages and towns. And they responded spontaneously to the Foreword which spoke of every village having a sthalapurana, the legend of the place, of a god or godlike hero and heroine. It touched a chord in their hearts as Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* did not."

On the other hand, talking of the social reality depicted in the novel, William Walsh is of the opinion that, "*Kanthapura* unlike *Coolie* focuses on the intensity of Indian life, its physical immediacy, its traditional swaddling and its religious murmurations. The action is located in a single village and told in the traditional way by a grandmother...the novel is dense with actualities of village existence and brilliant with an impassioned light of spirituality". In his essay titled "The Village that was Wiped out of Man and Mosquito", M.K.Naik makes a full length study of *Kanthapura* and looks upon the text as "a daring and highly meaningful experiment in style"; "a memorable work"; "a finished product"; "a minor classic". In the same essay Naik makes a comparison between Rao's *Kanthapura* and Ignazio Silone's *Fontmara* and discusses the affinities between the two. Not only is its sensibility truly of the soil but also its form and narrative technique can be traced back to the Indian Purana. V.Y. Kantak is also of the view that it is Raja Rao's evocation of native life as well as its speech rhythms that account for the power of the narrative.

Drawing upon the significance of the mythic aspect of the novel, H.M. Williams says that the idea in the style of writing this novel is that the epic tradition can be absorbed into depicting ‘Satyagraha’; “The novel is based on the tradition of the Indian epic, the Ramayana. India is Sita in the toils of the British (Ravana, the many headed Rakshasha). To rescue her, the Gods send an avatara, another Rama in the shape of Mahatma Gandhi, to lead the people of India against the British”. Another critic T.D. Brunton is however, severely critical of Raja Rao’s style and the narrative technique followed throughout the novel, “. . .his old woman narrator is a clumsy expedient, compelling him to write for pages at a time in a rigid syntactic pattern of short, hurried clauses. . . the author surrenders to the unfocussed flux of reminiscences (it cannot be called consciousness) of his narrator”.

The critical responses surrounding *Kanthapura* as you can understand from the above discussion are numerous and varied. For reasons of space, it is difficult to make elaborate discussion of these and other (some of which have not been covered here) responses. However, it is expected that this section will inspire you look into other responses related to Raja Rao’s works.

**SAQ:**

1. Identify the recurrent concerns in Raja Rao’s works. What are the themes and motifs that occur repeatedly? (80 words)

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2. Do you think Rao’s inclination towards Indian philosophy overcasts other themes in his creative works?

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3. Comment on the East-West encounters that Rao portrays in his novels.

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## **1.7 SUMMING UP**

The preceding sections give you a fair idea about Raja Rao, the novelist; his literary oeuvre and his pioneering efforts in initiating what constitutes now a substantial part in Indian English Writing. It is expected that this section will inspire you to further delve into the works of Rao and see for yourself what informs his writings. In the next section I shall discuss Rao's *Kanthapura* in brief; give an account of the vast array of characters and acquaint you with some of the critical responses that this masterpiece has evoked in the literary scenario.

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## Unit 2

### Introducing the Novel

#### Contents:

- 2.1 Objectives
- 2.2 The Story in Brief
- 2.3 The Characters
- 2.4 Summing Up

#### 2.1 OBJECTIVES

In this unit, I have attempted to introduce to you *Kanthapura*, the novel under discussion. From section 1.5 (Unit 1), you must have formed some idea of the concerns in the novel. This unit will help you to

- *gain* an overview of the story in brief
- *identify* the roles of the different characters and understand what they are meant to signify in the novel
- *appreciate* the novel in its totality of events

#### 2.2 THE STORY IN BRIEF

Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* is a story told in retrospect by one of its former inhabitants, Achakka, an aging grandmother. Achakka's narration starts with an elaborate description of the location of the village by the same name. As the narrative starts, the story is immediately imparted with an Indian speech style as in the manner of story-telling.

Kanthapura, as we get to know, is a small village in the district of Kara in Mysore, South India. It is situated on the slopes of the Western Ghats which form a wall along the Malabar Coast, facing the Arabian Sea. Cardamom, rice and coffee are the chief crops of the region, and there are forests of *teak* and *jack* of *sandal* and *sal*. Kanthapura has about a hundred houses divided into a number of quarters: the Brahmin quarter, the Potters

quarter, the Weavers quarter and a Sudra quarter. The reader is also given a detailed list of the inhabitants of the village with their professions and idiosyncrasies attached to their names. Such names as Postmaster Suryanarayana, Patwari Nanjundia, Waterfall Venkamma, Corner-House Moorthy, Kannaya House people, Temple House People, Fig tree House people, Coffee planter Ramayya, pock-marked Siddha, one-eyed Linga and so on, testify to this feature.

Like other villages in India, Kanthapura too has its own myths, deities and its own superstitions. The Goddess Kenchamma, residing on Kenchamma Hill, is the presiding deity of the village. The legend associated with the goddess is that long ago Kenchamma had slain a demon that created havoc in the countryside; that being the reason why a part of the hill was still red. It is believed that she protects the villagers from famine and diseases like small-pox and cholera. At this point in the novel one gets a fine instance of Raja Rao's use of irony: "...then there was cholera. We gave a sari and a gold trinket to the goddess, and the goddess never touched those that are to live—as for the old ones, they would have died one way or the other anyway... Ramappa and Subanna, you see, got it in town and our goddess could do nothing. She is the Goddess of Kanthapura, not of Talasanna. They ought to have stayed in Talassanna and gone to Goddess Talassanamma to offer their prayers".

The village also has the newly constructed Kanthapurishwari temple on the main street promontory. This soon becomes the centre of the village life, as well as the cause of all the trouble that form the substance of the novel.

The story starts with Moorthy finding out a half-sunk Shiva linga, and the resultant construction of the temple and the festivities surrounding the occasion of Sanker Jayanthi and Harikatha. Jayaramachar, the *Harikatha* man tells strange Harikathas, for along with the gods and goddesses, he would bring in Gandhi, the Swaraj and the Red-men thereby mingling politics and religion. The *Harikathas* provide the finest example of Raja Rao's use of the mythical technique. Gandhi is thus glorified and raised to the level of Rama and Krishna who fought the demons as Gandhi was fighting the Red-men. But the political propaganda carried out in the guise of Harikatha soon reaches the government and Jayaramachar is immediately arrested.



A few days after this, the policeman Bade Khan, comes to Kanthapura and is received with spite by the people of the village, which makes him go to the Skeffington Estate for lodging. The government agent that he is, Bade Khan keeps prowling about the village and later forms an alliance with Bhatta, a corrupted and greedy Brahmin of Kanthapura who agrees to work against Moorthy and the other Gandhi men of the village. Together they engage in every possible task that could curb the dissemination of the nationalistic spirit among the villagers. Thus the tension and conflicts in the novel result from the clash of these two opposing forces—the Gandhi movement for freedom (represented by Moorthy and his friends) and government repression (Bhatta and Bade Khan).

**SAQ:**

An author often gives indirect suggestions of hidden features. Identify such strategies in the depiction of Bade Khan. (70 words)

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While the Congress activities gain full force in the village with Moorthy convincing the villagers about the necessity of spinning and weaving, Bhatta, in order to disrupt such awakening, starts dishonouring Moorthy for his involvement in the pariah business. He threatens Narsamma, Moorthy’s mother that her son would be excommunicated by the Swami if he does not stop mingling with the pariahs. Bhatta’s threats, Moorthy’s refusal to yield and the shock of having a son excommunicated proves fatal to Narsamma and one morning she is found dead in the fields.

Even after the death of his mother, Moorthy continues in his mission with undaunted zeal and spirit. He also starts teaching the pariahs and decides to extend his programme to the coolies of the Skeffington Coffee Estate. These labourers in the Coffee plantation are recruited from different parts of the plains below the Ghats and are made to undergo a miserable life of torture,

suffering and back-breaking labour. When Moorthy comes to the Coffee Estate, he is confronted with the policeman Bade Khan at the gates. After a series of verbal abuses and curses, a fight ensues where Bade Khan and his foreman would have been torn to pieces by the women, had not Moorthy intervened.

The following morning, Rachanna and his family are thrown out of the plantation and are given shelter in Kanthapura. Soon after this incident, Moorthy starts his 'Don't touch the Government Campaign' and goes from door to door convincing people to join the Congress and start spinning their own khadi clothes. He gets an overwhelming response from the different quarters of the village; Patel Range Gowda, Ramayya, Elder Siddayya, and even the Pariah's like Rachanna, Lingayya and Madanna agree to form a Congress Committee of Kanthapura with Moorthy as the elected president. Range Gowda is elected as the Protector along with twenty one others who are also to be the members of the Congress Committee. They vow to spin everyday, practice ahimsa and to seek truth. The membership fee at the rate of four annas each is collected and sent to the Provincial Congress Committee.

A few months after this, Moorthy is arrested by the police and taken to Karwar on false charges of arranging the attack of the Pariahs on the police. In spite of the efforts of Advocate Sankar and the prayers of the Kanthapurians, the Redmen's court declares Moorthy guilty and he is sentenced to three months of rigorous imprisonment. Meanwhile Range Gowda is also dismissed from his position by the government and Bhatta leaves for Kashi for good.

In the absence of Moorthy, it is Rangamma who takes up leadership of the people and also discusses the Vedic texts with the villagers on account of the death of their teacher Rama Krishnayya. It is also under her inspiration that a Women's Volunteers Corps or *Sevika Sangha*, as they call it, is formed. Rangamma inspires the members to become Sevikas by telling them the stories of Rani Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi who fought the British heroically, of the Rajput ladies who burnt themselves on the pyre rather than surrendering to the enemy, of Annie Beasant, Sarojini Naidu and Kamala Devi. These *sevikas* take regular training in Rangamma's courtyard and are also given yoga lessons; she teaches them not to neglect their household duties and to remain absolutely non-violent if ever the police were to beat them.

On Moorthy's return from the prison, he starts his "Don't touch the government Campaign" in full swing and gets wholehearted support from his followers. The reader is also informed of another action taking place in the background, that is, the historic Dandi March and the breaking of the Salt Law. In accordance with the instructions from the Provincial Congress, the people of Kanthapura also refuse to pay taxes and elect a new government with Range Gowda as the Patel. This is followed by picketing and 'Satyagraha' at Boranna's Toddy Grove with a detailed and graphic account of the dramatic incident by the novelist. The people, who are arrested during the Satyagraha, later relate harrowing tales of the beatings and tortures which they were subjected to in the prison. Seetharamu, for instance, gives an account of how he was yoked like a bull and made to plough the field even though he was running high temperature.

**Stop to Consider:**

Amitav Ghosh is also another chronicler of the past; although he is not directly involved with politics. His concern with Indian politics (of the times which he talks about in his novels like *The Shadow Lines*) is to show how it affects the emotional and psychological sphere of the individual. *The Shadow Lines* is about a journey abroad that is needed to uncover some obscure events related to the protagonist's family past. However, the personal experiences of the characters invariably link up to the moment that caused the traumatic evolution of the Indian state: the partition and the resultant massacre of innocent lives.

In *The Shadow Lines* too we find a mingling of past and present as the narrator's memory crosses the frontiers and borders from Dhaka to Calcutta and London in which the death of the narrator's cousin in the 1964 Dhaka riot constitutes the central event. However, the technique used in mingling past and present in Ghosh's novel is different from Raja Rao's mythic technique in *Kanthapura* which sees the past as a continuation of the present.

Not only are the freedom fighters tortured in jails, but government repression also gets intensified on the people of Kanthapura. A new Patel is appointed and the people are ordered to pay revenue to him. One morning, the people of Kanthapura wake up to find that all the roads and lanes leading to

Kanthapura have been barricaded and a new beadle announces that if taxes are not paid according to the laws, the government will take punitive measures against the rebels. During the night, Moorthy and Rangamma run from door to door to inform the people to ring the temple bell for help if they are troubled by the policemen.

The next morning, the villagers see a long procession with an armed soldier at both ends of the line. In the middle, with one policeman to every two men, were the coolies who had left the Skeffington Coffee Estate to live in Kanthapura. They were being marched back to the Estate because the Sahib wanted them. They also find that while they were sleeping, the police had come and taken Moorthy and Rangamma away. The whole village is now full of policemen who start beating and abusing the women and burning down some of the houses and the rice granary. Terrified, the women take shelter in the temple and shut the temple doors so that the policemen cannot open them. They wait in vain hoping for people to come to their aid, but all they hear is the sound of soldiers' boots, keeping watch outside the door. They light the sacred fire and recite bhajans so that people get to know that there are prisoners inside the temple. To while away the time, Ratna starts telling them stories of the women of Bombay and of other big cities, and how bravely they were fighting the Red men, shoulder to shoulder with their men folk. The next morning, Rachanna's wife Rachi comes to their aid and opens the door. Thus released, they hurry back to their homes to discover that some of their menfolk have been away while some others have managed to hide themselves in the dense jungle bushes on the outskirts of the village.

Three days after this incident, some Europeans and city-coolies arrive at Kanthapura to auction the lands of the villagers. The women decide to bring out a procession on the eve of Satyanarayana Puja and under the cover of this procession, they plan to go out of Kanthapura. When the preparations are over, Ratna blows the conch and the women light camphor and break coconuts and the procession starts with the women singing songs and clapping hands. The policemen, on the other hand, are ready to attack them but seeing that it is a religious procession, they stop. At one point the

inspector stops Ratna and asks, “Where are you going?” “Where the gods will” she replies. As the procession marches forward, cries of *Vande Mataram* rises from their throats which is greeted, from the dense jungles by their men, with *Mahatma Gandhi ki jai*. In a fury, the police shower lathi blows on the men and the others like the city boys, the volunteers, Mohammedans and the peasants who had come to their help. In the ensuing confusion, the coolies rush out from the Skeffington Estate and a bloody battle continues in the fields. But Rachi, Rachanna’s wife could bear it no longer; she and some pariah women take off their saris, make a bonfire and start lighting one thatch after the other. In the midst of gunshots and human slaughter, some thirty Kanthapurians manage to reach the banks of the Cauvery River and soon cross over to the state of Mysore on the other side. They reach the village of Kashipur where they are given a hero’s welcome by the people and decide to settle there.

Kanthapura is not brought into the scenario again although towards the end of the novel (after one year and two months), the characters talk about it wistfully and longingly. The reader gets to know that these thirty refugees are comfortably settled in their new homes in Kashipur. In the afternoon, they all gather in the veranda and religious books are read and discussed, just as in Kanthapura.

On the other hand, as a result of the pact with the Viceroy, Moorthy is released from jail. Ratna receives a letter from Moorthy in which he tells her about Jawaharlal Nehru and how he is held in high esteem by the youth all over the country. In this way, the novelist has given us an idea of how Nehru was rising on the political scene and already attracting the masses. As Achakka puts it, “he was like Bharata to the Mahatma”. Ratna leaves for Bombay and they get to hear that the Mahatma is about to go to the Red man’s country to bring Swaraj for them. It is only Patel Range Gowda, who towards the end of the novel visits Kanthapura on his release from the jail. He goes to the village to dig out the jewels which he had buried underground on the night of government action. On his return to Kashipur, he informs the others of the sea change that Kanthapura has undergone over the time.

**Check Your Progress:**

1. Comment on the plot structure of *Kanthapura*? Compare with the plot structure of any other Indian English novel that you have read. Does it stand as justification of what Raja Rao writes in the Foreword?
2. Do you think the mode of story-telling serves as an effective narrative technique in the novel? How well does it voice the sense of community?
3. How does 'memory' work as a tool in the telling of the tale in *Kanthapura*? Is it different from the way in which 'memory' functions in *The Shadow Lines*?

**2.3 THE CHARACTERS*****Moorthy, the Village Gandhi:***

Moorthy is one of the central figures in the novel. It is he who organizes Congress work in the village; he is one among the thousands of young Indian men who left their studies and risked the wrath of the British government for the sake of their motherland. That Moorthy is liked by the village folk is evident from the affectionate manner in which he is referred to by the people of Kanthapura. He is called 'Corner-house Moorthy'; 'our Moorthy who has gone through life like a noble cow, quiet, generous, deferent, Brahminic a very prince'. He is considered to be honest like an elephant and is spoken of as 'our Gandhi', 'the saint of our village'. He is the 'small mountain' while Gandhi is the 'big mountain'. The influence of Gandhi transforms him from a common village lad to a man capable of leadership and self-sacrifice. Moorthy is said to have had not an actual meeting with Gandhi, but a vision of Gandhi addressing a public meeting and he himself making his way through the crowd and receiving inspiration from a touch with Gandhi's hands.

Moorthy goes from door to door in his village carrying the message of the Mahatma and explaining the importance of *khadi* and *charkha* to the villagers. It is he who forms the Congress Committee in the village and is unanimously elected as the President. Even Range Gowda, the 'Tiger' of the village is deferential to him and calls him 'Learned Master'.

However, Moorthy's character is never over-idealised, which makes Raja Rao's characterization realistic and credible. One of the important aspects

of the Gandhian movement is the eradication of untouchability. It is in this connection that Moorthy is shown to be an ordinary human being troubled with the common anxieties and concerns of his times. Being a Brahmin he is reluctant to enter Pariah Rachana's house (whom he calls 'Brother Rachana'), stands on the gutter slab (as demanded by custom) and wants to talk from outside; but Rachanna's wife calls him in. It is a very trying moment for Moorthy and his experience is very realistically depicted: "...and with one foot to the back and one foot to the fore, he stands trembling and undecided, and then suddenly hurries up the steps and crosses the threshold and squats on the earthen floor...and he looks this side and that and thinks: surely there is a carcass in the backyard and surely it is being skinned, and he smells the stench of hide and the stench of pickled pigs, and the roof seems to shake, and all the gods and all the manes of heaven seem to cry out against him, and his hands steal mechanically to the holy thread, and holding it he feels like saying, 'Hari-Om, Hari-Om'...."

Raja Rao has depicted Moorthy as a creature of flesh and blood with the fears, anxieties and failings of an average man of the times. He is not a superhuman; but a an average young man who like many others of the days were inspired by the nationalistic spirit to come out of their shells and fight for the cause of their country.

### ***Ratna, the Progressive Widow:***

Ratna is a young widow; she is attractive and charming as is clear from the attention which Moorthy pays to her. There is a very subtle hint of chances of an amorous relationship between the two, but this aspect is never fully developed in the novel. Ratna is a young educated woman of progressive views. Though she is a widow, she does not live in the conventional manner in which a widow is expected to live. She wears bangles, coloured sarees (not the white dhoti of a widow), uses the kumkum mark on her forehead, and parts her hair like a concubine, as Venkamma puts it. She is bold and witty in conversation. Although much criticized for her unconventional ways, she chooses her own path and sticks to it with firmness and determination.

Ratna takes interest in the Gandhian movement and is a source of inspiration and help to Moorthy. When Jayaramachar, the Harikatha man, is arrested,

she conducts the Harikathas. After Rangamma's death, it is Ratna who reads out the newspapers and other publicity materials of the Congress to keep the villagers updated about the happenings in the country. On the eve of Moorthy's arrest, Ratna along with Rangamma carries on the work of the Congress in the village. She exhibits immense courage and resourcefulness in the face of government suppression and police action. Consequently, she is dishonored, beaten up and sent to jail. As the narrator tells us, she comes out of the jail as a changed person, more humble and courteous, but more matured and determined. She is the epitome of those Indian women who were enthused with Gandhi's ideals and emerged from their homes to fight against British rule along with their menfolk.

***Patel Range Gowda, the Tiger of the Village:***

Range Gowda is a man of commanding and forceful personality and determination. He wields considerable power and authority in the village because of which he is known as the 'Tiger' of the village. Nobody dares to oppose or disobey his orders. As the narrator puts it, "he was a fat, sturdy fellow, a veritable tiger amongst us, and what with his tongue and his hand and his brain, he had amassed solid gold in his coffers and sold bangles on his arms. His daughters, all three of them, lived with him and his sons in law worked with him like slaves, though they owned as much land as he did. But then, you know, the Tiger, his words were law in our village". This powerful man is all ready to further the cause of the Congress. While he realizes the worth and integrity of the young Moorthy and is deferential to his ideals, the Patel is utterly disrespectful of Bade Khan when the latter comes to him searching a place for rent.

He explains to the people the significance of spinning and weaving, non-violence, and of the value and meaning of independence. During Moorthy's imprisonment, he boosts the morale of the people, guides and encourages them and sees to it that their spirits do not wane away.

***Bhatta, the First Brahmin:***

In the novel, Bhatta is Moorthy's foil. He is an agent of the British government and in league with the Swami in the city to frustrate and disrupt the freedom



movement in Kanthapura. According to C.D. Narasimhaiah, “he is one of the most interesting men in Kanthapura, and the novelist has given us a detailed account of the past, of his crooked nature, and the way in which he sets about doing the work of the red man and opposing the Gandhi movement”.

As the narrator tells us, Bhatta begins his life with a loin cloth at his waist, and a copper pot in his hand, goes on adding several acres of the peasants land to his own domain. With increasing prosperity, Bhatta loses his interest in priesthood. The Brahmin who starts with ascetic ways (which he keeps up for show), later on labours for wealth and position and luxury and lives on the exploitation of his neighbours.

Bhatta is very much crafted; and is always the first to reach the venue of any ceremonial occasion. The novelist gives a graphic account of one such occasion: “. . . then the real obsequial dinner begins, with fresh honey and solid curds, and Bhatta’s beloved Bengal-gram kheer: “Take it Bhattare, only one cup more, just one? Let us not dissatisfy our manes”. The children are playing in the shadow, by the byre and the elderly people are all in the side room, waiting for the holy Brahmins to finish their meal. But Bhatta goes on munching and belching, drinking water and then munching again”.

Bhatta is an unworthy husband too. He has little affection for his wife. In the days he dines out, the poor woman has to do with dal-soup and rice. His wife dies and soon this middle-aged man marries a girl of twelve years: “What could he do? Offers of marriage came from here and there. There is dowry too. A thousand rupees cash and five acres of wet land. And a real seven days’ marriage”.

Bhatta’s other social considerations hardly go any further. Bhatta is one of those who has nothing to do with the Gandhi bhajans. It is he who keeps the Swami informed about the happenings in the village. Moreover he is also the government’s election agent and therefore discourages the nationalist sentiments to surge in Kanthapura. He also sides with Bade Khan and sets afloat the rumours regarding Moorthy’s excommunication. Ironically, in the later part of the novel, he goes to Kashi to wash off his sins. Through Bhatta, the novelist presents the corruption among the high-caste Brahmins who wielded much influence in the society of the times. He is the symbol of greed and narrow orthodoxy.

***Bade Khan, the Policeman:***

Bade Khan, the policeman represents the rule of the Empire in Kanthapura. He is one of those Indians who made it possible for the British to rule in India for a long time. It is his duty to maintain law and order in Kanthapura and suppress the Gandhian movement. On arriving at Kanthapura, the first difficulty he has to face is that of accommodation.

Being a Muslim, he finds it difficult to find a house in the village. He can stay neither in the Potter's Street, nor in the Sudra Street, and of course the Brahmin quarter is out of bounds for him. Patwari Nanjundia is unable to help him. Then he approaches Patel Range Gowda, who receives him dryly, insults him, and bluntly tells him that his business is to collect revenue, and not to go about hunting for houses. Later, he is allotted a hut in the Skeffington Estate where he settles down with one of the pariah women.

Bade Khan moves about the village secretly watching the people, collecting information and passing it on to the city authorities. Very soon he forms a league with Bhatta and the other anti-Gandhi men of the village. When Moorthy goes to meet the workers at the coffee estate, it is Bade Khan who keeps watch and showers on him and his supporters the lathi-blows.

***The White Owner of Skeffington Coffee Estate:***

The Skeffington Coffee Estate, which is situated close to Kanthapura, is owned by a white man, who is popularly regarded as the 'Hunter Sahib'. The 'Hunter Sahib' always carries a whip or 'hunter' in his hand and wields it freely on any worker who has the audacity to neglect his/her duties in the estate.

A large number of workers are needed on the estate and they are recruited by his *maistri* or steward with false promises. The workers are brought to the estate from distant parts of Mysore with false promises of attractive wages with visions of a happy and comfortable life with no hard labour. Apart from this, they are also sexually exploited by the Sahib. If the Sahib takes a fancy to any of the women, she has to be sent to his house at night, or he would torture the other members of the family either by cutting off wages or lashing them with his whip.

### ***The Swami:***

The Swami lives in the city and like Gandhi, never appears on the scene. However, he influences the course of action and does much harm to the 'Pariah' cause. He is an orthodox Brahmin, narrow and conservative in his views. Moreover he is a traitor to the country. He receives twelve hundred acres of wet land from the government. So, he is a willing stooge of the Britishers. In alliance with Bhatta, he does his best to defeat the freedom struggle in Kanthapura. It is he who excommunicates Moorthy for the 'pariah business', and is thus indirectly responsible for his mother's death.

### ***Advocate Sankar:***

Like Moorthy, Advocate Sankar is a staunch follower of Gandhi. He is a true patriot and does his best for the cause of freedom. He wears Khadi, and does not go to functions where people come wearing dresses made of foreign material. When Gandhi is sent to prison, Sankar keeps fast, for he believes that fasting is a means of self-purification. He is very different from his professional counterparts. He withdraws himself as soon as he discovers that the case of his client Rama Chetty is false. Bold and fearless, he takes up the defense of Moorthy when the latter is arrested and sent to the city courts. As a husband, Advocate Sankar is to be contrasted with Bhatta. Unlike Bhatta, he does not marry for the second time when his wife dies.

### ***Waterfall Venkamma:***

Like a 'waterfall', this character in the novel is always found to be shedding tears and roaring and railing against almost everybody in the novel. Waterfall Venkamma symbolizes all the pettiness, jealousy, triviality and orthodoxy of Indian village life. She cannot bear to see others happy or successful; prosperity of other villagers arouses her wrath and spite. She is jealous of Rangamma because the latter has a much larger house and constantly rails against her: "Why should a widow, and a childless widow too, have a big house like that? And it is not her father who built it...its my husband's ancestors who built it. I've two sons and five daughters and the shaven widow hadn't even the luck of having a bandicoot to call her own."

She is also against Moorthy, because he refused to marry her second daughter. She nurses this grudge against him, and does her best to have her revenge upon him. Orthodox and conservative, she has no sympathy with the Gandhian movement and therefore take sides with Bhatta and the Swami. It is she who spreads the idea that Moorthy is to be excommunicated. In this way, she also causes the death of Moorthy’s mother. She also hates Ratna for her progressive views and constantly hurls abuses against her.

**Narsamma:**

Narsamma is the old widowed mother of Moorthy. She is tall and thin and “her big, broad ash marks gave her such an air of ascetic holiness”. She has a great love for her son and high hopes of a brilliant career for him. But her hopes and dreams are shattered when he joins the freedom movement. She gave birth to eleven children, five of whom died, and of the remaining six Moorthy was the only son. Being the youngest of all, Moorthy is deeply loved by her and therefore the news of Moorthy’s excommunication proves fatal to her. Excommunication is regarded by her as nothing less than a sin: “Oh! to have gone to Benaras and Rameshwaram and to Gaya, and to have a son excommunicated. I wish I had closed my eyes with your father instead of living to see you polluted. Go away, you pariah”.

Narsamma is the most pathetic character in the novel. She is not wicked or crooked like Waterfall Venkamma, but is blinded by traditional customs and orthodoxies. She is therefore unable to understand the implications of the Gandhian movement and the noble work that her son is engaged in and hence has the sympathy of the reader.

**SAQ:**

Can we apply standards of ‘psychological realism’ to the characters in *Kanthapura*? Do they appear to be individualized? (80 + 70 words)

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**Rangamma:**

She is one of the few educated women of the village. She is a lady with enlightened and progressive views and helps Moorthy in organizing the Congress work in the village. She reads the newspapers herself and keeps herself and the others acquainted with the day-to-day happenings elsewhere; the narrator tells us that she knows many things of general interest: "...of the plants that weep, of the monkeys that were the men we have become, of the worms thin as dust, worms that get into your blood and give you dysentery and cholera..." Waterfall Venkamma is jealous of her, and roars and rails against her day and night. It is from such railings that we learn much about Rangamma. We get to know that she is a childless widow, but has a very big home, bigger than that of Venkamma's. Her relatives stay in the city and visit her frequently.

**Check Your Progress:**

1. Analyse in detail the narrative strategies by which Raja Rao depicts the characters in the novel.
2. The independence Movement as depicted in *Kanthapura* is not merely a political struggle for freedom but an all pervasive emotional experience. Comment on this statement. (60 words)
3. Comment on Moorthy's role as agent of Gandhism in *Kanthapura*.

**2.4 SUMMING UP**

In this unit, I have tried to provide you with a brief overview of the story line of the novel and discussed the role of some of the characters that are integral to the development of the plot. But a reading of this unit will be more fruitful if you have already read the novel on your own. It is expected that this unit will assist you to look at the nuances of the narrative and broaden the scope of your reading.

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## Unit 3

### Themes and Techniques

#### Contents:

- 3.1 Objectives
- 3.2 Introduction
- 3.3 The Title
- 3.4 Major Themes
  - 3.4.1 The Question of Language
  - 3.4.2 Village and Community Life
  - 3.4.3 Colonial Exploitation
  - 3.4.4 Story-telling
  - 3.4.5 Sthalapurana and the Culture of Mythology
  - 3.4.6 Social Divisions and National Unity
  - 3.4.7 Nationalism and the Question of a New Society
- 3.5 Narrative Technique
- 3.6 Images and Myths
- 3.7 Summing up
- 3.8 References and Suggested Readings

#### 3.1 OBJECTIVES

This is the final unit of Block 2. The objective of this unit is to enable you to

- *analyze* the novel in terms of its themes
- *identify* the narrative technique employed by Raja Rao in the novel
- *assess* how these themes and techniques contribute to the overall effect of the novel.

### 3.2 INTRODUCTION

The novel is a western art form; but Raja Rao has used it to express an essentially Indian sensibility. *Kanthapura* is Indian both in theme and treatment; it is an 'Indian' novel in English and attempts to express the Indian sensibility.

After going through the previous unit you must have formed a fair idea of the story line. Now, it is important for us to look at the themes and techniques that appear in this masterpiece which impart an Indian flavour to it. For a novel like *Kanthapura*, it is very necessary to understand the narrative technique employed. It is very different from the traditional third-person omniscient narrative or the stream-of-consciousness technique. The entire narration is in the form of story-telling by a garrulous Indian grandmother. In the following sections I have discussed in detail some of the important themes and the techniques that the writer makes use of in his novel.

### 3.3 THE TITLE

The title 'Kanthapura' at once tells us what the novel is about. 'Kanthapura' is apt and suggestive as a title for the novel is about a South Indian village by that very name, about its people, their way of life and the metamorphosis that comes about in this village under the sweep of the freedom movement. The significance of the title also lies in the way in which it evokes an Indian sensibility. Unlike the British and other European novelists before him (like Defoe, Richardson, Fielding and so on), whose choice of titles (*Robinson Crusoe*, *Tom Jones*, *Pamela*, etc.), are all named after their respective protagonists), are suggestive of the prime importance of the 'individual' in the world, Rao's title shows the importance of 'community life' in India. If there is any protagonist in the novel, it is the community, the people of *Kanthapura*.

*Kanthapura* is not a novel dealing with the life and doings of any particular protagonist. It is certainly not the story of Moorthy, but of the village-folk, of their suffering, their exile, their momentary defeat—a defeat which has in it the seeds of ultimate victory. Hence one cannot talk about a single protagonist in this novel; it is *Kanthapura* itself and its people. Even the figure of Gandhi is very skillfully presented so that Gandhi does not become



an overbearing presence among the common villagers. Gandhi never makes a physical appearance in the novel although the impact of his ideals is very strongly felt. This suggests the importance that community life of Kanthapura has in the novel and also serves to justify the author’s choice of the title.

**SAQ:**

There are also many English novels with descriptive names—*Hard Times* for instance. Kanthapura is suggestive of an integrated community. Do you think it also suggests a land mark event in mass movement? Give your opinions. (70 words)

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**3.4 MAJOR THEMES**

In this section I shall acquaint you with some of the important themes that inform Raja Rao’s *Kanthapura*, an understanding of which is essential to appreciate the text in its totality:

**3.4.1 THE QUESTION OF LANGUAGE**

In the ‘Foreword’ to the text, there is reference to ‘English’ as a vehicle or medium of message in the Indian context. This medium, as Rao says, however, is “not one’s own”; but the spirit that the medium conveys “is one’s own”. The text of *Kanthapura* complements the ‘Foreword’ as Rao takes up his own challenge to demonstrate that the “thought-movement” is not “maltreated in an alien language”. In his use of English, he makes a distinction between two linguistic functions—‘intellectual’ and ‘emotional’:

“[English] is the language of our intellectual make-up—like Sanskrit or Persian was before—but not of our emotional make-up. We are all instinctively bilingual, many of us writing in our own language and in English. We cannot write like the English. We should not....Our method of expression has to be a dialect which will someday prove to be as distinctive and colourful as the Irish or the American.”

**Stop to Consider:**

In 1982, Salman Rushdie said, “we can’t simply use the language [English] in the way the British did: it needs remaking for our own purposes”

This shows that Rao’s succeeding generation has taken up his credo.

The works that followed *Kanthapura* are essentially Indian in their contextualization, their linguistic and cultural hybridity. Parthasarathy explains such experiments as “ritually de-Anglicized English”:

In *Kanthapura* English is thick with the agglutinants of Kannada; in *The Serpent and the Rope* the Indo-European kinship between English and Sanskrit is creatively exploited; and in *The Cat and Shakespeare*, English is made to approximate the rhythm of Sanskrit chants. At the apex of this linguistic pyramid is...*The Chessmaster and his Moves*, wherein Rao has perfected his experiments with the English language spanning more than fifty years. (Parthasarathy in *Word as Mantra: The Art of Raja Rao*)

English is a part of India’s multilingual linguistic repertoire and his stylistic experiment appropriates the English language in Indian terms. As a result the Indian reality that emerges from his style of writing is authentic. Foremost among the problems that the Indian writer has to wrestle with are, firstly, the expression of modes of thinking specific to his culture and secondly, terminology. Rao overcomes the first problem by invariably drawing upon the speech flavours of Kannada and Sanskrit, idiomatic and syntactic equivalences, and the imitation of native-style repertoires. He overcomes the second problem of finding words for culturally bound objects by contextualizing them so that their meanings are self-evident. It is within the frame of Kannada that the tale is told. Rao’s use of English suggests the appropriation of the structural characteristics of Kannada as the following example will show:

“High on the Ghats is it, high up the steep mountains that face the cool Arabian seas; up the Malabar Coast is it, up Mangalore and Puttur and many a centre of cardamom and coffee, rice and sugarcane.”

The literal translation of Kannada phrase and idiom into English is another factor which imparts an Indian flavor to the style. Certain names like “Waterfall Venkamma” and “Nose-scratching Nanjamma” are literal

translations from an Indian speech style. Phrases and idioms like “You are a traitor to your salt-givers”, “As you like says the licker of your feet”; “The Don’t touch the Government Campaign”; “Nobody... will believe in such a crow-and-sparrow story”; “Your voice is not a sparrow voice in your village”; “You cannot put wooden tongues to men”; “Why? Go and ask the squirrel on the fence!”; “The leaf is laid”; “To the mire with you”; “The sinner may go to the ocean but the water will only touch his knees”; “A tiger-jawed person, she could speak like a man” and so on, show the incorporation of the essence of an Indian speech rhythm in English. As Parthasarathy says, “the English language does not have sufficiently deep roots in South Asia.” It is therefore important for the writer to find his individual style through which to express his worldview.

**SAQ:**

Does the adoption of local idiom strengthen the ‘Indian’ flavour? Or does it lead to distortions which estrange the Indian scene? (70 + 70 words)

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With Rao, a new paradigm for the use of the colonial language started unfolding itself where the earlier conceptual frameworks were being substituted with fresh initiatives. The credo of 1938 became the cornerstone for what followed in the years to come. In different ways and with different emphases, one hears voices from different parts of the world regarding the use of English within a particular context such as Amos Tutuola (in *The Palmwine Drinkard*), Chinua Achebe (in *Things Fall Apart*) and Raja Rao’s own contemporaries and successors in the Indian subcontinent such as Upamanyu Chatterjee, Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth and so on.

**3.4.2 VILLAGE AND COMMUNITY LIFE**

*Kanthapura* is a typical Indian village; its different aspects have been minutely described which imparts a realistic element to it. We are told of its location,

of its crops, grinding poverty afflicting the masses, illiteracy and superstition. The setting of *Kanthapura* is a village in Karnataka on the Western Ghats of India, in an area rich in grains like rice, spices like cardamom, and other cash crops like coffee, sandalwood, sugarcane, and teak. The village has separate quarters for Brahmins, pariahs, potters, weavers and sudras. It is a well-populated village and like all traditional Indian societies religious sentiments predominate here. It has a temple devoted to the village deity Kenchamma, on the hill, and a temple devoted to goddess Kanthapurishwari on the main street promontory. In an Indian village like Kanthapura, relationships are interpersonal and social stratification is along caste and occupation lines. The coming of Gandhian ideology enables the novelist to penetrate into the rivalries and jealousies and rigidities of the caste system that are very religiously followed in such villages.

The villagers are represented in realistic colour. Their names are made descriptive in a typically rural way. There is Post Master Surya Narayana with his two-storied house; Patwari Nanjundiah who had even put glass panes to the windows; the thotti house of the pock-marked Siddha which has a big veranda, large roof and a granary; Waterfall Venkamma, who roared day and night; Zamindar Bhatta who has gone on adding peasants' land to his own domain; the young, idealistic, corner house Moorthy (who in due course of time shakes the village out of its complacency); and the nine-beamed house of Patel Range Gowda, the vigorous peasant chief of the village wedded to the soil from immemorial generations, a 'Tiger' to the authorities.

Although superstitious and ignorant, these people are deeply religious as seen in their faith in goddess Kenchamma, the village deity. There is a folk song which evokes in us images and attitudes to what Kenchamma means to the people of Kanthapura:

Kenchamma, Kenchamma  
Goddess benign and bounteous  
Mother of earth, blood of life  
Harvest queen, rain crowned  
Kenchamma, Kenchamma  
Goddess benign and bounteous

Kenchamma forms the centre of their lives and makes their lives meaningful.

Marriage, birth, sickness, death, funeral—all are watched over by Kenchamma. For these poor villagers, the hills, rivers, fields and animals have a distinct presence, as evident in the following:

“Suddenly a shooting star sweeping across the sky between the house-roof and the byre-roof, and Ramakrishna says, ‘Some good soul has left the earth’”.

Here, a distinctive Indian sensibility, a peasant sensibility, to be precise, has been expressed in the English language.

### **3.4.3 COLONIAL EXPLOITATION**

A considerable part of the book is taken up with life on the coffee estate, the crudities and vulgarities of the Red-man; the humiliations of the poor and helpless natives and the violation of their women’s honour—all have been portrayed to the last detail of credibility.

The Skeffington Estate is described vividly and elaborately in the novel. No one knows when the estate was founded although many people of Kanthapura still remember its first owner who was called ‘Hunter-Sahib’, from the manner of wielding his whip on the labourers. The coolies who worked on the estate were recruited from the plains below the Western Ghats and a Foreman or ‘Maistri’ was appointed for the purpose. This person would be sent from time to time to recruit coolies and would entice the latter to leave their hearth and home in lieu of reaping richer rewards from the work in the Coffee Estate. Once the simple and poverty-stricken people were brought to the plantation; all promises are forgotten and no wages would be given. The march of the coolies to the Coffee Estate is very graphically described which is evocative of their wretched condition: “...half-naked, starving, spitting, weeping, vomiting, coughing, shivering, squeaking, shouting, moaning, coolies with children clung to their mothers’ breasts, the old men to their sons’ arms, and bundles hung over shoulder and arm...winding through the twists of the Estate path”. And their joy and excitement on finding employment is equally evocative, “a four-anna bit for a man hand and a two-anna bit for a woman hand—and on finding rice and

water they cringed before the Sahib and fell on his feet in gratitude and that night they slept the sleep of princes”.

The work on the estate is not just picking coffee-berries as promised. The labourers also need to dig pits and hew wood, and the women had to pluck weeds and to kill vermin. Working with the axe or spade would become increasingly tiresome under the scorching sun. He who rested for a moment would be severely whipped by the Maistri who would be forever watching them. The workers would also be sexually exploited; the Sahib would have any woman who tickled his fancy. If a woman refused, the husband or the father’s wage would be cut or he would be given a whipping.

The arrival of Bade Khan, the policeman, further strengthened and encouraged the Sahib, because an officer of law was with him now. The majority of the coolies were Pariahs. But there were also a few Brahmins who could be suppressed so easily. Among them were two young Brahmin clerks, Gangadhar and Vasudev, with progressive and enlightened views. They took the Pariahs to Kanthapura to take part in the Gandhi-bhajan and invited Moorthy to come to the Estate to teach the ignorant coolies.

It is however to be observed that the villagers do not feel the pressure of any direct oppression or exploitation from the Government; it requires quite an effort on the part of Moorthy to convince them that spinning is the need of the hour. They need to be sensitized about the politics operating at the larger arena. A striking contrast is therefore posited in the depiction of the Sceffington Coffee estate where the workers are oppressed as well as exploited in more ways than one.

**SAQ:**

How much prominence is given to colonial exploitation in the novel? (80 words)

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#### 3.4.4 STORY-TELLING

The mode of story-telling used in the novel also imparts an Indian flavour to the mode of narration. Every Indian perhaps has the experience of listening to stories told by grandparents as children. “Indians have been great story-tellers since times immemorial. Indian grandmothers and grandfathers, sitting cozily by the fire on long winter evenings, have narrated interminable tales to their grandchildren. . . with the passing of time, outlines lose their sharpness and get blurred, and so fact and fancy, memory and imagination, jostle each other in wild profusion”.(Srinivas Iyengar) *Kanthapura* is just such a tale.

The narrator of the story of *Kanthapura* is an old woman from “Veda Sastri’s family”, a widow with neither a daughter nor a granddaughter. She is a familiar grandmotherly figure, with no formal education, but well-versed in the myths, legends, the social and ritualistic practices of her community, also possessing a flair for story-telling. She recreates the events and the speech of the characters involved in them with aptness in her story telling. Achakka, as she is called in the novel, tells the story of *Kanthapura* for the benefit of a new comer, years after the events narrated in the novel had taken place. From her home in some distant village in Mysore, she remembers wistfully the events of those stirring days, and as the story proceeds, much that is purely fictional and imaginary mingles with the factual. Memories grow dim with the passing of time, much is forgotten, and much else is unconsciously modified and glorified. The petty and the trivial acquire new dimensions and viewed in retrospect, events acquire a significance which they did not possess at the time. This is what actually happens as the grandmother Achakka proceeds with her narration.

#### 3.4.5 STHALAPURANA AND THE CULTURE OF MYTHOLOGY

In his structural design of the text, Rao looks back to the tradition of ‘Sthalapurana’. Braj B. Kachru in his essay “Raja Rao: Madhyama and Mantra” says, “Rao however recognizes that it is India’s Puranas and epics that provide structural frameworks to him: the conventions of *Kadambari* (7<sup>th</sup> century CE) by Bana and *Uttararamacharita* (7<sup>th</sup> century CE) by

Bhavabhuti”. In the ‘foreword’, Raja Rao tells us: “There is no village in India that has not a rich sthala-purana, or legendary history, of its own. . . .one such story from the contemporary annals of my village I have tried to tell”

In *Kanthapura*, Rao has not only given us a legendary history of the place, he has also tried to create a *Sthalapurana* for the region. This has been done by mythicising the heroism of the local hearts and heads in the cause of their motherhood. As Northrop Frye points out, “in a myth some of the chief characters are gods, other beings larger in power than humanity,” so also is the case with the novel. Moorthy is presented as a figure much above the common run of men. A dedicated, selfless soul, he is idealized to the extent of being regarded as a local Mahatma. And, of course, there is the real Mahatma also, always in the background though nowhere physically present. The village women think of him as the Sahyadri Mountain big and blue, and Moorthy as the small mountain. Range Gowda, the village headman, describes Moorthy thus:

“He is our Gandhi. The state of Mysore has a Maharaja but that Maharaja has another Maharaja who is in London, and that one has another one in heaven, and so everybody has his own Mahatma, and this Moorthy who has been caught in our knees playing as a child is now grown up and great, and he has wisdom in him and he will be our Mahatma”.

Just as there is the local goddess Kenchamma who protects the village Kanthapura and a greater god who protects all, Moorthy is the local *avatar* while Gandhi is the greater deity. The Harikatha man raises Gandhi to the level of a god by identifying his activities with one particular feat of Krishna, though it does not always mean fidelity to facts:

“You remember how Krishna when he was a babe of four had begun to fight against the demons and had killed the serpent Kali. So too our Mohandas began to fight against the enemies of the country. . . .Men followed him, as they did Krishna, the flute player; and so he goes from village to village, to slay the serpent of the foreign rule”

Whereas ‘Kaliya-daman’ here offers a parallel to the destruction of foreign rule, later on the battle between Rama and Ravana offers a similar mythical analogy. Although none of these analogies can be followed to find an exact point of correspondence between the past and the present, they do illuminate to some extent, the historical situation of the thirties. For the grandmother in



Kanthapura, 'Swaraj' is Sita, 'Mahatma' is Rama, and 'Jawaharlal' is brother Bharata:

“He will bring us Swaraj, the Mahatma. And we shall be all happy. And Rama will come back from exile and Sita will be with him, for Ravana will be slained and Sita freed...and brother Bharata will go to meet them with the worshipped sandal of the master on his head. And as they enter Ayodhya, there will be a rain of flowers”.

**Stop to Consider:**

There is also an account of a number of local rituals. “There is the ritual of yoking the bulls to the plough under the Rohini Star or of the traditional belief that at the beginning of Kartik, gods can be seen passing by, “blue gods and quiet gods and bright-eyed gods” or to the different modes of appeasing the goddess Kenchamma. All these make up the fabric of living of which the narrator is a part. Thus the reference to the rituals of ploughing, of worship and sacrifice, becomes a means of establishing the atmosphere in which the villagers live, as well as a device for concretizing the point of view, i.e., delineation of the character of the sophisticated narrator who can assimilate all facts into a mythical structure, for whom no fact become really significant unless it can be identified as a part of myth”.

**SAQ:**

1. What role do the women characters play in Kanthapura? Discuss their significance in the context of the prevailing political scenario. (40+60 words)

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2. Which Indian myth is the most appealing for the villagers in Kanthapura? (50 words)

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### 3.4.6 SOCIAL DIVISIONS AND NATIONAL UNITY

Caste hierarchy and the rigidities associated with it is a distinctive feature in the social life of *Kanthapura*. The village is divided into different sections on the basis of caste and members of the lower strata are prohibited from any kind of interaction with the members of the superior caste. However, the influence of Gandhian ideology brings about significant changes as well as discord in the village.

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

“Gandhi endeavoured to find a solution to the caste system by interpreting the traditional distinction of castes in a less restricted manner that allowed him to be free of addressing it in terms of ritual purity and pollution. His understanding of the *shastras* or the scriptures had made him realize that no one varna or caste was superior to another in terms of birth. In terms of office, however, a brahmin would be superior to others if he was true to his dharma of protecting the weak against the strong, but not if he were to prey upon the other castes. Gandhi’s reasoning did not insist upon the coexistence of castes in terms of common celebrations or communal eating that Rao, in his enthusiasm, permits in his vision of a united India” (Rumina Sethi, *Myths of the Nation*, p 85).

The Gandhian ideals of equality encounter tremendous resistance owing to the caste differentiations and the routine system within which the different castes of the village operate. Moorthy’s initiation of Gandhi’s programme of spinning yarn creates disorder and disturbance in a traditional society of Brahmins. One of them called Nanjamma vehemently protests against this, for it is demeaning for a Brahmin to indulge in such manual labour especially when there are enough weavers in the village. As for the pariahs, the feeling of being upwardly mobile through close contact with a Brahmin, as well as the promise of economic self-sufficiency they have always been denied owing to their status, are clearly motivating opportunities.

Bhatta is disgusted with this ‘Gandhi vagabondage’ and the intermingling of Brahmins and pariahs for which he holds Gandhi responsible: “he is a Vaishya and he may do what he likes. That does not pollute me. But, Rama-Rama, really if we have to hang the sacred thread over the shoulders of every

pariah...it's impossible, impossible...you should speak to your people and organize a brahmin party. Otherwise Brahminism is as good as kitchen ashes..." (*Kanthapura* 44).

Even Moorthy has a genuine dread of mixing with the pariahs in the village, in spite of being the first Gandhian there. He cannot do away with the fears, beliefs and superstitions related with his superior caste. Therefore we find him trembling and indecisive when Lingamma, a pariah invites him to her hut. In this climactic moment we are presented with Moorthy's dilemma as he is unable to choose between his loyalties: the message of Gandhi which made him pledge for a national cause, or, the brahminical purity, the corruption of which can pollute his progeny generation. Both Moorthy and Rangamma, Gandhian activists of the village, cannot really come to terms with such ethics of social reform. Moorthy is hesitant to enter Rangamma's house after the visit at the pariah quarters and Rangamma too is reluctant to allow him enter his hut.

### **3.4.7 NATIONALISM AND THE QUESTION OF A NEW SOCIETY**

Most of the creative writings which depict India's freedom movement have taken into account the ideals and achievements of Gandhi, who dominated the Indian political scene from 1916 till his death in 1948. For thousands of illiterate peasants, Gandhi came to stand for a religious avatar or incarnation of a god and even many of the city-dwellers looked upon him as a prophet as well as a saviour.

In *Kanthapura*, we have more than a glimpse of the Freedom Movement in India under the leadership of Gandhi. We see how the name of Gandhi acts like a charm in every nook and corner of the country and how the people in remote and far-away places like Kanthapura observe a fast in order to show their solidarity with Mahatma Gandhi as he sets out on his historic Dandi March. Moorthy is a typical example of the thousands of young men who were fired with patriotic zeal by Gandhi's inspiration and who, under his programme, left schools, colleges and universities or resigned from their jobs. Rangamma and Ratna depict how the spirit of nationalism fired the consciousness of the women of the country. Their participation in

the movement shows how women took an active interest in politics at the time. Rachanna and Range Gowda show how the people of the lower castes picked up courage, and accepted the voluntary restraint of non-violence. Peasants refused to pay revenue and other taxes to the Government, with the result that many were evicted from their lands and lost all means of earning a livelihood. When Moorthy is arrested his place is taken by Ratna, and so the struggle continues. There were ‘dharnas’, ‘picketings’ and ‘Satyagrahas’; people, including children and women were beaten up but their spirit could not be crushed. Shouts of *Gandhiji ki jai* and *Inquilab Zindabad* resounded in the air and fostered a spirit of patriotic and nationalistic zeal among the people.

Gandhi does not make a physical appearance in the novel, but he is constantly present in the background and at every juncture, there are references to important events of the day such as the historic ‘Dandi March’ and the breaking of the ‘Salt Law’. Hence, for a proper understanding of the novel, it is essential to form a clear idea of the important political and social events connected with the Indian freedom struggle. There were several strands in the Gandhian Movement—the political, the religious, and the social (including the economic)—and the three have been inextricably woven into the story of regeneration of Kanthapura as a result of the freedom struggle. It is not merely a novel that talks about the political condition of its times, but a novel concerned as much with the social, religious and economic transformation of the people. The Gandhian movement was based on ‘Satyagraha’, firmness in truth. Gandhi added an ethical dimension to what was basically a social and political movement. Gandhi believed that the strength of his *Satyagraha* alone would result in freeing India and establish a system of pre-capitalist, agrarian village community. The Gandhian influence is obvious: moral revolution takes precedence over social and political revolutions. It is significant that Moorthy enters the untouchable’s house in his own village first before his imprisonment as a revolutionary.

**Stop to Consider:**

Rumina Sethi in her book *Myths of the Nation* draws attention to the actual visits of Gandhi to Karnataka and the effects of his appeals :

“Gandhi first visited Karnataka in 1921 with a view to motivating people into joining the non-cooperation movement. His appeal to boycott schools, colleges and government offices was taken up enthusiastically. So was the adoption of khadi(home spun), the abolition of untouchability, and the prohibition of liquor. During another visit in 1927, he said: ‘more is expected of those who give much. I have found so much good in this State that I almost fancy that if you and the Maharaja together will it, you can make the state *Ramrajya*’ .

It is conceivable that Gandhi’s presence in Karnataka motivated the youth of its cities and villages alike, and, therefore, Moorthy’s encounter with the Mahatma, though imaginary, has a context”.

For the villagers, the politics of the country is inseparable from Gandhi, and Gandhi inseparable from divinity: ‘Rama, Krishna, Sankara and the Mahatma’ are always mentioned in the same refrain. This speaks of Gandhi’s birth as a divine visitation on earth to destroy sin and sinners alike in order to re-establish the hold of religion. The political struggle is, thereby, largely ritualized, and nationalism filters down into the village through religion.

### **Check Your Progress:**

1. Comment on the use of mythology to reinforce Indianness in the novel. Does Raja Rao also ‘mythologise’ Gandhism? If so what is the view of Gandhism that prevails?
2. Comment on the effectiveness of raja Rao’s linguistic strategy. Does it help to loosen the novelistic structure?
3. Do you think *Kanthapura* is a novel of India’s political and social awakening? Discuss.

### **3.5 NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE**

The narrative technique in *Kanthapura* is typically Indian. The Indian grandmother is the most ancient and most typical of story-tellers, and the narrator in the novel, Achakka, is one such grandmother, narrating the story for the benefit of a new-comer, years later: “Achakka is more articulate

than her predecessors, indeed, her garrulity is ear-splitting, if taken in large doses; her narrative style is the novel's crowning charm and also the greatest threat to its success. Those familiar with the vernacular and the circumlocution of Indian speech habits will be delighted with Achakka's narrative style and its gossip digressions". The substance in the novel is made up of the stream of her memory, in which many events and characters have been blurred by the passage of time, and many others have been heightened by her imagination. Her personality colours the whole Non-Cooperation Movement, the brave resistance of the people, and their consequent suffering.

Rao tells us in the classic 'Preface' to the novel that "the telling has not been easy". This is because one has to capture the tempo of Indian life in a foreign language. As the novelist says, "We, in India, think quickly, we talk quickly and when we move we move quickly...and our paths are interminable. The *Mahabharata* has 214,778 verses and the *Ramayana* 48,000. Puranas there are endless and innumerable. We have neither punctuation nor the treacherous 'ats' and 'ons' to bother us—we tell one interminable tale. Episode follows episode, and when our thoughts stop our breath stops, and we move on to another thought. This was and still is the ordinary style of our story-telling" (Preface). It is this swiftness of movement which an Indian novelist must capture, he must tell a tale in which episode follows episode in an endless succession. Seen from this perspective, Achakka's inordinately long, meandering sentences, use of blanks, digressions and expressions like 'this and that', 'here and there', are very significant and complement Rao's credo. In the very opening sentences, as Mulk Raj Anand points out, "the reader can almost hear grandma talking. Episode follows episode, and each one is integral to the story. The detailed accounts of Sankar, Rangamma and Bhatta are revealing, essential for the narrative. It is a long interminable tale, and its essentially *Indianness* is seen in its long interminable sentences, long paragraphs, and the absence of division into chapters".

The choice of such a narrator serves several purposes; it enables Raja Rao to mingle fact and myth in an effective manner. For the old woman, 'Jawaharlal' is Bharata to the Mahatma who, she believes will slay 'Ravana' (the British) so that 'Sita' (India) might be freed. For her Gandhi has attained

the status of God, and Moorthy is regarded as his avatar in Kanthapura. Achakka's imagination pictures the Mahatma as large as blue like the Sahyadri mountains, while Moorthy is seen as the small mountain. To her the Satyagraha becomes a religious ceremony to which she devotes her sacred ardour.

Another advantage derived by the choice of this narrator is that the language used by her is of an elemental quality. Her reaction to things is vivid and direct, not literary and second-hand. She talks of the "pumpkin moon"; "the stream of milk splashed on a moonlit night"; "young boys bright as banana trunks"; all are images taken from day to day phenomena which would come naturally to a village woman. The narrator also enables Raja Rao to achieve his professed aim of reproducing the rhythm of Indian speech in English, as well as of coming closest to the oral tradition of story telling.

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

Not only does Achakka narrate, she also comments and her comments are balanced and shrewd. Here are a few instances of her racy comments:

1. "To tell you the truth, Bhatta began all this after his last visit to the city."
2. "Rangamma did not understand all this, neither, to tell you the truth, did any of us."
3. "Bhatta left us after harvest on a pilgrimage to Kashi. I tell you, he was not a bad man, was Bhatta"

Achakka's manner of telling the tale is, according to Srinivas Iyengar, "characteristically Indian, feminine with a spontaneity that is coupled with swiftness, raciness suffused with native vigour, and exciting with a rich sense of drama shot through and through with humour and lyricism, . . . the telling of the story gives the whole affair with an *ithihastic*— at least a *puranic*-dignity. The narrative is hardly very straightforward: there are involutions and digressions, there are meaningful backward glances, there are rhythmic chains of proper names (Rachanna and Chandranna and Madanna; Satamma and Rangamma and Puttamma and Seethamma), there are hypnotic repetitions and refrains, and there are also sheer poetic iridescences.

A village, a picturesque region, an epoch of social and political change, a whole complex of character and motive, reason and superstition, idealism and cold calculation, all spring up before our eyes demanding recognition and acceptance; it is almost a *tour de force*. Although Raja Rao has put the story into the mouth of a grandmother— although the feminine touches and mannerisms, the seemingly effortless rotation of the tongue, the meandering sentences and massive paragraphs are characteristic of the narrator—there is nevertheless consummate art in all this riot of artlessness, there is careful selection behind the apparent abundant detail”.

### 3.6 IMAGES AND MYTHS

Raja Rao’s use of imagery is functional and creative. His use of images is functional and not merely decorative. His similes and metaphors are drawn from the common, everyday objects and phenomena, hence they serve to clarify and elucidate. Meenakshi Mukherjee opines that, “Images and metaphors are his natural mode of expression, and very little influence of English language is discernible. His earlier work was full of fresh perception and a first hand response to life. His language in the first two books is so richly strewn with similes that any passage quoted at random will serve to illustrate this element of his style”. Consider, for example, the following from *Kanthapura*:

1) “...and when Moorthappa comes lets the rice be fine as filigree and the mangoes yellow as gold, and we shall go out, horn and trumpet gong before us and break coconuts at his feet”

The imagery here touches upon objects and experience (‘rice be fine as filigree’; ‘mangoes yellow as gold’ and breaking of ‘coconuts’ at someone’s feet) that are distinctively Indian and faithfully conveys an Indian sensibility.

2) Postman Subbayya, who had no fire in his stomach, and was red with red and blue with blue.

3) You are a Bhatta, and your voice is not a sparrow voice in your village and you should speak to your people and organize a Brahmin party. Otherwise Brahminism is as good as kitchen ashes...

4) ...and mother and wife and widow godmother went up to their lighted lizard-clucking homes.



These expressions convey vivid images of a typically Indian context than could have been possible with English expressions. In the fourth instance, the words “lighted lizard-clucking homes” convey an image of security associated with the interior of a house after lighting time which is essential to these women (mother and wife and widow godmother), who have spent a long and uncertain day of struggle, picketing toddy-booths.

Another important aspect of Raja Rao’s art in *Kanthapura* is his use of myths. Because of the fact that even the most illiterate Indian is acquainted with mythological stories, myths play a significant part in Indian life. It is common for Indian preachers to give a mythological or spiritual significance to physical phenomena. Indians at every level are also extremely well-acquainted with the stories in *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharatha*. It is quite usual to compare two loving brothers, or friends, to Rama and Lakshmana, and the narrator does that in the case of her Seenu and Moorthy. In the myth that Jayaramachar invents about the divine birth of Gandhiji, he is held to be an incarnation of Siva, but Achakka compares him with Rama, and India with Sita. Gandhi’s going to England to participate in the Round Table Conference is compared to Rama’s exile, and the Indians who participate in the process of Government are compared to Bharata who worshipped Rama’s sandals in his absence. The foreign rulers are compared to Ravana, and Gandhi is to kill this demon, and bring back enslaved Sita, i.e. India who is under the domination of foreign rulers, back with him after liberating her. His return is expected to be like the triumphant return of Rama to Ayodhya when there was a shower of flowers from the sky. The followers of Gandhi are like Hanuman, and they are equally ready to carry out his instructions at any time. Similarly, the Satyagrahi in prison is the divine Krishna himself in Kansa’s prison.

### 3.7 SUMMING UP

The purpose of this unit was to discuss those aspects which are crucial to have a critical approach towards the different nuances of the narrative. By now, you should have formed some idea of the themes and techniques that have gone into the making of this novel. It is expected that the discussions contained in this unit will further motivate you delve into the novel and formulate your own ideas on the text.

### 3.8 REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READINGS

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Links:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Raja\\_Rao](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Raja_Rao)

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## Block 2

### ANITA DESAI'S *FASTING, FEASTING*

#### **Block Introduction:**

This block 2 of paper XVIII deals with Anita Desai's novel *Fasting, Feasting*, a representative text of Indian Women Writing in English. Desai is a fascinating literary figure in the arena of contemporary Indian Writing in English and her exploration of human relationship from an existential and gendered perspective helps to prepare the ground for the emergence of women voices through literature. *Fasting, Feasting*, the story of an Indian family in a traditional Indian setup was shortlisted for the 1999 Man Booker Prize. The novel tells the story of an Indian couple whose identity is inextricably linked as MamaPapa and their mutually dependent existence is representative of most Indian families where patriarchy rules supreme. Desai here explores the situations where the individuality of the woman invariably gets swamped and trampled upon to such an extent that she has no independent existence left. Although the female characters in the novel invariably experience the sense of entrapment, Desai shows that entrapment and isolation is not unique to the female characters only; Arun blessed with a privileged upbringing too fails to escape the burden of expectation and seeks anonymity and isolation. The two parts of the novel apparently explores contrasting ways of life in terms of the depiction of Indian and American cultures but there remains disturbing similarities which bridge the gap between the two cultures. Hence, this novel, prescribed for you, is unique in its concern with the various issues and debates centering on the constant victimisation of women in society, gender politics, culture conflict etc.

The units are designed with the aim of opening new ways for stimulating your thinking. Moreover, the units are not all-encompassing yet, after reading you will be able to reach to your conclusion and read Desai accordingly. To facilitate a critical reading of the novel, this block is divided into three units. Unit 1 is designed in a way to familiarise you with the background of Indian women writing in English as well as Anita Desai and her works. The aim here is to make you aware of the context as well as the trends. In Unit 2, you will be studying the novel *Fasting, Feasting* with special emphasis on

the plot and important characters to facilitate your reading and understanding of the text and see for yourself the significance of this novel in Indian writing in English. Unit III deals more specifically with the themes and techniques of this novel so that you can understand the novel in its totality.

Contents:

Unit 1: Background

Unit 2: Introducing the Novel

Unit 3: Themes and Techniques

# Unit 1

## Background

### Contents:

- 1.1 Objectives
- 1.2 Introduction: Indian Women Writing in English
- 1.3 Biographical Sketch of Anita Desai
- 1.4 Desai's Works - A Selected Few
- 1.5 Placing *Fasting, Feasting*
- 1.6 Summing Up

### 1.1 OBJECTIVES

In this unit, you will be given a brief introduction on Indian Writing in English with special reference to the women writers and their achievements. The 'background' of Anita Desai, her major works, and particularly of this novel *Fasting, Feasting* will be analysed. Thus, by the end of this unit, you will be able to

- *contextualize* of Indian Writing in English with reference to the women writers
- *connect* the life and career of Desai till the production of the prescribed text
- *place* this novel in the context of Desai's literary career
- *situate* Desai within the tradition of Indian Fiction Writing in English

### 1.2 INTRODUCTION : INDIAN WOMEN WRITING IN ENGLISH

Indian women writing in English, began with an attempt to conceptualise the roles women, across the globe, had to play with story telling as one of the major preoccupations. An Indian woman writer in English has always been comfortable with it, starting right from the beginning when she puts her

child to sleep with bedside stories. Europe has so far boasted of a galaxy of women writers like-Jane Austen, George Eliot, Charlotte Bronte, Emily Bronte, Mrs. Gaskell, Dorothy Richardson, Virginia Woolf and so on. But India too has Toru Dutt, Kamala Markandaya, Attia Hosain, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgal, and Shashi Deshpande among the old order and a whole lot of new and aspiring writers who have taken the literary scene by storm.

The early women novelists chose 'romance' as the vehicle of literary expressions because, 'romance' as a subject came easily to the women writers. It was a subject close to their heart as it provided an escape from the harsh realities of life. Toru Dutt's unfinished *Bianca or The Young Spanish Maiden* (1878) and *Le Journal de Mademoiselle d'Arvers* (1963) were more or less, written in this mould and had hints of the autobiographical elements in them. Though she died young, she has definitely made her mark in Indian fiction writings.

Mention may also be made of Raj Lakshmi Debi's *The Hindu Wife* (1876) and Mrs. Krupabai Sathianadan's *Kamala, a Story of Hindu Life* (1894) and *Saguna, a Story of Native Christian Life* (1895). On the other hand, Mrs. Ghosal's novels; *An Unfinished Song* (1913) and *The Fatal Garden* (1915) were English translations; she was perhaps, the first Bengali woman novelist. Soon after, the attractions of 'romance' wore off, 'realism' took over. The women novelists tended now to veer more and more towards a realistic depiction of society and the problems of a woman caught in its various intrigues and social restraints. They realised that the predicament of a suffering woman was universal and it entailed a detailed treatment. Moreover, they would make sure that such a subject would be treated sympathetically by them (the women writers). This genre of writing caught the imagination of the women writers and thus, 'Realism' became a major trend in the texts of the later periods written by women. Cornelia Sorabji explores the process of 'silent suffering' of the female in her works. (*Love and Life behind the Purdah, Sun-Babies: Studies in the Child- Life of India, and Between the Twilights.*)

If you think of Indian women novelists in English you cant help referring to the names of Kamala Markandaya and Ruth Praver Jhabvala. Markandaya wrote her first novel, *Nectar in a Sieve* in 1954. A novel of the 'soil' and

often compared with Pearl S. Buck's *The Good Earth*, this novel strives to show that the fears of 'hunger' and 'death' are latent in the lives of the peasants. The advent of industrialism and modern technology into their lives cannot solve any of their problems. If any, these problems are aggravated. (Read K.S. Venkataramani's *Murugan, the Tiller* for a study in similarity of theme and treatment.)

Ruth Praver's ancestry is like Anita Desai's in that she is also an outsider, being born of Polish parents and having been brought up in Germany. Having married an Indian architect, she came down to Delhi and has since settled down there. Sharing the common outlook of the 'outsider' to the different culture, she has never been able to identify fully with the Indian way of life. Delhi, with its old world charms, its multitudinous milieu, traditional and yet cosmopolitan, prompts her to find her inspiration of writing here. Delhi with its history of Independence and Partition (*To Whom She Will*) has a lot to offer to Ruth Praver for her novels. The traditional Indian way of arranged-marriages after matching horoscopes etc. come into conflict with the new modern way of 'falling in love at first sight' with no concern for caste, class and race and yet they find equal places in her fiction which, you will see, is more wide-ranging than the severely limited and inhibited Victorian world which often places women in claustrophobic domestic situations. In her later novels, Praver changes track and writes about married couples trapped in unfortunate marriages, wriggling to get out of them. (*The Householder, A Backward Place, Get Ready For Battle*)

Attia Hosain, another novelist of much repute, writes about life in its varied aspects—the otherwise calm and placid surface of life ruffled by under-currents of pain and suffering. (*Phoenix Fled, 1953*) She also tries her hand at autobiography. (*Sunlight on Broken Column, 1961*)

Nayantara Sahgal is Mrs. Vijaylakshmi Pandit's daughter and she is adept in essaying autobiography. Her fictional world opens on to various historical and political events of the country. She is well acquainted with the corridors of power. (Read her first novel, *A Time to be Happy, This Time of Morning and Storm in Chandigarh.*) Her grasp of politics is unique and inherent and hence, felt. The English language comes alive in her hands. Unfortunately, these factors score over her skill as a novelist.

I shall desist myself from writing about Anita Desai in this section as I shall be covering all the aspects of her writings in the subsequent sections. Suffice it be to say that she is one such novelist who has carved a niche for herself in Indian fiction in English by daring to be different. She adds a new dimension to this genre by opening up an altogether new vista before the readers – that of, the ‘climate of sensibility’ and characterization in her novels, takes on an entirely new meaning and concept.

In this section, I have tried to give you a brief idea of the work of some of the women novelists and how they succeeded in making their voices heard even in the hitherto male dominated world of Indian fiction. I suggest you to read some of their novels and acquaint yourself with the guiding forces behind their writing. You will thus, see how these women novelists have ‘felt’ the female experience in a predominantly male world and so, the cry for self- identity of a woman becomes their focus of writing.

**SAQ:**

1. What were the genres which influenced the Indian women novelists in the beginning? (60 words)

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2. How do you think women writers in IWE have succeeded in portraying the female predicament in their works? (60 words)

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**1.3 BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF ANITA DESAI**

Anita Desai, one of the leading living Indian women novelists writing in English was born of mixed parentage (her father, D.N. Mazumdar was a Bengali and mother was Toni Nime, a German national) on June 24, 1937,



in Mussorie, Desai's childhood was spent in Delhi. German was her first language while she conversed in Bengali, Urdu, Hindi and English outside. She had her schooling at Queen Mary's Higher Secondary School in Delhi and graduated from Miranda House under the University of Delhi in English literature in 1957.

Desai belongs to the genre of Indian writing in English which is as recent as the 1930s or the 1940s. Serious literature in English was still not widely read in Indian universities. An Indo-Anglian writer's existence in India was almost non-existent. It was "like being deep inside a dark cave, quite alone"; to use her words (The Telegraph Magazine, 2 December 2007). The publishing world also did not give much importance to Indian writing in English.

She drew inspiration from her neighbour and writer with a similar background as hers, Ruth Praver Jhabvala. Mrs. Jhabvala's adroit handling of her domestic life and her literary career impresses her no end. Desai decided to ignore the lack of response from readers and publishers alike. Henceforth, she devoted herself to her creative writing.

Her debut novel, *Cry, the Peacock*, (1963) was well received and her literary style began to be compared with William Faulkner and Virginia Woolf. Woolf's 'stream of consciousness' technique finds an echo in her first novel. Subsequently, she has gone on to write thirteen other novels, short stories and children books. *Clear Light of Day* (1980) is her autobiographical novel, set in the neighbourhood of her childhood days. Baumgartner's *Bombay* also comes close to being her story. (a German's story in an alien land and alienation thereof)

Desai has taught at Mount Holyoke College and Smith College. In 1993, she was engaged for teaching creative writing at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. She is a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, the American Academy of Arts and Letters and of Girton College, Cambridge University. She has just been made a life time fellow of the Sahitya Akademi and is the second Bengali to have been honoured thus.

Her novels have gained critical acclaim in the literary field and many awards and recognitions have come her way. Three of her novels, *In Custody*

(1984), *Clear Light of Day* (1980) and *Fasting, Feasting* (1999) were shortlisted for the Booker Prize for Fiction. *In Custody* was released as a film in 1993 by Merchant Ivory Productions. Marvellous actors like Shashi Kapoor, Shabana Azmi and Om Puri have starred in this film directed by Ismail Merchant with the screenplay written by Shahrukh Husain.

Desai follows the gynocentric tradition compounded by Elaine Showalter in that she is a woman writing for women. According to Showalter, some themes and motifs are recurrent in women's fiction; largely drawn from the female experience and stand contrasted with the male viewpoint. These influences include attitudes towards female sexuality, the subordinate role of women in the patriarchal setup and legal and economic restraints placed upon her.

Desai's mixed parentage is a kind of boon to her in so far as it gives her a unique dual perspective of looking at life. The blend of the western and eastern cultures is a topic well understood by her. She has a unique take on Indian society and has shown a deep maturity in understanding these core issues. The vibrant colours of India come alive in her hand. She knows very well that the family is the foundation of any Indian society and so, she centres many of her novels round the 'family' and its variant relationships notwithstanding her confession that while "she feels about India as an Indian, she thinks about it as an outsider".

Indian writing in English has come a long way since its 'cave' existence. It now resembles an 'eastern bazaar', (to quote Desai) what with western publishers queuing to snap up Indian books coming into the market by the dozens written by young, aspiring writers of the new generation. But even in this crowd of the recognised and the not-so recognised, Anita Desai's place in the genre of Indian writing in English will forever be reserved. She is and will be credited with taking IWE to new heights. From portrayals of banal everyday events to embroidering her characters with 'modernist sensibilities', she has done it all. (*Cry, the Peacock*) She stands unchallenged in her field even today. Her long list of books and awards won are, in themselves indicative of the range of her versatility.

#### **1.4 DESAI'S WORKS - A SELECTED FEW:**

In this section, I shall introduce you to some of the major works of fiction by Anita Desai. As I have already mentioned earlier, Desai belongs to the tradition of gynocriticism in women writing as opposed to phallogocentrism and hence, the common motifs are women-oriented. Writing from this angle, she gains a unique perspective into the workings of the minds of her female characters. Therefore, her strength can be said to lie in the portrayal of women characters. Her female characters are extremely vulnerable and sensitive to the surroundings they live in and so, invariably suffer from an inner tension. The position of a woman in a patriarchal society and the restrictions it imposes upon her very often makes her self-alienated and she fails to pursue her own identity. Desai's fictional world is mostly oriented towards domesticity. The lives and problems of women in traditional Indian families since Independence have fascinated her. She would rather write about them than the politics and intrigues of the Indian subcontinent which really have no place in her fiction.

Often, accosted by marital and social problems, her women characters seek a way out and then, come into conflict with their family and society. Her first novel, *Cry, the Peacock* written in 1963, is about one such woman, Maya caught in a loveless marriage. Her husband, Gautama much older to her, cannot understand her emotional needs; and this leads to a lack of communication between them. Moreover, the prophecy of an albino astrologer who had prophesied that after four years of marriage, death would occur to one of them preys on her mind. In a fevered state, Maya pushes her husband down from the roof of their house and some days later, commits suicide. Maya becomes a 'victim of the overworking of her fevered brain.' Maya remains Desai's most powerful evocation of a female character. The novel starts with a grisly image—the death of Maya's pet dog, Toto. An ordinary situation but it is Maya's hysterical response to this seemingly mundane event that strikes us. The 'Stream of Consciousness' strain finds expression in this novel. With a keen sensitivity to minute details, Desai succeeds in portraying the perpetually stretched psyche of Maya and the emotional strain that she undergoes. Her character is studied at length and amply developed. Everything about her—her absorption with her own neurotic self, her narrow way of looking at life, her over dependence on her father than on her husband has been outlined well. Desai has made apt use of

language, syntax and imagery to convey the extreme sensibility of Maya- her fears and fretfulness. The first part of the novel concerns itself with the incident of Maya's dead dog being carried away by the scavenging truck and narration here is in the third person. The second part belongs entirely to Maya. It mostly deals with Maya's remembrances of past things and events. The third part concerns itself with events after the death of Gautama.

*Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975) was a great success. You will find the same strand of self-alienation in the story of the protagonist, Sita. Pregnant with her fifth child, she feels so suffocated by the patriarchal order of things and of the violent world around her that she seeks an escape from it all. She goes into voluntary exile to an island, Manori seeking comfort in its supposedly magical properties. She feels that Manori will provide her the necessary succour to overcome her depression and to get over with her unwanted pregnancy. Here as in her debut novel, Desai scores with the effective and sensitive treatment of the inner life of her characters. The Indian middle class women feel trapped in their closed world of boredom and ennui and hence, are alienated from society. The characters take on escapist methods to overcome the harsh realities of life. They retreat to a utopian world and ironically, they find happiness here. You will notice that at the end, Sita and her husband Raman, get together and overcome their misunderstandings. The husband-wife polarization is not so acute here as in Desai's first novel.

*Fire on the Mountain* (1975) is a classic; it's an evocation of a life that is long gone by- a life of leisure, of easy camaraderie and warm friendship. It's a paen to the tranquillity of the majestic mountains. When this tranquillity is disturbed by outside forces, chaos is bound to occur. So is the case in this novel. Through the story of Nanda kaul and her great granddaughter Raka, Desai has also illustrated the generation gap- a feature inherent in every modern family. The story of Nanda Kaul and Raka is juxtaposed against the beauty of Kasauli, up in the mountain. Nanda Kaul is the wife of the ex vice- chancellor of the university. Her whole life has been spent discharging her duties-as the 'responsible' wife of an important personage. She had also done duty towards her children, attending to their every need. Nanda Kaul now wants nothing more than being allowed to live her life her way, away from all ties and responsibilities. Nanda purchases a house in Kasauli to live out the rest of her life in peace and seclusion amidst the

serene tranquillity of the mountains. Even the postman is an intruder into her wonderfully secluded life. She even shuns her good friend, Ila Das. If she could she would not renew her old ties with the past. Her choice of way of avoiding the prevalent patriarchal culture can be termed 'escapist'. But the surface of her tranquillity is ruffled by the arrival of her great-granddaughter at her doorsteps. She is apprehensive that Raka's arrival would catapult her back into the old, chaotic world of duties and responsibilities. Contrary to her expectations, Raka turns out to be very like her. She loves the solitariness of the mountains and avoids human company. Ironically, Nanda now wants to bind Raka to her life and so, she and Ila Das spin tales about the good old days to Raka. They end up sickening her. The tales spun by the old women are actually a façade to a hard life lived by them in the past. Ila's slipping into the past offer her an avenue of escape into a pleasant world, if only imaginative. She meets a tragic end. Perhaps the ironic finale occurs when Raka comes down to Nanda and tells her that she has put the forest on fire (raised a forest fire.) It is as if all the lies and falsehood have been put to fire.

The novel has been written in simple, lucid prose. There is the omniscient narrator in the background and the action is also carried forward by conversations between the characters. Nostalgia is a much used narrative technique here. But it does not help to carry the action forward. It just acts as an escape from reality. *Fire on the Mountain* is an 'infinitely moving' story of old age and of maladjustment- of people belonging to another time and age in a new world. The generation gap and the restrictions imposed upon women are also the themes treated here.

*Bye-Bye, Blackbird* (1971) is a novel which treats the colonial conflict and racial discrimination. This is the story of so many Asians who seek out greener pastures in the Land of Opportunities i.e. the western world. Disillusioned with their own country, with its abject poverty and corruption and lack of opportunities, the educated Asians venture into foreign shores only to be taken aback at the cold reception they get there. It does not matter whether an immigrant is an Indian or a Pakistani or a Bangladeshi- they are all clubbed as Asiatics and derided because they make their cities dirty and polluted. Such is the case of Adit and Dev, two immigrants to London. Adit comes from a well-to-do educated Bengali family in Calcutta. He tries to find a job in his native place but the dinginess, the unpunctuality,

the slowness as also the nature of his clerical job puts him off. He comes back to London and marries an English girl, Sarah and imbibes all English values and manners. Dev, his friend is the latest immigrant (he has gone to study at the London School of Economics) and cannot understand how Adit and his Indian friends can possibly tolerate the rude behaviour of the English towards them. Adit defends his tolerance of such demeaning behaviour saying life in London is much better than life back home even though there are lavatories for 'ladies, Gents and Asiatics' in the London docks. Meanwhile, there is a reversal of roles and situations. Adit who has always stood up for everything English prepares to return home along with his wife. But Dev reconciles and comes to terms with the allure of the city. Sarah pushes her English identity to the background and gets ready to be assimilated within the new culture.

Such stories of immigrant experience and maladjustment therein form the crux of Jhumpa Lahiri's collection of short stories, *Interpreter of Maladies*. *Bye-Bye, Blackbird* is full of such situations where the characters face a barrage of racial slurs. The characters often go into a mode of nostalgia- of their past in India, of 'rice', 'roti', and 'dal', of the exuberant 'Bhangra' and of Indian classical music. These efforts at reinforcing their Indianness are necessary in an alien land. But nostalgia does not always have the same desired effect on different people. Feelings of rootlessness and alienation are accentuated and lead to deep spiritual agony arising out of a dilemma – whether to go back to one's roots or stay on in their country of adoption. The conclusion of the novel is open ended. Adit seems to be able to extricate himself from the false illusions he had of his life in London. The call of the motherland is much stronger. Dev is finally at peace with his demons. The city beckons him and he looks at it with a new found love and understanding. Ironically, the same pattern of rejection still dwells in the mindset of the Londoners.

*In Custody* (1984) is the story of Deven, a struggling lecturer in a nondescript college in a dusty town of Mirpore near Delhi. A quiet, meek and submissive man, Deven, though a lecturer of Hindi is in love with the royal language of the Nawabs- Urdu. Hard times have forced him to study Hindi and take up the job of a Hindi teacher. But his heart still goes a flutter whenever he hears an Urdu couplet being recited. So, when an old friend, Murad approaches him with an invitation to interview the greatest living

Urdu poet, Nur in Delhi, Deven jumps at the chance to fulfil his life's greatest ambition. When Deven goes to meet Nur, he is appalled to find that all his expectations of Nur as a living embodiment of the 'greatest' language ever, come crashing down. All of Nur's prowess with the language is gone, he comes across as a weak, male surrounded by fawning sycophants and aggressive females who live off him. A mere shadow of his former glorious self, Nur turns out to be another male trapped in a life which is a pathetic caricature of the glorious past. Deven though put off by the denigrating scenes unfailingly played out before him; bravely latches on to flashes of brilliance in the otherwise mundane and dull moments with the poet. Meanwhile, Murad refuses to pay the room rent of the place where Deven had taken Nur to be interviewed secretly. His colleagues think he is running an affair in Delhi and so does his wife. Faced with trouble both at home and college (he is unable to account for the advance granted to him by the college for buying a tape recorder to tape Nur's voice) and feeling hedged in by the growing demands of Nur for financial assistance, Deven contemplates suicide. Then, heroically, he overcomes all the negativity in his life and decides to face life head on. This is his saving grace.

*In Custody* is a blatant criticism of traditional Indian society which puts so much emphasis on academic distinctions notwithstanding the ways to get them. It is an indictment on patriarchy which is now being slowly eroded with the voices of women starting to be heard. The past is idealized and hence, its juxtaposition with the present is harsh. The narration is mostly serious interspersed with occasional humour. It takes on a poignant note when setting off the decadence of a culture that was once truly majestic. Desai's style is totally controlled here and very smoothly conveys the sights, sounds, sensations and vibrant colours of Indian life. The 'death' of Urdu and the rise of Hindi as the national language is as emotional a subject here as the Partition of the country into Pakistan and India. Language aptly delineates the comedy in the actions of the characters. Deven's efforts in interviewing the great poet are pathetic but the scenes serve as a comic relief, specially the struggle with the tape recorder. The theme is carried forward through a lot of flashbacks and forwards. Dialogue is kept to a minimum as compared to the descriptive. A new technique of storytelling that is, of women telling their own stories comes to the fore. Nur's young wife decides to tell her side of the story, of why Nur married her (because

of her 'gifts and abilities') and dares Deven to read her poetry and 'place' it. Instinctively, Deven rejects it (the action of a weak prejudiced Indian male). In the young Indian woman's voice, we see the voice of countless women writers whose impatience with the male hegemonistic writings is beginning to show. The end of the novel shows Deven in a positive light. He resolves to be the custodian of Nur's poetry and thus, of his 'very soul and spirit'.

*Baumgartner's Bombay* (1988) is an evocative saga of displacement, alienation, the search for roots and the deep-rooted culture –hostility. It is the story of Hugo Baumgartner, an old Jew who has escaped Nazi Germany and made Bombay his 'home'. But he finds to his utter dismay that even after fifty years of living in India, he is still a 'firanghi'; neither accepted in Germany nor in India. His 'Jewish' skin is considered too dark in Germany and he has to flee his hometown because of the persecution of the Jews there. By Indian standards, he is too fair and always remains a foreigner, an outsider. Even after fifty years in India, he is still viewed with suspicion and he on his part, is also not at ease with his surroundings. He finds that to an average Indian, there is no difference between a German and a Jew. The novel is kaleidoscopic in its range and colour. It begins in Bombay and then goes back to the past- to Berlin just before the war, and then latches on to the present again. The novel takes us on a journey of discovery to pre-war Berlin, Venice, pre-war Calcutta, a detention camp at the foothills of the Himalayas, and then, post-war Calcutta. We find ourselves back in Bombay again at the end. Pre-war Berlin is to do with his closeted childhood. Nazism has just reared its' ugly head and he sees his father suffering at the hands of the Nazis and committing suicide. The currents of history toss him out of Berlin and into faraway India. (he comes to India to look after the family business and also to escape Nazi persecution) Before he sets sail for India, he spends a week in Venice and this fairy-tale memory of a magical place stays with him forever. Pre-war Calcutta also offers him a good life with its bustling night life. Then again, war breaks out and he along with other Germans are rounded off and taken to a detention camp. His protests that he is not a Nazi but a Jew fall on deaf ears. He stays there for long six years. The camp is not like a typical Nazi concentration camp and so, we cannot



regard the novel as a story of the holocaust. After the war, he comes back to Calcutta but finds the spirit of the city 'broken'. Here, he finds another war breaking out—the 'war' between the Hindus and the Muslims. It is too much for him to bear and so, at the advice of a friend, he comes to Bombay—the city of trade and commerce. Here he strikes up a friendship with a Gujarati businessman, Chimanlal and together they strike it rich at the races. When Chimanlal dies, his last link with the old world ends and he retires to an old life in a dingy flat. The advent of the hippie culture in India and its fallout is also elaborated upon in the speech of Farrokh Cama, the owner of a small roadside café which Baumgartner frequents in search of an occasional cup of tea or coffee and more importantly, leftover food for his large drove of cats who are his companions in the flat. The drug-crazed Aryan youth, Kurt whom Baumgartner offers shelter in his flat, (finding a strange affinity because of their German origin) abuses his hospitality. He has no qualms about murdering an old man in his sleep who has been kind to him for money.

The destruction of the kind old world by the fiercely new and amoral is also shown here. Baumgartner's friendship with Chimanlal and Farrokh gives us a feeling that all hope is not yet lost. But Chimanlal's business is taken over by his young, cold and scheming son—a representative of the new order for whom friendly bonds without legal papers do not hold any meaning. Baumgartner's strange equation with a fellow German- a cabaret dancer, Lotte is touching. His efforts to find out her whereabouts after the war reveal an exile's anxiety and loneliness. His efforts to locate his mother during the war are equally touching. He fails to save his mother from the Nazis, and then loses all hope to prosper in life. Ironically, he finds solace and comfort in the company of cats whom he rescues from the streets.

*Baumgartner's Bombay* is the story of the 'marginalised' or the 'other'. He is a failure, one with no voice, always at the mercy of others. In fact, in an interview in 1982, Desai declares, "I am not interested in brilliant members of society, who manage to control their fate. I am interested in the failures and the wrecks..." Baumgartner though one such wreck, garners our sympathy at all times. Maybe, the reason lies in that his story is everyman's. It is about how evil is all pervasive.

**Stop to consider:**

**Gynocriticism:** It is a kind of criticism which is essentially female-centred. It stands contrasted to phallogocentric criticism and attempted first, to increase the number of women readers, rediscover and reassess old under-valued works of women writers, and encourage them to come to the forefront. Overall, it addressed women issues. Gynocriticism struck at the male-hegemony in the literary texts of the day and aimed at giving an opportunity to the hitherto suppressed women writers. Elaine Showalter coined the term 'gynocriticism'. She is the author of *A Literature of their Own* (1977). The Virago Press, established in 1973 was instrumental in aiding and abetting this process of revival of long-forgotten women texts. Antonia White's *Frost in May* was the first book to be republished in the Virago Modern Classics.

**Phallogocentrism:** Before the 1970s, women-authored texts were notably few and far-between. In their absence, the second-wave feminists directed their attention to the analysis of the representation of women in the male-authored books. The degree of subordination of women in these texts has been the matter of study in this type of criticism. Therefore, looking at the male authors from a female perspective came to be known as phallogocentric literature. Two famous feminists to address this issue were Simone de Beauvoir and Kate Millet.

**Second-wave Feminism:** The First Wave Feminism spread from 1830 to 1920 and came to be associated with the Suffragette Movement. The Second Wave can be said to encompass the period from the 1960s to the present day and concerned itself with Women's Liberation. Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* is considered a yardstick to judge future studies on the subject

**Check Your Progress:**

1. To what extent are Desai's novels a reflection of a world that is fast fading away?
2. Trace the growth and development of Desai's female characters in her novels.
3. Elaborate how Desai's female characters are caught in an existential dilemma.
4. Where would you place Desai's debut novel, *Cry, the Peacock* in her corpus of literary works?
5. Examine the treatment of the subject of "displacement" and 'maladjustment' in the novels of Anita Desai.

### 1.5 PLACING *FASTING, FEASTING*

In this section, I will try to place this novel in Desai's literary career. This novel was shortlisted for the 1999 Man Booker Prize. It has been described as a 'disturbing novel' by The Times. Gerald Kaufman, chairman of the Booker Prize, 1999 says, 'If we could have chosen a runner-up, we would undoubtedly give the runner-up award to Anita Desai and *Fasting, Feasting*, a most beautiful novel, very moving, very funny, terribly illustrative of what happens to women in different parts of the world.' You will thus see how close the run up to the award was. *Fasting, Feasting* comes at a time in Desai's literary career when her focus is shifting from female characters to male characters. Thus, as T. Ravichandran says, in this novel, the focus shifts from feelings of sympathy with female characters to a different level of sensibility. Arun's perception of America and of an alien culture and ethos; his entrapment therein, in Part II of the novel, provides us an altogether different view of the story. The focus shifts from Uma's (a female) perspective to Arun's (a male). So, what you get in the novel is a dual perspective of looking at life and this is what makes *Fasting, Feasting* interesting. Still, compared to her earlier novels, specially, *Cry, the Peacock*, this novel is not very successful in exploring the recesses of the human mind and delineating the tensions therein. The comparison with Virginia Woolf seems more apt in her first novel replete with feministic concerns and touched with the 'stream of consciousness' technique.

Uma Mahadevan Dasgupta has termed the novel 'well-crafted, almost to a fault'. An atmosphere of bleakness and coldness in the book prevails all through; there is no celebration of ties, the very rhythm of life is stifling, heavy and oppressive. Nothing seems to be moving. A kind of vacuum exists where the characters are in a perennial wait. Identities are merged; MamaPapa become one and they are forever swinging rhythmically on the swing. The other major characters have their personalities stream rolled by their father's dominant character. Even the last scene of the novel where Arun thrusts the shawl and the box of tea into Mrs. Patton's hands remains just what it is – an awkward gesture. Again, this suggests a deep, stifling mood- one of suffocation. You get the feeling that Arun is eager to get rid of the parcel from home which reminds him of his suffocative bindings. Mrs. Patton's pleasant surprise and gracious acceptance of the gift on the other

hand, perhaps hints at the author's attempt to humanise the mechanical, robot-like Americans. She also had not expected this gesture from Arun- their relationship had never been one of easy camaraderie.

*Fasting, Feasting* is aesthetically unappealing. After having read Desai's other works, you will find a definite flagging of interest towards the end. The feeling of 'unputdownable' simply does not occur with this novel.

Critics have also objected to the too 'simplistic solutions' of the complex family equations in Desai's novels. *Fasting, Feasting* belongs to this category.

**SAQ:**

The novel has been criticised for its lack of aesthetic appeal. How do you reflect on this idea? (60 words)

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**1.6 SUMMING UP**

This unit has given you an idea of the writings of the Indian women novelists. You will be surprised to see how a relatively unknown and neglected field of writing has come a long way and gripped the literary scene by storm – both national and international. The new generation of writers have done remarkably well in bagging quite a few international awards. The increase in the number of readers in India and the change in their reading habits have also contributed to this phenomenon. Indeed, it has been a long journey from the 'cave with no bou-oum' to an 'eastern bazaar'. (The Telegraph Magazine, 2 December 2007)

In the next section, the life and career of Anita Desai has been charted out. Her major works have also been listed to give you an insight into the writer's psyche and her predominant concerns.

An author's writings are usually influenced by his experiences in life. Anita Desai is no different. Her dual culture upbringing has lent her a deep

understanding of both cultures – one of her country and the other the foreign. The dilemma of a person caught in a cross-culture conflict has been very often caught skilfully in her novels. *Bye-Bye, Backbird*, as you have seen deals effectively with this issue. Adit, Dev and Sarah become representational here.

Desai considers her classic, *Fire on the Mountain* (1977) nearest to being her autobiography, the reason being the similarity in the locale. The novel brings out nostalgic reminiscences of the past, of a world that is now no more. An element of poignancy can be felt therein. The novel was set in the same neighbourhood where she grew up. *Village by the Sea* (1982) is set in Thal near Alibaug where Desai used to take her four children for weekends – a throwback to childhood days once again.

As I have already mentioned earlier, Desai belonged to the gynocentric tradition that mainly focussed on women issues across the globe. You will have observed that the problem of the marginalised female is universal. Images of ‘imprisonment, of hidden rooms, fantasies of mobility and images of madness’ (*Literary Theory and Criticism*, an Oxford Guide, Patricia Waugh, p329) are all common to texts written by women. Remember Uma’s recurrent seizures in *Fasting, Feasting*? These are actually outlets of her repressed frustrations Uma’s regression into her imaginative world is actually her entry into a world of fantasy which she knows will never be hers. You will do good to remember here, Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre* which has a mad woman locked up in the attic. This madness in the Victorian woman is also a representation of her suppressed and neglected emotions.

Thus in these sections, I have tried to give you an idea of the key ideas and issues relating to the novel. I have also tried to ‘place’ the novel in the context of Desai’s literary career. Various critical responses to the novel have also been incorporated. This will enable you to explore the range and possibilities of this novel.

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## Unit 2

### Introducing the Novel

#### Contents:

- 2.1 Objectives
- 2.2 Introduction
- 2.3 The Plot in brief
- 2.4 List of Characters
- 2.5 Summing Up

#### 2.1 OBJECTIVES

In this unit attempt has been made to help you

- *contextualise* the novel in Desai's time of writing
- *summarise* the plot so as to enable you to follow the novel's flow of events
- *identify* the characters instrumental in the development of the story.

#### 2.2 INTRODUCTION

In this section, I shall introduce you to some of the important contexts of *Fasting, Feasting*. The plot will also be outlined briefly and the characters studied. The developments of the characters are directly linked to the development of the plot and so, as you will see, it becomes an interesting aspect of study.

I shall start with the textualisation of the novel. Indian writing in English was a direct offshoot of the introduction and popularisation of English in the education system of British India.

The British left India but the post-colonial hangover remained. Indian society was at a cross-road. The educated Indians, hitherto working in various

capacities under the British, still retained the flavour of the old life. Indian society in some ways was progressive, but sadly, the old drawbacks remained, acting as a blot on the progressive front of this society.

Many glaring aspects of Indian society are portrayed effectively. Dowry system was and still is an evil prevalent in the society. A woman's place in society is determined by her relation to her husband. She is the dominated one in this relationship. The son has always been the pivot or the heir to the family legacy; the one who carries forward the family name and hence, his every need has to be looked after well. To elaborate in *Fasting, Feasting* much before Arun is born, his name has already been chosen. His coming into the world is waited with bated breath by MamaPapa. Plans for his upbringing, his food habits, his diet, education and his study abroad have already been drawn. It is ironical that Arun in spite of all these attentions lavished on him, turns out to be a weakling, in exact opposition to his father's desires and expectations. One does sympathise with Arun whose very individuality gets swamped and bogged down by all such attention and dominance. Uma's existence, in contrast is one of meaninglessness. She is a nonentity as far as her parents are concerned.

Anita Desai, herself, the product of a cross-culture (her mother being German) portrays brilliantly the culture-conflict (between the American and the Indian way of life). Everywhere there is an undercurrent of conflict – the openness of the Indian is contrasted to the reticence and desire for privacy of the Americans. The position of women, the differences in the way of life, attitude, food habit and dress sense also come in for analysis. You will note that going abroad in pursuance of one's education during that time was regarded as an unusual and novel occasion. A person with a foreign degree was held in much esteem. This feeling is markedly absent in Arun. To him, going abroad gave him the chance to break free, of all mental shackles. He goes to the USA carrying a heavy 'baggage' - of stifling expectations and commitments. You feel for Arun when it is said that he at last experiences in America the 'total freedom of anonymity, the total absence of relations, of demands, needs, requests, ties, responsibilities, commitments'. (p.172) He glories in the fact that at the time he is not bound by any oppressive ties of family or country.



### 2.3 THE PLOT IN BRIEF

*Fasting, Feasting* is the story of an Indian family in a traditional Indian setup. It is the story of an Indian couple whose identity is inextricably linked. They are just called MamaPapa and are representative of most Indian families where patriarchy rules supreme. In such a situation, the individuality of the woman invariably gets swamped and trampled upon to such an extent that she has no independent existence left. Such is the case with Mama. Her existence revolves round Papa; she is at his beck and call and relegates all her desires to the background. All their decisions are mutually taken together. One is indistinguishable from the other. Uma is their eldest daughter. Myopic and greying, she is 'raised' all along to bring off a suitable marriage. Her whole life is one of subjugation; it is as if she has been born to look after others. If it is not her parents' needs she is attending to or looking after the house, it is running after her little brother Arun whose upbringing is dependent on her. She is taken 'off' school and told imperiously by MamaPapa that henceforth, her daily routine would comprise looking after Arun and attending to his every need. Efforts are made to marry her off, not out of any genuine thought for her. Twice, marriages are fixed but twice, she is deceived after her dowries have been taken and used by her in-laws. Her father never lets her forget this loss of his finances. In between, Ramu, her unconventional, 'eccentric' and madcap of a cousin comes to her house and she loves going out with him and doing all sorts of unconventional things like drinking and coming home late at night. Uma also enjoys her time spent with the nuns of the convent and she looks forward to Mira-masi's visits to their house. Mira-masi's descriptions of her journey across the length and breadth of the country enthralls her; they are wonderful breaks for her.

Her sister, Aruna 'brings off' a wonderful marriage and is able to move out of the suffocating confines of her home. She settles down in Bombay to lead a 'perfect' life – occasionally coming home to raise her nose at everything and everyone she considers beneath the posh life she is leading. After the birth of their brother Arun, Uma's education is cut short, to look after him. Her whole life henceforth will be devoted to the upbringing of Arun who is suffocated and swamped by all the attention lavished on him, being the sole male heir. Uma longs to break free from such a life of caring for others but her life is one long journey, one way or the other. Arun passes out of school and plans are afoot for his future study. Even his mother wants him to study

at the local college but not his father. He has 'big' dreams for Arun and wants the best education for him. So again, Arun has to prepare for all the entrance tests of many universities abroad. When finally after months of preparation, the acceptance letter comes from Massachusetts University, he is drained and so is his father. For, it has been after all, possible because of Papa's persistent efforts. Arun ironically, has no personal feelings. Uma trying her utmost to discover any emotion on his face, sadly finds none. 'She watched and searched for an expression, of relief, of joy, doubt, fear, anything at all. But there was none. All the years of scholarly toil had worn down any distinguishing features Arun's face might once have had...' (p.121) Arun's study plans abroad are actually an extension of his father's own dreams of a foreign degree.

Part II of the novel revolves round Arun and his new life in America. His life's course has already been charted by his imperious father in India. In America, Arun seeks out anonymity and seclusion. Years of being a puppet to someone else's will and desire has effectively robbed him of the desire for another such life. He admires the way the Americans fiercely guard their privacy; he also tries to do the same here. He deliberately shuns all Indian company and avoids getting close to the teachers. He dutifully and periodically sends letters home with all the necessary information about himself and his study but nothing more. He keeps them brief and to the point. He exults in his newfound freedom but this period of happiness does not last. During the summer break, when the University closes down, and students are asked to vacate their rooms, Arun has to look for an alternate arrangement. He puts up with the Pattons at Boston (naturally, he has no say in this arrangement). Mrs. Patton is Mrs. O'Henry's sister who is known to the family since years. Arun spends his summer break with the Pattons. He finds he cannot be at ease at this house and finds it difficult to adjust with the family. Food is a major problem for him. He is startled to find the non-vegetarian ways of his father reflected in Mr. Patton who can never understand the reason behind Arun's (an Indian's) avoiding beef. Mrs. Patton is overly enthusiastic in trying to make him feel at home. She finds an affinity in Arun's vegetarian ways and always springs to his defence in the face of her husband's remonstrations. But this very enthusiasm of Mrs. Patton who keeps on pulling Arun with her to shop for food and more food at the supermarket puts him off. He discovers that the Pattons are just another extension of the family he has left behind. He finds the Patton family a study

in contrast. Rod, the son of the family has no time for anyone. He is busy in his own world and is addicted to physical exercise and jogging. Naturally, he and Arun never see anything common between them. Melanie is Rod's sister and suffers from bulimia, a common occurrence there. She detests Arun and avoids him like the plague; perhaps she envies the attention given to him by her mother. Whenever he offers any help, Melanie withdraws into her self-exiled cocoon of abject solitariness and induces vomiting. Arun somehow finds an affinity between his poor sister Uma at home and the silently suffering Melanie. Coming from a different culture, America with its openness and surplus of everything is a shock to Arun. He wants to be all alone, living a life of anonymity, to be lost in the milling crowd of America. At the end of the summer, Arun gets ready to come back to his hostel in the university. He gets a parcel of a tea bag and a woollen shawl from home but gifts them to Mrs. Patton who is pleasantly shocked. Nevertheless, she accepts the gifts warmly. She never expects such a gesture from Arun. Though she tries her best to bridge the gap between the two cultures and to make Arun feel at home, she knows she has not succeeded. The gap remains mainly because of Arun's deliberate reticence. Her acceptance of the gifts coats Mrs. Patton's personality with a pleasant humane quality which is endearing. It also goes to show that cultures may be divergent but differences can be smoothed out by warm behaviour. It can be just a gesture-but the beginning has to be somewhere. Even the mechanical and seemingly hard-hearted Americans can be humane, after all.

**Check Your Progress:**

1. Do you think *Fasting, Feasting* succeeds in telling the story of women across the globe?
2. Try to find out the points of similarities and dissimilarities between the two divergent cultures-Western and Eastern.

## 2.4 LIST OF CHARACTERS

### **MamaPapa:**

MamaPapa is the perfect example of an Indian couple whose identities are intermingled so much so that one cannot be imagined without the other.

Papa is the typical Indian male – domineering, and autocratic. The patriarch whose word is command, he also stands for the Indian who is at a crossroad. Having struggled all his life for an English education, he has acquired a job in an office. Though he plays tennis with his ‘elite’ circle of friends, goes to club meets and bridge parties; putting on an air of superiority and authority, Papa still clings on to traditional, orthodox views. He cannot at all be called progressive in spite of his English education. He longs for a male heir; when Arun at last arrives, he is overwhelmed with joy. He focuses all his attention, and lavishes his affection on Arun to such an extent that it becomes suffocating for little Arun. Sadly, whatever he hopes for from Arun comes to naught. . He seeks to fulfil all his unfulfilled dreams through Arun. In the process, he fails to regard the boy as a living person, an individual with his own needs, and desires. For this, he even sends Arun to America for further study. This is just an extension of his dreams for Arun. Ironically, Papa does not entertain any such vision for either Uma or Aruna. He takes Uma ‘off’ from her education at the convent, on the pretext that she is not doing well – to look after Arun. He does not pay any heed whatsoever to Uma’s wish to continue her education, her desire to be with ‘friends’ and to be independent. He grudges Uma every paisa she uses up, even the phone call she makes to Mrs. O’Henry or Dr. Dutt. He cannot bear the idea of a working lady. So, he does not send Uma to work with Dr. Dutt even though he knows, it is what Uma wants most. The two dowries spent on Uma which were unfortunately ‘lost’ add to Uma’s woes. Papa never lets her forget it.

Mama, though a woman, is oblivious of her eldest daughter’s emotional needs. An extension of Papa’s character in that she echoes every word of his, she is also the picture perfect of a traditional Indian woman, acquiescing in his every utterance. She has, in all those years, perfected the art of keeping her husband happy, by even pushing into the background her secret longings for a rendezvous with friends.

**Uma:**

Uma, the spinster daughter of MamaPapa, stands for all that the Indian woman is deprived of. Her whole life is one of deprivation and suppression. She wants to continue her study though she does not do well, loves being in the convent but is taken ‘off’ school. She has desires of her own; longs to

be independent, go off on her own and enjoy life on her own terms. But pleasures such as her visit to the fair with the nuns, her visit to Benaras with Mira-masi, are very less and rare. Uma's longings for another life, where she can come out of her wearisome world of constantly caring for others are very touching. She reads secretly the Book of Poems by Ella Wheeler Wilcox deriving immense satisfaction and pleasure out of it. The titles of the books catch our attention – Poems of Pleasure, Poems of Pain. These are such eloquent expressions of Uma's wretched life.

From the time Arun was born, Uma's life is taken over. Her life from now on is going to be devoted wholly to Arun's upbringing. No one pays any heed to her wishes or desires. She has no say in her marriage plans. Everything in her life goes on according to what her parents have laid out for her.

Uma is not a strong character. She cannot and does not go against her parents' orders. Though she yearns to help Dr. Dutt in her work with all her being, she simply cannot articulate her wish. She seemingly nods her head in acquiescence, the words do not materialise. Finally, as usual, her decision is made by MamaPapa. She fumes inside, indignant but outwardly she cannot say anything. Meek and obedient, (only for flashes of rebellion) Uma looks at life from the outside. Myopic, and awkward, she is just there to look after her parents' needs and then Arun's. Her whole life is just reduced to intermittently looking at her collection of bangles and cards which temporarily transport her to another world.

Uma's character reminds us of Nanda Kaul in Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* in that both of them are entrapped in a life of duties and responsibilities. The desire to break free is in both of them.

### **Aruna:**

Aruna is the second daughter of the family. She is pretty, clever and more intelligent than Uma. She is all that Uma isn't- the perfect foil to her simplicity and submissiveness. Having seen from the background, what happens to Uma with one failed engagement and another failed marriage; Aruna makes sure she is not deceived likewise. She knows how to take care of herself and how to woo suitors and how to get the most out of a situation.

Expectedly, Aruna lands a 'perfect' husband, good-looking and economically well-off who can afford to offer her a far better life than the one she is used

to at her parents'. She goes to Bombay and becomes addicted to 'perfection'; looks for it everywhere and in everyone. The effort leaves her perennially dissatisfied, stressed out and tired. The obsession with 'perfection' leads Aruna to dominate even her husband and children. The look of discontent takes on a perennial note in her whole bearing.

**Arun:**

Arun is the only son of MamaPapa, the heir to the family and the apple of their eyes. His parents long for a son and when he is born, typically, they are over the moon. His name has long been chosen, the course of his life already charted out by his father – he just has to fall in line.

He becomes the symbol of his father's unfulfilled dreams. Remembering his own bitter struggle throughout his life, Papa sees to it that Arun does not have to undergo the same experience. In the process he envelopes the boy with all his attention, even to the extent of deciding his food habit. Arun feels suffocated by all these; he would rather be alone and live his own life. Arun is a weak character. Contrary to his father's ardent desire, he grows up all different. Physically also, he is weak and suffers from all kinds of ailments. A kind of fear stays on with him derived from all the years of being subjected to his parents' whims and fancies and left with no choice of his own.

He goes for further study to the University of Massachusetts. It is again his father who paves the way for his arrival and stay in America. He fills up Arun's application form, makes him study hard to win the scholarship. Finally winning the scholarship is more of Papa's triumph than his.

Arun is an escapist. Instead of adjusting to the American culture which is different from that he is used to; he is running away from it all the time. He has no friends, mostly because of his inability to mingle with others. When staying with the Pattons, he does not assert himself. His decisions are usually made by others. Even on the matter of his food habit, he cannot be strong. He is apologetic all the time.

I feel the only time Arun does something of his own volition is when he gives away the shawl and the bag of tea sent by his family, to Mrs. Patton, making her happy. The gesture is awkward but automatic. The gifts are a stark reminder of home and everything he is trying to get away from. Perhaps he is trying to break free of all shackles even if represented by these trifles.

**Mrs. Joshi:**

Mrs. Joshi is a happy cheerful lady, the kind of person who always spread good cheer. She is the jolly, helpful neighbour whom everyone would love to have.

Even when she is ill-treated by her mother-in-law, a symptomatic ill present in Indian societies, Mrs. Joshi does not feel inclined to retaliate. She manages to be happy with her husband in spite of all this and when the lady dies, takes over the running of her household, in the process, spreading happiness all around.

Mrs. Joshi is Uma's pillar of strength. She tries to fill up the emotional vacuum in the girl's life, instinctively knowing that she is "miserable" at home. No wonder, all of her own children are happily settled in life.

**Dr. Dutt:**

Dr. Dutt is a lady doctor of the town, hailing from a respectable family of lawyers. She is independent and takes her job seriously. She also wants to help Uma by engaging her in some work at the hospital. Sadly, she cannot break through MamaPapa's stubborn opposition to the idea of Uma working.

**Mrs. O'Henry:**

The O'Henrys are a symbol of the post-colonial life. They have lived almost two decades in that place. She, along with the sisters at the convent to which Uma goes, represent a life that is fast fading – a pure, simple life given to innocent joys and means of enjoyment – through fairs, baking cakes and having parties at their home etc.. The O'Henry's are kind and helpful people. In spite of MamaPapa's grudging behaviour with them, they offer to help out Arun during the summer break in his University. Mrs. O'Henry offers Arun a room at her sister, Mrs. Patton's home.

**The Cook:**

The cook in the household is reminiscent of a colonial life that is now no more. He came into their lives when he was young. Active then, he has become old now and cannot perform his duties properly. Grumbling and yet cycling down to the town or chasing the urchins from the garden, in response to his masters' dictates, cook is a lovable person.

His is a familiar character in most post-colonial novels. He is also present in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*.

**Mira-masi:**

Mira-masi is a distant relation of Uma. She is a widow and deeply religious. Her life's sole ambition after the death of her husband is to travel to holy places, to offer prayers to the Lord. An idol she carries along with her is stolen and henceforth, her aim is to go about in search of it till she ultimately 'finds' it in a shop.

She is symbolic of a ritualistic India. She is given to rituals all the time, even starving herself at times in the name of worshipping the Lord. She is like the traveller of the past who brings news and information from far flung areas and of relations who are cut-off from the family. Like the story of Mirabai in Indian mythology who dedicates her life to Lord Krishna, Mira-masi, also glories in the idea that her salvation lies at the feet of the Lord. She tells Uma that since she has been rejected twice in marriage, she should seek relief at the Lord's feet as He has chosen her. Needless to say, Uma who is very much, a woman of the world, is terrified of this idea.

**Ramu:**

Ramu is the proverbial black sheep of the family. Son of Uma's uncle, and brother to Anamika, he embodies everything that the family hates. Untidy, sloppy and physically deformed, he makes everyone's hackles rise by his unconventional behaviour at all times. He knows exactly what irritates his Uncle and Aunt and proceeds to do just that. He arrives at their doorstep at odd times, and wickedly 'wants' hospitality showered on him by his Uncle and Aunt who are livid at him. He takes Uma out to a restaurant and they get drunk, and arrive back late much to the anger of his Uncle-Aunt. Uma is delighted at her scruffy cousin's arrival for he gives her a way out of her drab routine existence. Though thoroughly despised by his Uncle-Aunt for his wayward ways, it is Ramu only who is sent to bring back Uma from her spiritual sojourn to an ashram in the foothills with Uma-Masi.

After this, Ramu's character disappears suddenly from the scene. Though he is intermittently remembered by Uma, he does not appear again.

**Anamika:**

Anamika is a character who does not come on the scene but whose presence is felt throughout. She stays in the background as a grim reminder of the fact that dowry death is one of the scourges of Indian society.



Seemingly beautiful, talented, and intelligent (she even wins a scholarship to Oxford University), she is feted by everyone in the family. Hers is an example highlighted for those not so fortunate, to follow. Expectedly, she is not allowed to go abroad to study. Her dreams are cut short, and her scholarship certificate is kept away, to be shown as a qualification in wooing a suitor.

Sadly, she meets a terrible death at her in-laws' hands. Though India has progressed on all fronts today, there are many more Anamikas dying a similar death every day.

### **The Pattons:**

The Pattons are a family in America with whom Arun stays during his summer break. It is Arun's interactions with them or lack of it that form the crux of the second part of the story. The Patton family is an extension of Arun's family at home in India. Mr. Patton with his constant engagement with barbecuing large slabs of meat and rueing his family's lack of interest in it is just like Papa who is disappointed with his heir's vegetarian ways. Mrs. Patton is sweet but overbearing; she is the kind who swamps others' with their eagerness to help out. She finds a kinship with Arun in his vegetarian ways and goes overboard in her attempts to make him feel comfortable in her predominantly non-vegetarian household. She stands contrasted to Mama (of MamaPapa) who has no voice of her own. Mrs. Patton is the quintessential modern woman who goes out and shops and generally leads her life her own way. Ironically, communication with their children is conspicuously lacking, sadly, a fast growing symptom of modern life. Rod, their son has his interest in physical activity; he goes out for jogging everyday; it is his way of seeking and finding his 'freedom'. He has no time for his family or sister who, he knows is suffering from bulimia. Melanie suffers from bulimia, a common occurrence in the land of opulence. She 'feasts' and then induces vomiting; in more ways than one, she is the prototype of Uma. Both are neglected and hence frustrated; Melanie's refuge in bulimia is her way out of her misery. This is in contrast to poor Uma who finds her refuge in an imaginative world of books and cards.

**SAQ:**

1. Show how lack of communication is getting to be a major problem of modern times. (50 words)

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2. What similarity do you find in the characters of Uma and Melanie? (50 words)

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3. Show how Anamika becomes a symbol of the scourge of Indian society. (60 words)

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5. Show how patriarchy is foregrounded in the novel. (100 words)

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**2.5. SUMMING UP**

In this unit I have outlined the plot in brief to facilitate your reading and understanding of the text. I have also made a study of the varied characters, which I believe, will help you to grasp the main strands of the text. As you know characters are instrumental in the development of a story and the narrative of a novel is carried forward through characters. The flow of the narrative is enhanced through the characters and I hope that by the end of this unit, you will have learnt to appreciate the entire gamut of the perspective of looking at the text and some of the main themes and issues relating to it. The next unit will explore such issues in detail to help you understand the novel in its totality.

## Unit 3

### Themes and Techniques

#### Contents:

- 3.1 Objectives
- 3.2 Introduction
- 3.3 The Title
- 3.4 Characterization
- 3.5 The Point of view and Narration
- 3.6 Images and Symbols
- 3.7 Themes
- 3.8 Summing Up
- 3.9 References and Suggested Readings

#### 3.1 OBJECTIVES

In this unit you will become aware of the various ways to study the narrative techniques of Desai and particularly, of *Fasting, Feasting*. The various themes and issues concerning the text have also been studied at length. I have tried to

- *give* you a picture of the narrative structure and texture of the novel
- *introduce* you to various strands of thought and ideas in the text vis-à-vis recurrent motifs
- *familiarise* you with the various issues pertaining to the text

#### 3.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit will give you an idea of the different ways of reading the text. The themes and main issues have already been discussed in the previous unit. The ‘technique’ relates to the narrative style and devices resorted to by the author. I have also tried to analyse the various images and symbols used in the novel; they will help you to understand better the varied and contrasting

situations that the characters find themselves in. As you go through the novel, and the subsequent sections here, you will also observe that the art of characterization is an important technique in the hands of a writer. The way a writer handles his characters also leads to the growth and shape of the novel. I have devoted a chapter to this in this unit, and you will learn to distinguish between 'round' and 'flat' characters as underscored by E. M. Forster in his 'Aspects of the Novel'.

### **3.3 THE TITLE**

Significantly, the novel has been divided into two parts. The first part is based in India and focuses on the domestic scenes of a typical middleclass Indian family and is described through the eyes of a female, Uma. The second part belongs entirely to Arun, the male-heir of the family and is based on his experiences in distant America. 'Fasting' aptly describes the Indian lifestyle – austere, bleak, passive and restrained. It also refers to the fasting rituals that the Indians traditionally follow during social and religious occasions. Mira-masi, a widow travels all over India in search of her Lord and peace therein. 'Feasting', similarly, refers to the abundance in the American way of life. Everything is in excess here – 'food, body and freedom'. After the restraints and constraints of an orthodox and religious India, Arun is taken aback at the display of food and body. It is a kind of cultural shock to him. If there is one thing which delights him here it is the freedom one enjoys here. He simply revels in his new-found freedom and finds himself free from all kinds of entrapment. Each day here is a celebration of life. The differences in the two ways of life and attitudes cannot be any sharper. It is a feast here all the time and yet, the search for happiness still goes on, too. The differences between the two cultures are also hinted at in the title.

### **3.4 CHARACTERIZATION IN *FASTING, FEASTING***

*Fasting, Feasting* is a novel rich in detail. The characters are also vivid, and are beautifully described. The author has succeeded in bringing out the individualistic traits of each character. Yet they are also representational and contemporary. The novel starts with a description of an Indian middle-

class household in an Indian setting. The way of life described here is one that is slowly fading away. The pace of life delineated here is slow and leisurely.

The story is mainly narrated in the indirect tense using the third person. Uma can be said to be the protagonist of the first part of the story; here the events are described as seen through her eyes. In so doing, the author, I feel makes Uma representational. She becomes a symbol of all suffering women in any society, particularly the Indian society. She is the girl child whose birth is not welcome and whose upbringing henceforth is oriented towards marriage. When she grows up, her education is frowned upon and her whole existence now revolves round the existence of her brother. She is dominated and marginalised with no voice and individuality. Her opinions do not matter in the long run.

Though the narrative is mostly in the third person, the other characters come alive only when they act as foils to Uma; they can be judged only on the basis of Uma's interaction with them. Her character also comes out clearly when set off against the others. Her character can be termed 'flat', in that it shows no development. From the beginning to the end, she is the same – timid, submissive, always giving in to others' decisions taken on her behalf. As E. M. Forster says, flat characters 'are constructed round a single idea or quality; when there is more than one factor in them, we get the beginning of the curve towards the round.' You will recall here that even when Uma badly wants to go with Dr. Dutt to help her in her work; she can do no better than nod her head vigorously in her parents' presence. The decision not to allow her to go has already been taken by her parents. So, it is seen that Uma's character can be more openly gauged through a study of the different situations she is in at different times in her life. Her characterization becomes poignant when juxtaposed with her 'lucky' brother's life. Arun had been presented in a contrasting light. He is supposedly, the fortunate fellow on whom everyone's attention is focussed. But, this very attention and expectations weigh him down to the point that he pines for anonymity in America. You will remember his torturous stay with the Pattons in America. In the same breath, he is also a shrewd character who even when small, knows instinctively how to gainfully utilize his liberties. (Do you remember how he calmly threatened Uma that he would tell their parents that she had given him sour guavas to eat?)

You will observe that none of the characters except perhaps, the Joshis are a happy lot in the novel.

Through a third person narrative, the author of *Fasting Feasting* has succeeded in bringing out the inherent complexities and intricacies of each character neatly. You must go through the text thoroughly to have a first-hand grasp of the dominant themes of the novel and the intricate workings of the various characters therein.

**SAQ:**

1. What ideas can you have of Desai's characterization in this novel?  
(100 words)

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2. Can Uma's character be termed as 'flat' or 'round'? (50 words)

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**3.5 THE POINT OF VIEW AND NARRATION**

The author has dedicated this book to her acquaintances: to 'all those whose stories I have told.' We can infer from this statement that Desai wants to clothe her story with an air of realism. Notwithstanding the authorial statement, *Fasting, Feasting* is everyone's story cutting across the borders of class and culture.

As I have already stated, the narration is in the third person, the first part presented through Uma's eyes, every situation delineated through Uma's viewpoint. But in spite of this, it is the authorial voice who is presenting the situation of a hundred such Uma's through a study of the character and situation of her heroine.

*The Times* has called this novel 'disturbing'. We can, agree with this comment because the novel does rattle our conscience and we are left with the

unnerving question as to the treatment of the girl child or the status of women in most societies across the globe.

The novel starts in the present tense but suddenly goes back to the past tense. Both the tenses are used side by side with wonderful effectiveness. Desai's style in the novel is fluid, efficiently describing in detail each landscape and each lifestyle. In his book, *The Craft of Fiction*, Percy Lubbock talks about the different points of view. He says, "the novelist can either describe the characters from outside, as an impartial or partial onlooker; or he can assume omniscience and describe them from within; or he can place himself in the position of one of them and affect to be in the dark as to the motives of the rest; or there are certain intermediate attitudes." Here it is the voice of the omniscient narrator which succeeds in presenting the two contrasting cultures in all their differences. With a subtle humour and wit Desai has been able to delve deep into her characters' minds. There is asyndeton in the omniscient narration. The repeated use of the word 'they' to describe Mamapapa catches the reader's eye. The conversation is staccato, in keeping with the unreal situation of Mamapapa. (They are described as perennially swinging and reinforcing the note of perennial wait. In between, the conversation takes on a frenzied note on trivial matters like 'food' and the 'parcel' suggesting mindlessness of the characters. Kind of monotony also invades the conversation between the characters at times and this is reinstated through the narration the omniscient narration takes on a relaxed tone at times specially when there is a description of Mama indulging in a game of cards with her neighbours. Here, narration is mostly in the third-person interspersed with dialogues or direct narration. Narration is more detailed, more kaleidoscopic when describing Papa at his dominating best. He is reduced to an automation by crisp, repetitive narration the stringent narration restricts the telegraphic free flow and this is excellent in moulding the characters of Mamapapa. But when describing Uma, the mood of the narration becomes gloomy, heavy, perhaps to keep in tune to her oppressed life. It is not relieved by any jocularity. Sometimes the narration loosens up giving moments of relief. The choice of anecdotes and incidents narrated are apt. the incidents from Papa's past are essential to reinforce the thematic growth, for example, the description of the vegetarian ways of his forefathers which he has abandoned for a non-vegetarian life succeeds in portraying his preoccupation with making something different of his life. Hence, when

Arun proclaims his distaste for non-vegetarian fare and it becomes apparent that he is not going to follow in his father's footsteps; Papa's disappointment is acute. The narration takes on an Indian flavour with Indian terms thrown in when describing the character of Mira-masi and the rituals followed on the river bank. The imagery becomes poetic while describing the imaginative and magical world of Uma (when she is alone with her cards and bangles and book of poems). The language takes on delightful hues as do the words chosen here. ('before this rosebud wilted', 'passionately sweet', 'wild waltz', 'flying feet', 'wonderful blue of your matchless hue', 'come fly with me – darling – fly') Next moment, the narration takes on a harsh, realistic note. The real intrudes into the gloriously imaginative and her reverie is broken by the insistent shouts of Mama outside the door.

In Part Two of the novel, the narration becomes appropriately descriptive of a nation that has a history of the 'wilderness' behind it. The mechanical perfection of the American way of life with their 'carefully constructed gardens', and 'immaculate lawns', the clipped hedges and the 'bird-feeders' and the painted houses is stressed upon. The language used is effective in reflecting the economic prosperity of this nation. The narration becomes chirpy and effusive when describing Mrs. Patton and her pattering ways. She is 'born to shop' and is what she exactly proceeds to do. She keeps on stocking her refrigerator and does not seem to mind food being wasted. The 'land of opulence is aptly described and the two cultures stand starkly contrasted at every point. Mr. Patton's similarity with Papa is brought forth by the same terse kind of narration used in his case. Later on, Mrs. Patton's interest in traditional medicines – in Yoga and astrology serves as a reminder of the 'East meets West syndrome and maybe, disillusionment with the 'fast' life of the Americans with its many ills, illuminated by what happens to her daughter. The narration now becomes slow and emphasises the lack of zest or vigour in the characters. Desai leaves the novel open-ended. The assimilation of the two cultures or acceptance of the one by the other is hinted at in the last scene when Mrs. Patton accepts Arun's gifts. But Arun's withdrawal or rejection of his home still stands. ('an aroma arises from it, of another land: muddy, grassy, smoky, ashen. It swamps him, like a river, or like a fire...'). Either way, the fear of annihilation (of his personality) still assails him and that is why, he moves away quietly from it all.



**Check Your Progress:**

1. Do you think the third person narrative is helpful in understanding the predicament of the two dominant characters, Uma and Arun in the two parts of the novel?
2. How does the author succeed in garnering our sympathy for Arun in spite of his being a weak character?
3. What are the various narrative techniques employed by Desai?

**3.6 IMAGES AND SYMBOLS**

*Fasting, Feasting* is full of images and symbols which strongly reinforce the various strands of thought and ideas in the novel.

The Swing on which MamaPapa perennially seen to sit and swing like a pendulum is an oft-repeated motif in the novel. It recurs so often that its image with MamaPapa seated on it becomes etched in our memory. It serves as a reminder of the boredom and ennui surrounding the house and the mechanical life the inmates are living. An air of fetidness hangs about it and the rhythmic swinging seems to indicate a routine and static life. MamaPapa seated on it become merged into one entity, one being. A sort of eeriness prevails and patriarchy is foregrounded.

In Uma's world, the woman has to be good in cooking. 'Samosas' and 'tea' become a symbol of a woman's qualification. The man is a symbol of supremacy and dominance. The woman has to preen herself in front of him in order to be chosen by him. She is just a doll to be presented all dressed up to her bridegroom, a deity to be worshipped and at the same time, a door-mat to be trampled upon but never a human being.

'Food' is again, a very used image in the story. Sylvia Brownrigg comments, 'in Desai's fictional worlds, food is often the most expressive means of communication between husband and wife, parent and child. To her, you are – culturally, familially, emotionally – what you eat.' It is pertinent to note that 'food' is a very important concept in Indian society and hence, Indian fiction. Even Ruth Praver Jhabvala shows a marked tendency to talk about 'food' in her novels so often. In Uma's world, the topic of food creeps in almost all the time and is supposed to be the solution to all problems. You will see right through the novel that Uma is constantly running after the

preparation of food in her household. It is a rigorously disciplined food diet that is administered to Arun right from his birth. Though his father is a strict non-vegetarian and does his best to raise his only son along the same lines, Arun disappoints him. He turns out to be a vegetarian. Food is not a problem with his family but there is again a difference between the food his family consumes and the meagre, bare meals that Mira-masi intake as part of her ritualistic life. Nothing can be more traumatic or shocking to Arun than the non-vegetarian ways of Mr. Patton in America. He keeps on barbecuing huge slabs of meat out in the garden and fails to understand why his own children do not take any interest in his activity. The plentifulness and the wastage of food in the country of the 'plenty' (Mrs. Patton keeps on stocking her fridge even when there is no need) shocks Arun. Melanie binges on food and then lets it all out – being a patient of bulimia. All of this is new to Arun. Somehow, the warmth and companionship of eating together back home was missing here, at the Pattons. The canned food bought from the stores and refrigerated has a 'cold' air to it. It all suggests a mechanical, routine and 'frozen' way of life of the Americans. A dichotomy between tradition and modernity is also hinted at here.

The temple at Varanasi is a symbol of all that a religious India believes in. It stands for the beliefs of countless Indians since time immemorial. The priest chanting a 'mantra', the devotees sitting with eyes closed and chanting the Lord's name together, the ghats at every corner add to the peaceful and spiritual ambience. The rituals Mira-masi indulges in remind us of a ritualistic Indian society, the rites a widow had to blindly observe at that time. But the rhythmically chanted 'mantras' in themselves are ritualistic, monotonous and meaningless. The whole situation is static and there is no vent to feelings.

The house that Uma lives in becomes a symbol of entrapment to her. She finds it stifling and the air about fetid. She loves it whenever she can be out of it, whether it be visiting the happy Joshis, the sisters at the convent or with Mrs. O'Henry in her garden party. She also loves to get away from it when Mira-masi takes her with her on her ritualistic journeys and when her cousin Ramu takes her out for a fun-filled evening.

A similar situation can also be found in another novel of Desai, *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*, where the heroine Sita, feeling claustrophobic in her Bombay house, goes away in search of her identity and happiness to an island house, Manori.

The closed world of Uma’s house is different from her imaginative world. To escape into that enchanting world, she looks at her collection of cards, bangles and handkerchiefs and reads poems by Ella Wheeler Wilcox. ‘Poems of Pain’, ‘Poems of Cheer’, ‘Poems of Pleasure’, ‘The Kingdom of Love’, and ‘Yesterdays’ speak of a world unattainable to Uma. Ella Wheeler Wilcox, Gay and Hancock, Henrietta Street, Covent Garden are all enchanting names for her. ‘Matchless, silken, casement, queen, rosebuds, wild waltz, passionately, madly, vows, fulfil’ – these are words appearing in the ‘Poems of Pleasure’ that Uma reads again and again, symbol of a world closed to her.

The River is also an important symbol here. Its incessant flow sweeps away all the complexities, the uncertainties and the fears lurking in the minds of people. So are Uma’s fear and her recurrent seizures when she almost drowns in the river.(when she accompanies Mira-masi for the ritualistic dip) A kind of ‘thrill and exultation’ courses through her. ‘She, in fact, hated the saving part.’ (p.111). The River in India is a potent symbol. It is revered for its ‘feminine power’ (*Indian Writing in English*, K.R.Srinivasa Iyengar) and cleansing act – of not only the body but also the soul.

**SAQ:**

How do important images and symbols help in carrying the theme forward? (50 words)

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What role does ‘food’ play in this novel? (60 words)

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3. Comment on the symbol of the ‘house’ becoming an image of entrapment for the people living in it. (80 words)

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4. What are the other symbols in the novel? (60 words)  
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### 3.7 THEMES

Anita Desai has said that it is not her intention to write about Indian society or people. What interests her are the inner workings or the psyche of people. Having said that, *Fasting, Feasting* is a novel replete with typical characteristics of a traditional middle-class Indian society. It is also about certain features common to people in societies everywhere. It is about male-dominance in society and in a family. The man is the patriarch, the pivot round whom the family revolves.

Many themes can be identified in the novel. I have outlined some of the dominant ones.

#### **Search for the self by the marginalised female**

The novel opens with an image of MamaPapa, sitting on a sofa-swing on the veranda and swinging forth rhythmically. The air about is passive and bored. All talk veer towards food as if its appearance will solve all problems. Uma, the eldest daughter is summoned straight away to carry out an errand. It is soon revealed that poor, myopic Uma is always at the beck and call her parents. Her whole life is devoted to the upbringing of her brother, Arun. Even after he is sent off to the University of Massachusetts for further study; she seems to be serving him, packing parcels for him writing letters on her father's behalf. MamaPapa, PapaMama have no separate identity. They speak and think for one another and so it is with the Indian woman. Her identity is forever fused with that of her dominant life partner's. Mama has

no separate enjoyment of life; her life is mechanical and full of ennui and boredom, only broken by occasional remembrances of past days. Mama's life is interlinked with Papa's; her own life a forgotten chapter, now just devoted to the fulfilment of Papa's every need. That is why, the intrusion of the thought of 'sweets' into her thought is symbolic; it bespeaks of a now forgotten past life. All these are occasional interludes where the Indian woman longs for or pines for a life of fun and frolic (she goes away to her friends secretly for a card game and behaves coquettishly in their presence) but pushes herself back to the furthest edge of her consciousness in front of her husband and reverts back to the insipid, insignificant present (maintaining a look of 'guarded restraint', 'censure' and a 'decorum', that is, all too tiring). Thus it is with MamaPapa. Their two identities merge into one being and the face they present to the world is inscrutable. The episode of Papa eating orange at the dining table, and Mama serving him the segments after peeling them in strips, and freeing them of pips and threads till 'only the perfect globules of juice are left' is comical, to say the least (He is the only one in the family who is given a napkin and a finger bowl; they are emblems of his status). This is all a picture of the male – ever so dominant, totally at ease only when giving 'curt' orders to others, putting on an air of authority, meant to discomfort others.

Still, what is noteworthy in this equation is the husband-wife agreement and understanding in all matters, this being the hallmark of all relationships in the traditional Indian society.

In spite of apparent modernity in Papa's way of life (he plays tennis, take pride in it and leads a modern life), his outlook is still traditional, to say the least. He pines for a son and when Arun is born at last, after two daughters; his pride at fathering a son knows no bounds. Everything said and done, it is always the desire for a son that occupies the minds of most Indian families. Expectedly, Uma's education is cut short to look after Arun. All her protests are of no avail. It is drummed into her time and again that the end goal of her life is just marriage. So, she should utilise her time in learning household jobs like cooking etc. Uma is shown the photograph of her suitors (a mockery of the 'progressiveness' of society). The reason why one of them is chosen for her is not divulged. Uma has just to look good before the suitor; her face is like a 'leather hide' to be examined. Predictably, Uma is

deceived twice in her marriage attempts. This reflects a sorry picture of the gullibility of families who are just eager to marry off their daughters to just anyone. The helplessness and plight of the girl's family at the hands of the evil called dowry is very sad.

### **Dowry system**

The evil of dowry was prevalent in society at that time and its shadow is still felt everywhere today, in spite of all round modernisation. The dowry system is expected, as usual, to solve the financial problem of the bridegroom's family. Anamika, Uma's cousin is one such dowry victim in the novel. She is beautiful, bright and intelligent. She wins a scholarship to Oxford but the certificate is put away, just to be taken out at times in order to show her qualifications before her suitor. Further education is also refused to Anamika. She is married off in a supposedly good family. But right from day one, the problems start. The family never get to see her again; she never comes to family ceremonies and rituals on the pretext that she is so loved, no one could 'let her out of their sight for even one day' (p.89). Her end comes, expectedly, the excuse a common one (that she had deliberately set herself alight).

### **Home – a negation of life**

For Uma or the girl child, home is a negation of life. It is different from all that a home should be; devoid of warmth, love and companionship. Uma is emotionally starved, she is tired of caring continuously for her parents (she has been doing it for twenty years now). She has no identity, she realises that her existence is linked to her brother's. Whatever she wants to do with her life is refused by MamaPapa. They even refuse to allow her to help Dr. Dutt with her patients (the idea of working women does not appeal to Papa. He hates the idea of women stepping into the hallowed precincts occupied by men). We cannot help feeling for the emotionally-bereft Uma who treasures her collection of cards and pressed ferns and bangles (reminiscent of two failed marriages and yet tokens of a fairy-tale existence elsewhere. Elsewhere. Elsewhere. p.117). Uma has no sense of belongingness to her home. She would rather be a daughter of the Joshis. Cheerful and happy, the Joshis live life as it should be, full of fun and carefreeness. Even a career for the youngest daughter, Moyna is not frowned upon.

Uma is the face of countless other women all over the world. Women like her face a kind of existential dilemma. Society primarily being male-dominated, women invariably suffer from an identity crisis. (Note: read Shashi Deshpande's novels, *The Dark Holds No Terror*, *A Matter of Time* and *That Long Silence*.)

### **Dichotomy between society and self**

The dichotomy between society and self is also elaborated upon in *Fasting, Feasting*. As seen in the novel, the 'self' is torn between one's individuality and the desire to conform to strict rules and regulations of society. The plight and situation of individuals caught in an existential dilemma as well as the strictures of society is unique to Desai. Poor Anamika's story is a case study. In spite of her harsh treatment at the hands of her in-laws, her family never try to bring her back. The thought of society always acts as the deterrent. (It is always the thought of what society would say if she came back. p 71). Similarly Arun's 'self' is predefined in conformation to the roles he is supposed to play in the society before he is born and consequently he seeks a life of anonymity. The desire to negate the 'self' is unique to the life of all the characters Desai depicts.

### **Search for spiritual solace**

Spiritual solace acts as a balm on a troubled person's mind. Mira-masi's life is one such journey of self-exploration amidst the rituals of widowhood. Faith in one's God and belief in one's actions are most often, the means to such spiritual solace. Mira-masi takes Uma with her on one such journey and the latter is at peace with her troubled thoughts. Towards the end of the novel, we see Mrs. Patton seeking her solace in yoga and astrology. Thus, the search is common to all cultures.

### **Culture conflict**

The novel also banks upon the theme of a culture conflict between two diametrically opposite cultures – India and America. Sylvia Brownrigg says that the book is 'not one of plot but of comparision', between the austerity and fasting rituals of India and the 'sumptuousness and opulence' of America. This part of the story occupies the second part and the sharp dichotomy is portrayed through the eyes of Arun. He is packed off to the University of Massachusetts to fulfil Papa's all unfulfilled dreams. America is a culture

shock to him in more ways than one. Everything is in excess here. The difference in the food habits, meals taken at different times, watching television all the time reflect the mechanical and plastic existence of the Americans. Although food is plentiful, Mr. Patton constantly barbeques huge slabs of meat and expects his family and Arun to share his passion for it. Mrs. Patton loves nothing better than stocking up her refrigerator and freezer.

You will here observe a similarity between the two families i.e. the lack of communication between the parents and the children. Both the sets of parents are overbearing in their own different ways. Mr. Patton is in many ways like Papa, he wants his children to imbibe and relish his non-vegetarian diet which makes Arun recoil both at home and in America. Melanie is another Uma. Both of them are frothing inside against years of neglect, inattention and misunderstanding. Uma is trapped inside her house, unable to protest whereas Melanie takes refuge in her bulimia.

You will also observe a difference in the roles of the women in the two cultures. The average Indian woman stays relegated to the background whereas her counterpart in America is more progressive and outgoing and shoulders equal responsibility with her male companion. The American woman has her own identity; she has her say in all matters and can never be termed a door-mat.

### **Desire for anonymity**

Arun's course of life has been charted out by his father right from the moment of his birth. He becomes the object of his father's unfulfilled dreams and the huge expectations weigh him down. Not surprisingly, he turns out the exact opposite of what his father wants him to be. His life at home is just one long journey of doing whatever his father wants him to. In the process, all his desires and longings have been sapped dry and are non-existent, Even when he is accepted in the University of Massachusetts, he has 'no expression of relief, of joy, doubt, fear, anything at all.' (p.121). the desire for anonymity is strong in Arun; he has had enough monitoring of his life. He seeks solace in solitude in the campus life and to a certain extent, he gets it there. The lecturers in the University never learn his name and he avoids the get-togethers of Indian students.



You will observe how different their society is from ours in that they never intrude into other's privacy. These are some of the dominant themes pervading the novel. It will be more helpful if you try to reinforce them through your reading of the text. You will then come to the conclusion that the search for true happiness is perennial and goes on everywhere. It can neither be found in abstinence (India) nor in excess (America).

**SAQ:**

1. How does the system of patriarchy lead to the marginalisation of female in most Indian societies? (75 words)

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2. Show how 'entrapment' of one kind or the other is an inevitable and hence, inescapable part of life everywhere (India/America). (60 words)

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3. Comment on the lack of communication as central to all cultures. (60 words)

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4. Show how too much expectations can be suffocating to the spirit. (Analyse Arun's experiences in about 100 words.)

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### 3.8 SUMMING UP

In this unit I have made an attempt to bring out the techniques of narration in *Fasting, Feasting* vis-à-vis, the point of view and the presence of the omniscient narrator. In the last section, I have addressed some of the major themes that occupy the entire novel. So at the end of this unit, I hope you will have come to appreciate *Fasting, Feasting* as a text that is a representation of the plight and situation of individuals caught in an existential dilemma all over the world.

### 3.9 REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READINGS

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### Block 3

#### AMITAV GHOSH'S *THE SHADOW LINES*

##### **Block Introduction:**

You are about to read here a commentary on the novel prescribed for your study, Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*. Since you will read of the novel in the pages that follow, in greater detail, we will only lead you at this point to seeing the novelist in wider terms. In today's world, among writers writing in English and bearing an Indian origin, Ghosh is probably the name that appears alongside Salman Rushdie's. Very recently, there was a lot of media coverage of the release of his latest work, *The Sea of Poppies*, with blurbs giving ravishing but brief statements of what the novel is said to contain. This is a measure of how much Indian writing means to a market-ridden literary culture. Do not think that it is all commerce and media-hype. Ghosh is probably one of those few writers whom critics and the general reader both consider in high esteem.

A reason - in very general terms - for the popularity enjoyed by Ghosh is that the style he employs in his writing is both accessible and yet capable of much refined subtlety. When the 'tsunami' in 2004 laid waste so much of human resources causing death and loss of shelter and basic facilities, a national daily ran a couple of articles on this disaster written by Amitav Ghosh. Those articles, describing the writer's visit to affected areas on the Indian coast and the people he met there, brought home to readers like us in Assam and other places the profound misery that confronted these victims. Ghosh, as a writer, probably rendered a great service during that time in employing his literary skills to bring forth what had happened and how people faced the calamity, in a restrained yet deeply moving fashion without dramatizing those disastrous days. This should show to you that Ghosh is most contemporary and relates to our times with passion and understanding and is, in the best senses of the term, 'global'. Novel after novel brings out such qualities. If we claim his "Indianness" as the quality which helps us to relate to all that he writes, we should also remember that Indians nowadays are expansively 'global' with not a shade of provincial inhibition.

In an essay on Satyajit Ray, Ghosh recalls the influence Ray's work had on him: "Looking back now, I am more than ever aware of the part that Ray

played in shaping the imaginary universe of my childhood and youth. I see this even in such details as my interest in science and science fiction; in ghost stories and the fantastical. One of my favourite Ray films to this day, remains *Paras Pathar* [The Philosopher's Stone], a neglected masterpiece that deserves a place of honour in the canon of surrealist cinema. When I saw *Agantuk* [The Stranger], in which the main character is an anthropologist, I began to wonder whether my interest in anthropology too, owed something, perhaps subconsciously, to Ray: I recalled suddenly that references to anthropology go back to some of his earliest work, starting with the African mask in *Apur Sansar*." This helps us to be aware of the myriad contemporary references in Ghosh's own work. In today's world inter-cultural traffic is visible and pervasive. The reference to anthropology here is a fitting reminder that not only is Ghosh a qualified anthropologist but the wide view of cultures all over the world is a measure of the variety of experiences that go into the making of his novels. Travel, therefore, is a central metaphor around which his writing is organised. It lends a special dimension to the themes that he explores in his fiction.

Your reading will naturally begin with the novel itself. Remember that no commentary we can supply for your academic purposes can equal the reading that you will give of the novel. To that extent, Indian Writing in English is about the best part of the entire programme of study since you too can be acceptable as a critic of note!

The first unit, focusing on the author, is meant to give you some idea of the worldly details behind the book. These need to be related to the novel with care. As a postgraduate student you would already be aware that no part of a book can be explained with a simple reference to the author's background. For instance, we cannot say why travel is a predominant metaphor in *The Shadow Lines* simply because Ghosh has himself been a veteran traveller. What you have to do is to connect this with the literary dynamics: how 'travel' functions as a metaphor in the novel. That is to say, how the idea of 'travel' brings up related ideas of borders as 'porous', and so on. The two other units in the Study Material here are more textual and will therefore be of more obvious utility.

Contents:

- Unit 1 : Introducing the Author
- Unit 2 : Introducing the Novel
- Unit 3 : Themes and Techniques

## Unit 1

### Introducing the Author

#### Contents:

- 1.1 Objectives
- 1.2 Introduction
- 1.3 Biographical Information
- 1.4 The Works of Ghosh
- 1.5 Placing the Work
- 1.6 Summing Up

#### 1.1 OBJECTIVES

This unit is an attempt to help you gain an overview of Amitav Ghosh's works, to familiarize you with certain aspects of his life and career as a writer and enable you to situate *The Shadow Lines* (the novel discussed here) vis-à-vis the social conditions and times that he depicts in the novel.

This unit is designed to assist you to

- *acquaint* yourself with the author's life and background
- *familiarize* yourself with Ghosh's other works
- *locate* Ghosh and his works in the gamut of Indian English literature
- *evaluate* some critical responses towards Ghosh

#### 1.2 INTRODUCTION

This is the first unit of Block 3 entitled Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*. As you all know, Amitav Ghosh is one of those hugely acclaimed writers from the Indian subcontinent who has enriched the notion of Indian English Literature itself in this unit, attempts have been made to acquaint you with the life-history of the writer and the works he has produced. Known for his

treatment of people's predicaments after the partition of India and the consequent violence, Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* most vividly presents the condition of displaced identities. This is perhaps one of those themes that inform most of his other novels also.

### **1.3 BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION**

Amitav Ghosh is one of the most prominent voices in Indian English Literature. He is widely acclaimed in the literary world for his works of fiction, travel writing and journalism. Born in 1956 in Kolkata, Amitav Ghosh has been raised and educated at the same time in as different places as Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Iran, Egypt, India and the United Kingdom. His father was in the Indian army and this enabled Ghosh as a child to come across different cultures in diverse locales. Ghosh completed his schooling from Doon School (Dehra Dun) where he was a younger contemporary of Vikram Seth. After graduating from St. Stephens College in 1976 with a B.A. degree in History, he obtained an M.A. in sociology from the University of Delhi in 1978. He went to St. Edmund Hall, Oxford, and in 1979 obtained a diploma in Social Anthropology. Ghosh also spent sometime at Tunis where he learnt Arabic. He was awarded the prestigious Oxford D. Phil in Social Anthropology for his thesis on "Kinship in Relation to the Economic and Social Organization of an Egyptian Village Community" in 1981. In 1999 Ghosh joined the faculty at Queen's College in the City University of New York as Distinguished Professor in Comparative Literature. He has also been a visiting professor to the English Department of Harvard University since 2005.

Ghosh has been bestowed with accolades by readers and critics from various sectors. His works have won different literary prizes in India and abroad and is required reading at several universities. He was awarded the Prix Medicis Etranger for *The Circle of Reason* (1986), the Sahitya Akademi Award for *The Shadow Lines* (1988), the Arthur C. Clarke Prize for *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1996), the Pushcart Prize for his essay, "*The March of the Novel through History: My father's Bookcase*" and the Grand Prize for Fiction at the Frankfurt International e-book awards for *The Glass Palace*. He was awarded the Padma Shri by the Indian Government in 2007.

The preceding paragraphs give you a cursory idea regarding Ghosh's early life and his achievements as a writer. Now, in the remaining part of this

section, we shall concern ourselves with his style, themes, techniques and certain issues, which occupy a place of paramount importance in his fictions. In his novels, Ghosh's prime obsession is with "history" and his endeavour in his fictions is especially to recuperate the silenced voices of those not documented in the historical records and archives. At this stage of discussion you might ask about the early influences that inculcated in Ghosh such abiding interest in history and national consciousness. To be able to answer such questions, one has to go back to his early years of childhood when he was immensely influenced by the stories of Partition, Independence and the Second World War. These stories made a profound impression on his mind and have formative influence on Ghosh, the writer. From the stories of his father which dealt mainly with the Second World War and the Indian soldiers of the British Indian army, Ghosh learnt about the many minor and failed rebellions that went unrecorded in the process of history-making. It is this aspect of historical reality that fascinated Amitav Ghosh.

We live in a world informed by history, but Ghosh as a writer is persistent in his questioning of the authenticity of documented records. Whom does history claim to represent? Who is writing that history? For whom is it written? In the process, he takes a critical stance at the knowledge and ideological systems produced by the Western world. Due to the wide spatial stretch of his novels Ghosh is able to invoke rich cultural contexts and explore the intricate cross-cultural relations across time, place, and history. One of Ghosh's persistent themes is the ephemerality of concepts of national and ethnic identity. In the novel under discussion, he uses the revealing force of memory to reconstruct the concept of freedom and its numerous connotations in the modern world. In away, the quest in this novel is universal as it examines and investigates the meaning of freedom for human beings in the present day world.

**SAQ:**

How does a variety of real-life experiences permeate Ghosh's writings ?  
(60 words)

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#### 1.4 THE WORKS OF GHOSH

In this section, I shall acquaint you with some of the major works of Amitav Ghosh, which will give you a fair idea about his literary output and enable you identify his major themes and concerns. If we arrange his novels chronologically by the order of their publication, it will be like this: *The Circle of Reason* (1986) that comes first, followed by *The Shadow Lines* (1990), *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1996), *Countdown* (1999), *The Glass Palace* (2000) and *The Hungry Tide* (2004) and *Sea of Poppies* (2008). In addition to his works of fiction, Ghosh has also authored a travelogue entitled *Dancing in Cambodia, At Large in Burma* (1998), and his other works include *In An Antique Land* (1992) and *The Imam and the Indian* (2002) which deal with various themes such as cross-cultural matrix, literature and fundamentalism. Ghosh is presently working on a trilogy of novels and his *Sea of Poppies* is the first of the three.

I shall discuss them in brief to facilitate your understanding of Ghosh's techniques and handling of some of his recurrent themes. Ghosh's first-published novel *The Circle of Reason* uses the oral tradition of story-telling as its narrative device. Here a linear plot-structure is abandoned and the time-sequence is shuffled back and forth that subtly depicts the connections between the present and the past. The narrative is woven with stories of the different characters and each story unfolds a distinct episode that forwards the plot movement in the novel. *The Circle of Reason* depicts Ghosh's first attempt at exploring the complications of migrancy and displaced identities—a theme which is carried over to his next novel *The Shadow Lines*. Both the novels offer a gripping critique of history, historiography, nationalism and political freedom by interrogating the positions and experiences of migrant individuals and also by consolidating the power of memory (both individual and collective) to tell different tales about the history of nation making. *The Circle of Reason* revolves around the lives of different characters assembled in an imaginary island, al-Ghazira (a prosperous sea-port) from different parts of the country. The different narratives concerning different characters in the novel enable Ghosh to interrogate and explore sensitive issues like crisis in identity and search for meaning in the lives of a displaced population.

Ghosh's in *An Antique Land* displays an innovation at the level of form with a blending of fiction, history, anthropological and travel records.



Speaking about this work in an interview Ghosh says, “I have tried to capture a story, a narrative, without attempting to write a historical novel. You may say as a writer I have ventured on a technical innovation” (Dhawan 1999: 24). *In An Antique Land* tells the tale of Bomma, an Indian slave who some eight hundred years ago was under the service of Ben Yiju, an Egyptian merchant. As in all his novels, *In An Antique Land* too takes us on a journey to different places and times. In narrative structure the book oscillates between the past (Ben Yiju and his Indian slave) and the present (Ghosh among the Egyptian villagers); between documented history and undocumented story. The narrative is rich in cultural overtones, historical relics and anecdotes. It is the result of his work as a researcher at Oxford University during which he got a chance to stay in Egypt. In the course of his stay, Ghosh retrieved from an ancient Cairo synagogue the accounts and letters related to the life of the twelfth century Jewish merchant Abraham Ben Yiju and Bomma, his slave, business agent, and a respected member of his household. The book begins with Ghosh’s arrival in an antique land (an Egyptian village) and his reaction to the new environment, its customs, practices and rituals, which also induces him to critically interrogate his own culture. The findings of antiquity in the novel alternate with Ghosh’s interaction with the village community and his interesting portrait of the villagers with all their idiosyncrasies and beliefs. Ghosh was not always welcomed with open arms as the villagers had reservations about an outsider and his society that burns its dead and worships cows. A reading of the novel depicts Ghosh as an astute writer, exploring the nuances of the ties between India and Egypt in two different time-planes: one, in the twelfth century through the trade relations between these two countries and manifested by the Indian Bomma and his Egyptian master, Ben Yiju; the other in the late twentieth-century, between himself and the Egyptian villagers, in a world changing fast under the forces of globalization.

*The Glass Palace* is a novel of epic proportions and encompasses several generations of an Indo-Burmese family. It explores the relationship between India and Burma during the period of colonial expansion of the British Empire. The novel opens in Mandalay in Burma in 1885 with the invasion of the British army and the exile of the Burmese Royal family to Madras and then to Ratnagiri (hundred and twenty miles south of Bombay). The fate of the Royal family is knotted with the story centering an Indian orphan, Rajkumar

who makes his fortune as a timber merchant in the teak plantations of Burma. Rajkumar starts off in the novel as a destitute and impoverished child of eleven years, earns name and fame in his own right and ends up marrying Dolly, the youngest and most beautiful maid of the Burmese queen, Supayalat, who accompanies them to India in their exile. It is at Ratnagiri that Rajkumar and Dolly come into contact with the family of a political activist, Uma Roy, which furthers the plot movement of the novel and shapes subsequent events. Through the character of Arjun, Uma's nephew, the writer casts a critical glance at the position of an Indian soldier in the Imperial military service. Early on, in the novel, Ghosh reminds us that two-thirds of the soldiers in the Imperial army that brought about the downfall of Burma were Indians. As the demand for India's independence became vehement, the role of the Indians in the British army became more controversial. Ghosh always locates his novels in a particular time in history and against such a historical backdrop, his characters engage themselves in personal struggle, ambition, love and material progress that knits together time and place. *The Glass Palace* offers crucial insights into issues like colonialism, racialism, the Indian Independence movement, the World Wars and the socio-political scenario of India and Burma. The novel once again testifies to Ghosh's resourcefulness as a storyteller, his literary acumen to present a welter of characters from different classes, conditions and cultures and to weave several interacting and interrupting strands within the plot.

*The Calcutta Chromosome* earned Amitav Ghosh The Arthur C. Clarke prize for science fiction in 1997. The novel presents an intriguing plot with a blending of science fiction, medical mystery, an engrossing tale of malaria research. The novel starts some time in the future New York City; the reader finds himself in the apartment of Antar, a programmer at the International Water Council. Antar locates a torn and tattered ID card of a long lost acquaintance, a man named L. Murugan who had disappeared mysteriously several years ago in Calcutta while searching for the truth behind the discovery for the cure of malaria. Murugan is possessed with Sir Ronald Ross' discovery of the malarial parasite and is suspicious that Ross, who by his standards was a dim and amateur scientist could have actually made this groundbreaking discovery, working in a laboratory in India in 1898. Antar's investigation into the life of Murugan leads him to the discovery of the Calcutta chromosome and some intriguing aspects about medical science. At one point in the novel the reader feels that the discovery of the malarial parasite

is hit upon by the two Indian assistants in the laboratory of Cunningham namely Mangala and Laakhan, with Ross snatching away international acclaim from their hands. There are three time-planes set in the novel and the narrative constantly shifts between them: one is Antar in the New York of future, investigating into the past; next is Murugan's errand in Calcutta and his subsequent disappearance in 1995 and finally, there are glimpses into the nineteenth century through letters and records of the times of Sir Ronald Ross and his contemporaries. By grounding his novel in a factual discovery of the clinic, Ghosh races through time, history and geography and suggests an alternative story to the historical discovery.

*The Hungry Tide* is set in the Sunderbans, the world's largest mangrove forest situated in the eastern coast of India. Forty two years old, Kanai Dutt is on his way to this delta region, summoned by his aunt Nilima to have a look at the journal which her deceased husband, Nirmal had left behind specifically for him. Piyali Roy, a cetologist of Bengali descent and working at the Scripps Institute of Oceanography in California arrives there too for research work on the dolphins and tigers that are unique to that topography. Integral to the narrative are the characters of Kusum, Horen and Moyna and the plot that is woven around them helps to unfold the nuances of the narrative. These characters in the novel partake in the drama of everyday existence. Through Piyali and Fokir, Ghosh explores the sense of connection between people that transcends the barriers of culture, class, status, language and gender and fosters an understanding that strengthens human bonds. Against the backdrop of a land that is constantly under the threat of tidal waves, Ghosh depicts the ephemerality of life itself through the plight of a displaced people (highlighted by the Morijhapi incident), the struggle for land and the constant effort for survival in a perilous and fragile ecosystem. These natural calamities obliquely underscore the disasters that human history is throughout fraught with. This again draws the reader's attention to Ghosh's handling of the lives of an uprooted populace, the Bangladeshi refugees who swarm the region in the hope of shelter. Piyoli and Fokir's relationship stands in stark contrast to that between Nilima and Nirmal who are married to each other but lack understanding of each other's view of life. Unlike Ghosh's other novels that are set across a vast geographical expanse *The Hungry Tide* is located in a specific locale and emphasise environmental factors which are central to his thesis.

**Check Your Progress:**

1. Discuss the view that “for all its concern with nationalism, the full force of *The Shadow Lines* is only apparent when we read it as an attempt to come to terms with *communalism*.”
2. How does geographical setting become central to Ghosh’s novels? To what extent is it linked with the question of identity in the novel?
3. Comment on the use of the metaphor of travel and the motif of the map as involved with the concept of space and nation/home in the novel.
4. Sketch briefly Ghosh’s central themes in his novels.

The affinity towards history and culture is also resonant in Ghosh’s non-fictional writings as manifested in his travel account *Dancing at Cambodia*, and *At Large in Burma*. The author made a visit to Cambodia in 1993. *Dancing at Cambodia* alludes to the first visit of King Sisowath to France along with a troop of Cambodian dancers in 1906. The present work recreates the atrocities and violence during the regime of Pol Pot and makes an assessment of the human and cultural losses during 1975- 1978, the period of socio-political turmoil in the region. Ghosh also locates Pol Pot’s village and speaks to some of his family members and relatives. He gives insights into Pol Pot’s background and the impact of his brutal regime. The tenacity with which Cambodian people held on to their culture is deeply moving and provides an illuminating account of cultural courage. ‘At large in Burma’ is the last piece in this volume and brings alive the recent history of the place, from the death of the political leader Aung San in 1947 to his daughter Suu Kyi’s struggle for the restoration of democracy in Burma. Amitav Ghosh also includes his interviews of Suu Kyi in this piece. This non-fictional work depicts his insightful understanding of the socio-political patterns across different cultures.

Ghosh’s *Countdown* interrogates and challenges the issue of nuclear weapons in India and Pakistan. Here Ghosh questions the views of Defense Minister George Fernandez, in the Cabinet of Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee who had reacted against the idea of India becoming a nuclear power, but surprisingly supported the nuclear blasts in Poldiaran. The five tests were carried out on 11 May 1998. Whatever enthusiasm may have

been felt by some in India soon died away when Pakistan carried out its own tests on 28th May, a few days later. The repercussions of the tests were gruesome as the rupee fell to a historic low, the stock -market index plummeted and prices of commodities soared. Ghosh makes a visit to Pokharan and meets the local inhabitants of the place and gets to know how, after the first nuclear test in 1974, many of his friends contracted cancer and other physical problems. Ghosh sums up his observations very tersely in this book. The primary intention behind the tests according to Ghosh is to force India within the circle of powerful nations so that the nation could be counted as one of the great powers.

*The Imam and the Indian* is a collection of essays on a wide variety of themes and subjects. The piece after which the collection is named was published in 1986. The essays under this collection were published separately in various journals. *'The Imam and the Indian'* depicts Ghosh's interaction with the Egyptian villagers which he recreates in *In An Antique Land*. Some of the other essays in this collection include 'Tibetan Dinner', 'Four Corners', 'An Egyptian in Baghdad', 'The Ghosts of Mrs. Gandhi', 'The Human Comedy in Cairo', 'The Relations of Envy', 'Categories of Labour and the Orientation of the Fella Economy', 'The Global Reservation', 'The Fundamentalist Challenge', 'The March of the Novel through History' (which won him the Pushcart Prize) and so on. *The Imam and the Indian* is not a unified work as it consists of essays written over a period of years. As a writer, Amitav Ghosh, in his fiction, as well as in his non-fiction, is engaged in the political and cultural wars that shape a postcolonial and globalized world.

**SAQ:**

Is there any similarity of concerns between Ghosh's fiction and non-fiction?  
(70 words)

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## 1.5 PLACING THE WORK

In this section, I shall focus on *The Shadow Lines* with the aim to help you place this novel in its context and enable you understand how it becomes a site accommodating the major concerns and issues that Ghosh addresses in his works. I shall also provide you with some of the critical responses to *The Shadow Lines*, which could facilitate your reading, interpretation, and evaluation of the novel and enable you to perceive the novel from various perspectives.

Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*, which won him the Sahitya Akademi Award, is located in Post-Partition Bengal. Ghosh, through the unnamed narrator, consolidates the power of memory to defy and challenge the veracity of recorded history. 'Memory' in *The Shadow Lines* is a tremendously shaping and productive force that preserves the repressed facts blurred during the course of time. *The Shadow Lines* narrates the story of the unnamed narrator's family spread over Dhaka, Calcutta and London, spanning over a period from the 1930s to the present. The relationship between the narrator's grandmother whom we know as Thamma in the novel and her dislike towards her nephew's sister, Ila, underscores the conflict between nationalism and migrant cosmopolitanism.

The narrative does not follow a seamless chronological sequence as the past and present are juxtaposed to facilitate the narrator's interrogation of recorded history. This will be more apparent to you once you read the novel on your own. The narrator recalls in the 1980s the crucial events that occurred in the 1960s but are related to the period during the Second World War. Thus, in 1939, thirteen years before the narrator was born, his great aunt Mayadebi (Thamma's only sister), went to England along with her husband and son Tridib. The mob violence in Dhaka in 1964 claimed the lives of Jethamosai, Tridib and Khalil. These deaths put to test the idea of cultural amity and solidarity among nations separated by the stroke of political divide. However, to state that the novel is just a rendering and recapitulation of these historical events would be to make a simplistic and naïve kind of a statement.

Ghosh shows, in this novel, the impact of politics on the lives of the common people and their daily affairs. The historical events offer the novelist a suitable milieu against which to locate his interrogation of national identity, political freedom and historical truths in the present-day world.

Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* depict a nexus between the world of imagination and recorded history. The past is reconstructed in the imagination through references to houses, photographs, maps, roads, names, newspapers, advertisements and so on. In the opening lines, the narrator refers to his grandmother's sister's visit to England and sets the framework for the narrative. After the details of Mayadebi's visit to England, the narrative shifts forward in time to 1960 when Tridib first shared his experience with the narrator.

The novel also holds surveys of the political turbulence in Bengal and the upbringing of the narrator's grandmother and Mayadebi in the decades of the anti colonial movement. The division of Bengal and the plight of the average individual are highlighted through Thamma's narrative. The vulnerability of human life caused by the mayhem of Partition which relentlessly divided friends, families, lovers and neighbours are poignantly evoked in the novel. *The Shadow Lines* quintessentially exemplifies the tradition of post-partition literature that chronicles the sufferings, plight and desperation of the victims.

### **Stop to Consider:**

#### **Partition and Literary Memory**

I. Lord Mountbatten, the Viceroy of India just before the time of Independence, got his reforms commissioner, Mr. V.P. Menon, to draw up the plan for the transfer of power and the division of India in just a few hours. With this plan he himself flew to London and got Mr. Clement Atlee, the prime minister of England and his cabinet to accept it. The subsequent hasty implementation of this plan without much foresight and the much needed preparedness at several levels, led to an unprecedented holocaust of communal frenzy. Before the people could realize the political and social implications of the partition, they were swept off their feet by a wave of violence. Hundreds of people were killed, butchered on either side of the border, and for those who survived the catastrophe, the experience was so traumatic that the memories of those grief stricken traumatic days haunted them forever. For millions of people, the independence brought terrible suffering and humiliation, a loss of human dignity and a frustrating sense of being uprooted. In *The Shadow Lines*, this is depicted at its best in the condition of Thamma, the narrator's grandmother.

2. The theme of partition and its aftermath has been treated in a number of Indian English novels by different writers writing before and after Ghosh. Like Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*, Khushwant Singh's *A Train to Pakistan* also attempts to grapple with the plight of the common people, caught between fanatic religious leaders, self-seeking politicians and power-wielding bureaucrats and anti-social elements. Hukum Chand, one of the characters in this novel, is thoroughly disillusioned with the concept of freedom and its implications under the circumstances of the partition. Political freedom has been achieved apparently through non-violent means but Hindu-Muslim riots had erupted in several parts of India and also in the newly created Pakistan. In *Train to Pakistan*, Khushwant Singh brings to focus the Partition of Punjab and the subsequent violence on both sides of the border is brought out in a very effective, vivid and graphic manner.

Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* has elicited myriad responses from various academic quarters. Let me try to acquaint you with some of these responses from different critics. In her essay, "Maps and Mirrors: Coordinates of Meaning in *The Shadow Lines*", Meenakshi Mukherjee throws light on the use of the two recurrent tropes in the novel, namely 'maps' and 'mirrors'. While maps attempt to chart the surface of the earth, mirrors deal with illusory space. For Mukherjee, the recurrence of these two tropes in *The Shadow Lines*, hints at the shifting reaches of meaning in the novel where the simultaneity of precision and illusion transforms the reader's perception of both time and space.

In an astute analysis of the novel in the essay, "The Division of Experience in *The Shadow Lines*", Raj eswari Sunder Raj an questions and reverses the gendered categories of the 'active' and the 'passive'. In the same essay, she observes that Ghosh, in the novel, depicts a striking contrast between the cultural rootedness of the passive male protagonists (the narrator, Tridib, Nick Price) and the migyancy of the women characters (the narrator's grandmother, Ila and May Price). Another critic, Vinita Chandra, in "Suppressed Memory and Forgetting in *The Shadow Lines*" investigates a recurrent question, "Don't you remember?" that persists throughout the text and finds that multiple, overlapping as well as contradictory memories ultimately destabilize any notion of a totalizing narrative of a national



historiography in the text. Taking up the function of this recurrent question one step further, Suvir Kaul in his essay “Separation Anxiety: Growing Up Inter/ National in *The Shadow Lines*” argues that the pressure of this question generates the form of the novel: its partial answers, its digressions, its looping, non-linear, wide-ranging narrative technique. For Kaul, these formal features are apposite to its larger project of brushing away of the cobwebs of modern Indian memory, a repeated return to those absences and gaps that mark the sites of national and personal trauma. Another critic, Kavita Daiya reads in Ghosh’s work a refusal to celebrate hybridity and finds, instead, a compelling critique of nationalism and the failure of migration through the experiences of women as citizens and subjects.

Neelam Srivastava in “Fictions of Nationhood in *The Shadow Lines*”, traces how Ghosh, in remembering and retelling the story of the nation through the task of ‘precise imagining’, that is so important to the narrator, is determinedly ambiguous, highlighting the uses as well as the limits of historical knowledge. Another critic Shakuntala Bharvani in her analysis says that *The Shadow Lines* is a remarkable novel by all standards as it transcends the narrow categorization of an ‘Indian Novel’. She comments that with Ghosh, the Indian novel in English has surpassed the rigid barriers of time, place and action, thus making most earlier Indian fiction seem dated and simplistic. Louis James in “*The Shadow Lines: Cross-Cultural Perspectives in the Fictions of Amitav Ghosh*” states that this novel brings together the forms of the autobiographical novel and the family chronicle, to subvert both. Ghosh novel, according to him, introduces a family “tree”, the Asian extended family of loyalties, affections and associations. There are several lines of family introduced — that of the narrator based in Calcutta; that of his grandmother’s sister, associated with Dhaka, and two further lines bringing into the story Robi and ha. But the blood relationships merge with those forged by intimacy, as with the British family, linked through domicile in India, of Lionel Tresawsen. The narrator’s closest links are with Mayadebi, his grandmother’s sister, and with her son Tridib, the enigmatic older friend through whom the narrator sees much of life and places. Brinda Bose in her edited book *Amitav Ghosh: Critical Perspectives* comments that “[t]he Indian writer in English has been weighted by the responsibility in particular of narrating the nation, in all its postcolonial contexts, and Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines*, following Rushdie’s *The Midnight’s Children*,

had often been cited as an exemplar in this tradition”(AG 29). Further she comments that Ghosh chooses to displace the nation with the unit of the family; family, as she says, may be “read as a metaphor at two levels: at the first in its function, and at the second, for that which stands in opposition to the nation in a far more complex fashion than the individual protagonist (hero or anti-hero) may, in the long tradition of the novel in English as well as other languages” (AG 30).

## **1.6 SUMMING UP**

The primary concern in this section is to acquaint you with the various influences that worked together in shaping the writer in Amitav Ghosh. In the third section of this unit, I have given an account of the formative influences on Ghosh’s early life and his travels to different places as a young boy. In the succeeding units you will see how the notions of ‘journey’ and ‘travels’ preoccupy him in his creative writings.

In the fourth section, I gave you a succinct analysis of the plot structure of his other major works. For lack of space, it has not been possible for me to discuss all these works elaborately but the purpose of my endeavour is to urge you to read Ghosh’s other works as well as to help you in interpreting his novels. In the next section, I have dealt with the various responses and critical reactions that the novel has generated since its publication and also established its centrality in the critical canon.

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## Unit 2

### Introducing the Novel

#### Contents:

- 2.1 Objectives
- 2.2 The Story in Brief
- 2.3 The Characters
- 2.4 Summing Up

#### 2.1 Objectives

This is the second unit of this block and here I have attempted to introduce you to *The Shadow Lines*, the novel under discussion. From the previous unit (section 1.5), you have obtained some idea of the context and concerns in the novel. This unit will help you to

- *gain* an overview of the story in brief,
- *identify* the roles of the different characters within the structure of the narrative, and
- *appreciate* the novel in its totality of events and structuring of the plot.

#### 2.2 THE STORY IN BRIEF

A reading of this section would be a fruitful exercise if you have already read the novel on your own. If you have not, I would suggest you to go back to it so that whatever this section contains assist you in a better understanding of the novel. The historical occurrences that lie at the core of the novel's plot are related to different places and times. Some of these are the Second World War, the freedom movement in Bengal, the Partition of India, the outbreak of communal violence in East Pakistan following the Hazratbal incident in Shrinagar in the year 1964 and so on. Those of you who have read the novel know that the narrative is divided into two sections: 'Going Away' and 'Coming Home'. I shall discuss these sections one by one.

At the very beginning of the novel we hear the voice of the unnamed narrator who unravels the story for the readers throughout the book. The narrative starts in the year 1939, which, as all of you know, is a crucial year in modern history as it saw the commencement of the Second World War. The novel starts with a reference to this year as it was the very year when Mayadebi, Thamma's only sister, left India for England along with her husband and son Tridib. Tridib was the only among his brothers (the other two were Jatin and Robi) who spent much of his life in the sprawling ancestral Ballygunge Palace. In Thamma's estimation, as the narrator acquaints us, Tridib was a good-for-nothing and feckless fellow who wasted his time idling around and thriving on his father's income.

Let us now see what the scene in London is like. The Dutta-Chaudhari stayed with the Price family in London. Mrs. Price, her daughter May, and her son Nick, lived in North London. The friendship between the two families started when Mrs. Price's father Lionel Tresawsen and Tridib's grandfather Chandrashekhara Datta-Chaudhari met during colonial rule in Calcutta. Tridib saw May Price as a baby when he went to England with his parents in 1939. By the time Tridib meets May again in Calcutta, their friendship has blossomed into love. Their relationship is central to the thematic concerns of the novel. In the first section of the novel the narrator establishes the significance of Tridib's influence over him. Although Thamma does not have a high regard for Tridib and his eccentric manners, the narrator is fascinated by his tales and anecdotes. The narrator, as an eight-year-old boy, describes Tridib as a "familiar figure within the floating, talkative population of students and would be footballers and bank clerks and small time politicians and all the rest who gravitated towards the conversation-loving stretch of road between Gariahat and Gole Park" (8). Tridib's vast reservoir of knowledge enables him to hold on to a wide variety of subjects: "Mesopotamian stellas, East European jazz, the habits of arboreal apes, the plays of Garcia Lorca, there seemed to be no end to the things he could talk about" (9). The narrator gets to know about the exploits of Tridib in England in episodes and snatches. He gets to know about the wartime scenario in England from the narration of Tridib who teaches him to make precise use of imagination to conjure up places and events, which have occurred in the past to render it in a new shape and hue that constitute its essence. Tridib's father, in 1939, took photographs of Alan Tresawsen, Mrs Price's brother and his friends.

Now every event and object, however trivial, has its relevance to the greater reality of the times. This photograph encapsulates the situation in England at those times. In the photograph there is a freshly dug pit to serve as an emergency trench. There is also a picture of Mrs. Price's brother, Alan Treswasen, a freelance journalist writing for socialist papers. Others in the photograph are Dan, a Trotskyite, Mike, an Irish nationalist, Francesca Halevy and an academic Snipe, the husband of Mrs. Price. Now Dan, the son of an eminent Cambridge physicist, had studied at the prestigious London School of Economics, fought in the Spanish Civil War, and written for left-wing newspapers. A couple of pages later in the novel, there is a vivid description of the house where, on that fateful night of September 1940, Dan and Alan Treswasen died in the intensive German bombardment.

Again, the deaths of Dan and Alan Treswasen are reported by using the technique of memory and imagination. This precise use of imagination is found to be at work when the narrator, on a visit to Brick Lane with her, Jatin's daughter (who has gone there to buy clothes at a cheap price), sees the signboard of Taj Travel Agency and recalls the death of Alan and Dan Treswasen. Imaginatively recalling Tridib's account, the narrator describes the manner in which Dan, Alan and their friends died during the German attacks in the Second World War. After seeing this house, Ila and the narrator quarrel about the importance of radical politics. Ila considers the deaths of Alan, Mike and Dan who raised their voices against war-mongering as sad because they were casualties of a ruthless nationalism. She also thought that Alan and his friends, who were witness to the war and the fight against fascism, must have been happy as she was in her political activism. She says, "that's why there is a kind of heroism even in their pointless deaths" (104). The narrator calls Ila and her companions as "pathetic little welfare-pink friends" who knew nothing at all about courage or politics" (104). The quarrel about courage and political activism continues between Ila and the narrator and finally the latter accepts that some form of commitment reflects involvement and political activism which he and his middle class friends would have never dared to do. The narrator says: "For I had been with Ila once, when she had come out of her hairdresser's shop, her hair all curled, and marched straight off to Brixton with her little crew of friends, to confront a gang of jack-booted racists armed with bicycle chains. As for me, I knew I could not have dared" (105). Incidents such as these provide an insight

into different aspects of political violence and the aftermath in terms of the personal and the psychic states of the individual.

In this section, through the narrator, Ghosh explores the peculiarly sensitive and intimate relationship between the Price family and Tridib's family. The narrator's meetings with May are crucial to the development of the narrative as he himself says in the course of the novel: "I met May Price for the first time two years after that incident [murder of Tridib] when she came to Calcutta on a visit. The next time I met her was seventeen years later, when I went to London myself" (19). The time-span of these seventeen years is very crucial for an understanding of the background of the novel. The telling encounters between the narrator and the other characters who witness the death of Tridib occur during these years and the horrendous incident is narrated to him as part of their haunted memories. Another relationship that is explored in this section is the narrator's growing infatuation for his cousin Ila. Ila's overtly unconventional conduct and manners attract the narrator while at the same time invites Thamma's condemnation. Novy Kapadia, in "Amitav Ghosh's: *The Shadow Lines*" observes that "The infatuation for ha is part of the growing up process of the narrator. As an adolescent, the narrator is fascinated by Ila's exotic appeal" (Kapadia 33). However, by the end of part one, the narrator realizes that his days of secret admiration and hopes are over as ha discloses her affection for her schoolmate, Nick Price. Ila tells the narrator: "You were always the brother I never had. I'm sorry. If I'd known, I wouldn't have behaved like this. Really believe me" (111).

**SAQ:**

Would you agree that memory, nationalism, and politics, are central to this part of the novel ? (60 words)

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The second section of the novel “Coming Home” starts with the retirement of the grandmother as headmistress. She had taught in the school for twenty-seven years and had worked as a headmistress for six years. The year is 1962, which is again a momentous year for the narrator’s family. Apart from his ‘Thamma’s retirement, the narrator turns ten and his father is appointed the General Manager of his firm. They shift from their former house in Gole Park to a house on Southern Avenue. With Thamma’s retirement and her growing old age, it is seen that she gradually becomes nostalgic and attached to the past, to her childhood days in Dhaka in the sprawling house where her family lived together with her uncle’s family. But when her father died, the ancestral home was partitioned due to a family strife. During her college days in Dhaka, she became familiar with the terrorist movement among nationalists in Bengal. She tells the narrator about the secret revolutionary societies like “Anushilan and Jugantar and all their offshoots, their clandestine networks, and the home-made bombs with which they tried to assassinate British officials and policemen” (37). Thamma tells the narrator stories about her ancestral home and early life. She narrates numerous anecdotes, such as the time when her husband caught a chill while “supervising the construction of a culvert somewhere in the Arakan Hills” (125). This chill led to pneumonia and ultimately to his untimely death. Thamma was then just thirty two years old and in order to look after her household, she managed to get a job in a school. After that her life undergoes a drastic change: “She had no time to go back to Dhaka in the next few years. And then in 1947, came Partition, and Dhaka became the capital of East Pakistan. There was no question of going back after that. She had never had any news of Jethamoshai and her aunt again” (125).

What the author shows through the character of Thamma is that although people like her did not suffer materially, they underwent a huge emotional crisis. Seventeen years after the Partition, Thamma goes to Dhaka to visit her sister Mayadebi; she realizes when filling up the disembarkation form that “that her place of birth has come to so messily at odds with her nationality” (132). This dichotomy in the situation upsets the grandmother and the author shows that this bewilderment is shared by many people. An important reason for Thamma to visit Dhaka was her desire to see her old house in Dhaka and to bring her Jethamoshai back to India. Accompanied by Mayadebi, Tridib, May Price and Robi, she sets out in the Mercedes car with the

driver and a security guard of the High Commission. As the car makes a halt near the house, Thamma and Mayadebi realize that what had once been a luxuriant garden is now an automobile workshop. Their Jethamoshai, now Ukilbabu is looked after by a mechanic, Saifuddin and a cycle rickshaw puller, Khalil and his family. The old and bedridden Jethamoshai fails to recognize his relatives, speaks ill of them when they are mentioned and refuses to return to India. His memory has faded with age but his interaction with Thamma raises important questions on the nature of political freedom. Delving into the past, he recalls what he told his sons when they left for India following the Partition:

“I don’t believe in this India Shindia. It’s all very well. You’re going away now, but suppose when you get there they decide to draw another line somewhere? What will you do then? Where will you move to? No one will have you anywhere. As for me, I was born here, and I’ll die here” (215).

**SAQ:**

Does Thamma’s story exemplify a new approach to ‘borders’ and ‘memories’ in the novel ? (60 words)

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The old Jethamoshai seems more secure and mentally at peace with himself in his ancestral home. By befriending the Muslims in his area and giving them a place to stay in his house, the old man displays an act contributing to communal harmony in the otherwise sensitive atmosphere. Khalil’s family cooks for him and takes care of him. Thus he has found a family to look after him in his old age.

The climax occurs in the novel when Thamma and Mayadebi are returning in their Mercedes car from their home, while Khalil is following them with Jethamoshai on the rickshaw. The violence that occurs is recalled through Robi and May’s recollection in the later part of the novel. When Thamma



and the others reach the bazaar area, they find the shops closed and the streets deserted except for a few stragglers. The rioters surround the car, break the windscreen and the driver gets a cut on his face. The car lurches and comes to a halt with its front wheel in the gutter. The security guard comes out and in order to scare away the crowd, fires a shot from his revolver. After this incident, the attention of the crowd is diverted by the sound of Khalil's rickshaw with Jethamoshai on it. The hysterical mob surrounds the rickshaw; sensing the danger May Price followed by Tridib jumps out of the car to save Khalil and Jethamoshai from the clutches of the frantic mob. After that everything happened within a blink of an eyelid; Tridib gets lost in the mob and his throat is cut ear to ear by the rioters. Khalil's stomach is cut open while Jethamoshai's head is hacked off. The honor of the murder gets indelibly imprinted in the memories of Robi, Thamma and May Price who witness the incident from close range. For years May Price accuses herself thinking that her reckless act of rushing out of the car to save Jethamoshai and Khalil caused Tridib's death. She says: "For years I was arrogant enough to think I owned his life, but I know now I didn't kill him; I couldn't have if I wanted. He gave himself up; it was a sacrifice. I know I can't understand it. I know I musn't try, for any real sacrifice is a mystery" (251-52). Even after fifteen years Robi shivers as he remembers the gruesome deaths. This fear haunts him in his nightmares and he realizes that the concept of freedom is a delusion. After Independence and Partition, many believed that religious communalism would be obliterated from the subcontinent. But nothing of that sort happened as people failed to realize the meaning of freedom. Later in the novel, Robi voices his disillusionment with the concept of freedom in front of a derelict church at Clapham in London:

"And then I think to myself why don't they draw thousands of little lines through the whole subcontinent and give every little place a new name? What would it change? It's a mirage, the whole thing is a mirage" (247).

In contrast, Tridib's death in the 1964 riots arouses bitterness and anger in Thamma. This personal loss transforms the meaning of the 'border' for her. Previously it was just a confused line, now it has transformed into something that defines her nationality. When the 1965 war breaks out between India

and Pakistan she views it as a threat to the future and security of her grandson and the nation. The meaning of freedom for her, unlike Robi, is not a mirage but necessarily includes aggressive warfare against the Pakistani who was once her own countrymen.

The novel upholds the imperatives that ensure empathy and an unimpeded flow of friendship. It mocks the conception of militant nationalism, exclusive national pride and identity. The outbreak of communal strife in Dhaka following the disappearance of the Prophet's hair in Srinagar exposes the fragile demarcation of political frontiers. Thamma's ideals of nationalism do not stand the test of time. Ultimately the message of the novel is the need for coexistence and humanitarian ties despite cultural and political differences. The narrator, with his expanded horizons and imaginative understanding of the world, stresses on the need to preserve memories of sanity and humane feelings for this will help in cultural self-determination and inter personal relationships. G.R. Taneja in his essay aptly says that the novel is "an eloquent critic of colonial hangover and cultural dislocation in a postcolonial situation as also the psychological make up of the contemporary man who thrives on violence."

**Check Your Progress:**

1. How does the novel's structure highlight the primacy of 'borders' and 'memories'?
2. In what way does Partition symbolize the characters' entry into a modern Symbolic order in the novel? Comment on Ghosh's use of Lacanian concepts in *Shadow Lines*.
3. Do Tridib's hopes of being lifted "beyond the limits of one's mind to other times and other places, and even, if one is lucky, to a place where there was no border between oneself and one's image in the mirror" sum up Ghosh's concept of cosmopolitanism in the novel?
4. Discuss the strategic position of Calcutta in the novel.

## 2.3 THE CHARACTERS

From the discussion in the previous section, you must have realized by now that the novel has a large gamut of characters and they are related to one another either as friends or as family relations. In this section, I shall help you to identify the roles of the various characters in Ghosh's novel.

### **The narrator**

The narrator performs the key role in the novel in bringing together different people, places and memories across time and space. Although he has to play such a crucial role in the scheme of the novel, Ghosh doesn't give his narrator a name. One could say that the novel is a quest for recovery and restoration of lost connections of the past and a confrontation of the present through a nuanced understanding of the past and it is the narrator who brings this about. This unnamed narrator, throughout the novel, strives to give voice and ascribe meaning to penetrate the fearful chasms of silences that have been indelibly imprinted in private memory. He goes on hunting relentlessly for facts that could unveil the mystery behind Tridib's death in East Pakistan. This is achieved by repeated insistence on each character (Thamma, Robi, May and so on) to contribute his/her share of events. Finally the fissures of history are filled with meaning and the pieces of the jig-saw puzzle fall in the right places as the archival information connects the riots of 1964 in Calcutta to the mob violence in Dhaka, killing Tridib. The memories of the riots faded away; they failed to find a place in the documented history of the nation: "They had dropped out of memory into a crater of a volcano of silence"(230). It is this awful silence, which the narrator succeeds in investing with meaning.

### **SAQ:**

How does the strategic device of the narrator's anonymity add to the 'postcolonial' theme of the novel ? (70 words)

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### **Thamma**

Thamma is one of the central characters in the novel through whom Ghosh addresses the complexities and crises of migrancy and identity. Thamma grows up in the tumultuous days of the Indian freedom struggle in Dhaka. At one point in the novel, she reveals to the narrator that she had once planned to join the revolutionaries and would have murdered a British police officer to contribute to the cause of the revolution. Fervently patriotic, she embraces the anti colonial revolution in the activities of which she could not directly participate because she was a woman. After the Partition, she migrates to Calcutta with her husband where he suddenly dies and thereafter, a relative arranges for her a job in a school where she has to teach. Thamma's sense of self-respect and her refusal to bow down before others in times of crisis is brought out very strikingly in the novel as she refuses any kind of aid from her relatives and raises her son single-handedly. Ghosh uses the character of Thamma to articulate and simultaneously interrogate a vision of national identity, citizenship, homeliness and a sense of belonging. Thamma's settled convictions about nationality, religion and belonging get shaken when she returns to Dhaka after a gap of many years and for the first time after the Partition. Thamma is startled when she is told that she would not be seeing any separating boundaries between India and Pakistan from the plane since in the modern world, borders are crossed in the airports with the filling up of disembarkation forms with specific information about nationality, date of birth, and so on. With her disillusionment, Ghosh drives home the point that fixity of national boundary and national identity is a myth and can be transcended by the powers of memory and imagination.

### **Tridib**

Tridib, the character towards whom the nameless narrator is strongly drawn, is an eclectic young Calcutta intellectual who, though he cannot get started on his own career, has a momentous influence on the lives of those around him. From Tridib, the narrator learns about tropical snakes and Irish myths, about Indian archaeology and London gossip. Tridib is the key character in the entire schema of the plot of *The Shadow Lines*. Even in his absence (since he is long dead), Tridib and his influence haunts the entire narrative.

Any reader can almost feel an overbearing presence of Tridib and his memories through each and every page of the book. It is the mystery behind his death that sets the plot moving and connects the different places (Calcutta, Dhaka and London) together. One could say that the ties between the different characters across different nations are fostered by that single horrendous incident that proved fatal to Tridib and to which many were witnesses. The manner in which the narrator as a child and later as an adult comes to know of it is revealing. His parents and his Thamma are reluctant to talk about it and label it as an accident. As a child he accepts these versions, as death for him was just a word, whose meaning he knew from reading comics and watching films. What is noteworthy in the novel is that, it is Tridib who has actually given the narrator the key to the locked room of silences by urging him (as a boy) to use his “imagination with precision”. Tridib fires the boy’s imagination with a longing to know everything, not through scholarship but through the use of his extraordinary imaginative powers. It is this precision in the use of imagination which enables him to connect with the unplumbed incidents of the remote past and to comprehend the concurrence with similar facts of fifteen years later: “And so fifteen years after his death, Tridib watched over me, as I tried to learn the meaning of silence”(232). Tridib must have been aware that in the tension-ridden atmosphere in Dhaka under the threat of communal violence, only May’s security was unthreatened. But the rest were exposed to imminent peril. So the question that arises is, why did Tridib sacrifice his life? Was it a symbolic act? Was it his love for May that forced him out of the car in which he was safely seated? Was it a gesture of human compassion? Was it an act propelled by his humanity? These are the questions, the answers to which are provided by May later on in the novel.

**SAQ:**

Describe the connection between the continuing narrative of identity (centred on Tridib) and the unstated ‘identity’ of the narrator. (70 words)

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## **Ila**

Ila is the narrator's cousin and a few years older than him. She is the daughter of Jatin, the diplomat and has traveled widely and seen a lot of the world. She is more sophisticated than the narrator. As a teenager, the narrator is captivated by Ila's alluring appeal. Her foreignness, western ways and habits and easy informality attract him. On the other hand, her emancipated behaviour, and highhanded casual attitude irritates Thamma and makes Ila, in her estimation, a loathsome character. Brought up in international schools and having visited India during the summer holidays, she decides to live and study in London. Ila is shown to be a little insecure in her personal relationships. She later gets married to Nick Price, May's brother and their relationship turns out to be an unsteady one owing to Nick's infidelity. This aspect of their relationship is brought out towards the last part of the novel. Ila is not rooted in any particular culture and her discomfiture in marriage exposes her wobbly adjustments with western culture. Her predicament is the result of her penchant for illusions devoid of any real understanding of the cultural interface. Ila's last words in the novel are an attempt to console the narrator that there is perfect understanding between her and Nick. However the narrator can see through her anxieties and unease. What leads to Ila's peculiar predicament is that she believes bohemianism can liberate her from everything she finds repressive in upper class Indian society. Raised all over the world and having acquired a cultureless identity, she follows her schoolgirl illusions about British decency into a disastrous marriage. Commenting on Ila's role in the novel, Suvir Kaul notes that she is central to the narrator's coming of age and functions as "a narrative scapegoat, a fixture who acts as a lightning rod for a great many sexual and cultural anxieties."

## **May Price**

May Price plays the role of Tridib's love-interest in the novel. The narrator meets May for the first time when she comes to India for a visit, and after a gap of seventeen years, again when he visits England for research work on his PhD thesis. By that time, May had become a cellist in an orchestra. She is a misfit, a frustrated musician, dedicated to a life of international good causes. The narrator develops a friendship with May after attending one of her concerts and she too partakes in filling up the gaps and silences of the

past by providing details of her and Tridib's past, which the narrator had been wondering about all these years. In the process, the narrator comes to know that in 1959, when she was nineteen and Tridib twenty-seven, they had begun a correspondence through letters and frequently wrote to each other. May too was one of the witnesses of Tridib's murder. At that time, she had come from England to visit him. Her retelling of Tridib's murder is heartrending as it was she who had thoughtlessly stepped out of the car into the mob, making Tridib follow her. Tridib's death triggers May's personal tragedy and her memory of her own role in it is tormenting, making her ironically implicated in it: "Your grandmother screamed at me. She said I did not know what I was doing and I'd get everyone killed. I didn't listen....But she knew what was going to happen. Everyone there did except me. I was the only one who didn't" (250).

### **Nick Price**

Nick Price is the son of Mrs. Price. He is shown throughout the novel to be a flippant and frivolous character. Nick is Ila's childhood friend and classmate. She is fascinated by Nick and later gets married to him. Nick's flamboyant manners and his unemployment lead him to depend on Ila's father financially. Shortly after their honeymoon, Nick openly admits about his infidelity to Ila. He accepts that he is at the same time involved in a relationship with a woman from Martinique.

### **Mayadebi**

Mayadebi is the first character that the narrator introduces to us in the novel. She is Thamma's only sister and Tridib's mother. She is the first member in the Datta-Chaudhari family to settle in England. In later years, she always had the aura of a movie star for the narrator, someone a bit larger-than-life, who had seen the world.

### **Robi**

Robi is Tridib's brother and the narrator's uncle who was one of the witnesses to the inhuman murder of Tridib. Robi, who qualifies for the Indian Administrative Service (IAS), has developed a cynical view about sacrifice and freedom after years of experience as an administrator. He feels that human nature has remained unchanged and that the concept of freedom is just a catchword to condone killing and that political freedom is also an

illusion. Throughout the novel, the atrocity of the murder haunts him in the form of a recurrent dream. Finally he is able to give voice to this dreadful chasm of silence when he recounts the atrocious murder to the narrator and Ila much later in London “ I have never been able to rid myself of that dream...I used to think: if only that dream would go away, I would be like other people; I would be free. I would have given anything to be free of that memory” (246).

### **Jethamoshai**

Jethamoshai is Thamma’s and Mayadebi’s uncle who refused to migrate to India after the Partition. He stayed back at their house in Dhaka although his children had left the place long back. His family did not share a cordial relation with that of his brother’s and thus they lived in a divided house. After the Partition he went around looking for people to move into the house because he was afraid that his brother’s family would come back to claim their share. Khalil and Saifuddin and their families now populate his house. Thamma and Mayadebi’s decision to take the old man to Calcutta along with them proved fatal to him as the rioters hacked off his head while he was in Khalil’s rickshaw.

### **Khalil**

Khalil is the rickshaw-puller who has come from Murshidabad and finds a shelter in Jethamoshai’s house. Khalil and his family look after the old and haggard Jethamoshai in his dying days in Dhaka. Although he is poor and gullible, Khalil is kind-hearted and compassionate and is Jethamoshai’s present confidant; it is Khalil who succeeds in convincing the old man that his relatives are actually clients who have come to seek his help in a court-case. As he takes out the old man in his rickshaw, Khalil, along with Jethamoshai and Tridib, is slain by the fanatical mob.

### **Saifuddin**

Saifuddin is the mechanic who has his shop in Thamma’s ancestral house in Dhaka. We meet Saifuddin when Thamma, Mayadebi along with their relatives go to Dhaka to meet Jethamosai. Saifuddin was born in Bihar (India) but after Partition had come to stay in Dhaka. He arouses Khalil’s suspicion when he insists that the old man, in whose house he had set up his shop, should be taken away by his relatives from India. Khalil accuses him of his ill intentions of claiming the house, once the old man is gone.



## 2.4 SUMMING UP

As mentioned at the very start of this unit, I have tried to provide you with an overview of *The Shadow Lines* in brief. I have also discussed at length the place of the different characters in the narrative and how their roles knit up the plot into a whole. By now, you should be able to understand *The Shadow Lines* in its context, to broaden the scope of your reading and to explore other different aspects of the novel on your own.

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## Unit 3

### Themes and Techniques

#### Contents:

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- 3.2 Introduction
- 3.3 The Title
- 3.4 Major Themes
  - 3.4.1 History (personal and official)
  - 3.4.2 Location
  - 3.4.3 The Past
  - 3.4.4 Memory
  - 3.4.5 Idea of reality
  - 3.4.6 Partition
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  - 3.4.10 Identity
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  - 3.4.12 Migrancy
  - 3.4.13 Travel as metaphor
- 3.5 Narrative Technique
- 3.6 Images and Symbols
- 3.7 Summing Up
- 3.8 References and Suggested Readings

#### 3.1 OBJECTIVES

The aims of this unit is to enable you to

- *analyze* the novel in terms of its themes
- *identify* the narrative techniques employed by Ghosh in the novel and
- *assess* how these themes and techniques contribute to the overall effect of the novel

### 3.2 INTRODUCTION

Any perceptive reader will find himself/herself preoccupied with the themes and narrative techniques in a particular novel. A reader may find a recurrent idea and other sustained patterns in a particular work. Such recurrent themes help one to identify the concerns that preoccupy a writer's literary oeuvre. Apart from the themes, it is also crucial to have an understanding of the narrative techniques employed by the novelist that create the overall effect of the novel. A writer like Amitav Ghosh employs various narrative strategies in his novels and in the succeeding sections I have discussed in detail the themes that predominate *The Shadow Lines* and the techniques that the writer makes use of in his novels.

### 3.3 THE TITLE

In any genre of literature, the title plays a crucial role in giving us an insight about the work at hand. The title is a window to look at the subject-matter and the concerns of a literary work. Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* is no exception in this regard. The title works at various levels in the novel. At one level, Ghosh is definitely jeering at the idea of etching lines as markers of geographical landscape to create mutually exclusive terrains of existence. The sheer futility of such exercises is made clear by showing the power of the imagination to defy all physical demarcations by transcending the limits of time and space. Here it is important for us to go back to the narrator's comment: "They had drawn their borders, believing in that pattern, in the enchantment of lines, hoping perhaps that once they had etched their borders upon the map, the two bits of land would sail away from each other like the shifting tectonic plates of the pre-historic Gondwanaland" (233). The question that Amitav Ghosh raises or seems to ask his readers is whether one can draw a line of demarcation between imagination and reality and the implied response resonating throughout the text is that if one cannot. There indeed cannot be a dividing line between imagination and reality and the so-called markers of territory are at best shadows and mirages. 'Reality' is too vast and complex to be circumscribed within historical chronology or geographical contours. A place is more than its geographical and historical

features and as Tridib believes, a place is to be recreated in the imagination; it is to be perceived with the eye of imagination. The narrator disapproves of His down-to-earth perception of reality. He says: "I could not persuade her that a place does not merely exist, that it has to be invented in one's imagination; that her practical bustling London was no less invented than mine, neither more nor less true, only very far apart" (21).

Reality is interpreted by the various characters as they attempt to conduct their lives at the mundane, everyday level. As with Ila, the subjective perception of reality shears it of its true meaning. In the first section of the novel "Going Away," the novelist focuses on London, on the eve of, and during, the war. The significance of war is explored at both the personal and the public level. At the personal level there is a feeling of pity and sympathy, of fellow-feeling brought about by the shadow of an impending death and at the national and public level, there is a feeling of masked and counterfeit exhilaration across national borders. S.P. Swain in the essay, "The Quest for Meaning: a Study of *The Shadow Lines*" says "the title of the novel 'The Shadow Lines' becomes an ambivalent symbol. It suggests the dichotomy of one's mind, the shadow lines that pervade the minds of the people." As the narrator's father says: "This is the modern world. The border isn't on the frontier; it's right inside the airport. You'll see. You'll cross it when you have to fill in all those disembarkation cards and things" (151-152). The title itself is an ironical rendering of the results of the Partition.

In the second section "Coming Home", Ghosh investigates the implications of political freedom within the Indian context. Indian nationalism, a manifestation of political freedom fails to guarantee the territorial integrity of the country. The historic event of Partition gave a jolt to the Indians' sense of nationalism. A critic, Sharmila Guha Mazumdar, observes: "Nationalism in the Indian context changed its meaning to include people on the other side of the border but could not include everybody on this side of the paradise." *The Shadow Lines* is about how boundaries are formed, how identity is created and how notions of nationalism and nations are perpetuated and accepted. Seen from this perspective Ghosh's choice of title is appropriate as it strikes a reader that lines drawn on the Maps are mere constructs and can be transcended by mutual amity among nations.

**SAQ:**

Comment on the use of the word, “shadow”, in the title. How would you interpret the use of the definite article in this case? (60 + 60 words)

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**3.4 MAJOR THEMES**

Thematically speaking, this novel is a storehouse of various intricate and pertinent issues which can neither be easily solved nor overlooked but can be regarded as burning issues of late. The following is an attempt to acquaint you with some of these themes that inform most of Ghosh’s writings, including *The Shadow Lines*.

**3.4.1 HISTORY (PERSONAL AND OFFICIAL)**

The private narratives that Ghosh chooses to foreground against the background of sweeping narratives of the nation-states confirms the power of memory to transcend the confines of the shadow lines etched on the earth as markers of national territory. This focuses on the discrepancies of an all-assuming documented history of the nation for only when the private narrative intersects with the public, the silence penetrated. As a child, the narrator had no inkling of the connections between the riots in Calcutta and Dhaka in 1964, though they affected his family intensely. It is only as a mature historian that he is able to connect the snippets of history with the nuggets of facts and make sense of the past and the inhuman murder of Tridib. He acknowledges the uncanny simultaneity and similarity of the mayhem in Calcutta and Dhaka though both the lands have been separated by the great political divide: “there has never been a moment in the four-thousand-year old history of that map when the places we know as Dhaka and Calcutta were more closely bound to each other than after they had drawn their lines...a moment when each city was the inverted image of the other...” (233). The individual narratives of each of the characters, May,

Robi, Thamma, highlight the precariousness of private narratives against the sweep of the public.

Characters in *The Shadow Lines* appear to have an intimate relation with history. Tridib pursues a Ph.D in Archaeology, Thamma has lived through the Partition, and the narrator's visit to London is prompted by the need to "collect material from the India Office Library, where all the old colonial records were kept, for a Ph.D thesis on textile trade between India and England in the nineteenth century". Novelistic discussions are intended to bring the readers closer to the real world of people, to the turmoil, discussions and conflicts that they experience in their everyday lives. This point is well illustrated in *The Shadow Lines* with regard to the riots of 1964 and the political condition in India at that time. Referring to newspapers in the archives, the narrator tells us the complete facts regarding the sacred relic, the rumours of poisoned water, and the reactions of the governments of India and East Pakistan. These are the ostensible fragments from which mainstream history is constructed. What the narrator does tell us later is his own bewildering experience as a child during the riots, his estrangement from his best friend Montu, who is a Muslim, and the death of Tridib which form the 'real world' of ordinary people who live history. Though not available in the records of history, these events are not falsifications. It takes the narrator fifteen years to realize that the construction of history is time-bound, separate and nation- specific and is ridden with contradictions. Through his imaginative legacy, he projects an image of history which cuts across the 'shadow' lines.

### **3.4.2 LOCATION**

The novel is not situated in a particular locale. While reading this novel, you will realize that, the narrative is constantly shifting from one place to another and neither is it fixed within a particular period of time. The novel starts with a reference to 1939 and then moves to the present, goes back to the period of Indian independence and its aftermath and the riots of 1964. The crux of the plot is centered around the events of 1964 that triggered off the family tragedy. The constant shift in the geographical location is crucial to bring together the different snippets of that incident to make sense of the violent past. The narrator's role in the novel is to bring together these different

places — Calcutta, Dhaka and London, to show how, in spite of their physical distances, they are all connected to each other by shared memories. Apart from different physical locales, most of the action is set in the minds of the characters (This however does not mean that it is a stream-of-consciousness novel like those authored by James Joyce or Virginia Woolf where the action is set in the psyche of the characters). This is because the incidents are narrated in the novel only after a journey to the past through memory.

### **3.4.3 THE PAST**

If we see *The Shadow Lines* in terms of a single theme that encompasses all the other concerns, it is definitely the novel's involvement with the past and everything associated with the past. In *The Shadow Lines* an understanding of the past and its ramifications is necessary to come to terms with the present. The present is incomplete without articulating the past—a past that haunts. The characters May, Robi, Thamma, Jethamoshai live in the memories of the past. The past is a burden which the characters carry along with them through out the novel. As is evident from a reading of the novel the narrator goes on a journey visiting the places and the people who figured in Tridib's past.

### **3.4.4 MEMORY**

The postcolonial history of the Indian subcontinent is one of conflicts, wars, multiple partitions and violence. *The Shadow Lines* excavates a traumatic and violent history in order to make sense of the past, the nation and the self. There is a continuous insistence and urgency on memory and rekindling of the past that brings the personal and public sphere together. In *The Shadow Lines* memory serves as a potent agency opening up vistas of acknowledgment of the complex aftermath of colonial restructuring. Memory is here a storehouse of repressed facts - a tremendously productive, revealing and shaping force in the rediscovery of the unarticulated facts. Through narrative revisiting and recalling of the past, conflicts and crisis are mourned and identity negotiated. According to Novy Kapadia, "*The Shadow Lines* is basically a memory novel" which skilfully weaves together personal and



public life. The focus of the novel is on storytelling. The memories of the different characters are made to unfurl through the narrator’s narration. Amitav Ghosh, with his subtle humour and awareness of contemporary politics, uses the device of memory to ensure that private turmoil and crisis are mirrored in public turmoil and crisis. The first instance of different strands of political nuances in this novel appears in the memories of the grandmother about her old home town in Dhaka which are passed on as vivid stories to the narrator.

**SAQ:**

How does Ghosh equate memory with truth in the novel ? (60 words)

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**3.4.5 IDEA OF REALITY**

The crux of *The Shadow Lines*’s technique lies in the expression of connection between the real and the imaginary. It establishes its socio historical situation through its careful observation of concrete social reality. But here one may question, “what is real?” “Does mere documentation of events certify their authenticity?” Definitely it does not. There may be different versions of a particular “fact”. *The Shadow Lines* explores the role of memory and imagination to create and evoke different nuances of so-called reality. Everyone in the novel, in fact, hovers over shadow lines between imagination and reality; everyone has his/her story and memories that are partly based on imagination and partly on reality, and when they are retold they are relieved as well. They interlink and participate in each other, so that in the end the boundary between fact and fiction, imagination and reality, disappears, and every thing becomes part of an imaginatively perceived experience of real life. The shadow lines between people and between the countries they inhabit and call their own, too, merge and become one. When, therefore, Ila shouts out that she has chosen to leave India and live in London because she wants to be free of her past, of her people and of the inhibitions

they impose on her, the narrator shouts back at her, “you can never be free of me... if I were to die tomorrow you would not be free of me. You cannot be free of me because I am within you.... just as you are within me”(89). Imagination is not just a part of reality, it can, and does, create its own reality. Rumours can start a riot; so that the story of the loss of the prophet’s hair, in faraway Srinagar can kill Indian Hindus in Dhaka and make vast crowds of people believe that their water has been poisoned and break up a friendship in Calcutta. For it is imagination that links a people together, not the facts of geographical contiguity. The Bengali feels closer to what is happening on the Indian subcontinent than to events in Chiang Mai in Thailand or Chendu in China, which are close to Calcutta than Delhi or Srinagar; while places in Europe, as far away from each other as KhuIna and Srinagar in South Asia, remain uninvolved with each other, for there is no imaginative connection between them.

#### **3.4.6 PARTITION**

The partition of the Indian subcontinent was the single most traumatic experience in our recent history. The violence it unleashed in the actions of a few fanatics, the vengeance that the ordinary Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs wreaked on each other worsened social sense, distorted political judgment and deranged understanding of moral righteousness. In *The Shadow Lines*, the historical event of the partition of India provides Amitav Ghosh with raw materials against which to interrogate the meaning of nationalism and political freedom. This novel examines the impact of Partition in Bengal and the plight of the numerous Hindu families who had to leave their ancestral homeland in erstwhile East Pakistan and settle in the suburbs of Calcutta. The trauma of Partition in the novel is continued through three generations. The agony of displacement from the native land and the constant dream of return to one’s land are recurrent in the novel. Ghosh brings out the futility of drawing lines across nations through the experiences of the narrator’s grandmother. Thamma belongs to the generation that had to uproot itself in 1947. When she decides to go to Dhaka to rescue her Jethamoshai, she wonders if she will be able to see the border between India and East Pakistan from an aircraft: “But surely there’s something — trenches perhaps, or

soldiers, or guns pointing at each other, or even just barren strips of land ...But if there aren't any trenches or anything, how are people to know? I mean where's the difference then? And if there's no difference, both sides will be the same; it will be just like it used to be before.... What was it all for then— Partition and all the killing and everything — if there isn't something in between?" (151). Subconsciously she has rejected the historical act of Partition. When told that Jethamoshai was still alive in Dhaka and that the whole house had been occupied by refugees, she exclaims, "You mean our house has been occupied by refugees?" (135). The fate of Muslim refugees as exemplified by the mechanic Saifuddin is similar. Many Muslim families who were uprooted from Bihar, Bengal and Assam, had to migrate to the cities of the eastern wing of the newly-formed Pakistan. The novel shows that the people of Thamma's generation were often bewildered about how places of birth and nationalities come to be at mess and this became a part of the history of the subcontinent.

**Stop to Consider:**

Anshuman A. Mondal writes: the narrator in this novel remains silent about the 'other thing which "not religion *per se* but the intimate relationship of religion to nationalism in the subcontinent. . . One must remember that the novel emerged out of Ghosh's personal and first-hand experience of the anti-Sikh communal riots in Delhi in 1984 following the assassination of the Indian Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi. The fact that he could not articulate a critique of communalism without also interrogating nationalism in the subcontinent merely underscores the point.

For although nationalism and communalism in India have customarily been characterised as oppositional discourses, much recent work suggests that far from being essentially opposed to one another, they were in fact construed as such after the development of secular Indian nationalism in the 1920s. Prior to that, the construction of national identity by Indian nationalists developed along broadly 'communal' lines."

What are the other novels on Partition that you have read?

Do you find any similarities in those novels in terms of narration and themes?

### 3.4.7 CARTOGRAPHY

To put it in very simple terms, cartography is the science of ‘map drawing’, codifying space. Maps are devices to demarcate the surface of the earth with precision by drawing lines to delineate a particular geographical terrain. One of the recurrent tropes in *The Shadow Lines* is maps. The Bartholomew Atlas has an important role to play in the narrator’s interrogation of distance that separates two terrains. A copy of the atlas, which was given to Tridib on his ninth birthday in London, is recovered forty years later in a dilapidated condition at the bottom of a bookshelf in Delhi. Tridib, the mentor, on whom the child projected his own self; pointed out places in the Bartholomew Atlas while telling him stories “Tridib had given me worlds to travel in and he had given me eyes to see them with” so that long before he actually moved out of Calcutta, his world had expanded to include many parts of the globe through hearing and reading about these places. Cairo, Madrid, Cuzco or Colombo, names that his globe-trotting cousin Ila mentioned casually were, for the narrator, to be invested with reality through precise imagination in the way Tridib had taught him, though he knew he could never replicate the same feat.

Tridib had told him of the desire that can carry one beyond ‘the limits of one’s mind to other times and other places, and even if one was lucky, to a place where there was no border between oneself and one’s image in the mirror’. Distance, in *The Shadow Lines*, is thus perceived as a challenge to be overcome through the use of imagination and desire until space gets dissolved. Meenakshi Mukherjee in her essay “Maps and Mirrors: Coordinates of Meaning in *The Shadow Lines*” says that, “one of the intricate patterns that weave the novel together is the coalescing of time and space in a seamless continuity, memory endowing remembered places with solidity, and imagination the recounted ones.” But for a person like Ila who is locked in the present, maps and memory are equally irrelevant; all the cities she had lived in ‘went past her in an illusory whirl of movement, like those studio screens in old films which flash past the windows of speeding cars’.

### 3.4.8 THE ELEMENT OF TIME

*The Shadow Lines* is a novel about time, about growing up, not so much in years as in understanding. It is not what happened, but the meaning of what

happened that is the central concern and the meaning emerges when the past and the present are considered together. The personal drama in each case is played out against the canvas of sweeping historical events — the freedom movement and the rise of insurgency in Bengal, war between England and Germany, the Chinese aggression and the Indo-Pak war, the desecration of the Hazratbal shrine in Srinagar in 1963, and the communal riots in Khulna and Calcutta in 1964 — each of which directly or indirectly impinges on the child's experience.

### 3.4.9 BORDERS AS POROUS CONSTRUCTIONS

*The Shadow Lines* deploys a wide range of devices to drive home its point that borders are porous constructions. Two or three allegories are used to highlight the flimsiness of lines and the ridiculous irrationality of Partition carved out by them. For instance, Ila's making for the narrator a dusty checkerboard of lines (64-71), indicating the different portions of a house, rubbing them off and redrawing them in a different pattern, suggests the repetitive problem of drawing and redrawing borders on a map, a game that mankind has been playing over and over again through gory centuries, believing that every fresh attempt is final:

"If we pretend it's a house, it will be a house. We can choose to build a house wherever we like."

"No I cried... it won't be a real house. It can't be" "Why?" she cried smiling".

"Frowning, I puzzled over the pattern in the dust" (70).

Somewhat ironically tragic dimensions are given to this linguistic word-play when in 1964, much after the Partition, and after her husband is dead, Thamma goes ('or comes') to Dhaka to her ancestral house to bring to India her Jethamoshai. Though now in an advanced state of senility Jethamoshai has always emphatically refused to move to India: "Once you start moving you never stop that's what I told my sons when they took the trains. I said I don't believe in this India-Shindia. Its all very well you are going away now, but suppose when you get there they decide to draw a line somewhere? What will you do then? Where will you move to?" (215). Later in the novel, Robi makes a somewhat similar remark about terrorist violence: "And then I think myself why don't they draw thousands of little

lines through the whole subcontinent and give every little place a new name? It's a mirage: the whole thing is a mirage (247). Such lines have actually been drawn on the old map of the Indian subcontinent creating two and (later three) countries where only one existed. Pakistan being an 'invented country' (157), the partition was unnatural and artificial as was that of East Pakistan from West Bengal, like the division of the ancestral house of Thamma in Dhaka which was partitioned with a lawyer-like precision.

**SAQ:**

Explore the ways in which subjectivity, in the novel, hinges on the understanding of 'lines' and 'memory'. (60 words)

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**3.4.10 IDENTITY**

The demarcation of boundaries on the earth's surface as signifiers of nation states has a far-reaching impact on individual as well as the national identities of one or more group of people. Such neat patterns cannot address the intricacies and complexities lurking in the minds of the victimized people; as Ghosh rightly voices through Robyn the novel: "How can anyone divide a memory?" This identity-crisis gets evoked at its best in Thamma's exasperation when she has to fill in "Dhaka" as her place of birth on the disembarkation form. She is flabbergasted by how the partition has palpably dismantled her and how her place of birth has come to be so messily at odds with her nationality. In *The Shadow Lines* Ghosh points out the limitations of realizing personal identity within the dialogue of 'nation-making'.

**3.4.11 SPACE**

The idea of space can be talked about from two perspectives in the novel: physical space and subjective, psychic or emotional space. In the essay "The Shadow Lines: A Critical Appraisal" Brinda Veerappa K. says "space

is governed implicitly by a reproduction of customary spatial structures. It is a language, perhaps just like speech. Spatial experience is all pervasive and powerful.... In *The Shadow Lines* the major challenge facing the concept of space is one of identity. The novel attempts to analyze how space functions to obscure the concreteness of it.”

The title of the first section, “Going Away”, suggests moving away from a space. The concept of space (both geographical and emotional) is introduced into the novel with Mayadebi’s going away from India to England with her family. It is a moving away which has a tremendous impact on the narrator as a young boy, though it occurred thirteen years before he was born. The narrator moves from India to England, from one physical space to another perhaps in the quest for freedom — cultural, emotional and intellectual. Geographically, India is the protagonist’s real space, yet Tridib’s stories are so fascinating that he needs to realign that space imaginatively.

On the other hand, for Ila there is no traveling through imagination and hence no subjective or emotional space. Ila journeys through geographical spaces but none of them is her own. They are all only transit-points, spaces which she never belongs to. The narrator, having derived his concept of space from Tridib and ha, searches for his own space when he grows up only to find shadow lines. His childhood perception of space grasped and seen through a child’s eye, a space invented by others, is not his real space. In the narrator we detect dissatisfaction with his real space because of Tridib and Ila’s influences on him. The narrator is not given a name, perhaps to show that he is not sure of the concept of identity. Probably his identities clash — politically he is Indian but emotionally and culturally he has still to find himself.

#### **3.4.12 MIGRANCY**

The issue of migrancy and associated complexities is extensively explored in *The Shadow Lines*. In the novel, two generations of migrant women — the grandmother and Ila — become the figures through whom different kinds of promises of nationality and the resultant issue of migration are interrogated and considered. In the novel, neither the grandmother’s dream of a middle-class citizenship and national belonging nor Ila’s dreams of being free of patriarchal social structures to do whatever she wants are

realized. Ila rids herself of Indian middle-class values which she finds oppressive as they only create more troubles for her future. She ends up marrying Nick Price who openly admits of his extra-marital affair. Robi's aggressive behaviour in the club is replicated by Nick's act of infidelity and marginalization of Ila. Thus Ila is unable to make either national communities — India or England — a home in the world for herself. Again, the grandmother's desire for a national community free from British subjection, culminates in the failure of the middle-class life she had envisioned for herself. Kavita Daiya in her essay, "No Home but in Memory" says: "Separated from her home and family in Dhaka which is now in East Pakistan, displaced to Calcutta through the Partition that brought the postcolonial freedom she had fervently hoped for, Thamma has 'no home but in memory.'" For Thamma, her alienation from her place of birth Dhaka by Partition, the internal religious and regional conflicts between "Muslim or Hindu, Bengali or Punjabi" that fracture the fabric of her free country, and finally, the communal violence that claimed her nephew, Tridib's, life in Dhaka, all embody the failure of her dream of freedom. The 1947 Partition not only separates Thamma from her family and her childhood home, but its legacy of violence fails to replace that loss with national unity and belongings, national identity that transcends communal and regional identity.

### **Hybridity:**

The term 'hybridity' is widely used in postcolonial theory to describe the newness of the many different forms of migrant or minority discourses that flourish in the diasporas of the modern and postmodern periods. For the postcolonial critic Homi K. Bhabha, hybridity is the margin where cultural differences come into contact and conflict and unsettle all the stable identities that are constructed around oppositions such as past and present, inside and outside, or inclusion or exclusion. Hybridity offers a possible release from the singular identities that are constructed when class, race, or gender are used as primary categories. Bhabha celebrates the 'in-between spaces' created and inhabited by hybrids, and holds that all cultures are now caught up in a continuous process of hybridization.



### 3.4.13 TRAVEL AS METAPHOR

The travel metaphor is central to the book and is a device to extend and expand the plot spatially and temporally. After all, a journey takes place in space and time. *The Shadow Lines* begins with a statement about a journey, that Mayadebi, the narrator's great aunt, her husband and her son Tridib undertook in 1939, from India to England: a journey which will be undertaken again and again, and by other characters in the novel, too, both physically and in the imagination. A very significant aspect of journeys in Ghosh's novels is that they are meant to do away with history and restrictions. Traveling across borders and repudiating their fixity is almost an obsession with Ghosh. For instance, the narrator in *The Shadow Lines*, who has not been outside Calcutta till he is an adult, crosses borders easily with the help of the imagination. His cousin, Tridib, who is both his idol and teacher, constantly relates his experiences to the young narrator. More than half of the novel is Tridib's story as seen through the narrator's eyes. It is through the stories narrated by Tridib that the narrator validates his experiences: "Tridib had given me worlds to travel in and he had given me eyes to see them with." Through the numerous journeys undertaken by different characters at different points in the novel, Ghosh shows that the borders are set up to exclude people and create differences on the basis of nationality, race, culture and religion. These journeys are not however mere quests, they also provide Ghosh with the means to explore the ramifications of history and the impact of violence on human behaviour. The novel can be described as the narrator's journey backwards in time in the quest of a fuller meaning of life. It is an attempt to impose pattern on experiences.

#### **Check Your Progress:**

1. How does the power of imagination work in the novel in construing places and events? Does imagination function as counterbalance to memory in the novel?
2. Comment on the theme of nostalgia and the reiterative occurrence of this theme in the novel.

### 3.5 NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE

*The Shadow Lines* depicts a wonderful blending of private and public events into a mosaic of history. The narrative unfolds through fragmentary streams of consciousness where the private turmoil of the individual is reflected in the public chaos and crises. The narrative structure in *The Shadow Lines* does not follow a linear and chronological pattern. Here past and present are juxtaposed as in the case of a collage or a montage. Ghosh uses memory and imagination as narrative devices to interrogate space, time, and personal psyches and to bridge the gaps between space, time and people. His novels are noted for their simultaneous probing into the chronicles of nations and private lives, the reality of the fictional and the fictionality of the real, the geographical space as projected by maps and the subjective space as surface in the individual's memory and consciousness. With respect to the fusion of space and time in the novel, the titles of the two parts of the book—"Going Away" and "Coming Home"—reveal the irony underlying Ghosh's stance that one can neither "go away" nor "come home". Nearness and distance collapse in the novel as men and women separated by borders, seas and continents try to reach out to each other, and at the same time even relatives or former fellow citizens meet as no less strangers amidst ruins of the past. In *The Shadow Lines* it is Tridib who makes the narrator understand that reality lies not in the obvious but in what is evoked and understood by memory and imagination, in different times.

The use of multiple narratives is another narrative technique employed by Ghosh in the novel. These different threads merge together to articulate the silent past that haunts the narrator throughout the text. The narrator's voice serves as the axis through which the other narratives are filtered. The novel contains multiple stories of his grandmother, of Mayadebi, of his uncles, Tridib and Robi, of his cousin Ila, of May Price and her brother Nick Price who live in London. The overall story emerges in layers and each layer is a fusion of private lives and public events — all linked into a kind of thematic unity.

The metaphor of journey is central to the narrative technique of *The Shadow Lines*. Journey here does not merely mean physical journey or covering of a specific distance; but it could also mean the space charted out

by the imagination and enlivened in the memory. The novel charts out the narrator's journey undertaken to discover a vocabulary to articulate the silences of the past, lost connections and repressed experiences that have receded into the archives of private or public memory. The narrator constantly shifts between Calcutta and London to collect materials for his Ph.D. thesis. As a child, his imagination was enriched by Tridib's vivacious tales of different places and locations. Tridib makes the young narrator value the importance of imagination. The narrator realizes that imagination reveals a world as concrete and real and more exciting than the world experienced through the senses. Tridib, as an eight-year-old child, along with his parents had stayed with the Price family for a whole year in 1939. Tridib had told the narrator about their life at 44, Lymington Road, and other places and about the threats of the air raids during the Second World War. Tridib's narration had been so graphic that even after forty years, the narrator, on a visit to London, could make out the location of these places even though he had never visited those places before. Thus the personally experienced reality of Tridib colours the imagination of the storyteller.

Thamma starts from Dhaka (her place of birth), moves to Burma with her husband, and finally lands up in Calcutta after the Partition. Her journey to Dhaka to revive past relations and recover old ties becomes a symbolic search for a point of fixity. The narrator talks about the minor details to depict the narrator's allegiance to the past, such as changing into a red-bordered sari at the moment of departure. Her return to the ancestral home at Khulna, where she is now a total stranger perplexes her. In a bid to revive old relations she forgets the altered realities of the present. She fails to realize that the Khalil and Saifuddin who now stay with her Jethamosai, constitute a family for him. They are now everything for him and she who stays across the border is now a total stranger.

Journeys are a very important part of Ghosh's fictional landscape. Another significance of the journeys in Ghosh's novels is that they are meant to do away with the authenticity of 'history' and historiography. Traversing borders becomes almost an obsession with Ghosh. Borders are meant to be crossed. Ghosh shows that men and countries set apart by borders produce differences based on nationalities, race, culture and religion. In his novels, Ghosh makes it clear that the borders set up by men are mental constructs, that the lines in the maps are mere 'shadow' lines.

The death of Tridib is the central event around which the entire plot is built. The death of Tridib can be taken as an instance of the manner in which Ghosh blends theme and technique. Ghosh extends his thematic concerns to explore human relationships. Tridib's death occurs in East Pakistan in 1964, but the details are spread out for the narrator years later in London. Tridib had rushed out into the frenzied mob to save his old uncle from the agitators and had been killed in the attempt. His death is seen and narrated by different people at different times. Thus, in Ghosh's novels events and characters are seen through different time-space events. By letting his stories interplay with time, Ghosh renders in his narrative a specific narrative texture.

**Check Your Progress:**

1. The narration of the past is a device leading to the formation and development of the 'self'. Comment.
2. Ghosh makes different cultures and places interact with each other. What are your comments on this recurrent dialogue between various cultures and its role in the overall design of the novel?
3. Do you agree that the emotional crises of the characters is unavoidably linked with issues of identity—crises of the characters? How is this reflected through the narrative?
4. Comment on the narrative technique Ghosh has used in this novel. How does it weave together 'memory' and 'reality'?
5. From your reading of *The Shadow Lines*, comment on Ghosh's representation of Indian middle-classes and their values. Why do you think such values clash with that of Ila's emancipated life-style? Give reasons for your answer.
6. Analyse the time-shuffling technique of Ghosh in the narrative. What role does it allow to the reader of the novel?
7. How does the idea of displacement work in this novel? Attempt to show its importance in the context of Ghosh's construction of modern cultural 'hybridity'.

### 3.6 IMAGES AND SYMBOLS

Before we proceed to a discussion of the images used in the novel, let us discuss first what an 'image' is. An image is a vivid sensory description that is hard, clear and concentrated and facilitates a rendering of the writer's impression of a visual object or scene. Such impressions are rendered by means of a metaphor, which has the function of an image in a literary work. Use of images enables symbolic detailing of certain impressions that are central to the writer's concern in a work.

The image of 'mirrors' rhythmically recurs in the text and includes reflectors of a wide range, from the small hand-glass to the vast cosmic mirror of the desert that sends inverted reflections in the form of mirages. These mirrors are constituted of personal consciousness as it envisions personal life and national events. Nick Price had become a spectral presence beside the narrator in the mirror of his boyhood, "growing with me" (50). The mirror-image comes back most poignantly on the occasion when he tries to reconstruct the past through the headlines of old newspapers. He felt, "I began on my strangest journey: a voyage into a land outside space, an expanse without distances; a land of looking glass events" (224). This journey is stalled when he stumbles at the point of Tridib's death—his most traumatic memory. The narrator, after fifteen years, acknowledges the simultaneity of the mayhem in Calcutta and Dhaka though both the lands have been separated by the great political divide: "there had never been a moment in the four thousand year old history of that map when the places we know as Dhaka and Calcutta were more closely bound to each other than after they had drawn their lines... a moment when each city was the inverted image of the other..." (233).

The child who had once believed that distance separates, 'that it is a corporeal substance... that across the border there exists another reality' has, by the end of the novel, had some of these certainties shattered. Bartholomew's Atlas is for him no longer a safe guide to a neatly compartmentalized world: the solid lines dividing countries turn into glass, through which it is clearly visible that Chiang Mai in Thailand is spatially closer to Calcutta than New Delhi, Chengdu in China is nearer than Srinagar is.

Another symbol that has been used by Ghosh in the novel is that of the divided house. This symbol is evocative of the country as divided as a

consequence of the Partition which had left many families homeless and divided. There are various references to the divided house and one such striking instance in the novel is presented through the division of Thamma's ancestral house in Dhaka. The personal, domestic divisions function as a microcosm of the strife in contemporary society at large.

### **3.7 SUMMING UP**

As mentioned in the introduction, the purpose of this unit was to discuss those aspects which are crucial to have a critical approach towards the different nuances of the narrative. By now you should have been able to identify recurrent themes and techniques adopted which go into the making of the novel. It is hoped that the objective of this unit has been fulfilled in helping you to appreciate the novel better and to place it among the canonical works of Indian English fiction.

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## Block 4

### SALMAN RUSHDIE'S *MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN*

#### **Block Introduction:**

This block introduces you to the famous expatriate Indian writer Salman Rushdie and his highly acclaimed novel *Midnight's Children*. As you leaf through the pages of this block, you will find detailed information regarding Salman Rushdie as a writer and his novel *Midnight's Children* which is often considered to be one of the greatest modern fictions of our time. Although included in Indian writing in English, this novel seeks to exemplify most of the dilemmas prevalent in modern and postcolonial literatures of the world. This novel is significant for two identifiable reasons—firstly, it is a part of contemporary and postmodern Indian literature and secondly, it can often be placed in the history of postcolonial literature.

To speak of Indian English literature is to provide a significant cultural site to accommodate several contested ideologies. Our indebtedness to both pre and post independent India often compel us to re-define the very spirit of Indian literature in a specific post-colonial context. A critical reading of Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* might show us a way by which Indian English Literature could finally find a headway both as a discipline and an institution. In today's parlance 'Indian English Literature' has replaced the earlier terminology, 'Indo-Anglian Literature'. The hyphenated term, Indo-Anglian, did not have the conceptual clarity of its replacement, because it assumed that the Indian component of the literature was subsumed under its Englishness. This terminological shift is however, part of a larger effort to provide a more imaginative space for the Indian part of writing. This new term is part of a major attempt by the ex-colonized nation to re-contextualize itself in terms of its need to constitute the 'other' in the very definition of its selfhood. And in this regard, mention must be made of Rushdie and his magnum opus *Midnight's Children*.

Needless to say, English was legitimized by the early Indian writers as a tool to homogenize the spirit of India in the discourse of the emerging sense of nationalism. This aspect laid the foundation for the modernist ideology of pan-Indianism. That is why perhaps, the early Indian writers, despite

their individual differences, subsumed their world under the grand narrative of the nation—a strategy that continued till the 1960s. Because, most of the writers writing in English before the 1970s involved themselves with the issues of national identity and Indian cultural revivalism. The paradoxical complicity between mimesis and emergent Indian nationalism continued to plague Indian writing in English until the 1970s when a new kind of writing brought about a fresh creative breakthrough. And the credit goes to *Midnight's Children* which inaugurated a regeneration in the whole gamut of Indian writing in English.

In order to make you comfortable with the various issues related to Salman Rushdie and his novel prescribed for your study, this block is divided into three units. Unit 1 will try to establish Rushdie in the context of 'Indian' literature in English. However, in unit 2, I have adopted a more down-to-earth approach to the novel *Midnight's Children*. The reason behind this is to reduce your difficulty in getting a comprehensive idea about the text. And finally in unit 3, you will find specific considerations of the various themes and techniques which are synonymous with the significance of this novel. I hope such a division of this block will be convenient and informative for you.

#### Contents

- Unit 1 : Background
- Unit 2 : Introducing the Novel
- Unit 3 : Themes and Techniques

# Unit 1

## Background

### Contents:

- 1.1 Objectives
- 1.2 Introduction
- 1.3 Biographical Sketch
- 1.4 Placing Rushdie
- 1.5 Placing the Work
- 1.6 Summing Up

### 1.1 OBJECTIVES

This is the first unit of Block VI of paper VIII. In this unit, you will read about the author Salman Rushdie, one of the leading expatriate Indian novelists whose 'oeuvre' has placed Indian writing in English at its zenith. The objectives of this unit aim to make you-

- *read* Salman Rushdie as an Indian writer
- *obtain* a comprehensive idea of his works
- *place* Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* in the arena of Indian writing in English
- *acknowledge* the relative significance of contemporary Indian novels in English

### 1.2 INTRODUCTION

In this introduction I would like you to contextualize Salman Rushdie in the traditions of Indian writing in English. So, let us quickly look at the ways the English language was sought to be legitimized in India by the British and how that legitimization ultimately resulted in the proliferation of literature written in English in the coming days.

The noted Indian critic, Gauri Viswanathan, in her book *Masks of Conquest*, clearly points out the fact that under the educational reforms laid out by British officers like Charles Grant and Thomas Babington Macaulay was lying hidden a tendency to secure political power. Seen in the context of postcolonial writings of India whose English education came as a foreigner's tool for cultural domination, Salman Rushdie's readiness to accept English as a sub-continental language invites attention and debate. However, the English language began to create more problems in the contemporary neo-colonial situation. Today English still remains as the lingua franca of power and a means to access to all resources in today's world of cultural transactions. Then what remains to be 'Indian' in Rushdie if he chooses to write in an alien language by abandoning the vernacular? It is in this context that I would ask you to read Indian English novels as well as the novels of Salman Rushdie.

In this context, another noted Indian critic, Bishnupriya Ghosh, says that English in India is not a language disconnected from Indian realities, but has itself become a vernacular, subject to significant variations as a result of differential class and regional uses. And Rushdie's 'localised or regionalized urban (Bombayite) use of English can be shown as an useful example of that. So, against the common view that Rushdie 'translates most of the Eastern cultural signs for his Western audience', Ghosh insists that local references and the situatedness of language based in contextual, historical, cultural and linguistic knowledge of the country, engage Rushdie with the milieu for whom he speaks.

**Stop to Consider:**

An attempt to establish a Christian civilization with the help of a sound ethical educational system in India, compelled a Britisher like Charles Grant to comment in an article of 1797 that "The Hindoos err, because they are ignorant, and their errors have never fairly be laid before them". Charles Grant further observed that the 'communication' of light and knowledge to them would prove the best remedy for their disorders, and this remedy is proposed, from a full conviction that if judiciously and patiently applied, it would have great and happy effects upon them, effects honorable and advantageous for us. Hence, the communication of 'light' to 'darkness' could easily be made 'the medium of languages of 'India'

because English will help Indians in accessing the 'world of new ideas' more effectively than the vernacular. Such ideas of Grant were further enhanced by acts like the 'Charter Act of 1813' which relaxed the control of missionary activities in India and committed the British to greater interventions in native education.

Another Act was the 'English Education Act' which made English the medium of instruction in Indian higher education. Through this act Thomas Babington Macaulay argued for the superiority of English literatures over all other literatures.

(Andrew Teverson, p- 31)

### 1.3 BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Salman Rushdie was born in Bombay (now Mumbai) on June 19<sup>th</sup>, 1947 almost two months before India gained Independence from the British. His father's name was Anis Ahmad Rushdie who was a barrister turned businessman, and his mother Negin (nee Butt) Rushdie was a teacher from Aligarh, in North India. His schooling continued both in Bombay and at Rugby in England and then he studied history at King's College, Cambridge, where he also joined the 'Cambridge Footlights Theatre company'. After his graduation, his family moved to Pakistan in 1964 and Salman worked temporarily for television before returning to England. His first novel, *Grimus*, was published in 1975. *Midnight's Children* was his second novel and it was published in 1981 and won him the Booker Prize for fiction. Rushdie's third novel, *Shame* (1983), which many critics saw as an allegory of the political situation in Pakistan, won the 'Prix du Meilleur Livre Etranger' and was again short-listed for the Booker Prize for Fiction. The publication of his fourth novel, *The Satanic Verses*, in 1988, led to accusations of blasphemy against Islam and demonstrations by Islamist groups in India and Pakistan. The orthodox Iranian leadership issued a *fatwa* against Rushdie on 14 February 1989 and he was forced into hiding under the protection of the British government. It won the 'Whitbread Novel Award' in 1988.

Salman Rushdie however, continued to write and publish books, including a children's book, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1990), that won the 'Writers' Guild Award' (Best Children's Book), and which he adapted for the stage with Tim Supple and David Tushingham. It was first staged at the

Royal National Theatre, London. This was followed by a book of essays entitled *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* (1991); and *East, West* (1994), a book of short stories; and a novel, *The Moor's Last Sigh* (1995) relating to the history of the wealthy Zogoiby family. *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, is published in 1999, and through this novel, Rushdie re-works the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice in the context of modern popular music. His novel *Fury*, set in New York at the beginning of the third millennium, was published in 2001. He is also the author of a travel narrative, *The Jaguar Smile* (1987), an account of a visit to Nicaragua in 1986.

Salman Rushdie is presently working as Honorary Professor in the Humanities at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), and Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. He was also made Distinguished Fellow in Literature at the University of East-Anglia in 1995. He was awarded the 'Austrian State Prize for European Literature' in 1993 and the 'Aristeion Literary Prize' in 1996, and has received eight honorary doctorates. He was elected to the Board of American PEN in 2002. The subjects in his book, *Step Across This Line: Collected Non-fiction 1992-2002* (2002), range from popular culture and football to twentieth-century literature and politics. Salman Rushdie is also co-author (along with Tim Supple and Simon Reade) of the stage adaptation of *Midnight's Children*, premiered by the 'Royal Shakespeare Company' in 2002. *Shalimar the Clown*, was published in 2005. It was short listed for the 2005 'Whitbread Novel Award'. Salman Rushdie became a "Knight Commander of the Order of the British Empire" (KBE) in 2007. His latest novel, *The Enchantress of Florence*, was published in 2008. This novel is based on the history of India during the reign of the great Mughal emperor, Akbar.

If we peep inside Rushdie's personal life we find that on the eve of partition Rushdie's parents Anis Ahmad Rushdie and Negin Rushdie decided to leave Anis's home in Delhi and move to the south-western part of Bombay. They did not feel like being a part of the journey to Pakistan being made by many other Muslims in 1947 because they, like Ahmad Sinai in *Midnight's Children*, felt 'more like Indians than Muslims'. Anis Rushdie felt that their stay in Delhi during the partition disturbances would not be free from troubles and Bombay, with its multiplicity of faith and cultures, seemed like

guaranteeing safety to Muslims who chose to remain in India after the separation. Rushdie enjoyed a privileged childhood with an education in the elite Cathedral and John Cannon School—a period transmuted into fiction in the middle sections of *Midnight's Children*. He and his school friends went to see 'Bollywood' movies, read comic books and pulp-fiction and bought records from 'Rhythm House' record-store in Bombay-later a model for the 'Rhyme Center' in his rock-'n'-roll novel *The Ground Beneath her Feet*. However, Rushdie's family had begun to suffer anti-Muslim prejudices. As Rushdie recalls, there were questions about his family's loyalty to India: as Muslims they had not left. There were court cases. The Government took over his father's properties, as being evacuee properties. In *Midnight's Children*, this incident is translated into fiction where the freezing of Ahmad Sinai's 'assets' results in his testicles turning into 'little cubes of ice' (75). Then, Rushdie's family had to move to Pakistan which is again fictionalized in *Midnight's Children*. The later visits made to Pakistan form the basis of his third novel *Shame*. Pakistan, as it appears in both *Shame* and *Midnight's Children*, is a bleak and unforgiving force in contrast to the wonderfully various and endlessly re-created India.

#### 1.4 PLACING RUSHDIE

Situating Rushdie in the greater context of post-independence Indian literature necessitates our reading him in the discourse of English in India. I have already discussed this issue in section 1.2 of this unit. In this section, my attempt is to help you situate Rushdie in the chain of famous Indian novelists writing in English and then to see how he finally comes out of all criticism that might be raised against all Indian writers choosing to write in English.

Although English writings in India formally began with Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's *Rajmohan's Wife* there is no doubt regarding the fact that the real flourishing of Indian novel-writing in English began with the publication of the social critiques of Mulk Raj Anand (*The Untouchables*, 1935, and *Coolie*, 1936), R. K. Narayan ('Malgudi' novels like *Swami and Friends*, 1935) and Raja Rao (*Kanthapura*, 1938). Andrew Teverson in his book on Rushdie writes 'Rao's commitment to the transformation of English, as well as his desire to revolutionize the novel in English by importing into it the rhythms of the Indian story-teller, clearly anticipates Rushdie's later

experiments with the form.’ However, Rushdie celebrates his differences from Rao and deviates towards G. V. Desani’s *All About H. Hatterr* (1984) which, according to Rushdie himself, helps him in breaking away from the manner in which India had been written about in English. According to Rushdie, Desani is the first writer to give modernism an ‘Indian’ dimension. Although the novel form made an entry into India as a colonial legacy, Rushdie’s success lies in his hybridization of the novel form by adopting non-novelistic narrative machineries. Most interestingly, Rushdie adds a most distinctive Indian strain to the novel by drawing heavily on Indian (Hindu) epic narratives like the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* and upon tale-cycles assimilating elements of Indian, Persian and Arabian story-telling traditions such as the *Arabian Nights*. Hence, both the mytho-poetic and folkloric oral sources are seen to have played a vital role in the narrator’s shaping of the narrative in most of Rushdie’s fictions like *Midnight’s Children* and *Shame*. But Aijaz Ahmad in his book, *In Theory*, has argued that even though Rushdie promotes a view that his borrowings from *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* give his fictions a ‘quintessential Indianness’ of form and content, his fiction has clear lines of descent from European modernism and postmodernism that show such assumptions to be deceptive. However, Rushdie seems to be self-consciously mixing up elements from both the Euro-American novelistic tradition and Indian story-telling traditions in order to see how one tradition might productively transform the other and secondly, and show how fictions have been brought into new hybrid relations in his own experience, as a migrant intellectual working in increasingly globalised, postcolonial arenas. (Teverson, 46-47).

Based on the above discussions we can see that Rushdie’s use of pseudo-Indian story telling registers not only signifies the ideas of ‘Indianness’ to non-Western readers but also demonstrates the impossibility of any immediate consumption of Indian vernacular materials. Other than these, it enables him to emphasise the placement of the literary utterance by revealing that literature is never a-historical and occurs independently of cultures but grows out of heavy cultural exchange with social and political significance. And that is what is exemplified by Saleem and Padma’s discussion in *Midnight’s Children* that the telling of his story is conditioned by different contexts. Similarly, Rushdie’s narrator is an ordinary individual whose words are fallible. The epic, oral, filmic, televisual and photographic modes



employed by Rushdie in his works, exemplify the referential range and intertextual strain in his fictions. Rushdie has so far written ten novels. But, the impact his novels have on common readers and critics is profound and far-reaching.

**Stop to Consider:**

In his introduction to *The Vintage Book of Indian Writing in English*, Rushdie lists out several distinctive accusations labeled against Indian English Writers:

- a) they are too upper-middle-class
- b) they lack diversity in their choice of themes
- c) they possess ‘inflated reputations on account of the international power of the English Language, and of the ability of Western critics and publishers to impose their cultural standards on the East’
- d) they live ‘in many cases, outside India’ and so are ‘deracinated to the point that their work lacks the spiritual dimension essential for a ‘true’ understanding of the soul of India’, and finally
- e) they suffer from ‘Rushdie-it is’-a condition.

But according to Rushdie, English is the most powerful medium of communication in the world, but the fact that Indian writers show a growing mastery of this medium of communication should be a matter of celebration, rather than critique.

Timothy Brennan in her book *Salman Rushdie and the Third World: Myth of the Nation* names Salman Rushdie as one of the leading ‘Third-World Cosmopolitan’[s]. By the term ‘cosmopolitan’ she means those writers celebrated by the Western reviewers as the interpreters and the authentic public voices of the ‘Third-World’. Originally the term ‘Third-World Cosmopolitan’ included writers like Mario Vargas Llosa, Derek Walcott, Salman Rushdie, Isabel Allende, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Bharati Mukherjee, and a few others. But according to Brennan, if there was any one of them who seemed to capture what all these writers had collectively represented, it was undoubtedly Salman Rushdie.

## 1.5 PLACING THE WORK

It is interesting to see how Rushdie has tried to place his *Midnight's Children* in the realm of Indian English literature. For the early Indian writers, English was a gateway to the outer world and a necessary precondition for their national identity. (You all have already gained considerable insights into this aspect in Block VI of paper 10). The novelists of 1930s like Mulk Raj Anand, R. K. Narayan and Raja Rao also busied themselves with the pragmatic use of English to convey a sense of 'Indianness' in their writing and tried deliberately to distance themselves from the subtle nuances of the language and its flexible idiom. They based their narrative structures on the prevalent oral and epic traditions. However, the situation has changed with Salman Rushdie. His essay 'Imaginary Homelands' is a profound attempt to articulate the postcolonial Indian voice. Justifying the use of an alien medium like English, he defends the Indian writers in English against the 'nativist' attacks on them and suggests that as a means of creative expression, English is a necessary step towards a process of globalisation in literature. He has also experienced in the Indian writers a reflection of the struggles between the cultures within us and the influences at work upon our societies. By saying "to conquer English may be to complete the process of making ourselves free", Rushdie actually suggests that the true freedom of an ex-colonised country lies not in translating the language of her erstwhile ruler into her native idiom but in conquering the other tongue (English) in constituting it in one's mother-tongue.

According to Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* is a 'product of its moment in history, touched and shaped by its time in ways which its author cannot wholly know.' One possible way to read the text is to adopt a critical viewpoint regarding the notion of the 'Indianness' of India and its functionality. The early Indian fictions in English, like Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*, tried to represent a kind of 'pan-Indianness' by extolling the notions of Hinduism in their novels. But the novelists like Rushdie, in a sense, critique 'Pure Hinduism' with representation of non-Hindu communities in India and their varied world views, values, beliefs and practices. In the 'Foreword' to *Kanthapura* (1938) Raja Rao opined that Indians had to acknowledge that the West had changed them and so they must learn to look at the reality around them both as Indians and as members of a larger world. In Rushdie,

however, the same idea is presented more forcefully. His characters would instead say that though they are a ‘translated lot; (cultural translability is a noticeable factor in Rushdie’s fictions and that is most evident in *Shame* in which the narrator describes himself as a ‘translated man’ because he has been ‘borne across’ from one culture to another. This act of translation means that something has been lost. (Teverson 130-131)

**Check Your Progress:**

1. Explain Rushdie’s choice of particular Indian traditions in his fictions.
2. Discuss the authorial compulsions behind Rushdie’s work in fiction.

## 1.6 SUMMING UP

In this unit, you must have seen that my discussion of Rushdie is basically drawn from his position amongst the Indian writers writing in English. My main intention here is to prepare for you the ground to understand and discuss Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight Children*, often considered as an excellent example of the post-colonial and the post-modern Indian English novel. I feel that understanding the various contexts of Indian English literature is almost a precondition for all of us to read Rushdie. Once you have finished reading this unit, I am sure that you can proceed with the next two units.

—xxx—



## Unit 2

### Introducing the Novel

#### Contents:

- 2.1 Objectives
- 2.2 Introduction
- 2.3 The Story in Brief
- 2.4 Reading the Novel
- 2.5 The Indian Context
- 2.6 The Characters
- 2.7 Critical Reception
- 2.8 Summing Up

#### 2.1 OBJECTIVES

In this unit, attempt has been made to help you read and understand *Midnight's Children*, one of Salman Rushdie's most acclaimed novels. What is significant about this novel relates to the ways in which Indian novels in English not only regenerate themselves but help to their own establishment as an area of research in the world academia. However, after the end of this unit you should be able to

- *narrate* the story of *Midnight's Children*
- *situate* this novel in the context of contemporary Indian writing in English
- *grasp* what is so 'Indian' about this novel
- *explain* the critical significance of this novel

#### 2.2 INTRODUCTION

During his stay in London in 1977, Rushdie became involved in a local project to create employment for Bangladeshi immigrants. He realized that

racism had ‘seeped into every part of British culture’ and that ‘Britain is now two entirely different worlds, and the one you inhabit is determined by the colour of your skin’. Experience gained through the project formed the basis of his most controversial novel *The Satanic Verses*. In the meantime, his fictional self was in the grip of India. His first effort was entitled ‘Madame Rama’ and its chief characters bore some resemblances to ‘Indira Gandhi’. But, gradually it took the shape of *Midnight’s Children*. He continued to tap the same rich vein and became aware of his true position as a writer.

The novel narrates key events in the history of India through the story of pickle-factory worker, Saleem Sinai, who claims to be one of 1001 children born as India which had won independence from Britain in 1947. The critic Malcolm Bradbury acclaimed the novel’s achievement in *The Modern British Novel* (Penguin, 1994) as ‘a new start for the late-twentieth-century novel.’ Before going into the other sections of this unit, I would like to make this point clear that the greatness of this novel lies in its readability. And there may be several ways to read fiction like *Midnight’s Children*. For example, I can adopt one way of reading the text by paying more attention to Indian national history. Similarly, one can also read the text by focusing on the experiences of the expatriate Indians (Rushdie being an expatriate Indian writer) and what India means to them. Any way, this unit is meant as an introduction to the novel. So, I hope, once you finish reading this unit, you will be able to know exactly what Rushdie is trying to do in the text.

### **2.3 THE STORY IN BRIEF**

Peeping inside the novel we find that Saleem Sinai, the narrator of *Midnight’s Children*, opens the story of the novel by explaining how he was born on the midnight of August 15, 1947, at the exact moment of India’s independence from British rule. Now nearing his thirty-first birthday, Saleem believes that his body has started to crack and fall apart. Afraid of his imminent death, he grows anxious and impatient to tell his life-story. Padma, his loyal and loving companion, serves as his patient but often skeptical audience.

The story of the novel begins with Saleem's birth in Kashmir in 1915. Aadam Aziz, Saleem's grandfather and a doctor by profession, begins treating Naseem, the future grandmother of Saleem. For the first three years, Adam treats Naseem who is always covered by a sheet with a small hole in it that is often moved to expose the part of her that is sick. Finally, Aadam Aziz and Naseem marry and the couple moves to Agra, where Aadam, whose loss of religious faith has affected him deeply, sees how protests in the name of independence get violently suppressed. Aadam and Naseem raise three daughters, Alia, Mumtaz, and Emerald, and two sons, Mustapha and Hanif. Aadam becomes a follower of the optimistic activist Mian Abdullah, whose anti-Partition stance eventually leads to his assassination. Following Abdullah's death, Aadam hides Abdullah's assistant, Nadir Khan, despite his wife's opposition. While living in the basement, Nadir Khan falls in love with Mumtaz, and they secretly marry. However, after two years of marriage, Aadam finds out that his daughter is still a virgin, as Nadir and Mumtaz have yet to consummate their marriage. Nadir Khan is sent running for his life when Mumtaz's sister, Emerald, tells Major Zulfikar, an officer in the Pakistani army, soon to be Emerald's husband, about his hiding-place in the house. Abandoned by her husband, Mumtaz agrees to marry Ahmed Sinai, a young merchant who until then had been courting her sister, Alia.

Mumtaz changes her name to Amina and moves to Delhi with her new husband. Pregnant, she goes to a fortune-teller just to hear a cryptic prophecy about her unborn son and a declaration that the boy will never be older or younger than his country and will have two heads, knees and a nose. After a terrorist organization burns down Ahmed's factory, Ahmed and Amina move to Bombay. They buy an estate from a departing Englishman, William Methwold. Wee Willie Winky, a man who entertains the family of Methwold, reveals that his wife Vanita is also expecting a child soon. Amina and Vanita both go into labor, and, at exactly midnight, each woman delivers a son. Meanwhile, a midwife at the nursing home, called Mary Pereira, is preoccupied with thoughts of her radical socialist lover, Joseph D'Costa. Wanting to make him proud, she switches the nametags of the two newborn babies, thereby giving the poor baby a life of privilege and the rich baby a life of poverty. Driven by a sense of guilt afterward, she becomes an ayah, or nanny, to Saleem.

Because it occurs at the exact moment of India's independence, the press heralds Saleem's birth as largely significant. Young Saleem develops an enormous cucumber like nose and blue eyes like those of his grandfather, Aadam Aziz. A few years later, his mischievous sister, nicknamed the Brass Monkey is born. Overwhelmed by the expectations laid on him by the prophecy, and ridiculed by other children for his huge nose, Saleem takes to hiding in a washing chest. Unable to speak, he hears a babble of voices in his head. He comes to realize his telepathic power by which he could enter other's thoughts. Eventually, Saleem begins to hear the thoughts of other children born during the first hour of independence. The 1,001 'midnight's children', a number later reduced to 581 by their tenth birthday (as found in Chapter XIV), all have magical powers which vary according to how close to midnight they were born. Saleem discovers that Shiva, the boy with whom he was switched at birth, was born with a pair of enormous, powerful knees and a gift for combat.

One day, Saleem loses a portion of his finger in an accident and is rushed to the hospital, where his parents learn that according to Saleem's blood type, he couldn't possibly be their biological son. After he leaves the hospital, Saleem is sent to live with his Uncle Hanif and Aunt Pia for some time. Then, Saleem returns home to his parents. Hanif commits suicide. While the family mourns Hanif's death, Mary confesses to having switched Saleem and Shiva at birth. Ahmed, now an alcoholic, grows violent with Amina, prompting her to take Saleem and his sister, -the Brass Monkey, to Pakistan.

Four years later, after Ahmed suffers a heart failure, Amina and the children move back to Bombay. India goes to war with China and Saleem's perpetually congested nose undergoes a medical operation. Consequently, he loses his telepathic powers but, in return, gains an incredible sense of smell, with which he can detect emotions. Saleem's entire family moves to Pakistan after India's defeat to China. His younger sister, now known as Jamila Singer, becomes the most famous singer in Pakistan. Already on the brink of ruin, Saleem's entire family dies in the span of a single day during the war between India and Pakistan. During the air raids, Saleem gets hit in the head by his grandfather's silver spittoon, which erases his memory entirely.



Loss of memory reduces Saleem to an animalistic state. He finds himself conscripted into military service, as his keen sense of smell makes him an excellent tracker. Though he does not know exactly how he came to join the army, he suspects that Jamila sent him there as a punishment for having fallen in love with her. While in the army, Saleem helps quell the independence movement in Bangladesh. After witnessing a number of atrocities, however, he flees into the jungle with three of his fellow-soldiers. In the jungle of the Sundarbans, he regains all of his memory except the knowledge of his name. After leaving the jungle, Saleem finds Parvati-the-witch, one of midnight's children, who reminds him of his name and helps him escape back to India. He lives with her in the magician's ghetto, along with a snake-charmer named Picture Singh.

Disappointed that Saleem will not marry her, Parvati-the-witch starts an affair with Shiva, now a famous war hero. Things between Parvati and Shiva quickly change, and she returns to the magicians' ghetto, pregnant and still unmarried. There, the ghetto residents reject Parvati until Saleem agrees to marry her. Meanwhile, Indira Gandhi, the prime minister of India, begins a sterilization campaign. Shortly after the birth of Parvati's son, the government destroys the magician's ghetto. Parvati dies while Shiva captures Saleem and brings him to a forced sterilization camp. There, Saleem divulges the names of the other midnight's children. One by one, the midnight's children are rounded up and sterilized, effectively destroying the powers that so threaten the prime minister. Later, however, Indira Gandhi loses the first election she holds.

The 'midnight's children', including Saleem, are all set free. Saleem goes in search of Parvati's son, Aadam, who has been living with Picture Singh. The three take a trip to Bombay, so that Picture Singh can challenge a man who claims to be the world's greatest snake-charmer. While in Bombay, Saleem eats some chutney that tastes exactly like the ones aunt Mary used to make. He finds the pickle-factory that Mary now owns, at which Padma stands guarding the gate. With this meeting, Saleem's story gains full circularity. His historical account is finally complete. Saleem decides to marry Padma, his steadfast lover and listener, on his thirty-first birthday, which falls on the thirty-first anniversary of India's independence. Saleem

prophecies that he will die on that day, disintegrating into millions of specks of dust.

**Stop to Consider:**

**Women in *Midnight's Children***

In *MC*, women are usually of symbolic value. Metaphorically they represent the motherland. In general, they possess little power. But Indira Gandhi is an exception as she possesses a great degree of political agency. Saleem, after telling his audience repeatedly how much he was in love with his step-sister, comes to the conclusion that it was not so much Jamila that he was in love with but Jamila as a symbol of 'Bharat-Mata' or Mother India. Saleem asks himself: 'How are we to understand my too-many woman? There is no personal or sexual relation between Saleem and the women in his life. They are significant only in terms of their symbolic value.'

**Check Your Progress:**

1. Distinguish between the story of Saleem and the narration.
2. List out the incidents which you feel contribute to the development of the story.
3. Explain the multiple associations of the term, "midnight's children."
4. Saleem's birth is synonymous with the arrival of the nation. How does Rushdie infuse the human subject into a postcolonial world?

**2.4 READING THE NOVEL**

What is so interesting about *Midnight's Children* is the fact that it has an epical dimension that extends over time and space. It seeks to cover not less than six decades of Indian national history. It is divided into three parts with a total of 30 chapters. Each chapter is given a title to suit a particular kind of situation or an object.

## **Chapters in *Midnight's Children***

### **Book I**

*Chapter I The Perforated Sheet*

*Chapter II Mercurochrome*

*Chapter III: Hit-the-Spittoon*

*Chapter IV: Under the Carpet*

*Chapter V: A Public Announcement*

*Chapter VI: Many –Headed Monsters*

*Chapter VII: Methwold*

*Chapter VIII: Tick, tock*

### **Book II**

*Chapter IX: The Fisherman's Pointing Figure*

*Chapter X: Snakes and Ladders*

*Chapter XI: Accident in a Washing Chest*

*Chapter XII: All-India Radio*

*Chapter XIII: Love in Bombay*

*Chapter XIV: My Tenth Birthday*

*Chapter XV: At the Pioneer Café*

*Chapter XVI: Alpha and Omega*

*Chapter XVII: The Kolynos Kid*

*Chapter XVIII: Commander Sabarmati's Baton*

*Chapter XIX: Revelations*

*Chapter XX: Movements performed by Pepperpots*

*Chapter XXI: Drainage and the Desert*

*Chapter XXII: Jamila Singer*

*Chapter XXIII: How Saleem achieved Purity*

### **Book III**

*Chapter XXIV: The Buddha*

*Chapter XXV: In the Sundarbans*

*Chapter XXVI: Sam and the Tiger*

*Chapter XXVII: The Shadow of the Mosque*

*Chapter XXVIII: A Wedding*

*Chapter XXIX: Midnight*

*Chapter XXX: Abracadabra*

**Book 1**

Chapter I begins with Saleem Sinai's celebration of his own birth which coincides with the birth of the Indian nation at the midnight hour of August 15, 1947. From the very beginning, Rushdie is trying to show how the individual and history are internally linked. Saleem's utterance 'I had been mysteriously handcuffed to history, my destinies indissolubly chained to those of my country' provides the central metaphor of the novel. Consequently, Saleem's personal account turns out to be a mirror of the history of India. However, Saleem's consequent search for meaning is replete with complexities which are further symbolized by the reference to Scheherazade's condition in *A Thousand and One Nights* who must not cease to work. *A Thousand and One Nights* also provides Saleem with the organizing principle of the narrative of this novel. In the second chapter, Padma, Saleem's interlocutor, is introduced. Padma, 'named after the lotus goddess' works in the pickle-factory managed by Saleem. Then, the narrative suddenly shifts to April 6, 1919 in the city of Amritsar where Dr. Aziz and his newly-married wife were stranded. It was India's prime period under Gandhian nationalism and people started 'hartals' in protest against the infamous 'Rowlatt Act'. Meanwhile, Gandhi's non-violent protest against British rule was subverted by the rioting mobs ransacking shops and railway stations that led to the imposition of martial law. Dr. Aziz roamed around the streets curing the wounded people and disinfecting them with 'mercurochrome' - a kind of red medicine resembling blood. Mercurochrome became a metaphor of the real bloodshed of Jallianwala Bagh by Brigadier Dyer and his fifty soldiers on April 13<sup>th</sup>, 1919.

**SAQ:**

How do you think the individual and history are linked together from the very beginning of the novel? (80 words)

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

Chapter III is relatively more important because here Saleem is conscious of his own disintegration. He feels that he is falling apart by being 'buffeted by too much history, subjected to drainage above and drainage below'. Saleem spends more time in his pickle- factory. Whenever he digresses, Padma controls Saleem by keeping his tale on the right track by her demand for a 'linear narrative'. Padma's desire to know 'what-happened-next' and Saleem's timely digression further accelerates the narrative. A reference to 1942 the 'Quit India Movement', is also made to narrate the tragedy of nationalist Muslims who had opposed the partition. This chapter gains its name from the practice of the old Nawabi game of hitting the spittoon with betel juice. Much of what happens in this chapter is narrated in the form of gossip, rumours and everyday talk. Rushdie has used gossip as a subversive medium to provide an alternative view of history.

In the next chapter, Saleem is busy with tracing his origin and parentage. Caught up in the problems of re-constructions of remembered incidents, Saleem finds reality challenged by the duality of things and acknowledge the intervention of chance in the processes of causality. Saleem considers his birth to be an accident. He further reflects on the notions of truth and reality by referring to it as something which is concealed in the story/fiction. Thus, Rushdie is seen to have offered a self-conscious fictional alternative to the linearity of historical narrative. Amina Sinai's visit to the fortune-teller Ramram Seth and Ahmad's encounter with the forces of racial hatred are both significant incidents having far-reaching consequences. However, the entire narration is dotted with questions of authenticity.

Chapter VII ('Methwold') and chapter VIII ('Tick, tock') are the other important chapters of the first part of the novel because they hint mostly at the thematic elements of the novel. Saleem becomes nostalgic about Bombay, both as a place and as an idea. Bombay, for Saleem, becomes the metaphor for the multiplicity of India. After that he ponders on the significance of Bombay by alluding to its topographical details, local myths and legends (for example, Bombay got its current name from Goddess Mumbadevi). Coming to Bombay, Saleem's parents found themselves bargaining with a departing colonial officer William Methwold, who wanted to sell his property at a much cheaper price. For Saleem, 'the transfer of assets' coincided with the 'transfer of power'. Methwold's estate was supposed to be sold

to select members of the Indian elite on two conditions that the house should be purchased with every last thing in it and that the actual transfer would take place at midnight on August 15. Methowld tells Ahmad Sinai that they were not all bad as they had built the roads, schools, railways, parliamentary system and all sorts of worthwhile things for the Indians. This also implies the transfer of colonial mantle to the Indian elites who had inherited political powers from the British masters and shamelessly fashioned themselves like the British. (For example, Ahmad Sinai had changed his voice into a ‘hideous mockery of an Oxford drawl’ in the presence of an Englishman)

**Stop to Consider:**

**The buyers of Methowld’s ‘estate’ who play a major role in the story of the novel**

Methowld’s Indian heirs include the Sinais in Buckingham Villa; Homi Catrack, a film magnate and racehorse owner in Versailles Villa; the Ibrahims, a farm owner and his family in Sans Souci; the nuclear physicist Adi Dubash, the child-hating gynecologist, Dr. Narlikar, and the naval commander Sabarmati and his wife Lila in Escorial Villa. All these people found themselves gradually changing out of the magic of the place. And subsequently, all these people adapted themselves to the colonial lifestyle. Amina, the would-be mother of Saleem, does not seem to have been influenced by this change. The *Times of India* is looking for stories for the independence celebration and has announced a prize to any Bombay woman who would ‘give birth to a child at the exact moment of the birth of the new nation. Ramram Seth prophesized that Amina would win the prize instead of the other would-be mothers like Nussie, Vanita whose pregnancy is the result of Methowld’s guilt, and Wee Willie Winkie. There is a reference to Mary Pereira, a virgin midwife at Dr. Narlikar’s Nursing Home and her communist lover who hated the rich.

Saleem had promised Padma that he would reveal the secret of his birth. So, he narrates most of the previous events to her. But his deferral arouses suspense as the story unfolds through a single witness and suggests the simultaneity of the past with the present. Saleem’s parental story is the ‘part of the luggage brought into the world’ because Adam and Naseem are the parents of the child, like him born on the midnight. He tries to establish the

point that the history of his life is the history of the country and that he is India and India is Saleem. This is followed by a description of the preparation of the simultaneous birth of the nation and Saleem between 13-15 August. The countdown (tick-tock) captures all the euphoria, tension and trauma of independence through illusions of public drama and private ritual. Amina dreams of protestations of astrologers to would-be rulers of India, mass bloodshed, division of Punjab, consequent communal violence and Mahtma Gandhi's peace-march. On 14<sup>th</sup> August, 1947, Vanita the wife of Wee Willie Winkie, entered into a prolonged labour in the charity ward of Dr. Narlikar's nursing home. The first pangs hit Amina when M. A. Jinnah announced the midnight birth of Pakistan as a Muslim nation. Across the border, preparation was going on and the 'myth of the Indian nation' was going to be imaginatively constructed. Saleem says, "a nation which had never previously existed was about to win its freedom, catapulting us into a world which, although it had five thousand years of history, was nevertheless quite imaginary; into a mythical land, a country which would never exist except by the efforts of a phenomenal collective will—except in a dream we all agreed to dream." Saleem, by virtue of his synchronous birth was going to be living proof of this 'collective dream'. Six hours before midnight on 15<sup>th</sup> August, Methwold finally transferred his assets to the Indian heirs and left for good. At the same hour, Amina went into a 'prophecy-ridden' labour and was driven into Dr. Narlikar's clinic.

**Stop to Consider:**

Salman Rushdie most appealingly says that Saleem's arrival in independent India was framed by Nehru's legendary narration of Indian post-colonialism, because these were interspersed by labour pains, partition riots, ravaging fires and police haunts. (This represents Rushdie's multiple vision which subverts the versions of official histories by an alternative view that takes into consideration contradictory realities and displays the varying impact of the event on different sections of the people.)

In his congratulatory letter to Saleem—the 'midnight's child' as found in chapter IX, Jawaharlal Nehru identifies Saleem with India by saying— "You are the newest bearer of that ancient face of India which is also eternally young. We shall be watching over your life with the closest attention; it will be in a sense, the mirror of our own." Assured of this role as a mirror of the nation, Saleem arrives home from Narlikar's clinic.

Mary Pereira, out of a sense of revenge, changed the name tags of the babies of Vanita (who died at child-birth) and Amina, ‘giving the poor baby a life of privilege and condemning the rich-born child to . . .poverty.’ Thus, Saleem who became the chosen child of midnight to win the *Times of India* prize and receive Nehru’s congratulatory letter, turned out to be an Anglo-Indian, the illegitimate son of a reluctantly departing colonizer Methwold and a poor Hindu woman Vanita. The shocking revelation enrages Padma who exclaims with horror “An Anglo?” At the same time, this alternative genealogy refutes the established narrative of Indian history and repudiates the newly-born nation-state as an illegitimate product of the colonial violation of the Indian subcontinent. Saleem argues that this accident is an unavoidable allegorical condition of the inheritors of the colonial state. He says, “In fact, all over the new India, the dream we all shared, children were being born who were only partially the offspring of their parents—the children of midnight were also the children *of the time*: fathered, you understand by History.” (MC, 118). When the Sinais eventually discovered the betrayal of Mary Pereira, they reconciled themselves to the fact of Saleem’s ‘hybridity’ or miscegenation: “We all found that it made no difference! I was still their son. They remain my parents. In a kind of collective failure of the imagination, we learned that we simply could not think our ways out of our pasts.” (MC, 118). Mary Pereira, later affected by remorse, gave up her job in the clinic and devoted her entire life to bringing up baby Saleem as a surrogate mother.

### **Book II**

The chapters in Book Two mainly narrate the growth of Saleem Sinai, from childhood to adolescence, mirroring the development of the newly-independent Indian nation between 1947-1965. The major historical events that are alluded to include the assassination of Gandhi, the Suez Crisis, India’s Five-Year Plans, the conquest of the Everest, the imposition of martial law in Pakistan in 1958, the Chinese aggression in 1962, the theft of the relic from Hazratbal Mosque in Srinagar, Nehru’s death and the Indo— Pakistan War in 1965. Ahmad Sinai’s bankruptcy, the birth of Saleem’s sister, the successive deaths of Saleem’s uncle Hanif and grandfather Adam Aziz and the family’s migration to Pakistan are some of the other important events here.

Padma is finding it difficult to follow the seemingly irrelevant and flawed genealogy of Saleem. Saleem’s propensity to digress further exasperates



Padma because she expects linearity from Saleem. At the same time, 'impotent' Saleem's mentioning of his love for Padma enrages her. She instead points a finger at his dysfunctional organ, calls him a mad man and departs from the scene leaving Saleem with his memory and digression. However, this departure upsets the balance of the narrative. As Rushdie symbolically mentions, Saleem is reconciled with the 'narrow one-dimensionality of a straight line which cannot really project a multidimensional reality'. His distortions of certain historical facts (about which you can read in detail in section 3.4 of Unit 3) raise questions of his reliability as a narrator as well as a chronicler. But the more the narrative comes closer to the present, the more it loses its hold and becomes fragmentary and grotesque. Saleem is seen philosophizing on the notion of illusion and reality. As his memory also plays tricks, Saleem is capable of distortions and hence, what he is saying cannot be an authentic guide to the history of the nation.

**Stop to Consider:**

Saleem says: "Suppose yourself in a large cinema, sitting at first in the back row, and gradually moving up, row by row, until your nose is almost pressed against the screen. Gradually the stars' faces dissolve into dancing grain; tiny details assume grotesque proportions; the illusion dissolves—or rather, it becomes clear that the illusion itself is reality. (*MC*, Chapter-XII, p-165-66)

On the issue of distortion Saleem asks:

"Does one error invalidate the entire fabric? Am I so far gone, in my desperate need for meaning that I am prepared to distort everything—to rewrite the whole history of my times purely in order to place myself in a central role?" (*MC*, Chapter-XII, p-166)

Saleem discovers that suddenly he has turned into a sort of Radio which could receive and control voices. However, what he telepathically hears are the inner monologues of the teeming multitudes. Rushdie here relates the multilingual textures of Indian life and India's language problem to Saleem's miraculous power. Blessed by black-money in the wake of the first five year plan, the business community of India turned white. The pigmentation disorder, however suggests the metaphorical processes of westernization.

Chapter XIV, however, turns out to be important as it ponders on the significance of the title of the novel (read more about it in section 3.3 of the next unit). Padma once again returns to the narrative. Saleem introduces the Indian concept of time and the myth of cosmic creation, referring to Padma ‘the lotus goddess’ as one of the guardians of life. She gradually becomes the ‘Mother of Time’ and the co-producer of Saleem’s fictive universe. Padma is amazed by the story of Saleem’s birth. However, her incredulous position makes Saleem strongly argue that ‘reality can have metaphorical content; that does not make it less real.’ However, Saleem’s ‘introduction’ to the ‘midnight’s children’ foreshadows their inevitable doom at the hands of an unidentified woman called ‘the widow’. (This is actually a part of the dream Saleem was having during a heavy fever). Padma’s suspicion also compels Saleem to embark on the justification of his narrative, his alternative version of reality. He values his remembered version of events more than the literal facts of history.

**Stop to Consider:**

Saleem holds that the personal experience is the only authentic version of history and therefore, memory becomes the only representation of truth. He insists that he has told Padma the truth. It is ‘memory’s truth’ which ‘selects, eliminates, alters, exaggerates, minimizes....but in the end creates its own reality, its heterogeneous but usually co-herent version of events.

(Chapter-XV)

In chapter XVII (‘The Kolynos Kid’), we for the first time, encounter Saleem’s exile from home after the accidental loss of his finger and the discovery of his genetic difference from his parents. Saleem, like the other ‘midnight’s children’, has no place in the ‘active-literal mode’. Instead, he assumes his central position as a witness to and chronicler of national events only in the ‘passive-metaphorical mode’ of connection because he will be ‘handcuffed to history’ if placed in the active-literal mode. Like Saleem, Rushdie also believes that many of the problems plaguing post-independence India can be traced back to the habit of Indian people to lapse occasionally into myth-ridden and retrogressive Indian past. Independence had provided

the country with a chance to remain free from the ‘fabulous antiquity’ of Hindu India and accept the notions of modernity and multiplicity and also to embrace secular, democratic ideals. But people soon forgot the new myth of freedom and reverted to their old ways and ‘regionalist loyalties’ which ultimately created cracks in the country’s democratic fabric.

**SAQ:**

Is Rushdie trying to make out a case for ‘subaltern history’? (80 words)

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Perhaps, this realization helps the narrator comment in Chapter XVIII on the future of the ‘midnight’s children’. Because, soon the children would fail to resist the influence of their parents and consequently, ‘the prejudices and world-views of adults began to take over their minds.’ Saleem’s experience in Pakistan later compels him to contrast his Indian childhood with his Pakistani adolescence which further throws valuable insights into the twin realities of the subcontinents. Saleem implicitly made this point clear that India was better than Pakistan in many ways. India beset Saleem with ‘an infinity of alternative realities’ but Pakistan left him disoriented ‘amid an equally infinite number of falsenesses, unrealities and lies’. Hence, the ‘Pakistani’ part of this novel ends in fantasy.

**Book III**

The last part of the book deals mainly with the Bangladesh War, the disarmament of Pakistan, the Emergency and its aftermath. Through the War of 1971, Saleem experienced the ultimate degradation of man to bestiality. The horror and trauma of the war leads Saleem to a state of near-insanity and the way Saleem regains his sanity through a snake-bite is wonderfully written by Rushdie. Saleem’s return to India after the Emergency and his involvement with politics and the consequent experiences puts more light on the darker side of the contemporary political history of India.

So, from chapter XXIV onwards, we find the narrator referring to the events around 1970s. Metaphorically speaking, the war of 1965 had left Saleem ‘orphaned and purified’ to enter into a grotesque adulthood. Due to his loss of memory he forgot his name and identity. Cut off from history, Saleem had to submit himself as a ‘citizen of Pakistan’. But his lack of consciousness when he became a tracker-dog in the Pakistani army led to his having a split in him which is metaphorically presented through Pakistan’s own rift with Bangladesh.

**SAQ:**

Which dates and names do you associate with the Bangladesh War? (60 words)

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**Stop to Consider:**

**Chapter XXIV The Buddha**

This chapter has direct reference to the political crisis in Pakistan. For example, there is reference to the Indo-Pak war of 1965 leading to the downfall of Ayub Khan. Then General Yahya Khan had become the next president of the country and promised to hold a ‘free and fair’ election. The election was held in the 1970s and Mujib-ur-Rahman’s Awami League in East-Pakistan (presently called Bangladesh) won a crushing victory over the Pakistan People’s Party of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. Then, after the end of the 1971 war, the consequent migration of millions of refugees into India’s territory put tremendous economic and political pressures on India leading to the liberation of Bangladesh from the occupation of Pakistan. However, the war turned out to be the most decisive military victory since independence which also shattered the myth of the nation founded mainly on religion.

In the penultimate chapter, Rushdie makes the narrator Saleem return to his story, to his present conditions that compel him to write down his experience. In terms of its framing, the narrative completes a circular journey. No longer interested in politics and history, Saleem at the age of thirty, withdraws into

a life of privacy and retirement. He manages a pickle factory for the old Mary Pereira who now raises his son Adam. He even accepts the proposal of Padma to marry her despite his 'impotence' and imminent disintegration. In the wake of postcolonial history, the myth of the nation, born thirty years ago, had started to decay. Saleem realized that the country now needed new myths to inspire her people. Saleem is now totally broken and waiting to be assimilated with dust.

This discussion of the text shows that Rushdie adopts a homely Indian way to reconstruct his notion of Indian history which he names as 'the chutnification of history' as if each chapter falls into the mould of a pickle-jar. 'Chutnification' is also a method of preserving. But Saleem acknowledges that both processes involve distortions and one jar is intentionally left empty so that the future is preserved. That is why perhaps the novel ends on a note literally and metaphorically against the idea of closure. Consequently, in the last paragraph, the novel is handed over to the reader. The final note is, however pessimistic not regarding the future of India but regarding writers because each writer prevails only for a short time. Generations after generations of writers must interpret India for the Indians and for themselves. But fate will produce a different version of India to the Indians.

**SAQ:**

What is the role of writer vis a vis history? Is it more important than a reader? (70+50 words)

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**Images and Symbols in *Midnight's Children***

Rushdie takes metaphor and symbols as what transform the bald facts of history into an imaginatively inspired version of it, and throughout the entire book these have been employed in magical ways. For example, the 'perforated sheet', Adam Aziz's only means to look at his future wife, reveals only one section of her anatomy at a time, leaving the rest to his imagination, a perfect symbol of Rushdie's

attitude to history itself. As Saleem says in the text: 'Most of what matters in our lives takes place in our absence: but I seem to have found from somewhere the trick of filling in the gaps in my knowledge so that everything is in my head, down to the last detail.'

Adam Aziz's extraordinary nose is the symbol of a patriarch and the head of a 'dynasty'. Naseem is the representative of the traditional East. Her upbringing is extremely orthodox. She is hidden away in the house guarded by women. Her husband is chosen by her father. She is given a marriage in traditional style, with dowry and ceremony. The implication of the 'perforated sheet' is that women cannot, at first, be seen whole but a more serious point emerges as Naseem appears to represent 'Bharat Mata' (Mother India). India can be seen, and understood, only in fragments. (MC 22)

Another significant symbol is the 'pointing finger'. Most significantly, chapter IX which is entitled 'The Fisherman's Pointing Finger' symbolizes a quest in Saleem. Padma's 'accusing finger' reminds Saleem of the portrait of a fisherman, hung on the wall of baby Saleem's bedroom in Buckingham Villa, pointing his finger to the Western horizon where the sun is setting. The pointing finger thus becomes the symbol of quest because Saleem is always questing for the meaning and purpose of his life. This also symbolizes the continued presence of the boatman Tai in Saleem's mind.

Other symbols in the novel include the snake and the ladder. The game of snakes and ladders refers to the fluctuating fortunes of Saleem Sinai's family. It also refers to the unchanging duality of things in the scheme of things. Almost working as a binary it tells that for every snake that pulls one down there is a ladder to lift one up. But the result of the game itself is ambiguous. Because 'snakes can also lead to triumph, just as ladders can be descended.' (MC, 148).

### **Check Your Progress:**

1. It is said that *Midnight's Children* is about Post-independence India. How do the various chapters in this book help in your analysis of this point?
2. Within the larger frame of the novel's narrative, there are many smaller stories that are told, a technique that Rushdie uses time and again in his fictional works. How does it serve the purpose of Saleem's narrating India? Give a textual analysis.
3. "Saleem is the child of many fathers and mothers." Comment on Rushdie's emphasis on the idea of multiple inheritance and placelessness.

## 2.4 THE INDIAN CONTEXT

In the first unit, I have already discussed briefly that the evolution of Indian fiction in English during the last three decades of the twentieth century is an unprecedented phenomenon mainly because of the fact that it introduced new techniques in the genre of Indian writing in English usually conceived as historical overviews. As Viney Kirpal, the noted Indian critic, writes in his essay *The Indian English Novel of the 1990s*, Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* signified a major thematic and technical break away from traditional Indian fiction-writing in English with 'de-doxified' use of language, the irreverent tone, defiant and vigorous challenge to the power of history and legacies of received traditions. What is so specific about the novels of 1980s like *Midnight's Children* is that it gives more importance to the Indian individual who has to play a leading role in the re-writing of history and thereby expose the problematics involved in certain politically defined notions of 'India' and 'Indian Nationalism'.

As an emigrant from India and a new-comer to England, the condition of migrancy is central to Salman Rushdie's aesthetics. Rushdie asks, how is it possible from a distance and straddling so many different cultures, to write about India? When Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* is contextualized in India (Bombay), it provides an amazing display of the multiplicity of which Saleem, the narrator, is at once a victim and a celebrant. Calling himself a member of the 'Generation of Indian', Rushdie takes sides with the non-sectarian philosophy and claims that 'Hindu' culture cannot be considered alien or more important than the Islamic heritage. He believes that it has something to do with the nature of Bombay, a metropolitan city in India in which the multiplicity of faiths and cultures are the only sources to work on. This is again only one way of examining the Indian context in *Midnight's Children*.

*Midnight's Children* carries a deep impact of the complex socio-cultural scenario of India which has a remarkable bearing on the thematic and stylistic aspect of the fiction. It is this engagement with the history and politics of this country, which has induced many critics to regard him as one of the most influential Indian writers in English. Many often opine that his bicultural background produces the 'creative matrix' in his novels. But the conditions of his being a migrant writer, however, help the readers find his ancestry in an Indian culture and society.

### **Stop to Consider:**

Being an Indian writer, according to Rushdie, has never been an easy task. That is why perhaps, in his essay 'Imaginary Homelands' Salman Rushdie has written: 'To be an Indian writer in this society is to face, everyday, problems of definitions. What does it mean to be Indian outside India? How can culture be preserved without becoming ossified? How should we discuss the need for change within ourselves and our community without seeming to play into the hands of our racial enemies? What are the consequences both spiritual and practical, of refusing to make any concessions to western ideas and practices? What are the consequences of embracing those ideas and practices and turning away from the ones that come here with us? These questions are all a single, existential questions: how are we to live in the world?'

These quoted lines clearly exemplify the crisis of identity and the existential predicaments found in most of the Indian English writers. Rushdie's significance lies in the fact that he considers this identity crisis as the source of his famous works.

## **2.5 The characters**

The best way to conceptualize the significance of Rushdie's characterization in this novel is to see the ways in which they are involved in various events of the novel. Following is a list of some of the major fictional characters in *Midnight's Children*:

**Aadam Aziz:** He is a Western-educated, progressive Kashmiri who rejected ancestral ways in favour of modernity. He also spent five years studying medicine in Germany. Western education ultimately unsettled his faith in his place of origin and his religion. He is the father of Amina Sinai or Mumtaz. He has many children with Naseem and Saleem Sinai is one of his grandchildren. The story of the novel starts with the telling of how, as a young doctor, Aadam Aziz, met Saleem's grandmother leading to their unhappy marriage. He is also briefly involved in politics in Amritsar in 1919, helping people who are suppressed by British troops. Aadam dies in 1964 after returning to Kashmir to find a religious icon- a strand of the Prophet Mohammed's hair. Because of circumstances, Aziz had to compromise with his faith but that compromise also suffered another setback when he met



with an accident at prayer time which drew blood from his nose and led to his further loss of faith in the family religion of Islam.

**Naseem Ghani:** She is the daughter of a landlord and the mother of Amina Sinai or Mumtaz Aziz. She is dramatic and strong-willed, possessing a lot of power in her relationship with her husband Aadam Aziz. She is later referred to by Saleem as the “Reverend Mother”.

**Tai:** He is a boatman and a friend of Aadam Aziz. At times, he demonstrates an ability to predict the future and while most people consider him insane, he makes several insightful remarks, the most important of which is his advice to Aadam Aziz to “follow his nose.” Dr. Aziz’s return was considered by the boatman Tai as an evil intrusion to the paradisaal Kashmir. Tai’s view of an unchanging, ageless and organic cosmos was under pressure from Aziz’s intrusion. His Kashmir stood for wholeness as against Aziz’s and later Saleem’s fragmented world-view. It was through Tai, that Aziz met the blind landowner Ghani and went to check his nubile and sick daughter, Naseem, leading to their marriage.

**Saleem Sinai:** He is the protagonist and narrator, a telepath with an enormous and constantly dripping nose, who is born at the exact moment that India becomes independent. He is constantly referred to as “the nose” in the book.

**Jamila Singer:** She is Saleem’s sister, named Jamila Sinai at birth, nicknamed “the brass monkey” during her childhood. She later becomes the most famous singer in West Pakistan.

**Padma Mangroli:** is Saleem’s lover and eventually his fiancée. She works in Saleem’s ‘pickle factory’. She plays the role of the listener in the storytelling structure of the novel. Padma, whom Saleem claims to be ‘captivated by love’ is bewildered by Saleem’s confusing genealogy presented in a fragmentary manner. The self-conscious distortion of Saleem’s narrative further confuses Padma’s desire for a straightforward narrative. Moreover, the mention of love by ‘impotent’ Saleem triggers a violent reaction from Padma.

**Ahmed Sinai:** Saleem’s father and Amina’s husband.

**Amina Sinai:** Saleem’s so-called mother. She is repeatedly described by Rushdie as “assiduous” in her wifely efforts. By sheer willpower, she forces

herself to love her husband, Ahmed Sinai. However, during her marriage with him, she also has an affair with Nadir Khan, to whom she was married for two years in her youth. But they had never consummated their marriage.

**William Methwold:** An Englishman from whom the Sinais buy their house in Bombay. Before selling his estate, Methwold invites Wee Willie Winkie and his wife Vanita to perform for him. He sends Winkie out to fill a prescription of his, and seduces Vanita, resulting in Vanita's pregnancy. Methwold is Saleem's biological father. He is a grotesque caricature standing for the evils and moral depravity of British colonization. Salman Rushdie, very promisingly, through the character of Methwold, expresses his views about colonial oppression and exploitation in the subcontinent. The conditions imposed by Methwold on his Indian heirs were absurd and none but Amina was seen protesting against them. In another sense, Methwold's estate symbolizes colonial India possessed by the British who had imposed European cultural forms on Indian consciousness.

**Hanif:** Saleem's uncle. He is a screenwriter who enjoys some fame in his youth, but who grows disillusioned later in life with Bollywood and the superficiality of the film industry, and commits suicide. He is Pia's husband.

**Pia:** Hanif's wife, a former actress and later joint petrol-pump owner with Naseem, her mother-in-law.

**Mustapha:** He is another uncle of Saleem's, the brother of Mumtaz. He marries Sonia.

**Emerald:** Saleem's aunt, the sister of Mumtaz. She marries General Zulfikar.

**Mian Abdullah:** (also known as the 'Hummingbird') He is a pro-Indian Muslim political figure, who dies at the hands of assassins. The founder of the Free Islam Convocation, Mian Abdullah is assassinated by government agents in Agra in 1942.

**Nadir Khan:** Mumtaz's first husband. He is "the Hummingbird's" personal secretary. After the Hummingbird's assassination, Nadir hides in the Aziz household for a few years, where he has a relationship with Mumtaz.

**Rashid:** The rickshaw-puller who informs Doctor Aziz that Nadir Khan needs a place to hide.

**General Zulfikar:** The husband of Emerald, who is involved with Pakistani political events.

**Lifafa Das:** He is a peep-show street man who leads Amina to Shri Ramram Seth, the fortune teller. This Hindu youth used to visit the Muslim neighbourhood of Delhi with his 'Dunia Dekho' machine. With his 'Dugdugee' he attracted the children and the common mass to see through his 'machine' the collage of 'unified India' with pictures of the Taj Mahal, the Meenakshi Temple, or the holy Ganges, untouchables being touched or educated persons sleeping together on railway lines. On that ill-fated morning, the quarrel regarding who should put his/her eye first at the hole turned communal amongst the group of children because of the feuds between the Muslims and the Hindus. Amina rushed to rescue Lifafa Das with the public announcement of her pregnancy. In return, she was offered by Lifafa Das the gift of a prophecy about her unborn child as found in chapter V of the novel.

**Wee Willie Winkie:** Shiva's father and Vanita's husband.

**Vanita:** Saleem's biological mother, who dies during labour.

**Mary Pereira:** A midwife and servant, who switches Shiva and Saleem at birth.

**Doctor Narlikar:** A gynecologist and businessman.

**Joseph D'Costa:** Mary Pereira's lover, a political radical.

**Shiva:** The boy who is born at the same moment as Saleem. They are switched at birth. Shiva possesses an amazing ability to fight. Shiva possesses abnormally large knees. He is the biological son of Ahmad and Amina Sinai.

**Parvati-the-witch:** One of 'midnight's children', and a friend (and wife) of Saleem.

**Homi Catrack:** A man who has an affair with Lila Sabarmati and is subsequently murdered by Commander Sabarmati.

**Lila Sabarmati:** Commander Sabarmati's wife, who is shot, but not killed by him, for having an affair with Homi Catrack.

**Commander Sabarmati:** Husband of Lila Sabarmati, who shoots his unfaithful wife and murders her lover.

**Picture Singh:** A snake charmer and a friend to Saleem.

**Musa:** The disgraced servant of Ahmed Sinai whom Mary mistakes for the ghost of Joseph D'Costa.

## 2.6 CRITICAL RECEPTION

When Rushdie wrote this book, India was not yet a subject in vogue or important in the West. One publisher even said that the received wisdom in those days was that books on India did not sell and ‘big fat books’ on India by writers whose last book had been rubbish were worst of all. Still, Jonathan Cape’s, London’s most prestigious publishing house for literary fiction at that time, first print run was only 1,750 copies. The reviewers were sporadic. The “New York Review of Books” hailed it as ‘one of the most important (novels) to come out of the English-speaking world in this generation.’ In 1981, Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* was published for which he also received the most coveted ‘Booker Prize for Fiction’. Other awards for the same book included-the ‘James Tait Black Memorial Prize’ (for fiction), the ‘Arts Council Writers’ Award and the ‘English-Speaking Union Award’, and in 1993 it was judged to have been the ‘Booker of Bookers’, the best novel to have won the ‘Booker Prize for Fiction’ in the award’s 25-year history.

## 2.7 SUMMING UP

In her introduction to *Midnight’s Children* Anita Desai writes that in twentieth-century India, fiction became an instrument for social reform in the hands of Mulk Raj Anand who, on returning from England, full of Marxist fervour, wrote *Coolie* and *Two Leaves and a Bud*. But, after independence, Indian writers seemed to lose a sense of purpose. Introspection and search for an identity became the motivating factors in their writings. During 1950s, Indian readers were neither prepared for any self-mockery nor were they capable of laughing at their hybrid heritage. During the 1980s, however, there emerged a new generation of writers like Salman Rushdie who had proved such assumptions to be wrong. After going through the various sections of this unit you must have seen that Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* best exemplifies the new generation of Indian writers.

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## Unit 3

### Themes and Techniques

#### Contents:

- 3.1 Objectives
- 3.2 Introduction
- 3.3 The Title
- 3.4 Major Themes
  - 3.4.1 Problem of Identity
  - 3.4.2 A View of History and Distortion of History
  - 3.4.3 Postmodern and Postcolonial Concerns
  - 3.4.4 Struggle for Language
  - 3.4.5 Notion of 'Indianness'
  - 3.4.6 Allegiance to Eastern Narrative Tradition (Intertextuality)
- 3.5 Narrative Technique
- 3.6 Summing Up
- 3.7 References and Suggested Readings

#### 3.1 OBJECTIVES

This is the last unit of this block. After going through the first two units you must have gained a fair idea of Salman Rushdie and his novel *Midnight's Children*. My intention in this unit is to make you aware of the richness of this novel in terms of its themes and techniques. However, after the end of this unit we claim that you will be able to

- *explain* the writer's strategies in the novel
- *identify* the various thematic elements of the novel
- *assess* the richness of the novel in terms of its narrative technique

### 3.2 INTRODUCTION

You have already read in the previous units about the relative importance of *Midnight's Children* as one of the landmarks of modern Indian fiction-writing in English. This unit is dedicated to the discussion of various themes and techniques of the novel. The novel begins like a fairy-tale, suggesting fantasy, but reference to actual historical dates and facts, suggests a responsibility to history and the meaning of historical data.

If we consider the issues of form, meaning and representation as the most impending problems in the arena of 'third-world' novels, then Salman Rushdie's oeuvre and the style in which they are written, can be discussed as powerful responses to all such problems. Moreover, the Indian critic Mukesh Srivastava says that the postmodern cultural paraphernalia with its valorization of the collage form, the fragmented, the ways of seeing and knowing, have become the *frames* through which the historical cultural products of the third-world are placed and assessed in as fast growing global markets. Rushdie's highly stylized narrative may well have become the prototype of the new genre—the metafictional third-world literature where the mythic and historical, fabulous and rational, comic and ironic, jostle all too easily into spectacular pastiche of non-mimetic form." (Mukesh Srivastava, 196)

**SAQ:**

How does the global market shape the form of fiction? Do you think 'third world fiction' is a fast-selling item? (80+60 words)

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### 3.3 THE TITLE

In chapter XIV ("My Tenth Birthday") of *Midnight's Children* Rushdie implicitly comments on the significance of the title of the novel. Rushdie makes Saleem narrate that during the first hour of August 15, 1947, the hour of freedom for India, one thousand and one children were born within the frontiers of India. But what made this event remarkable was not the number of the children, but their nature, as most of them were born as

mutants with a miraculous gift or talent. ‘Fathered’ by history, they represented the promise of a drastically changed and new future. Out of the total one thousand and one children, four hundred and twenty died soon after their birth due to malnutrition and disease. Of the surviving five hundred and eighty one, two hundred and sixty six were boys and three hundred and fifty were girls. The children, who were completely ignorant of one another’s existence, were nearing their tenth birthday in January 1957 when Saleem became aware of them as a consequence of a bicycle accident. Another noteworthy feature of the children was that the closer to midnight their times of birth were, the greater were their powers. But the children born in the last seconds of the hour were no more than ‘circus freaks’ like Siamese-twins and bearded-girls. Those born towards the half hour were gifted with more useful faculties like the powers of healing and remembering. On the other hand, the children arriving in the first minute after midnight, gained ‘the highest talents of which men had ever dreamed’ like the gifts of transformation, prophesy, time-traveling and, as the girl Parvati-the-Witch in Old Delhi’s ghetto of magicians had-sorcery. But two of them Saleem and Shiva were endowed with the greatest talents of all. Shiva, blessed with powerful knees, received the ‘gift of war’ while Saleem, with his prodigious nose, had gained the power of telepathy—the ability to peep inside the hearts and minds of men. With their miraculous power the children were symbolized as ‘one thousand and one possibilities’ and offered by the heterogeneity and multiplicity of the Indian society they had gained one-thousand-and-one-possible ways of looking at things. Consequently, Rushdie’s title for this novel exemplified the fact that the children of midnight could be made to represent many things as they could be seen as the last throw of everything antiquated and retrogressive in our myth-ridden nation or as the true hope of freedom.

**SAQ:**

Does Rushdie “mythologize” the midnight hour of India’s political birth by associating it with supernatural magic? (90 words)

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### **Stop to Consider:**

In his introduction to the novel *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie narrates the interesting story behind the birth of this novel. Rushdie says that during 1975, he traveled in India and ultimately saw the conception of the novel. He was wondering whether to write a novel of childhood arising out of his own childhood memories in Bombay. In his own words-

“Now, having drunk deeply from the well of India, I conceived a more ambitious plan. I remembered a minor character named Saleem Sinai, born at the midnight moment of Indian independence, who had appeared in the abandoned draft of a still born novel called *The Antagonist*. As I placed Saleem at the center of my new scheme I understood that his time of birth would oblige me immensely to increase the size of my canvas. If he and India were to be paired, I would need to tell the story of both twins. Then Saleem, ever a striver for meaning, suggested to me that the whole of modern Indian history happened as it did because of him: that history, the life of his nation-twin, was somehow *all his fault*. With that immodest proposal the novel's characteristic tone of voice, comically assertive, unrelentingly garrulous, and with, I hope, a growing pathos in its narrator's increasingly tragic over-claiming, came into being. I even made the boy and the country identical twins.”

(Rushdie, x)

### **3.4 MAJOR THEMES**

In his essay 'Imaginary Homelands', Rushdie considers *Midnight's Children* as 'a novel of memory and about memory'. Rushdie clearly believes that individual history does not make much sense unless seen against the national background, nor does national history make sense unless seen in the form of individual lives and histories. He even explains- 'To understand just one life, you have to swallow the world, and though he does not claim more than that, and his memories are partial and fragmented, he is convinced that 'these shards of memories acquire greater status, greater resonance, because they were remains, fragmentation-made trivial things seem like symbols, and the mundane acquired numinous qualities. Antiquity thus can be reconstructed.' What Rushdie actually tells his readers is to acknowledge the importance of memory in the life of an individual. It is because, each individual has the capability to remember and 're-construct' his/her past



relatively. Interpretations of history or the past nullify any claim that might be raised against the fixity in history. Following is an attempt to identify the major themes in this novel.

### 3.4.1 PROBLEM OF IDENTITY

The basic problem that Rushdie has faced relates to his Indian identity, the predicaments of which is sought to be explored in his book *Imaginary Homelands*. He says-”To be an Indian writer in this society is to face, everyday, problems of definitions. What does it mean to be Indian outside India? How can culture be preserved without becoming ossified?” (*IH*, 17-18). Rushdie’s Bombay can be identified as the space where the fractured India is sought to be defined by heterogeneity with ideas and examples borrowed from multiple Indian cultural forms.

The common charge against Rushdie is that his novels fulfill a ‘Western’ desire for experiencing India as a strange, sensual, tyrannical, fantastical other place. But the notion that his *Midnight’s Children* depicts India from an ‘Indian’ point of view is critiqued as it draws substantially on European fictional forms. Although Rushdie himself does not claim to have spoken from the “perspective of Indians—a diverse body in itself” he accepts the view that he speaks from the perspective of the privileged migrant Indian intellectual in a complex, even compromised, but not entirely unworkable position. The drawbacks of this position, he admits, compel him to write as an outsider from several cultures and an insider to none, and that his writing emerges out of an experience of disjuncture and discontinuity. In such an unstable position, it is really important to note the ways that Rushdie, being a migrant writer, wants to conceptualize his ‘Indian’ identity in terms of his location and culture.

**SAQ:**

Are ‘India’ and ‘Indianness’ to be seen as cultural descriptions or as conceptions? How could you differentiate between the two? (20+50 marks)

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Consequently, this idea becomes the determining factor for most of his novels in which the claims of an Indian location underlie the writings most powerfully. But for Rushdie this realization of location is very shaky as reclaiming gives rise to profound uncertainties. His physical alienation from India would inevitably mean that they will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost, that they will in short, create fictions, and not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, 'Indias' of the mind. This may further mean that Rushdie invents his own 'India' and its supposed 'Indianness' to suit the purpose of his reclamation. And the city of Bombay presents him with a chance to preach his own 'Indian' identity in terms of a location found both in his *Midnight's Children* and *The Satanic Verses*. We can also say that Bombay is not just a location for Rushdie. It is a multiplicity and hope. This becomes evident when he writes, "One of the things I like and still like about India is that it is based on a non-sectarian philosophy. I was not raised in a narrowly Muslim environment; I do not consider Hindu culture to be either alien from me or more important than the Islamic heritage. I believe this has something to do with the nature of Bombay, a metropolis in which the multiplicity of commingled faiths and cultures curiously creates a remarkably secular ambience." (*IH*, 16). We can see the importance of Bombay through his other essay 'The Riddle of Midnight: India' in his *IH* where he says, "I come from Bombay, and from a Muslim family too. 'My' India has always been based on ideas of multiplicity, pluralism, hybridity: ideas to which the ideologies of the communalists are diametrically opposed. To my mind, the defining image of India is the crowd, and a crowd by its very nature is superabundant, heterogeneous, many things at once." Thus, Rushdie celebrates heterogeneity and multiplicity as the source of any Indian experience.

**Stop to Consider:**

**Hybridity in Rushdie:**

In several essays and articles, Rushdie had discussed the problematic issue of his own hybrid identity. Against all sorts of negative connotations and criticism, his hybridity proves to be an aesthetic device in a novel like *Midnight's Children*. Rushdie has emphasized the assimilation of both Western and Eastern literary traditions. He has also reiterated the fact that a postcolonial migrant writer like

him, who inhabits a fractured, hybrid and multilingual world, should preserve the experience of cultural translation.

**Migrancy in Rushdie:**

As Aijaz Ahamad points out, Rushdie's idea of 'migrancy' which is quite central to his self-representation both in fiction and in life, has come to us in two versions. In the first version, fully present in his novel *Shame*, (1983) and in the writings that came at more or less the same time, 'migrancy' is given to us as an ontological condition of all human beings, while the 'migrant' is said to have 'floated upwards from History'. In the second version,..this myth of ontological unbelonging is replaced by another, larger myth of excess of belonging: not that he belongs nowhere, but that he belongs to too many places.

(Aijaz Ahamd, *In Theory* p-127)

### **3.4.2 A VIEW OF HISTORY AND DISTORTION OF HISTORY**

The presentation of Indian political history during the pre-independence period is apparent in Rushdie's novels. For example, *Midnight's Children* makes several references to Nehru's speech at the midnight of India's independence in which he desired to create a secular, democratic, tolerant, pluralist and socially just nation- 'a noble mansion of free India where all children may dwell...'. (From 'Tryst with Destiny'). He said that they are citizens of a great country on the verge of a bold advance. Rushdie's attempt, however, was to ask whether the first generation of independent Indians lived up to Nehru's hopes for the newly-created nation states. The novel produces an ambivalent answer. On the one hand, the image of India that emerges is broadly affirmative and emphasizes the nation's talent for non-stop regeneration. On the other hand, certain specific political developments led Rushdie to paint a much gloomier picture like lurching into fratricidal wars with Pakistan, losing its democratic rights at the hands of manipulative political leaders and fragmenting into violently opposed communal factions. If we look at the narrative of this novel in the aforesaid context, it seems it is told retrospectively as Saleem Sinai 'reconstructs' the events of his life for the benefit of a single auditor, Padma, his occasional lover and a worker in the pickle factory to which he has come to end his days. The novel's setting thus alternates between a fictional present, in which Saleem intervenes authorially to reflect upon the processes of writing, and a fictional past, in

which Saleem's family saga unfolds against the backdrop of Indian national life. However, Rushdie himself has repeatedly insisted that his refusal to 'totalize' is not a product of abstract speculation but springs from a particular conception of the composition of the Indian subcontinent and from a desire to resist 'singular conceptions' of Indian national identity.

*Midnight's Children* is also a novel that is preoccupied at the level of ideas of history and historicity, with the ways in which history is recorded, by the techniques with which a period is conjured and contained and by the ways in which the individual historiographer understands his relationship with his material. The reason behind Rushdie's foregrounding a sense of history was to give its locations (Bombay, Kashmir, Delhi, for instance) sufficient probability to allow readers to believe that historically real times and places are being described. This novel also locates itself in the period of transition between the colonial occupation of India and India's and Pakistan's emergence as postcolonial states.

**Stop to Consider:**

If we consider Rushdie's other novel, *The Moor's Last Sigh*, we can find in it the fictional assessment of the darker, less forgiving portrait of India's post-independence political life. As Andrew Teverson in his book on Rushdie explains, TMLS is yet another novel centered on the politics of Post-independence India where greed, cynicism, aggression, malaise and ennui have become the determining characteristics of the generation. *Midnight's Children* too finds such factors at work and locates in the diverse Indian populace, a spirit of resistance to the corruption and tyranny practiced by the nation's rulers.

Hayden White, in his book *Tropics of Discourse*, examines the various ways a historian constructs history. He opines that historical representation is always dependent on the 'fictive capability of the historians'. White further defines history-writing precisely as a narrative act, not just a practice where someone discovers the stories of history and records them. One meta-fictional claim of this novel is a critique of its own form. The narrative, through Saleem's story, seeks to establish itself as history, but at the same time is also suspicious of the narrator's reliability. This is exemplified by

certain distortions of factual details like the wrong reference to the date of Mahatma Gandhi's assassination (*MC*, 166) or inaccurately pinpointing to the elections of 1957 (*MC*, 222). Although Saleem never take this dilemma lightly, he cannot decide an alternative to it either. According to Hindu Mythology, the elephant-headed God Ganesha, who is very fond of literature, agrees to sit at the feet of the bard Vyasa and jot down the entire text of the *Mahabharata*. In this novel, on the other hand, Saleem Sinai, at one point, makes a reference to this old tradition. But according to Saleem, Ganesha sat at the feet of the poet Valmiki and took down the *Ramayana*. So, Saleem is definitely wrong. Again Saleem, during an account, tells that Mumbai's patron goddess, Mumbadevi, had fallen out of favour with contemporary Bombayites: 'The calendar of festival' reveal her decline... Where is Mumbadevi's day?' As a matter of fact, the calendar of festivals includes a perfectly good Mumbadevi's Day. Or how could Lata Mangeskar have been heard singing on 'All India Radio' as early as 1946? While referring to the Amritsar Massacre, Saleem says that Dyer had entered the Jallianwalla Bagh followed by 'fifty white troops'. The truth is that there were fifty troops, but they were not white. Or could the train that brings Picture Singh and Saleem from Delhi to Bombay, possibly have passed through Kurla, which is on a different line? All these sum up the point that Saleem is an unreliable narrator. Rushdie himself has written an essay entitled 'Errata: or, Unreliable Narrative in *Midnight's Children*' to clarify that such errors have to be inferred as such by the reader. Rushdie's argument is that Saleem's mistakes are the mistakes of a fallible memory and of circumstances.

**Stop to Consider:**

The celebrated Indian English writer Anita Desai in her introduction to *Midnight's Children* writes that Rushdie takes pride in the fact that even while being a Muslim he is enough of a Bombay-ite to be well up on Hindu stories (Ganesha being adopted as the patron saint of Bombay with a special festival devoted entirely to him), a blunder which Rushdie explains in his essay "Errata". Rushdie also asks the readers to 'see through' the errors of his erratic witness, claiming that false memory sometimes has more weight, because it has more meaning than the literal truth. Rushdie then goes on to refer to Saleem's listener, a pickle maker,

named after the lotus-goddess, Padma. According to Saleem, Padma is the source and the mother of time. She provides him with inspiration to write his own self. This signifies the point that Padma, with her desire to know more, helps Saleem in his 'chutnification' which in a way gives form and shape to whatever he is trying to say.

### **Rushdie's own comments on the distortions of history**

"It is by now obvious, I hope, that Saleem Sinai is an unreliable narrator, and that *Midnight's Children* is far from being an authoritative guide to post-independence India....But this isn't quite how unreliable narration usually works in novels. Conventionally unreliable narrators are often a little stupid, less able to work out what's going on around them than the reader. In such narratives, one deciphers the true meaning of events by 'seeing through' the narrator's faulty vision. However, the narrator of *Midnight's Children* is neither particularly stupid, nor particularly unaware of what's happening." (IH, 23)

"When I first found out my error I was upset and tried to have it corrected. Now I'm not so sure. The mistake feels more and more like Saleem's; its wrongness feels right."

(IH, 23)

"Saleem's greatest desire is for what he calls meaning, and near the end of his broken life he sets out to write himself, in the hope that by doing so he may achieve the significance that the events of his adulthood have drained from him.... He is cutting up history to suit himself...The small error in the text can be read as clues, as indications that Saleem is capable of distortions both great and small. He is an interested party in the events he narrates.

(IH, 24)

### **Check Your Progress:**

1. Does Rushdie in your view achieve in showing that public remembrance can often be at variance from 'personal memory'?
2. How do you think Saleem represents the blurring of boundaries between the private history of individuals and the public history of the nation?

### 3.4.3 POSTMODERN AND POSTCOLONIAL CONCERNS

The various assumptions of postmodernism problematise both fiction and history. Saleem Sinai's and Rushdie's versions of history is different from the traditional, which is logical, imposes patterns, a chain of cause-and-effect, and is seemingly objective, definitive, unitary, repressive and closed. In a postmodern way, history in *Midnight's Children* is fragmented, provisional, openly subjective, plural, unrepressive, a construct, a reading. It thus established itself as different from the European 'master-narrative'. Salman Rushdie, in this novel alluded to both European and indigenous sources but what is so important in him is that he gives voice to a whole range of sections in society from the leaders to the slum-dwellers, men as well as women.

It seems that post-colonialism is a questioning of the three main principles of Western enlightenment-universalism, rationalism and objectivity—as well as a critique of empiricist methodologies. It becomes obvious that the theory of 'time lag' does not apply nor do the concepts of mimicry and hybridity. In this context, what Jasbir Jain says is much more applicable to Rushdie. Jain says that we, as culture, due to whatever pressures on us brought about by imperial frameworks, projections, conceptualizations choose to forget a part of ourselves. The danger is once again present for us if we do not stop to question and debate. It becomes necessary to know how we wish to confront the present when we find ourselves caught between the threat of globalization on the one hand and the fear of nativist fundamentalism on the other. Consequently, the rewriting of modern Indian history and the knowledge regarding who constitutes the nation are common concerns for contemporary Indian novels in English and in recent Indian historiography. It is really interesting to see how through his novels Rushdie makes an attempt to rewrite an alternative and post-colonial Indian history by privileging plurality over national homogeneity and by making the historian and the narrator complementary figures. Indian historiography and Indian novels thus can be seen as two genres reproducing the colonial relationship between the margin and the center in their representation of the Indian nation as the site of an incomplete or fractured modernity.

Saleem has been a swallower of lives. His heterogeneous versions also include the heterogeneity of the world. This inclusive mode of writing which

defies the arbitrary distinctions between facts and fiction and between the individuals and the world around him, distinguishes the novel as an Indian work of art against all sorts of allegations that Indian novelists are inheriting the form of the Western novelistic genre. Rushdie has assigned a peculiar kind of omniscience to Saleem (as is visible from the chapter ‘Tick Tock’) which enables him to see, know and report, more than an ordinary human being can, on things and events of his past as well as that of the country.

Needless to mention that in the post-independence period various economic and social pressures are at work, and they have led to the end of the so-called Nehruvite consensus in India. The notion of ‘unity within’—so central to the years of nationalist struggle and the building of the new nation-states—has been displaced by an urgent need to question the nature of that unity itself. The issues like imagining a nation, determining the fate of the children of the midnight hour of independence, have been pressing ones throughout India of late. These are however such issues which have been debated in all languages. If Rushdie ushered in a new era of Indian writing in English, it has to be acknowledged that he was more a sign of the times than their creator.

**SAQ:**

Seen from the viewpoint of postmodernism or postcolonialism, how will you consider the post-independence history of India in *Midnight’s Children*? (100 words)

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**Stop to Consider:**

The issue in question in *MC* is that there is a resistance to genealogy, which also means simultaneously recognizing and fighting one’s origins, history and roots. The interpretation of this dilemma is frequently debated within the prevalent postcolonial discourse. Since, the appearance of Edward Said’s influential book *Orientalism* (1978) however, things have changed. It is perhaps; appropriate to clarify that the discussion will not be of Rsuhdie’s homelands, the three countries



of his past and present namely India, Britain and Pakistan, nor of his book *Imaginary Homelands*, but rather of homeland as a theme or as a problem. (“Resistance to Genealogy: Salman Rushdie’s Homelands” by Joel Kuortti, p-59)

Critiquing Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* we can say that Salman Rushdie had turned his back on the Victorian/Indian tradition that had rooted itself so powerfully in colonial soil, and ushered in post-colonial impulses and attitudes mixing genres and employing postmodern techniques such as discontinuous narrative, cinematic images and metaphors, mirror games and linguistic blasphemies which were also the main ingredients of the ‘Magic-Realist’ school of Eastern-Europe and Latin America. In order to work on his Indian themes, he journeyed back to older Indian story-telling at fairs and festivals, in temples precincts and village gathering and proved that India’s oral traditions are still capable of versatility and invention. Instead of taking English as a handicap for Indian culture he had used it as a means of cross-fertilization. Rushdie refused to see English as a barrier, instead he used the pan-Indian, interregional versatility to explore different areas of Indian society.

#### **3.4.4 STRUGGLE FOR LANGUAGE**

Referring to the appropriateness of English for Indian themes, Rushdie admits that a writer like him can never use language as the Britishers had used. The use of English or Western story-telling strategies actually signify a linguistic struggle which is between the cultures within ourselves and the influences at work upon our societies. So, to conquer English may be to complete the process of making ourselves free. (*IH*, 17). Although the novel form made an entry into India as a colonial legacy, Rushdie’s success lies in its hybridization by adopting non-novelistic narrative machineries. Most interestingly, Rushdie adds the most distinctive Indian strain to the novel by drawing heavily on Indian (Hindu) epic narratives like the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* and upon tale-cycles assimilating elements of Indian, Persian and Arabian story-telling traditions such as the *Arabian Nights*. Consequently, both the mytho-poetic and folkloric oral sources are seen to have played a vital role in the narrator’s shaping of the narrative in Rushdie’s fiction like *Midnight’s Children*.

**Stop to Consider:**

But Aijaz Ahmad had argued that even though Rushdie promotes a view that his borrowings from the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, he gives his fictions a 'quintessential Indianness' of form and content, his fictions clear lines of descent from European modernism and postmodernism and shows that such assumptions are deceptive. However, Rushdie seems to be self-consciously mixing up elements from both the Euro-American novelistic tradition and Indian story telling traditions in order to firstly see how one tradition might productively transform the other and secondly, to show how fictions have been brought into new hybrid relations in his own experience, as a migrant intellectual working in increasingly globalised, postcolonial arenas.

Rushdie's innovations in *Midnight's Children* also include his use of language. It differs drastically from the British writers who wrote about India like Kipling, Forster and Paul Scott, and also from Indian writers in English like G. V. Desani. Expressing his indebtedness to Desani, Rushdie writes "It showed me that it was possible to break up the language and put it back together in a different way... I found I had to punctuate it in a very peculiar way, to destroy the natural rhythms of the English language; I had to use dashes too much, keep exclaiming, putting in three dots, sometimes three dots followed by three dashes... That sort of thing just seemed to help to dislocate the English and let other things into it." (Kunapipi, Vol-4, No-2 pp-19-20). Consequently, his method of using language demonstrates a revitalization of language itself.

One of the legacies of *Midnight's Children* was to provide a vibrant model for rewriting English in dialogue with those Indian languages. Anita Desai has claimed that Indian writers finally felt capable of using the spoken language, spoken English, the way it is spoken on Indian streets by ordinary people. But this is not exactly true because the Indian writers more often bring different languages into comic collision, testing the limits of communication between them with a view to celebrate India's linguistic diversity and taking over the English language to meet the requirements of the Indian context.

**SAQ:**

Why does language become so important in this novel? Do you think that Rushdie is justifying the various uses of language through *MC*? Elaborate with examples from the text? (40+80 words)

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**3.4.5 NOTION OF INDIANNES**

Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* cannot be isolated from the modern history of India. The emergence of the phenomenon called ‘Indianness’ in Indian literature too goes together with the ‘discovery of India’, which was an outcome of the encounter of India with the West on the political and intellectual level. Thus, by going into the historical analysis of the roots of Indian self-assertions, nationalism, and the consequent opposition to the West, some of the formative elements of the concept of ‘India’ will have to be pointed out. In *The Discovery of India* (1946), Jawaharlal Nehru’s analysis implicitly initiates a discussion on how the birth of the notions of ‘India’ is encircled by the political and social reality of India. According to Nehru, Western influence, experience of the geographical reality of India, and intellectual encounter with Indian history, religion, myths and literatures are combined with emotional appreciation and identification in such a way that they add up to a ‘sense of reality’ which brings history and tradition to life. In the present scenario, Indian literature has generated an outpouring of literary analysis and criticism. It would be fair to say that more than ever before the Indian subcontinent is enjoying a resurgence of interest in its writings and its writers. At this juncture, the first question that presents itself is whether a sense of national identity can be asserted through literature and how the Indian writers compose their own vision of nationhood. The second question, of course, centers on the use of language. Writers invariably select and limit their audience through the language they employ. But in India, this is a crucial problem with sixteen major languages to choose. English, first

introduced by the colonizers, has been adapted and assimilated into Indian culture and many writers have succeeded in making it uniquely their own. The third question involves the use of fiction as a medium of social protest. Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* exemplifies all these issues with great success.

### **3.4.6 ALLEGIANCE TO EASTERN NARRATIVE TRADITION (INTERTEXTUALITY)**

Rushdie has expressed his indebtedness to the Eastern tradition, He has stated that the narrative of *Midnight's Children* was inspired by traditional methods of Indian story-telling. As Rushdie tells, one of the strange things about oral narrative which he did look at very closely before writing *Midnight's Children*, is that one finds there a form which is thousands of years old, and yet which has all the methods of the modernist novel, because when one has some-body who tells one a story at that length, a story which is told from the morning to the night, it probably contains roughly as many words as a novel, and during the course of that story it is absolutely acceptable that the narrator will every-so-often enter his own story and chat about it, that he will comment on the tale, digress because the tale reminds him of something, and then come back to the point. All these things, which are absolutely second nature in an orally told story, become bizarre modern inventions when one writes them down. Consequently, it seems to him that when one looks at the old narrative and use it, as he tried to do, as the basis of a novel, one becomes a modernist writer by becoming a very traditional one. By going back to the very ancient traditions, one has done something which is very bizarre and modern. And this is what is discussed in detail in Rushdie's "Wizard of Oz".

**Stop to Consider:**

In Sanskrit poetics, there is a category of prose called 'Akhyayikas', which combines facts and fiction, and a category of fiction called 'Sakalahatha', which is a cycle of stories, which may have influenced Rushdie. Moreover, Indian myth too is a part of the background of his novels. In *Midnight's Children* myth functions as a kind of shorthand to convey various concepts.

(Goonetilleke, p-19)

Rushdie spent almost five years in writing this novel. He began it as a third person narrative which would have been useful in setting up a framework, but the change to the first person was crucial in making his satire come alive and ensuring an immediacy of impact. The novel was completed in June 1979, two weeks before the birth of his son. He dedicated it to Jafar, his son, and an inheritor of India's legacy and a sign of his own connection to it and to Islam. (Goonetilleke, 20).

**Check Your Progress:**

1. "*Midnight's Children* sounds like a continent finding its voice"- how valid do you consider this assessment? Give reasons for your answer
2. Migrant writers, because of their distance, can struggle against "the control of history by those who are powerful" by offering "alternate histories" to alter official versions of events. Can you say that Rushdie too proved that to be true? Justify your stand with textual references.
3. Rushdie's exploration of the textuality of history is informed by the historical experiences of colonisation, migration, Independence and Partition. Illustrate your answer from your reading of *Midnight's Children*.
4. Do you think that the pickling and chutnifying in Saleem's pickle factory is a metaphor for Indian amnesia after independence? Attempt to highlight this pattern in *Midnight's Children*.

### 3.5 NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE

What signifies this text as one of the praiseworthy experimentations of the novel form is the fact that it is replete with levels of narration, intertextual material and literary devices making it difficult to fit into any narrative scheme. For Rushdie adhered to the non-realist alternative tradition of Cervantes, Rabelais, Sterne, Swift, Melville, Gogol, Joyce, Gunter Grass, Borges, Garcia Marquez in Western fiction. Rushdie once said that in almost every country and in almost every literature there has been every show of an outburst of these large-scale, fantasized, satiric, epic tradition, whether it was Rabelais or Gogol or Boccaccio. Rushdie gained an access to his 'masters', via Gunter Grass which is best understood from his acceptance

of the relationship between *Midnight's Children* and *Tin Drum*. Rushdie himself had said that he was sure that Grass is somewhat behind the book.

**Stop to Consider:**

The narrative strategies of the novel do include a first person narrator, who chats and frequently digresses. But Rushdie denies the influence of classical Indian allegory:

In an interview to the journal 'Scripsi' he said: 'I usually resist the idea of allegory. In India there's too much of it, allegory is a kind of disease. People try to decode everything, every story or a text allegorically, and although clearly there are elements that you could call allegorical in *Midnight's Children* and *Shame*, the books are not allegories in the way that *The Pilgrim's Progress* is where everything stands for something and the real story is a story that is not told. Allegory asks readers to make a translation, to uncover a secret text that has not actually been written. In that sense I don't think my books operate as allegories.'

*A Thousand and One Nights* provides Saleem with the organizing principle of his narrative as it helped Saleem in physical self-preservation and justification by story-telling. Rushdie himself has acknowledged his indebtedness to the form and style of the *Arabian Nights*, and has clearly looked to it for his model in the linked narratives, the interruptions and digressions, the stories nested within stories, and the most basic assumptions of the story-teller. As narrator Saleem realizes that his life as a protagonist consists in 'an excess of intertwined lives, events, miracles, places, rumours, so dense a commingling of the improbable and the mundane from which, with help of memory and imagination, he will have to reconstruct the form of his life'. He even admits that his narrative will be a promiscuous blend of various kinds of stories and narrative modes and it will unfold in series of episodes spiced with myths and legends, gossips and rumours.

The fairy tale like beginning of the novel is used almost like a leitmotif in this novel. It suggests the level of fantasy which is of course rejected in favour of actual historical facts. Saleem is important as an individual and as a representative of independence. Wit and humour play a significant role in *Midnight's Children*. However, it is not easy to predict exactly where

Rushdie is using them. The novel is written as a comic novel as it seemed to him that the form of comic epic was a natural form for India but the problem he identified was that no one was actually discussing. Justifying his own specific use of 'Magic Realism', Rushdie says: 'I think of fantasy as a method of producing intensified images of reality...one thing that is valuable in fiction is to find techniques for making actuality more intense, so that you experience it more intensely in the writing than you do outside the writing.' This liberation of the imagination, as it functions in this way, affords Rushdie the maximum opportunity to be the artist as 'maker' and a way of transcending the politics of dominance, whether European or sub continental.

**Stop to Consider:**

"I have written and spoken elsewhere about my debt to the oral narrative traditions of India; also to those great novelists, Jane Austen and Charles Dickens. Austen for her portraits of brilliant women caged by the social convention of their time, women whose Indian counterparts I knew well; Dickens for his great, rotting, Bombay-like city, and his ability to root his larger-than-life characters and surrealist imagery in a sharply observed, almost hyper realistic background, out of which the comic and fantastic elements of his work seemed to grow organically, becoming intensifications of, and not escapes from, the real world. I have probably said enough, too, about my interest in creating a literary idiolect that allowed the rhythms and thought patterns of Indian languages to blend with the idiosyncrasies of 'Hinglish' and 'Bombaiyya', the polyglot street slang of Bombay. The novel's interest in the slippages and distortions of memory will also, I think, be evident enough to the reader. This may, however, be an appropriate moment to give thanks to the original people from whom my fictional characters sprang: my family, my *ayah* Miss Mary Menezes and my childhood friends." (Rushdie, *MC*, p- xii)

Such a view puts light on some of Rushdie's intertextual references which according to him reduces his problems in comprehending his Indian experiences.

While reading the novels of Rushdie we must always try to explore the range of his readership and for whom the proposed kind of Indianness is addressed. We must agree with the fact that Rushdie's use of pseudo 'Indian

story-telling registers' not only signify the ideas of Indianness to non-Western readers but also demonstrates the impossibility of any immediate consumption of Indian vernacular materials. Other than these, it enables him to emphasize the placement of the literary utterance by revealing that literature is never a-historical and occurs independently of cultures but grows out of heavy cultural exchange with social and political significance. And that is what is exemplified by Saleem and Padma's discussion in *Midnight's Children* that the telling of his story is conditioned by different contexts. Similarly Rushdie's narrator is an ordinary individual whose words are fallible. The epic, oral, filmic, tele-visual and photographic modes employed by Rushdie in his works exemplify the referential range and intertextual strain in his fictions. This also further exemplifies the plural nature of all cultures and cultural products. But the interesting point is that 'New Indian writing' often manifests itself in the form of reportage-turned-fiction. That makes perfect sense in an age of market-driven media, which is no longer a tool for radical social reform or the dramatic exposes of the 1980s. And in the hands of gifted writers like Rushdie, facts and recorded history can be transformed into near poetic transcendence.

**SAQ:**

1. How does Rushdie's narrative style reflect the novel's intentions? Attempt to enumerate the 'intentions' of *Midnight's Children*. (80 words)

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**3.7 SUMMING UP**

Rushdie's novels have completely transformed the entire tradition of novel writing in English in India. According to Rushdie, contemporary novelists are like archaeologists who collect various items from the past and collate them together to make a sense of history. By mixing up historical narratives and genealogical enquiry of the past, Salman Rushdie foregrounds the



significance of gaps, discontinuities and random associations in the making of the fictional narratives. By doing so, he has shown that the Indian novel in English must shed its insularity and obsession with a teleological structure and participate in a global postmodernist genres exploited by various world famous writers. He opines that the genealogical method of enquiry into the complexities of 'Indianness' proved to be a more useful tool for discovering the mystery of the Indian past than the traditional historical method of temporalisation. Since India is constituted and represented by diverse communities, religions, beliefs, and faiths which have created a space for negotiations, the Indian English novelists are seen to be more inclined toward self-generating modes of autobiography and personal narratives. This introspective, chiasmic mode of fictional representation is therefore an appropriate way for responding to the plurality and differences of the country.

Going through such an idea we can identify three cognitive sources of knowledge which can be applied to the treatment of Indianness or Indian reality in Indian Writing in English personal experience, direct observation and information gained through books and media. The first two are easily available for the authors totally based on India who methodologically differ from the West-based Indian authors. But an effective way to find out the Rushdian kind of Indianness is to trace the nature of historical knowledge itself- a kind of knowledge that has to be created and generated secondhand, derivative, imitative, pursuing the definitions set by alien perceptions or a kind of knowledge rooted in our own ground reality born out of our own needs and perceptions. Consequently, it addresses the question of the secondariness of knowledge which is discussed fruitfully by Rushdie.

**Stop to Consider:**

“The Shreds of memory acquires greater status, greater resonance, because they were remains, fragmentation made trivial things seems like symbols, and the mundane acquired numinous qualities. There is an obvious parallel here with archaeology. The broken pots of antiquity, from which past can sometimes, but always provisionally, be reconstructed, are exciting to discover, even if they are pieces of the most quotidian objects”. (Rushdie in *IH*, 12)

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