

# UNIT-I

# 1

## **CRITICAL STUDY OF TWO ESSAYS (MEENAKSHI MUKHARJEE'S "THE ANXIETY OF INDIANNESS" AND URVASHI BUTALIA'S "MEMORY" FROM *THE OTHER SIDE OF SILENCE: VIOLENCE FROM THE PARTITION OF INDIA*)**

### **Unit Structure :**

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 Meenakshi Mukherjee : "The Anxiety of Indianness" from *The Perishable Empire : Essays on Indian Writing in English*
- 1.3 Urvashi Butalia: "Memory" from *The Other Side of Silence : Voices from the Partition of India*
- 1.4 Let's Sum Up

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### **1.0 OBJECTIVE**

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The objective of this Unit is to introduce to the readers the development of Prose in Indian Writing in English and how the contribution of various eminent authors have made this genre a very successful and preferred area of literary art.

The two essays Meenakshi Mukherjee's 'The Anxiety of Indianness' from *The Perishable Empire : Essays on Indian Writing in English* and Urvashi Butalia's 'Memory' from *The Other Side of Silence : Voices from the Partition of India* on the one hand relates to the anxiety that Indian writers face because of their Indianness and on the other hand covers the trauma and pain of partition through the untold tales of common folk, especially the women. The narrations touch upon the mind and heart of every Indian as they express the pain of identity crisis and the pathos of existence.

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### **1.1 INTRODUCTION**

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From the times of the British rule in India, English has acquired a dominant position and has very swiftly moved away from its alien status to an inner creative urge of expressiveness. The contributions of various literary writers have brought out an overwhelming and remarkable impression in the history of Indian Writing in English. Starting from the range of concepts like nationalism, freedom struggle, social realism, individual consciousness and many more the writers have progressed with a unique style of their own, gradually conquering the convolutions of the

overseas language and blending in it the shades and savors of the Indian sub-continent. Raja Ram Mohan Roy was the first Indian to commendably express himself in black and white through English language followed by Swami Vivekananda who displayed his mastery of the language through his reminiscent prose that made the West sit up in awe and appreciation. Rabindranath Tagore contributed noteworthy prose in the form of lectures and his collection of speeches, 'Personality and Nationalism', 'Creative Unity' 'The Religion of Man' has brought forward the theme of divinity, revealing him as an internationalist and a humanist preaching the gospel of harmony. Sri Aurobindo produced voluminous prose writings based on religious, metaphysical, political, cultural, social and literary subjects. His essays on the Gita, 'The Life Divine', 'The Synthesis of Yoga' and 'Heraclitus' presented the theme of affirmation of a divine life earth and an immortal sense in mortal existence.

Mahatma Gandhi added to the evolvement of English prose with his autobiographical writing 'My Experiments with Truth'. The contemporaries of Mahatma Gandhi who showed their mastery in English prose were Rajagopalachari, Jawaharlal Nehru, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Jay Prakash Narayan, V. D. Savarkar, to name a few. Jawaharlal Nehru's 'Glimpses of World History' and "Discovery of India' became masterpieces in Indian English Prose writing with simple but remarkable choice of English words and phrases. Sir Radhakrishnan was also an exponent of religious and philosophical prose and his works 'Reign of Religion in Contemporary Philosophy', 'Indian Philosophy', 'The Hindu View of Life', 'The Future of Civilization' expressed a comprehensive account of philosophical thought. Nirad C. Chaudhuri added to the extravagance of English prose with his famous works like 'Grand Solitary', 'The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian', 'A Passage to England', 'The Continent of Circle', etc. Many more authors followed the trend of English Prose Writing like Meenakshi Mukherjee, Urvashi Butalia, Jasbir Jain, K. Satchidanandan. Arjun Dangle, to name a few; and their contributions have augmented the concept and subject of prose enrichment.

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## **1.2MEENAKSHI MUKHERJEE: "THE ANXIETY OF INDIANNESS" FROM *THE PERISHABLE EMPIRE: ESSAYS ON INDIAN WRITING IN ENGLISH***

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### **THE AUTHOR:**

Meenakshi Mukherjee (died 16<sup>th</sup> September 2009, aged 72), wrote extensive Indian English Criticism and traced the rise of novel in India. Her inspiring opinions were judiciously theorized from a transgressive, postcolonial and feminist lens and were not just restricted to literary studies but also took into account cultural history. Famous for her colonial and postcolonial studies, she often merges feminist writing along with her other works on varied subjects. Her book, 'An Indian for all Seasons' (a biography of the historian R.C. Dutt) is a pioneer in Indian English biographical writing. She received the Sahitya Akademi Award in 2003 for her highly-appreciated book, 'The Perishable Empire: Essays on Indian Writing in English'. Her

book, 'The Twice Born Fiction: Themes and Techniques of Indian Novel in English', made her a forerunner of contextualizing and positioning novels in their historical and social framework integrating the various junctures such as class, gender, culture and colonialism. She leaves behind a legacy in the form of her inspiring profound work that will help the next generation readers and researchers to walk hassle-free on the path of writing.

### **SUMMARISING THE TEXT:**

First published as 'The Anxiety of Indianness: Our Novels in English' in the *Economic and Political Weekly* (Vol.28. No.48; Nov. 27,1993) and then included in the book, *The Perishable Empire: Essays on Indian Writing in English* (2000), Meenakshi Mukherjee starts her essay with the positive approach of how in a short period of time, since Indians have adopted a relationship with English language, there has been a sudden escalation and prominence of English novels written by Indians. These writers whom the *Time Magazine* calls "the new makers of World Fiction" take the raw material of their novels from India but target the world audience so vehemently that they are even ready to undertake journeys – either factual or metaphorical. The major argument that is delved into is the identity of the Indian writers – should they come out of their colonial hangover and focus on their vernacular strength; or should they continue to focus on the Queen's language and try to create a unique global forum; or should they develop a new English language that will have the capacity to hold on and spread the ethnicity of India.

Divided into six sections, the writer takes a reference from the Foreword written by Raja Rao in his novel 'Kathapura', Mukherjee points out that how Raja Rao not only experimented with language striving to make English take on the rhythm of Kannad but also focused on the narrative mode challenging the universal expectations of novel that was prevalent in Western Europe during that time. He used the 'sthalapurana' form – the legendary history of a village caught up in the Gandhian Movement as told by an old woman – trying to assimilate myth with history. Raja Rao definitely addresses the problem of the encounter between language and culture in the Indian perspective – the difficulty of conveying the myths, cultures and legends in a language that we have acquired and not inherited. The English language ensembles the brainpower no doubt but fails to catch the local emotions and thus it becomes difficult to write a regional novel in an alien language and then finding an international audience.

Meenakshi Mukherjee then moves on to seek justification on why when Indians write in English they are termed as Indian Writers in English but when they write in their mother tongue they are not referred to as Indian writer in Marathi or Bengali rather just considered as a Marathi writer or a Bengali writer. It is indeed for wider audience and having a literary competence only in English (apart from the language they speak at home) that Indian authors prefer the language and delve into it. The second question that she touches upon is regarding those writers who didn't shift from their mother tongue to English, what would the children of those vernacular writers do – would they continue to write in their mother tongue or would they be compelled to choose differently? She believes that the Indian writers writing in English also uses basic Indian themes like Mulk Raj Anand using the class

and caste inequities, Bhabani Bhattacharya's religious exposure, Kamala Markandaya's concern for the suffering Indian women, etc. – all these reflect the cases of the Indian anxiety manifested in the themes. She also refers to the 'Indianness' used by R.K. Narayan that evolved in and around the town of Malgudi and points out how there is a difference in the setting, character and culture between English writers and vernacular writers; for example the powerful stories of tribal life by Mahasweta Devi. What Mukherjee believes is that the English texts have a greater pull towards a homogenization of reality, trying to flatten the complicated and conflicting outlines as the Indian writers in English have other unstated compulsions – especially the uncertainty about their target audience.

Mukherjee assumes that because for a long time English writing in India was destined to remain constricted as the normal condition of literary production like culture and its variations, language and its dialects, oral tradition and written literature, etc. networked to originate a new text; and this was not the case with the English in India. And when these older generation of novelists in English were handling the themes in India they remained predictably pan-Indian – themes like national movement, partition of the country, tradition and modernity, faith and rationality, east-west confrontation, etc. – they were in a way defining 'Indian' concerns as against local or regional issues. As the history of English novel in Britain from 'Robinson Crusoe' to 'Brideshead Revisited' can be seen as a chronicle of the nation – constructing the ideas and concepts associated with the national life as well as differentiating it from what is not British – similarly the Indian novel in English also has a brief history of articulating national identity. From the three pioneering writers, R.K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao, who with their differences in ideology, background and narrative modes had shared a common unspoken faith of projecting Indian reality through particularized situations; to the authors like Amitav Ghosh and Vikram Seth who brought in Asia and Africa into their writings – Indian writing in English has seen major inclusions and exclusions now and again.

Meenakshi Mukherjee then traces back to the success of one seminal novel, 'Midnight's Children' by Salman Rushdie where Rushdie celebrates the plenitude of India – the novel constructing the idea of a nation, an India that is inclusive and tolerant and, on the other side, the novel is plagued with an anxiety about the fragility of this concept of India. Rushdie's success became a liberating factor for a large number of Indian writers at home and abroad. Initially as Rushdie clones and later the younger writers have been able to enter the expansive space in literature which the western world has earlier reserved for the privileged race. And at this juncture the writers had overlooked the vast space that was available for them in India too. But of late, Mukherjee notices, that some of the novelists who have gained fame abroad are suddenly eager to connect with their origin and establishing a language harmony.

Mukherjee then moves on to Timothy Brennan's proposed new category of novelists – the 'Third World Cosmopolitans' – who emerge from a non-western culture, but their exceptional hold over the contemporary expression of the cosmopolitan meta-language of chronicle confirms their encouraging response in the international centres of publication and criticism.

The expectation from these Third World cosmopolitan writers, who are also known as postcolonial writers, is that they will highlight the experience of colonialism, making it as their theme or metaphor. She also feels that one of the reasons why our 'Bhasha' classics, be it from the past or the present, and even translated into English, do not get recognition because on the one side they are more conditioned by other literature and on the other side they have a constant local and complex pressure. She completely complies with the fact that for those who live outside India, like Bharati Mukherjee, India is just a metaphor being used in their novels but for those who stay in India it is a day-to-day living. She clearly justifies – *"India may be a 'discursive space' for the writer of Indian origin living elsewhere, but those living and writing here, particularly the bhasha novelist, would seldom make figurative use of something as amorphous as the idea of India, because s/he has a multitude of specific and local experiences to turn into tropes and play with."*

Very specifically does Meenakshi Mukherjee say that if the anxiety of Indianness in the past writers like Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand and R.K. Narayan was seen in their desire to be rooted, the anxiety of the new generation of writers, who can very easily flourish with international approachability in the present times, can be attributed to the pressures of the global marketplace. In the recent times when we talk about the 'New Indian Novel' or 'Publishing in India', English is only presumed as the language in which publishing is done in India and today the language of the elite is no longer considered an allegation that requires to be sidestepped. It is mainly the demand of economy that has generated an amalgamation of cultures and in India the language that has most effectively achieved this is English. Though, with the emergence of globalization and the 'MNC culture' that has continuously led to the establishment and dominance of the English language culture in the work-place, the liability of mother tongue has not entirely erased. So howsoever connected a writer is with the American and European literary styles, the final recognition is through their national linkage.

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### **1.3 URVASHI BUTALIA: "MEMORY" FROM *THE OTHER SIDE OF SILENCE: VOICES FROM THE PARTITION OF INDIA***

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#### **THE AUTHOR:**

Urvashi Butalia (born 1952), an Indian feminist writer, publisher and activist, is known for her exclusive work in the women's movement in India and is also highly recognized for her books, *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* and *Speaking Peace: Women's Voices from Kashmir*. Along with Ritu Menon, another Indian feminist writer and publisher, she co-founded Kali for Women, India's first feminist publishing house in 1984 and founded Zubaan Books in 2003 which was an imprint of the previous publishing house. Butalia and Menon were jointly awarded the Padma Shri in 2011 for their contribution in Education and Literature. Butalia's major areas of interest are the Partition and the oral histories from a feminist perspective and she has also written on issues like gender, fundamentalism, communalism, media, etc. Her intriguing writings have been a part of various newspapers and



magazines and her voice has touched upon difficult questions on community, caste and gender associated with violence that accompanied partition.

#### SUMMARISING THE TEXT:

The partition of the two countries, India and Pakistan, has caused one of the massive human tremors in the history of mankind. With millions of people displaced and dead, women abducted and raped, children captured and lost; the horrific tales of the partition seep deep into the hearts creating ripples of pain and suffering. Butalia in 'Memory' fills the cavity by bringing in the individual experiences and their personal agony and thus making everyone understand how and why certain happenings become blanketed in silence. But before venturing into the experiences of others during this violent pandemonium, she traces facets of her own emotionally distressing and partition-scarred family history. And all those whom she interviews, disclose that though might be in the private corners of their life, the painful voices of partition has not calmed down and the bitterness still haunts. Throughout Butalia raises a very significant question – what was partition meant to achieve and what did it actually achieve? How can the unspeakable horrors that burdens the survivors still be soothed? With a belief that only by remembering and narrating their harrowing stories maybe the affected can start the course of healing and forgetting, Butalia delves into this sensitive issue and heartrending her mission to perceive the painful truth behind the engulfing silence.

Butalia starts her essay with a number of deep rooted questions and also feels that how much ever we come to know, there remains a lot to be learnt about partition – in fact, she says she hardly had any idea about how much she will learn when she started with her work. The 'history' of the event is known by most of the Indians but hearing the pitiful stories of the survivors she started feeling why the historians had not *attempted to explore the 'underside' of history – the emotions, the pain and anguish, the trauma, the sense of loss, the silences in which it lay shrouded?* The death, the displacement, the loss, the suffering, all that happened during the partition was revisited again in 1984 which acted as a turning point for many historians. But 1984 had been preceded and was followed by various equally disturbing developments and people watched in helpless horror the swelling divergence of the Indian society on the criteria of religion. The 1984 partition-like situation again brought back memories of the past and it became significant for the survivors to speak and collect their testimonies. Though for many it was still painful to speak, there were many others who wanted their vocal narrations to be recorded for they felt it was the right time to probe the past.

Butalia believes that though familiar with the history when we research the past, it becomes an overwhelming anticipation as we get nothing new maybe except the interpretation, and at times maybe not even that and it is only how we train our eyes to look into the past that paves the way. History is based on records and a lot of the past remain untouched as

it does not delve into the emotions and feelings attached with those appalling events. Butalia finds this dig into the past to be an important aspect for her as a feminist and someone very interested in history and as she starts her research her main intention is to know how human beings relate themselves to their past? Obviously she feels, as far as Partition history is concerned, there is a vast gap between the history we have studied and we know about and the history people remembered. So she tries to reach out to the voices of those ordinary people so that she can touch the past in a different way, different from conventional history that has marginalized the experiences of the common folk. She takes the feminist historiography as her instrument because according to her that is the most unheard area – the area of silence. Undoubtedly there are reasons to believe that there is a great crevice between speech and silence and while framing the history of Partition the voices of women, children, scheduled castes and many others have been silenced on purpose by the State as well as for the sake of writing history. She is apprehensive about how much of what people said and unsaid could she bring in print form and how far will she be successful in making people come out from silence to speech. On her journey to recover the ‘voices’ she has reached out to the people’s narratives and testimonies as well as extended to the letters and documents.

As Butalia reached out to the people she found how difficult it was to recover women’s voices as, firstly, they are all chained to a particular hierarchy in the family; secondly, the families are fearful of letting their members speak about partition without the presence of elders and thirdly, it is always the men who speak and women, even when addressed directly they direct it to the men. Even historians like Kathryn Anderson and Dana C. Jack have pointed that how a woman speaking about her life might present two separate and even contradicting standpoints – one reflecting the dominant position of men and the other her experiences which do not ‘fit’. Hence women most often mute their thoughts and feelings and speak the familiar voice that is publicly acceptable. To make a middle class woman speak is still easier than a Dalit woman and Butalia says that there was practically no way at all in which she could speak to a woman who had been raped or abducted as they held their stories close to them for the memory of rape or abduction was shameful for them to be disclosed. Butalia is very clear about her feministic approach and she feels that though her book is not just directed to women but it is women and their histories that lie at the core of any incidence.

Butalia’s writing speaks about everything – *silence and speech, memory and forgetting, pain and healing*. She quotes Krishna Sobti, a writer and a partition refugee, who had said ‘Partition was difficult to forget but dangerous to remember’ and as she goes deep into it she realizes that she has to explore it with caution as there are many illustrations where silence is more important than speech. And there are different types of silence – on one side, the historical silence and, on the other, familial since where families would prefer hiding their histories. Some are reluctant to speak as they find no sense in collecting stories;

some had a fear of the sense of violence that they believe can work against them. And at times silence was a form of protest – for example, a woman married to a Muslim abductor took to silence as protest, a Punjabi refugee witnessing the rape and murder of her neighbour's daughter took silence as her weapon, even the great author, Attia Hossain took to silence in writing about partition as she refused to select between Pakistan and India. For many it is a kind of resignation – they had adjusted with the trauma – no one had come to any help at that time so why now? Some of the stories of women were not known to the families even; now speaking about them and making them public was not just opening up old wounds but exposing them to consequences again, *maybe another rejection, another trauma*.

Partition had suddenly redefined identities; away from cultural, linguistic, geographical, economic identities, the dominating factor was the religious identity. And violence became so complicit that the victims and the assailants became reluctant to remember it. Strangely in India there is no institutional memory of partition – no memorials, no marks at the borders, no plaque, no particular post – it was just the dark side of independence. It was just the survivor families who commemorated the martyrdoms and held remembrance rituals to pay homage to the lost souls. A powerful and moving account of women martyrdom can be seen through the picture of Mata Lajjawanti who fearlessly led ninety women to their deaths by jumping into a well full of water. The ceremony of such martyrdom continues and coming out from the stories of rape and abduction they have transformed their history into courage and bravery.

As Butalia progresses towards the end of her writing, she finds out how apart from the stories of violence and loss, there are also innumerable stories on friendship and sharing and how, though the British had kept the two countries apart, they had crossed time and again and how in spite of the trauma opportunities have opened up to make something of the lives of the people. Butalia also refers to the category of women who are termed as 'Partition widows' who were provided training and work by the State government and now depended on their meagre pension. If widows could stand on their feet it was obvious that other women also joined professions like teaching and nursing or business and social work. All these women, putting aside their own grief and loss, gave their selves to working with the new nation, especially for its women. Butalia ends her narration with the touching tale of Chaudhary Latif and Harikishan Das Bedi and the special relationship that had grown between them through letters – *evidence of the fact that borders can be crossed and friendships built and maintained*.

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## 1.4 LET'S SUM UP

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On the one side, Meenakshi Mukherjee's elaborating the fact of anxiety persisting among the novelists and how the dogma of Indianness has played its role into the mind and writings of the authors are well established. The concept of traditional vernacular writing in contrast to



Indian writing in English has been focused upon and exemplified which should be the proper mode of writing for Indians. On the other side, Urvashi Butalia revisits the time of Partition delving into the lives of the survivors and trying to reach out to that silence that the historians had failed to capture. Trying to scoop out the trauma and the pain, she realizes how tender that area is and how it should be carefully handled and well preserved.

### **Works Cited**

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## UNIT II

# 2

### **CRITICAL STUDY OF TWO ESSAYS** **(K. Satchidanandan's "That Third Space: Interrogating the Diasporic Paradigm" and Jasbir Jain's "Prologue" from *beyond post colonialism: dreams and realities of a nation*)**

#### **Unit Structure :**

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 About the author (Jasbir Jain)
- 2.2 About the essay *Prologue: from the personal to the political*
- 2.3 Key arguments of the essay
- 2.4 Key points of the essay
- 2.5 Questions
- 2.6 About the author (K. Satchidanandan)
- 2.7 About the essay *That Third Space: interrogating the diasporic paradigm*
- 2.8 Key points of the Essay
- 2.9 Summing Up
- 2.10 Questions

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#### **2.0 OBJECTIVES**

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In this unit, we will study two critical essays by Jasbir Jain and K. Satchidanandan. Students will be acquainted with the critical concepts like the diaspora, colonialism and post-colonialism, the third space and will learn how a critical argument is logically advanced and presented in an essay. The unit will help the students to understand and appreciate academic papers and development of an argument.

#### **Prologue: from the personal to the political** *beyond post colonialism: dreams and realities of a nation*

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#### **2.1 ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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Jasbir Jain is a renowned academician. She is an Emeritus Fellow at University of Rajasthan and is also the recipient of the Sahitya Akademi Fellowship as Writer in Residence, K.K. Birla Fellowship and several

other awards. She has also taught at various universities abroad including Copenhagen (Denmark) and Tampere (Finland).

Jain is an extensive researcher on varied range of subjects across languages and genres and has contributed volumes in the field of academic writing. Her books include -‘*Indigenous Roots of Feminism*’ (2011), ‘*Theorising Resistance*’ (2012), ‘*You Ask, I Tell*’- a translation of Hansa Wadkar’s autobiography, with Shobha Shinde (2013), ‘*The Diaspora Writes Home*’ (2015), ‘*Forgiveness: Between Memory and History*’ (2016), ‘*Bridge Across the Rivers*’ (2017) co-edited with Tripti Jain and ‘*Sub continental Histories: Literary Reflections on the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*’ (2018).

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## 2.2 ABOUT THE ‘PROLOGUE: FROM THE PERSONAL TO THE POLITICAL’

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The prescribed text –‘**Prologue: from the personal to the political**’ is the befitting beginning to Jasbir Jain’s book -‘*Beyond Post colonialism: Dreams and Realities of a Nation*’.

Jain, in her book-‘*Beyond Post colonialism: Dreams and Realities of a Nation*’ speculates into the nature of Indian novels across languages after 1947 and enquires into the legitimacy of the framework of post colonialism to apply to the term called Indian novels which is characterised by multiplicities –of language, of experience, of themes and subjects.

Jain says that Post-colonialism is marked by concentration of power and resistance to change and as a result of this post-colonialism ignores and erases the indigenous inheritance. It ignores the fact that there is a constant revision into the past and there is a continual dialogue with culture, politics and language.

Looking into the genre of Indian novels post 1947 across varied Indian languages, Jain says that these novels are extremely varied in respect to themes, subject-matter, experiences and languages and display several shifts in narrative structures and their interaction with art movements, with location and space as well as with the social realities of caste and community, which continue to dominate our epistemological frameworks. Although novel as a form is historical in its narrative style and representation, it functions concurrently as a counter discourse because the novelistic form is continuously opening out the hidden layers of history with a continuous evaluation and dialogue with the on-going socio-cultural and political worldviews. Working at these multiple levels, the novel is both political and personal. It is a powerful counter discourse and a critique of cultural practices. The novels after 1947 passed through the dreams of freedom actualised through the accompanying brutality and violence of the partition. Passing through the violence of the partition and the visions of independence, Jain traces the early diasporic writing, the

gender issues and feminism, classical and experiential aesthetics including the Rasa theory. Jain makes a powerful claim for new interpretative strategies and the recognition of new tropes while describing Indian novels after Independence.

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### 2.3 KEY ARGUMENTS OF THE TEXT

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Jain begins her prologue by saying that the post-1947 novel in India is marked by multiplicities: multiplicities in terms of language, themes and discourses, landscapes and perspectives and even memories. Besides, post-independence novels in India freely move between oral traditions and newer experiments associated with modernism and post-modernism. Therefore, it is not possible to include Indian novels after Independence under a singular definition.

Post colonialism is the critical study of the state of affairs after the Western Colonialism. It also means the simultaneous project to re-think and reclaim the history of the subaltern- the people subordinated under diverse forms of imperialism. The key goal of post-colonialism is accounting for and combating the residual effects of colonialism. Because, post-colonialism is driven by this ultimate goal, it offers a perspective which is imposed by the western position and market forces. Therefore, post-colonialism as an ambit is insufficient to include the vast diversity of the Indian novel. And defining Indian Novel within the convenient terms would serve as the reductionist strategy.

Jain makes it clear that the purpose of her book is to seek a different pair of lens to explore the everyday revolutions taking place everywhere and to work for an integrated concept of Indian Writing across languages.

Jain says that the novel once displayed hierarchical control like representing and glorifying the ascetic figure or the Gandhian image. Those singular representations and the need to explain one's culture to the other is pushed to the background. Instead, the writers across Indian languages like Amitabh Ghosh, Mridula Garg, Bama, Ashapurna Devi display varied themes and strategies to defy any singular standard norm of writing. The writer today explores the form of the novel for himself/herself and talks of matters that were not spoken earlier. As a result, a new kind of aesthetic, a new kind of realism has come into being that depicts through a distant, objective narrative voice the ugly and the filthy like the violence challenging the old *RASA* theory.

Jain then proceeds to explore the term 'nation'. Defining 'nation' also has become difficult today because the constitutive elements of a nation like religion, culture and geographical boundary have become fluid. With religion, culture and power –the constitutive elements while understanding the term 'nation' coming under scrutiny, the idea of the 'nation' has been under constant change. Dual-citizenship, dual national -

identity after the partition and religion being challenged by political realities have posed problems of defining nationhood on the basis of geographical boundaries or religious ground or socio-cultural grounds.

Jain says that in the near future, the reformist writings of authors like Jyotiba Phule and other writers who uncover and criticise the caste histories may also be placed under review just like the way British reformist activities are placed under suspicion. This is because the intellectuals are always placing the past under scanner consciously and unconsciously. The contemporary novel too is performing this role. Even while saying that a writer is using the realist mode or writing about social reality, we are problematizing the situation because the nature of 'reality' itself is illusionary.

While going back to the category of nation, Jain brings in the idea of Diaspora, a non-ignorable phenomenon visible today. The mixture of the 'Host Cultures'- the cultures of adoption, and the culture that is left behind, problematize the representation of a pure iconic singular culture. These diasporic writing with their multiple identities, pose the question where it wishes to belong. The trope of dislocation demands the trope of belonging. Jain contends that although the diasporic dislocation have already earned a literary respectability, the dislocation and trauma caused by the partition and other sub-continental strife is still to achieve the desired academic space. Therefore, Jain focuses on writers for whom dislocation is a constant happening and a constant reminder of all traumas like Mumtaz Shah Nawaz, Attia Hosain, Intezar Husain and Abdur Samad.

The last part of the prologue throws light on the dominant tropes of contemporary Indian novel.

Jain says that the dominant tropes are a reworking of the inherited concepts like dharma and karma. These two concepts function at more than one level and also need a re-evaluation at the same time. The meanings of the concepts of the Dharma and Karma, functioning at the level of the individual, the community and the nation, offer a wonderful trope to the contemporary writers. Although the writers can limit to anyone of the meaning, the concepts have the capacity to expand to the social and political realities.

The second trope is that of belonging. The contemporary Indian novel suggests the problematic where does one belong to in terms of language, region, religion and nation.

The third trope is the engagement with violence and hatred. Violence and hatred can manifest in different forms like social discrimination, of personal, familial or societal persecution, communal riots. The violence can be the results of hatred, aggression and prejudices of the authorities. Being detonative by its very nature, Violence expresses itself in far ranging directions.



The contemporary Indian novel displaying the Inner conflicts of being and belonging, the conflicting social relations, the national conflicts of power demands a continuous dialogue with the fluidity of the present moment.

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## 2.4 KEY POINTS OF THE ESSAY:

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The prologue is divided into three parts – Jain first discusses the pluralities existing within the post-independence Indian novels that drastically move away from the earlier hierarchical control of representation to emerge into new forms of realistic fiction associated with modernism and post-modernism. The contemporary Indian novel stems from the personal positions of the authors but consciously or unconsciously builds up a dialogue with its own past. These revisionist dialogues with the past offer a political position demanding new frameworks to look at these dynamic narrative structures.

In the second part, Jain focuses on the problematisation of the term ‘nation’ and contends that the idea of the nation also has been changed completely today. It is no more a fixed, defined idea on the basis of geographical boundaries, religion or culture. Nation too has become indefinable and a fluid concept today and the idea of the diaspora further complicates the issues of homeland and belonging.

In the third part, Jain focuses on the dominant tropes of contemporary Indian novel –the reworking of the concepts of Dharma and Karma, the problematic of belonging and the representation of hatred and violence –pushes the contemporary Indian novel to demand a framework to map the constant dialogue with the fluid moments of the present.

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## 2.5 QUESTIONS

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1. Write a note on the important concept discussed in the prologue.
2. Write a note on the key argument made by Jasbir Jain in the prologue.

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## 2.6 ABOUT THE AUTHOR (K. SATCHIDANANDAN)

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A pioneer of modern poetry in Malayalam and a bilingual literary critic, **K. Satchidanandan** was born in 1946 in Kerala. His multifaceted personality as playwright, editor, columnist and translator has earned him an iconic position in Indian literary scenario. As a bilingual critic, **K. Satchidanandan** writes both in his mother tongue Malayalam and English. He has served his tenure as the former Editor of Indian Literature journal and the former Secretary of Sahitya Akademi. A social advocate, he supports causes like environment, human rights and rights for free software. He is a well-known speaker on issues concerning contemporary Indian literature. He is the festival director of Kerala Literature Festival

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## **2.7 ABOUT THE ESSAY *THAT THIRD SPACE: INTERROGATING THE DIASPORIC PARADIGM***

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K. Satchidanandan in this paper poses to problematize the standard notion of the diaspora. His primary argument is that the diasporic experiences have undergone tremendous change today with the advancement communication network and multi-media developments and therefore, diaspora cannot be viewed with the same standard framework of homogenous exile-experience. He first unsettles the idea of the diasporic immigration on the basis of different class, status in the job-market, class, gender and minority-majority status. Then, he unsettles the idea of Indianness as a singular phenomenon based on the concept of united nationalism and cohesive culture. After unsettling the concept of diaspora to an indefinable phenomenon that Homi Bhabha calls the third space, K. Satchidanandan concludes the essay on a personal note by sharing his own experience as a Malayali diasporic writer.

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## **2.8 THE KEY POINTS OF THE ESSAY**

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K. Satchidanandan begins his paper with three small excerpts from Panna Naik, Meena Alexander and Homi Bhabha and all the three excerpts evoke the problematic of location and displacement associated with diaspora. Diaspora refers to the scattered population of a country who have left their indigenous territory, their homeland for various reasons to different places of the globe. The last few decades have seen a tremendous rise in writings by and about these scattered people of the globe. The idea of diasporic subjectivity –the diasporic experiences of the subject as an exile-had been an important topic of academic research.

K. Satchidanandan begins his essay with the contention that the phenomenon of diaspora has come to a stage where the concept needs a revision and a fresh interrogation. He doesn't deny the fact that diasporic experience is a great source of creative inspiration because the dislocation creates agonising pain mixed with the dilemma of new-subjectivity. The experience of the exile, the memories of homeland and the complex engagement with multiple identities contribute in a positive spring of artistic stimulus.

But, the tremendous advancement of real-time cyber communication today has definitely changed the agonising experiences of the exile, of the pangs of dislocations and displacements of diaspora. There is a contradictory pull when we talk about the exile experience of the diaspora today because the advanced multi-media communication have made possible of forming a little 'real' community of one's own people, of one's own homeland and this community is not 'imagined'. These shared experiences with one's own people who possibly speak the same language have changed the nature of the experience of the diasporic exile. The large communication networks today have led to the obliteration of the national boundaries and thus promoting intense transnational communication.

These smart multi-media communications fosters intense communication network between the members of a diasporic community. Therefore, the diasporic community remain local and at the same time, gain multinational characteristics. The homeland has become both remote and accessible at the same time.

Familiarizing Nalini Natarajan's concept of diasporic subjectivity, K. Satchidanandan says that the world today is ruled by visual, auditory and verbal images created by the multi-media. These images play a crucial role in shaping the diasporic experiences as these images as varied as ranging from culinary to religious combine memory, experience and desire. These images juxtaposing mythology with commercial advertisements create new discourses. These discourses challenge the media hegemony in the city which contradictorily strengthens other hegemonies like caste or class or religion within the community.

After pointing out the need to look at diasporic experience as the contradictory phenomena of migration and cyber-communication, K. Satchidanandan problematizes the concept of diaspora on the basis of certain assumptions about diasporic writing. The first challenge that he poses is that the location of the writings in indigenous regional language in the conventional diasporic paradigm. Satchidanandan says that the term diaspora is used as an umbrella term for immigrant workers evading the differences in contexts as well as in background. The first general assumption about diaspora is that it only refers to those writers who write in English as presumed by Emmanuel S. Nelson in his book-'*Writers of Indian Diaspora*'. In such context, where does one locate regional Indian writers like a Malayalam writer in Oman or a Bengali writer in Paris? Does writing in English become an inevitable precondition to be qualified as diasporic writer?

The second general assumption about the diasporic writer is that he/she occupies a 'second space' of exile and cultural solitude and Homi Bhabha calls it a Third Space. The third space is a hybrid location of perpetual tension and indefinability. The reality of the body as a material production of one's local culture placed against the thoughts of the mind as the sub-text of global experiences creates the unique hybrid existence of the diasporic writer. These contradictory pulls of local and the global, of material reality and the cognitive reality enunciates the indefinability of the third space. Third Space acts as a vague area created after the interaction of two or more individuals / cultures. The individual and local experiences of the diasporic writer challenge our notions of the historical identity of culture as a homogenous, unifying force. Bhabha says that the inter-subjective and collective experiences of nationhood, of community interest and cultural values are negotiated with the rise of the intervening third space. This negotiation of cultural identity involves continuous exchange of cultural performances and these continuous exchanges cause a mutual and mutable recognition of cultural difference. This recognition of cultural difference is not the reflection of the fixed traditional cultural traits.

The context of immigration also changes the nature of diasporic experience. The earlier Diasporas were the results of forced immigration – of people who wanted to escape religious, social or political oppression. But, the immigration happening after 1970s is the result of the hope and promise of an enhanced life-style. People chose to immigrate for better material and academic success. These immigrants didn't have to burn the bridges with the past. Rather, a new stronger bond with the past evolved specially in the field of academics and working in the South-Asian Departments. These new immigrants –the 'resident aliens' like Gayatri Spivak and Amartya Sen, who became a new kind of coloniser without the intention of ruling over the land but taking advantage of their position in the labour-market. They had a home to go back and an identity to protect.

Satchidanandan then brings in the knot of class difference in diasporic experience. He says that one cannot ignore the difference between a refugee worker and an academician working at a University. And, just like the class factor, language and gender too come as differentialising agents.

Apart from these qualitative factors, the quantitative factors like the status within the majority and minority population contribute to the intensity of exile experience. Besides, the experiences of the second generation and third generation migrants are obviously different from the first generation migrants. The concept of the distant homeland is unreal to them. Home becomes an imaginative space rather than of nostalgic remembrances.

Satchidanandan says that this transposition, this switch of memory to imagination in the second generation is noticeable in many second generation migrants from Kerala. The second generation re-construct their homeland from fragments of information from the hearsay or the internet. Home is a place not to return to but to visit as a guest, as a tourist and a place to fantasise about. Therefore, the idea of the home is related to time transforming it into history or myth.

It is important, therefore to consider the different forms of 'othering' experiences within the diaspora along with the different levels of identity.

After this, K. Satchidanandan begins with the second part of the essay dealing with the concept of 'Indianness' in the contemporary times. He says that the idea of Indianness is being challenged today from diverse perspectives of the Dalits, the tribals, of women, of gay and lesbian and minorities to give few examples. These diverse perspectives make it impossible to pin down the concept of Indianness to any singular, essentialist notion. He says that the essentialist concept of India is derived from the Orientalist discourses. But, today the essentialist idea of Indianness is challenged and gives way to the idea of a polyphonic India-a mosaic of various cultures. But, Satchidanandan observes that critical discourses on Indian Diaspora seem to hook on to those essentialist exotic

ideas of India combined with the diasporic writer's own conception of his country. Satchidanandan quotes Homi Bhabha to bring in the idea of the shifting boundaries disrupting the existence of a single monologic discourse. Bhabha says that the people occupying that third space, the diaspora mark a shifting boundary that distances the borders of modern India. The single discourses of modern cities with memories of the imperial rule are unsettled to give way to multiple shifting notions. The diaspora creates a moment when the imperial inheritance is thrown back and as a result, challenges the single notion of modern Western nation. But, it can also foster cultural nationalism like Hindu hegemony pulling down another religion. Religion, patriarchy, class –structure, ethnic conflicts can be reproduced and reinforced by diasporic ideologies. Reinforcements happen when the nostalgia of the lost golden past makes a diasporic writer to impose the past structure to create a Promised Future.

After challenging the old singular concept of a nation and its unified culture, Satchidanandan then goes on to extend the concept diaspora happening within the country like the Malayali diaspora in Delhi, or a Santhali diaspora in Kolkata. These diasporic migrants are concentrated basically in the cities and give the cities a multi-cultural cosmopolitan character.

Being a Malayalidiasporic writer in Delhi, Satchidanandan says that he can talk about Malayali diaspora with authenticity. He says that Malayali diaspora has been contributing significantly since 1960s to Malayali literature producing specifically new genres of writing reflecting the diasporic consciousness. He gives example of the 'military fiction'—products of writers in the army like Kovilan, Parappurah, Vinayan and Nandanarreflecting the complex life in the barracks. Many of the writings of Malayali Diaspora reflect cosmopolitanism in their pan-Indian themes, characters, language and even in linguistic structures.

Satchidanandan declares that Modernism in Malayali literature, especially fiction, is a product of Malayalidiasporic writers living in Delhi, Mumbai and Kolkata. They reflect in their writing an influence of urban life by which they express their perspectives –the distrust in the system, fear of the crowd, the experience of boredom and nostalgia for the lost villages of Kerala.

Satchidanandan concludes his unsettling essay on a personal note by sharing his experience as diasporic poet. He says that there is no way of knowing whether he would have written the poems if he had continued to live in Kerala. But, he admits that some poems definitely bear the mark of exile like the series of poems on Saint Poets which are the product of his interaction with the Bhakti-Sufi movement after his arrival in Delhi. His interest in Bhakti-Sufi movement is the result of his search for alternative to contest the hegemonic versions of politicised religion.

Besides, Kerala began to appear on his poems in all its diverse forms-birds, flora and fauna, contemporary cultural icons in movies. His



distance from the homeland has advantaged him to experience the anxiety of being in the Third Space of the homeless providing him with the stimulus for creative expressions.

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## 2.9 SUMMING-UP

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Thematically the essay can be divided into three parts. The first part deals with problematizing the general concept of diaspora as a homogenised concept. He evokes the contradictory pull created by diasporic migration and advanced cyber-communication. The advanced multi-media communication system has helped a diasporic person to experience the homeland as local while being a transnational citizen. This has created a shifting hybrid identity of global and local at the same time. Besides, there are the differences within the migrant workers –their class, their status in the labour market, gender, language and the generation - all vary to such an extent that it is impossible to pin down diaspora to one single monolithic concept. It is that indefinable hybrid space that Homi Bhabha calls the third space. K. Satchidanandan bringing in the concept of the third space as postulated by Homi Bhabha says that diaspora must be viewed keeping in mind the different forms of othering experiences in terms of class, gender, ethnic identity, status majority-minority.

The second part of the essay deals with the idea of Indianness and the impossibility of arriving at a monolithic idea of the same. The idea of the nationhood, of Indianness has also become fluid and eternally hybrid. The concept of Indianness based on the concept of united India with a single unified culture, is pulled down to create the notion of a polyphonic India which is impossible to define with a single essential attribute. Satchidanandan then talks about the regional diaspora, the inter-state immigration happening within the country. He says that the writers from these trans-regional diaspora have been contributing to the regional literature of their own native state with the same fervour and zeal as with the transnational diaspora.

The third part of the essay deals with the writer's own personal experience as a diasporic writer. After problematizing the standard notion of diaspora, K. Satchidanandan concludes the essay with his personal note.

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## 2.10 QUESTIONS

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1. Discuss key points the essay *That Third Space: interrogating the diasporic paradigm*.
2. Write a note on the key argument made by K. Satchidanandan's essay.



## UNIT III

# 3

### CRITICAL STUDY OF ANITA DESAI'S FASTING FEASTING - PART I

#### Unit Structure :

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 Anita Desai
- 3.3 *Fasting, Feasting*
- 3.4 The Structure of the novel, *Fasting, Feasting*
- 3.5 Summary of the novel, *Fasting, Feasting*
- 3.6 Questions

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#### 3.0 OBJECTIVES

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This unit aims at making the students familiar with:

- Anita Desai, a well-known Indian Novelist
- *Fasting, Feasting*, the novel by Anita Desai
- The narrative structure and style of the novel
- Indian Diaspora writing

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#### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

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Indian literature in English has a history of about two hundred years now. With the introduction of English educational system in India by Lord Macaulay, English became the medium of instruction of education in India. Three modern universities were established in India in 1857 to cater to the educational needs of Indian students and also to fulfil the requirement of cheap labour force to run the British Raj. Soon the Indians started to show their immense interest and liking for English language and literature. It initially started with the writers from Calcutta and soon they were followed by the young minds from all over the country. At present the number of books written in English in India is more than the books written in all Indian languages put together.

The history of writing in English in India has numerous well-known names of writers like Rabindranath Tagore, Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyaya, Sarojini Naidu, Raja Rao, R. K. Narayan, Nayantara Sahgal, and a host of others, who have won international accolades. Amongst them Anita Desai is one of the very important and successful writers.

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### 3.2 ANITA DESAI

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Anita Desai, a child of German Indian mother and Bengali father, is an Indian author known for her novels, short stories and also for her multilingualism as she speaks several Indian and foreign languages including Hindi, Bengali, Urdu, German and English. As a child, she was brought up in Delhi, where she picked up English and started writing in it at an early age of seven. She completed her graduation in English Literature from University of Delhi. She is married to Ashvin Desai and has four children. Her daughter, Kiran Desai is also a well-known Indian English writer, who has won Booker Prize for literature. She has been a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature and the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Besides an active and prolific writer, she also taught creative writing at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. She has also taught at Mount Holyoke College, Baruch College, and Smith College. Anita Desai is also Padma Bhushan Awardee of Govt. of India.

Anita Desai's 1978 novel, *Fire on the Mountain*, won her Sahitya Akademi Award. She is also awarded with the British Guardian Prize for her *The Village by the Sea*. She is a prominent Indian writer writing in English, who has been shortlisted thrice for Booker Prize. Some of her prominent works include *Cry the Peacock* (1963), *Voices in the City* (1965), *Bye-bye Blackbird* (1971), *The Peacock Garden* (1974), *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975), *Cat on a Houseboat* (1976), *Clear Light of Day* (1980), shortlisted for Booker Prize, *In Custody* (1984), adapted for a film named, *In Custody* that won President of India's Best Picture Award and also shortlisted for Booker Prize, *Fasting, Feasting* (1999), shortlisted for Booker Prize, *The Zigzag Way*, (2004), and *The Artist of Disappearance* (2011).

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### 3.3 FASTING, FEASTING

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Anita Desai's novel, *Fasting, Feasting* (1999) is a Booker Prize shortlisted novel that won the novelist international recognition. It basically tells the story of two families – one each from India and America. It introduces the readers with a host of characters – Papa - a magistrate, Mama - his wife, their children - Uma, Aruna and Arun, Lila Aunty and Bakul Uncle, their children - Anamika and Ramu, Mira-Masi - an unmarried distant relative of Papa, their neighbor - Mrs. Joshi, Uma's teachers, Mr. & Mrs. Patton, their children – Melania and Rod, etc.

The novel mainly narrates Uma's story, in which Uma is found entrapped in her family under the strict surveillance of her parents. Her Mama-Papa are closely attached with each other, Mama always play the secondary role and takes care of all the demands of her husband. In this family, daughters have very little value in family affairs. They are supposed to play their roles meekly and support the men in all their works. The same is seen happening in the family of Lila Aunty and Bakul Uncle.

Mr. and Mrs. Patton is one more family in the novel. In this family also, Mrs. Patton plays secondary role to her husband. Almost all women characters in this novel, except Mira-Masi and Dr. Dutt, are bound to their homes and perform their duties faithfully. There are also some incidents in which the readers are told about the differences between Indian and American ways of life. Thus, it can be observed that *Fasting, Feasting* by Anita Desai is a remarkable work of art that deals with varied human emotions and relations

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### **3.4 THE STRUCTURE OF *FASTING, FEASTING***

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The novel is set in India and America - two geographically and culturally distant places. The novel has 27 chapters and does not follow chronological order in its story-line. The novelist has used third person narrative technique with flashbacks and flash-forwards that makes the novel an interesting read. The first half of the novel primarily deals with the family of a magistrate in rural part of India and then along with Arun, who gets admitted to a University in Massachusetts in America, shifts to urban background in America where the readers meet Mr. & Mrs. Patton and their children – Melania and Rod. With the help of her characters and their inter-relations, Anita Desai unravels their minds and hearts that make her novel successful.

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### **3.5 SUMMARY OF THE NOVEL, *FASTING, FEASTING***

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When the novel opens readers find Uma taking orders from her parents to pack a box to be sent to Arun in America. The way they give her instructions makes it clear that they were more concerned about Arun, their son and neglect the feelings of Uma. They feel that Uma should learn and be very careful in doing each and every household chore. Their incessant orders to Uma with very minute details like putting a warm sweater and tea in the box for Arun shows that they think only of their own demands and needs. It makes Uma feel that she is being neglected thereby affecting her personality negatively.

The novel seems to be a story of Uma and Aruna, two sisters, who follow the traditional ways of life in a typical Indian household. It is seen that Uma's parents, Mama and Papa, are patriarchal by nature, who strongly believe that their daughters should master the works that are traditionally meant for girls like sweeping, cleaning, cooking, caring, etc. However, Uma, who is a kind of representative of new women, likes to attend the school rather than doing household works. Apparently, Papa is the decision maker of the family. He works as a middle government magistrate and Mama was proud of her husband and was more than happy to submit to all his decisions.

Uma's destiny takes a negative turn with the birth of Arun, the youngest member of her family, because her parents want her to discontinue her schooling in order to take care of the baby boy. But Uma

doesn't want to give up her schooling. She vainly tries to request Mother Agnes to convince her parents to allow her to continue to attend the school. Uma has a cousin named Anamika. In case of Anamika also it is seen that her parents - Lily Aunty and Bakul Uncle - do not allow her to continue her schooling. Instead of allowing her to get educated from Oxford University, they arrange her marriage with a Bombay-based educated man with the hope that she will be happy in her married life. But unfortunately, the readers come to know that Anamika is ill-treated by her husband and her mother-in-law. Though Anamika was educated and her in-laws were well-off, she is forced to work like servant in the house failing to which she is cruelly beaten.

Uma usually looks at her parents as inseparable as her mother always seen following the footsteps of her husband. That is why Uma calls them as Mama Papa. There were only few incidents Uma remembers of her young days when her Mama would step outside her home and visit the women in her neighbourhood to play cards. On those occasions Uma had seen her laughing loudly and showing her coy and playful side. She would never tell her Papa that she had left the house. It was the time when Papa was still working as an attorney. Uma also remembers the days when Papa played tennis. He used to make all the family and the servants be present during the game. Mama used to take the care that everything is properly ready for him like washing his tennis suit and keeping lemonade ready for him to drink after the game was over. Papa as a magistrate always tries to show himself very serious at home and also at social gatherings, trying to establish his superiority and social status. Though Mama feels proud of Papa and his status, she is not allowed to follow her hobbies openly. It shows the patriarchal structure of their family as well as the society. The occasion of peeling the orange and feeding it to Papa shows the kind of unequal gender status in the family.

The writer has narrated the event of Arun's birth in this novel. Uma was asked by her parents to discontinue her schooling as she was required to take care of the baby boy. Uma as a teenager could not understand why she was being treated like this. Even she tried to take help of Mother Agnes, the head nun of her convent school, in convincing her parents to allow her to attend the school. But Uma is shocked to know that even after Mother Agnes' hard efforts, Uma's father could not be convinced. She tells Uma that it would be better for her to learn household work. It was at this time that Uma suffers her first epileptic seizure. Now it was mandatory for Uma to take care of her brother Arun. Uma observes that her parents were very much concerned about Arun and his progress. She is perturbed particularly by the behaviour of Mama as she takes pride in being a mother of a son and a wife of a socially important person.

Uma feels that there was no love between Mama and Papa. They were just like two bodies living together. Uma is seen bewildered by the way her mother submits herself completely to the demands of her husband as if she was not an independent individual. It was during such occasions that Uma's rebellious nature is seen as she thinks she will never marry



without love. Arun as a little boy was sickly and weak. But the kind of superior treatment he was getting at home makes him feel that he has a place of importance in the family. So whenever he gets an opportunity, he is seen threatening Uma even for a small issue.

Uma's idea of independence was different from her mother. She feels that she is an individual having her own likes and dislikes, her own needs and demands. Though it was difficult for her to nurture her free spirit in the dominating presence of her parents, she is seen expressing her individuality whenever she gets an opportunity. On one of such occasions Uma is seen getting angry and scolding Ayah for beating Laxmi, her daughter. It was when Ayah tells Uma about Laxmi's running away from her arranged marriage. Laxmi did not want to get married and preferred to find some work as a servant and earn her livelihood. Ayah tells Uma that it was because of Laxmi that she has suffered a lot in her life. She has sacrificed all her pleasures for Laxmi. But Laxmi did not understand the concerns of her mother. Uma tries to convince Ayah that it would be better for her if she allows Laxmi to have her own way. Uma's anger against Ayah is actually the result of her own frustration of her life. Her parents have not allowed Uma to live her life in her own way for which she feels very angry with them. But as she could not express her anger against them, she does it against Ayah.

As a child, Uma is seen very much under the influence of Mira-Masi, a distant relative of the family. Mira-Masi was a widow, who led a lonely but free life, travelling all over the country. She had dedicated her life to Lord Shiva whose company she likes the most. She was well-versed with Hindu scriptures. Uma's parents did not like Mira-Masi for being old fashioned in the matters of religion. In fact, they were more worried about Mira-Masi's free nature and her sense of freedom, which was a threat to their own social beliefs. However, Uma very much liked Mira-Masi and her free nature. She used to insist that Mira-Masi narrate her wonderful and magical stories of Gods and Goddesses. The writer tells the readers that though Mama Papa did not like Mira-Masi, one day they allowed their children - Uma, Aruna and Arun- to accompany Mira-Masi to go to the river for her religious bathing. They had warned all the children not to enter into the river owing to its filthy water and the big currents. Though Aruna and Arun follow the warning of their parents, Uma jumps into the river as she wanted to experience how it feels when the water washes over her. In fact, this act on the part of Uma was her longcherished desire to have her own freedom, not only physical but also an inner freedom that would make her to fulfill her own desires.

Like Mira-Masi, Uma was also influenced by Ramu, the son of Lila Aunty and Bakul Uncle, as he was known for his free spirit. It was Ramu, who had persuaded Uma to return home from an Ashram, where she had lived for a month as a pilgrim and wanted to continue living there. Mama-Papa did not like Ramu from the beginning as they considered him to be the black sheep of the family. Though they did not want Uma to go out with Ramu for a dinner, he convinces them and takes her to the

Carlton Hotel. Here Uma drinks and laughs and enjoys the moment at its fullest. After coming back home, Uma tries to narrate her experience to mama. But Mama did not like it and on the contrary blames Uma.

Uma belongs to typical Indian family where young girls were required to get married at a certain age. Uma had reached to her middle age and now it was almost impossible for her to get a proper match. The writer has made this point clear with the help of an incident in which the local jeweler asks, “Am I to make Baby’s wedding jewelry this year?” Actually the jeweler used to come to Uma’s house every year and every time he used to ask the same question. He had realized that Uma has passed her marriageable age but keeps on asking the same question every year. The same social attitude towards women is made apparent by the writer by introducing Anamika, Uma’s cousin. Anamika was gracious, beautiful and intelligent and had several suitors. She had won the scholarship to Oxford. But her parents – Lila Aunty and Bakul Uncle – did not allow her to the scholarship. They preferred to get her married instead of sending her to Oxford. Though Anamika was beautiful and could not have got a good husband, her parents marry her off to a much older man who was socially equal to them. This marriage proves to be a failure because Anamika’s husband was more concerned about keeping his own mother happy than taking care of the wishes of his wife. It results in Anamika’s frequent beatings at the hands of her husband and mother-in-law. Finally, Anamika becomes a kind of servant in her own home. Once when she was pregnant, she was severely beaten that leads to her miscarriage making her unable to bear a child permanently in future. It means a women like Anamika had to suffer only because of the social customs to which she falls a victim.

The similar social custom is seen disturbing the life of Uma. On one occasion Mrs. Joshi, Uma’s neighbour is seen trying to find a match for Uma, though Uma was not much interested in it. But Uma’s parents invite the Syal family to see Uma. After two weeks they sent a message that instead of Uma they liked Aruna as their daughter-in-law. Mama is enraged to receive such a message as it was not customary to get the younger daughter married before the elder one. She blamed Uma for it because she thinks that Uma never paid proper attention towards making her suitable for marriage. Because of Uma’s love for education and playing, she did not learn womanly works at home properly.

In another incident the Goyals came with a marriage proposal for Uma, which is liked by Mama Papa. However, the Goyals demanded the amount of dowry in advance as they wanted to buy a property. As Mama Papa wanted their daughter, Uma to get married at the earliest, they accept the demand for dowry and give the amount to the Goyals. But soon they realize that Goyals have deceived them as they tell them that their son wanted to pursuing education than getting married. As the money was already spent for buying the property, Mama Papa could not do anything.

After Syals' message accepting Aruna as their would-be daughter-in-law, it is seen that Aruna's attitude towards Uma has changed. She has started considering herself superior to Uma. Even the other members of the family start to withdraw their sympathies from Uma. This changed attitude of her family members makes Uma feel like an outcast. She doubts whether the family protects its members properly. Like herself, Uma has also witnessed similar treatment given to Anamika by her own parents. This disbelief in the institution of family makes Uma feel more and more isolated. She feels that the parents of the girl children were only concerned about getting their daughters married off without paying proper attention towards the needs of their own daughters. This attitude of the parents is seen in the cases of both Anamika and Uma.

In their desperate attempt to get Uma married, Mama Papa accept the marriage proposal which they receive through the newspaper advertisement. But at the time of marriage, Uma is horrified to see that her husband was old, fat and had no interest in her. After the marriage, Uma enters into her new house. But her husband immediately leaves for Meerut as he works there. At home, nobody cares for her. On the contrary, she was given directions about cooking and other household chores. After some days Papa comes to know that Uma's husband had another wife in Meerut and he had married Uma only because he wanted money to save his business. So the marriage is broken and Uma is forced to get back to her maternal home. This incident coupled with others throws light on how the families of the sons of marriageable age take disadvantage of the helplessness of the women's families.

The readers are further told that Aruna is married to the handsomest and wealthiest young man, Arvind and got shifted to Bombay. She was very particular regarding all the rituals of her marriage that take place in the Carlton Hotel. There were elaborate arrangements made for the wedding. However, Uma suffers an epileptic seizure during the cocktail party that Aruna had arranged for the family and her in-laws the night before the marriage. Aruna feels that Uma's "fit" had spoiled the party and threatens Uma to be careful on the day of her marriage. During the entire ceremony, Uma feels ignored and isolated. The local doctor has suggested that Uma should be taken to the specialist for her treatment but Aruna objects to it by saying that it would be too costly and there is no need to spend a lot of money on Uma's illness.

Whenever Aruna comes to visit her family it is observed that she keeps criticizing not only Uma but also her mother. She calls them 'villagers' having no manners of social behaviour. This makes Mama to get united with Uma in disliking Aruna. Even Aruna's children, Aisha and Dinesh, are seem to be different in their nature. Once Aruna had come to her maternal home with her in-laws to have a holy bath in the river. On this occasion, Uma jumps off the boat into the river. Somehow she is saved. It is shocking that nobody including her parents was interested in getting Uma treated by a specialist. It shows the indifferent nature of the parents towards their daughter.

This indifference further leads Uma feeling more and more lonely and isolated. Once Uma is invited to a coffee party thrown by Mrs. O' Henry. Though Mama Papa did not want Uma to attend the party, Uma goes out. During the party, Uma helps Mrs. O' Henry in taking care of her guests. This helping nature of Uma makes Mrs. O' Henry think that Uma has a potential to get converted into Christianity and so she invites her to a Christian retreat in the Mountains of Landoure. For Mama Papa it was unnecessary for Uma to accept invitations and go out. They feel that socializing is a bad thing and one should do it only if one has no other choice. This hypocritical behaviour of Mama Papa is criticized by Uma.

During the school days of their children, it is seen that Mama Papa paid more attention towards the education of their son, Arun. They hired tutors to drill words, rules, facts and formulas into Arun's brain. Papa wanted Arun to get best of the education so that he can move ahead in his social life. After the hard studies, Papa wanted Arun to go out and exercise. But Arun used to get exhausted and did not like exercise. The continuous hammering from his parents for better performance does not allow Arun to give some time for his own hobbies. It seems that his life was meant for his parents than for himself. That is why when he receives a letter of acceptance to the University in Massachusetts, he does not feel excited but exhausted. Even at the time of his departure to America, he was not happy. As Mama Papa never asked whether Arun wanted to go to America to pursue his higher studies, similarly they never asked Uma whether or not she wanted to marry. They kept on forcing their children to fulfill their own dreams.

The incident of Uma's writing a letter to Arun on behalf of her parents informing him that he was invited by Mrs. Patton, the sister of Mrs. O' Henry, to live with them during the summer throws further light on how Papa was concerned only about Arun and not about Uma whose even basic needs are ignored. Uma was facing some problem with her eyes for quite some time now, but her Papa shows no interest in taking her to a specialist.

When Uma gets a call from Mother Agnes inviting her to help Mrs. O'Henry to run her Christmas booth during the Christmas Bazaar, she happily accepts it. This incident shows Uma's yearning for the life outside her house. She was always interested in helping people, getting familiar with them, and socializing. It was Uma's intense desire to pursue a career of her own which was not liked by her parents, who thought marriage to be the only destination for a woman.

It is seen that Mama Papa never liked Uma's going out and getting mixed with the people outside home. The only exception was Mrs. Joshi, who had come to live in the neighbourhood after her marriage. Actually Mrs. Joshi's was a marriage based on love that made her mother-in-law punish her. Mrs. Joshi had developed closed affinity and friendship with Mama. After the death of her mother-in-law, Mrs. Joshi had taken over the

change of the household and always allowed to have free and joyous atmosphere at home. Her children could pursue the careers of their own choice and hence became successful in their respective careers. Mrs. Joshi is unlike other women characters in the novel, who are seen meekly submitting to the dictates of their families and leading unhappy lives. In this sense, Mrs. Joshi can be looked upon as a model to be imitated by other women.

Uma's liking for Mrs. Joshi for her progressive attitude is in fact her own desire to lead similar life. Even though Uma lived with her parents, she usually felt lonely. Her parents had never allowed her to pursue her own likes and dislikes. Even she had no any close friends and relatives except Mira-Masi and Ramu. Her parents did not like both of them. Mira-Masi recently had almost stopped her visits. Uma remembers Mira-Masi's last visit to her family. Once the idol of Lord Shiva was stolen from her altar. But when Lila Aunty visited the family, she told them that Mira-Masi has found the idol of Shiva in a shop that sold brassware. She further told them that Mira-Masi had come to know about the idol through her dream which excited Uma.

Uma and Dr. Dutt were close to each other. Dr. Dutt wanted Uma to take up a job of running a dormitory for nurses in training. But Mama Papa opposed it even though Uma was really interested. Mama sent Uma to the kitchen to take a tray and told Dr. Dutt about Uma's seizures. It meant Uma herself required medical assistance so she cannot take up the job. One day when Uma called Dr. Dutt to know about the possibility of her taking the job, Dr. Dutt told her that her Mama was not well and she wanted Uma to work as a nurse for her. This incident shows that Mama Papa did not want Uma to be independent so that they can make her work for the family.

One late night after the dinner, the electricity went out. At that time a telegram came announcing the death of Anamika. The family came to know that Anamika had committed suicide by burning her outside her home. But the neighbours were whispering that it was Anamika's mother-in-law, who dragged Anamika out of the house in the midnight and put on kerosene on her body and burnt her alive. Anamika's ashes were dispersed in the sacred river. Papa arranged a large wooden boat to carry all of them. It was at this time Uma thinks of Anamika's life. In fact, it was Uma who had tried twice to get drowned in this river but still she was alive and Anamika was dead. This thought disturbed her mentally. Anamika's death made Mama Papa feel love for Uma, especially Mama gets closer to Uma and for some time Uma feels at home in Mama's company.

Then the novel suddenly shifts to Massachusetts, America, where readers meet Arun walking by the road noticing the neatly trimmed green lawns and speeding cars and closed houses. He feels that Americans were rich and loved to exhibit their richness. But they could not enjoy it as they were forced to be either inside their cars or their homes. They were more individualistic than community oriented, which Arun does not like. When



he entered the house, he saw Mr. Patton trying to locate a can of stewed tomatoes, which she wanted to serve Arun for his dinner. Arun found Mr. Patton as an authoritative person like his Papa, who always tried to dominate the other members of the family. It is made clear by the kind of anger Mr. Patton expresses when nobody shows any interest to eat the steaks which he himself had grilled for them. His children - Melanie and Rod - did not join the family for the dinner. On the contrary, Melanie is seen eating a bag of peanuts sitting alone at the bottom of the stairs. Though Mrs. Patton also does not like to eat the steaks, there was no choice for her. She tells Mr. Patton that Arun was vegetarian and he must respect his religious beliefs. But Mr. Patton does not approve it and says that how it was possible for anybody to refuse a good steak. This small incident shows that though the Pattons live together, there was a lack of family bonding amongst them.

After his coming to America, Arun had witnessed strangeness in the place and people around him. He did not like the loud music, weekend parties and smoking habits of the students in his college. Even he did not like to participate in the cooking nights and movie hangouts arranged by Indian students. Actually, Arun had been brought up in an atmosphere that was surrounded by his family. He had witnessed that his parents always worried about him and paid much attention even to the smallest of his needs. This too much care of his parents made Arun yearn for solitude. That is why Arun always tried to keep himself away from getting involved with anybody either in India or America. On the contrary, Uma was always neglected by her parents and hence she is found craving for company.

Actually, Arun had tried to find out a room for him just before his first summer in America. He had rejected the offer of his Indian classmates for renting a house for them for the summer. At that time he received a letter from his Papa informing him that Mrs. Patton has offered him a room for the summer. In fact, Arun did not want to live in a family because he felt that the members unnecessarily interfere in the lives of each other. Arun wanted to live an independent life, but unfortunately he had not mastered the skills required for independent survival. It is observed that he was habituated to having all his needs met by his family when he was in India and by his University in America. That is why, he was required to accept the help of others.

At Patton house, Mrs. Patton is seen developing close relation with Arun. She was told by her sister, Mrs. O' Henry from India that Arun has different food habits and would like to continue with them. She tells Arun that she would also like be vegetarian like him. But Arun says that he would prefer to take his meals outside though he realizes that it was not a permanent solution. In fact he did not to share her enthusiasm as he would prefer to be alone. Arun had observed that Mrs. Patton buys a lot of things from the market but fails to use them to prepare the food at home. Everything at home was packaged without much nutrition. Mrs. Patton's attempt to be vegetarian is ignored by Mr. Patton, who usually forced

others obey him submissively and not to challenge his authority. Arun could draw a parallel between his own family in India and the Patton family in America.

Arun had observed how the Patton family lived together as if they were all independent entities and had nothing to do with each other. It becomes clear when readers observe Mrs. Patton nibbling at the steak reluctantly as she does not like it. Arun being a vegetarian refuses to have it, Melanie prefers a bag of peanuts, Rod, the son of the family, did not join them for the dinner as he came very late at night and ate the remnants of the meat off the grill. Melanie even doesn't like Arun looking at her when he was on his way to his room. It means all the members of the family just lived together for the sake of living no more no less.

While returning from the library, Arun meets Rod, who invites him to join him jogging but Arun refuses. At home, Mrs. Patton invites Arun to cook Indian food. As Arun had never cooked before, he mixes all the ingredients together. Though the food was not good, Arun eats it in order to please Mrs. Patton. Melanie could not eat this food and prefers to eat Hershey's. At this Arun feels guilty as he thinks that he has spoilt the food. Mrs. Patton attempts to spend more time with Arun. But it is also not liked by Arun as he feels that she silently wanted him to make her feel like a good mother. Mrs. Patton told Arun that few years ago she used to take her children - Melanie and Rod - for shopping and they used to buy a lot of things. At home they used to finish it off within a week's time. But now, Mrs. Patton buys the things for the family and stock them in the freezer so that they would take them off whenever they liked. After witnessing the incidents happening around him, Arun had realized that the Patton family was not only having some problems with their eating habits but they were disjointed from each other in every aspect.

When Arun saw that American men are trying to build their body with lot of exercise, he also begins jogging. He strains his body so much that he feels tired. At home, when he tells Rod that Melanie seems to be sick, Rod shows indifference towards his sister's health. He says that Melanie is destroying her health by eating too much junk food and then throwing it out to keep her slim. Arun wonders at the American obsession for their bodies. It seemed to him that they blur the line between health and sickness, which, according to Arun, was unnecessary. Arun's stay with the Pattons has made him aware of the fact that the Pattons were facing the problem of family dysfunction. Nobody really cared about anybody else. When Arun notices Melanie's swollen face, he asks Mrs. Patton if she was ill. But instead of considering the issue of Melanie's health seriously, she says that she was all fine and needs just to have scrambled eggs. Even Mr. Patton fails to understand the seriousness of Melanie's health. Arun realizes that both the Pattons consider Melanie as a small child and ignore what actually she wanted as a young woman. When Arun accompanies Mrs. Patton to the super market, she feels offended by the cashier's remark. Arun feels embarrassed by the awkward situation as Mrs. Patton wanted him to reassure her that she was neither fat nor old.

The incident at the cashier's counter had made Mrs. Patton behave little strangely. It is noticed by Arun when he saw her in a bikini sunbathing in a front yard. She is seen inviting all to accompany her for the sunbathing but all of them keep themselves away from her. Arun notices that Melanie was actually neglected by her family. He remembers Uma behaving in the same way as Melanie does. Like Mama Papa the Pattons fail to understand the emotional needs of Melanie. All the time they treat her like a silly child. Arun feels that Melanie needed love and understanding of her parents like Uma who always craved for the love of Mama Papa. Mrs. Patton's hobby of sunbathing puts the entire household in disarray. The changed atmosphere at home made Arun stay longer in town eating sandwiches and watching movies all by himself.

One Saturday, Mrs. Patton takes Arun and Melanie with her at the swimming pond in the woods near their home. Melanie begins to eat chocolate candy bars while her mother shades the clothing over her bikini for sunbathing. The near nakedness of Mrs. Patton makes Arun feel uncomfortable. So he jumps into the water feeling peaceful and content. After he comes out of the water, he saw that Melanie has disappeared. When he attempts to explore the woods by himself, unexpectedly he comes across Melanie who was lying face down in her vomit. But Melanie asks him to go away. Arun feels like saving her like the hero but realizes that it was impossible for him because Melanie's pain and hunger were real. Mrs. Patton comes there but fails to show her real love and concern for her daughter. For Arun Melanie was like Uma who needed to come out of the sense of her loneliness.

Now it was the time for Arun to return to college. He feels normal as the town was lively due to the return of the students. Mr. Patton had sent Melanie for the treatment at a temporary recovery home in the Berkshires. The reports of her recovery and leading a normal life make the Pattons happy and relieved. Mrs. Patton had stopped sunbathing. Now she gives more attention towards Melanie's room than the kitchen. Rod had won a football scholarship. Before Arun leaves the Patton family, he receives a box with a brown shawl and tea from his parents. He gifts both the items to Mrs. Patton and leaves the house.

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### 3.6 QUESTIONS

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1. Write a brief note on the life and career of Anita Desai.
2. Discuss the plot-structure of the novel, *Fasting, Feasting*.
3. Write a brief summary of the novel, *Fasting, Feasting*.
4. Discuss the relationship between Mama and Papa.
5. What kind of relation was there between Uma and her parents?
6. Comment on Anita Desai's use of narrative technique in her novel, *Fasting, Feasting*.



## UNIT IV

# 4

### CRITICAL STUDY OF ANITA DESAI'S *FASTING FEASTING*- PART II CHARACTERIZATION AND THEMES IN *FASTING, FEASTING*

#### Unit Structure :

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 Characterization in *Fasting, Feasting*
  - 4.2.1 Uma
  - 4.2.2 Aruna
  - 4.2.3 Arun
  - 4.2.4 Mama
  - 4.2.5 Papa
  - 4.2.6 Anamika
  - 4.2.7 Mira-Masi
  - 4.2.8 Ramu
  - 4.2.9 Mrs. Patton
  - 4.2.10 Mr. Patton
  - 4.2.11 Melanie and Rod
- 4.3 Critical Issues in *Fasting Feasting*
  - 4.3.1 Socio-cultural patterns in *Fasting, Feasting*
  - 4.3.2 Institutions of marriage and family in *Fasting, Feasting*
  - 4.3.3 Individuality vs. social constrains in *Fasting, Feasting*
  - 4.3.4 East vs. West in *Fasting, Feasting*
- 4.4 Questions

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#### 4.0 OBJECTIVES

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The objectives of this unit are to know about:

- Anita Desai's art of characterization
- The characters of the novel, *Fasting, Feasting*
- Anita Desai's thematic concerns in *Fasting, Feasting*

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## 4.1 INTRODUCTION

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Anita Desai is a critically acclaimed Indian novelist writing in English. Her skilful handling of her art has brought her many national and international laurels. Her novel, *Anita Desai's novel* contains a multitude of lively characters, both major and minor. It revolves mainly around the characters of Uma and Arun but also touches upon the lives of many others during its course. Anita Desai's treatment of her characters, particularly women characters, helps the readers to understand the male-dominated social structure both in India and America. The characters of this novel are ordinary human beings and exhibit the common qualities that are found amongst the people around them. Her realistic characters all the time attract the attention of the readers and make them come alive in front of them.

The characters of Uma, Aruna, Arun, Mama, Papa, Anamika, Mira-Masi, Mrs. Patton, Melania, etc. are beautifully drawn by the novelist. So to understand the novel in better manner it is essential to analyze its characters.

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## 4.2 CHARACTERIZATION IN *FASTING, FEASTING*

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### 4.2.1 Uma:

The character of Uma is perhaps the most important character in the novel as most of the events revolve around this character. She plays the roles of a daughter, sister, and an independent adventurous person that longs for freedom. The readers look at Uma as the heroine of the novel, who is oppressed by her parents and is forced to submit to the familial and societal pressures. The constant unending pressures from her family had a negative effect on Uma's personality that pushes her towards life-long illness of seizures.

Uma is the eldest daughter of the family and hence her parents wanted her to shoulder the responsibility of her younger brother, Arun. Though, Uma wanted to continue with her schooling, she is removed from the school so that she can take care of Arun. Actually she requests Mother Agnes to convince her father to let her attend the school but to no avail. Rather than going to school, her parents wanted her to pay close attention towards domestic works so that she can be married off in a good family. But Uma was of the opinion that if there is no love there should not be the marriage. So she deliberately ignored their instructions.

Uma's negligence towards herself and her responsibilities make her misfit in the world of marriage, where a bride is required to be beautiful and obedient. Naturally, her parents could not find her a proper match till she passes a marriageable age and hence they are left with no choice than to get her married off hurriedly without much initial enquiry about the groom. It leads to the failure of her married life and her parents

bring her back home, where she has to live for entire of her life taking care of her parents.

Uma is a free spirited girl. She wanted to experience the life from the front. That is why, she accepts Ramu's invitation for a dinner and enjoys the time out with him. Even, she accompanies Mira-Masi to an Ashram and stays there for a month. It was because of Ramu, who succeeds in convincing her, that she had come back home. Her adventurous nature can also be seen from her jumping into the river when she had gone there with Mira-Masi. When Dr. Dutt asked Uma if she would like to work in the hospital, Uma was very much delighted and wanted to accept the offer. But her parents did not want her to work and hence she misses this opportunity.

Thus, Uma, the heroine of this novel, is a lively character that attracts the attention of the readers towards her. It is her free and adventurous spirit that makes her appealing and unforgettable.

#### **4.2.2 Aruna:**

Aruna is Uma's younger sister. She is described as a beautiful young woman having gracefulness in her personality and social behavior for which her parents like her more than Uma. Her beauty, gracefulness and self-confidence, they feel, are the required qualities that a young woman should have to get a suitable husband. That is why, Aruna is seen considering herself superior to Uma and disliking her for her being simple and careless in her familial and social behavior. It is seen that her sense of superiority increases when the Syals sent a message saying that they prefer Aruna to Uma as a daughter-in-law.

As a young eligible woman, Aruna receives many marriage proposals. But she chooses to marry Arvind, the handsomest and wealthiest young man from Bombay. During her married life, Aruna is found trying to emulate the manners and mannerisms of high class society in Bombay and be a perfectionist in them. However, her changed ways of behavior physically and emotionally distance her from her maternal family. It is seen in her criticism of her family during her visits, which gradually become very less. So Aruna, a girl who was loved and admired by her family, gets disintegrated from them because of her over-emphasis on social mannerisms.

#### **4.2.3 Arun:**

Arun is the younger brother of Uma and the only son of the family. Naturally, he is the darling of the parents, who take care of all his needs. In fact, Mama Papa doted on Arun and saw to it that he leads a comfortable life. It is because of Arun that Uma is removed from the school. For Mama Papa, taking care of Arun was much more important for Uma than attending the school. As per his parents' desire, Arun attends a good school and gets assistance from tutors to learn different subjects. Though Arun studies hard and wins a seat in a University in Massachusetts, America, it is observed that he did it under the pressure of



his parents. This pressure is seen when Arun expresses his liking for vegetarian food. His father is annoyed by it as he thinks that non-vegetarian food was essential for strength. Even Arun did not like to exercise as he used to get exhausted after his studies. So he preferred to be at home than going out to play.

In fact Arun wanted to free himself from the overpowering atmosphere at his family. Too much interference into his life from his parents makes Arun dislike the family as a unit and the familial atmosphere. So when he comes to America, he wanted to rent a flat for the summer. But his parents force him to live with the Patton family. Though Arun goes to stay with the Pattons, he tries to keep himself away from all the members of the Patton family as much as possible. It is seen from the fact that though initially he refuses to accompany his friends to go to watch movies, now during his stay with the Pattons, Arun begins to eat outside and go to watch the movies all alone. This behavioral change in Arun is his reaction to the familial pressure through which he goes during his life in India.

#### **4.2.4 Mama:**

Mama's character is one of the important characters in the novel. However, her importance in a way is ignored by the novelist as she is not given any proper name. So throughout the novel, she is just a Mama for her children, other characters and also the readers. Mama is the proud wife of Papa and shares almost all his views and opinions with reference to her family and the outside world. She is the mother of three children - Uma, Aruna, and Arun. She was so closely connected with her husband that Uma usually calls her Mama Papa. She is a submissive wife and hardly questions her husband and faithfully obeys all his commands.

With her husband, she is found controlling the lives of her children so much so that on many occasions the poor souls suffer a lot. For example, Mama does not oppose Papa when he decides to remove Uma from the school so that she can take care of the baby boy. Uma was not very brilliant student but she wanted to continue her schooling. The decision of removing her from school negatively impacts her personality growth and all her future life. It actually was one of the chief reasons that lead Uma to suffer from seizures. Mama also does not play any significant role in Uma's marriage. When Papa was trying to find out suitable match for Uma, Mama remains passive and allows him to do whatever he wanted to do resulting in the failure of Uma's married life. Even when Dr. Dutt offers Uma a job in the hospital, Mama does not allow Uma to accept it. On the contrary, she tells Dr. Dutt about Uma's inability to accept the job as she was suffering from seizures.

However, it doesn't mean that Mama does not speak her mind at all throughout the novel. For example, Mama is seen visiting Mrs. Joshi, playing cards and enjoying those moments about which she does not tell anything to her husband. Even readers witness Mama telling Papa that she wanted to terminate her late pregnancy as it will be painful and dangerous

to her health. But Papa does not listen to her and it results in the birth of Arun. Mama also is seen sympathizing with Uma in her later life after she comes to know about the death of Anamika. Thus Mama's character can be judged as a character exhibiting all the essential qualities of an ideal India wife.

#### **4.2.5 Papa:**

The character of Papa is introduced to the readers early in the novel as a magistrate, who behaves like the one even after he gets back home. He is an undisputed leader of his family, who wanted all the members to follow his commands without raising any doubt. It is seen when he makes all the family and servants to play an audience whenever he plays tennis. Besides a magistrate, Papa plays the roles of a husband of a submissive wife and also a father of three children. Mama, his wife has been his faithful companion, who helps him to control the destinies of Uma, Aruna and Arun.

Mama knows how Papa was against the idea of freedom of women even though he is highly educated and belongs to the modern age. In his social circumstances, Papa observes how women enjoy freedom and lead their lives on their own terms. However, he represents the old generation that believed in unconditional submission of women to the dictates of the men. That is what he expects from his own wife and children. It is seen that Mama meekly submits to him and even does not dare to tell him how much she liked to mix up with other women and enjoy her life.

In case of Uma, too, Papa takes all decisions that show his patriarchal attitude. He forces Uma to give up her schooling in favour of his son. Similarly, Uma is not at all consulted when Papa thinks of the marriage proposals for her. Papa dislikes all those women who are seen defying their traditional roles and exhibiting their sense of individuality and freedom. That is the reason why Papa dislikes Mira-Masi, a woman who remains unmarried and wanders all over the country in search of her Lord. Similarly, Papa detests Dr. Dutt as instead of getting married, she pursues her career. Such women, Papa thinks, are the threats to the traditional Indian society and its culture.

It is not only the women who are dominated by Papa but Ramu and Arun also suffer at the hands of Papa. Ramu, the son of Lila Aunty and Bakul Uncle, was considered as a black sheep of the family and never liked by Papa for his outward, careless behavior. Even in case of Arun, it is found that Papa takes all the decisions regarding his life. During Arun's school and college days, Papa makes him do whatever he feels good for him. He makes Arun study hard that exhausts the little boy. And after that he used to ask Arun to go out and play, which physically was very difficult for him. He also criticizes Arun's liking for vegetarian food, as he believes that non-veg is required for Arun to make him physically strong. Even when Arun goes to America, Papa forces him to live with the Pattons for his summer though Arun did not want to stay in the family. Thus Papa

is the true representative of Indian patriarchal mindset that wants all to be subservient to it.

#### **4.2.6 Anamika:**

Anamika is the beautiful daughter of Lila Aunty and Bakul Uncle. As a student, she was brilliant and had won the scholarship to go to the Oxford. Like all other girls of her age, she was eager to pursue her higher studies. But her parents did not allow her to do so. Instead they wanted her to get married and settle in her life. Accordingly, she is married off to a man who was an obedient son of a dominating mother. Naturally, Anamika's married life becomes a nightmare for her. The readers are told that Anamika is regularly beaten by her husband and mother-in-law. But instead of opposing their cruel treatment, she keeps suffering silently. It seems that she was sure of the fact that she won't get any support from anybody including her parents. The constant inhuman treatment at the hands of her husband and mother-in-law, finally forces Anamika to take the final step. Though the readers are told that Anamika commits suicide, it is also mentioned that her neighbours whispered something else. Thus, Anamika, a brilliant student, an obedient daughter, a submissive wife and above all a finest human being loses her life because of the familial and societal pressures.

#### **4.2.7 Mira-Masi:**

Mira-Masi was a relative of the magistrate's family with whom Uma was very closely connected. The readers are told that Mira-Masi was an elderly unmarried woman. In Indian social structure, marriage is believed to be the sole and final destination of a woman's life. But Mira-Masi defied this social tradition and remained unmarried. She had devoted her life to spirituality and so she used to wander all over the country visiting different places of pilgrimage in search of her Lord Shiva. Naturally, she was an unwelcome guest at the Papa's. Papa, the believer of Indian traditions, never liked Mira-Masi and the ways of her behavior probably because he considers her to be a threat to his authority that has bestowed upon him by the tradition. But Mira-Masi was liked by Uma. Whenever, she visits the family, Uma used to be her constant companion. Uma, actually, liked the free and adventurous spirit of her Mira-Masi and that is why Uma jumps into the river when she had gone out with Mira-Masi. Even once Mira-Masi convinces Papa to allow Uma to go to an Ashrama with her, where Uma stays for more than a month. If Ramu would not have convinced Uma to return home, probably Uma's life would have been quite different than what it is. Thus Mira-Masi's character is delineated on a different social plane than the characters of Mama, Anamika and Aruna by Anita Desai.

#### **4.2.8 Ramu:**

Ramu was the son of Lila Aunty and Bakul Uncle. He was considered as a black sheep of the family because of his careless and out-of-the-box ways of behavior. Naturally, he is not liked by Mama Papa. But Uma was very close to Ramu. That is why, against her parents' wish, she accompanies Ramu for a dinner in a city restaurant and enjoys his

company. Even earlier, Ramu plays a vital role in bringing Uma back home from the Ashrama, in which she had lived for more than a month and from where her parents were afraid that she won't return. Thus, Ramu is a lovable character so far as his relationship with Uma is considered.

#### **4.2.9 Mrs. Patton:**

The readers meet the character of Mrs. Patton along with Arun when he goes to stay with her during his summer break. The readers are told that Mrs. Patton is the sister of Mrs. O' Henry, who was an acquaintance of Arun's family in India. It was because of O' Henry's close connection with Uma, whom she considers as a person easy to be converted into Christianity that makes it possible for Arun to stay with the Pattons. Mrs. Patton plays different roles of a wife, a mother and a host.

Soon after Arun's arrival at the Pattons, the readers come to know that Mrs. Patton was a house-wife, who tries to play her role as faithfully as possible. But it is also observed that she had her own ideas regarding playing her role that unfortunately makes her get disintegrated from her family. She feels that she has to buy a lot of groceries to fulfill the needs of all the family members. However, she fails to understand that it was not only the food items that people around her wanted from her. Her daughter, Melanie, actually wanted her mother to pay attention towards her emotional and physical problems. But Mrs. Patton fails to understand her. Similarly, Mrs. Patton fails to make her husband understand that she prefers vegetarian food to that of non-veg. But she never tells him so fearing that he will disapprove of her food preference. In this way, though she lives in a family, she leads a lonely life as she could not get emotionally united with her family members. That is why, probably, she tries to befriend Arun and make him feel at home by taking him for shopping and providing him vegetarian food. So as a character, Mrs. Patton remains in the minds of the readers as a woman who fails to understand her own self.

#### **4.2.10 Mr. Patton:**

The readers know Mr. Patton as a workaholic person, who focuses more on his work than his wife and children. He has devoted his life to his work and wanted all the members of his family to be equally productive like him. Like the head of the family, Mr. Patton is not seen taking much interest in the day-to-day activities of his family. He is happy with his wife taking care of the household responsibilities like shopping and cooking. However, he likes to grill the steak and serve it to his family. Like many American men, he also likes to exercise and build his physique. His self-centered nature does not allow him to gauge what actually his wife and children want from him.

#### **4.2.11 Melanie and Rod:**

Melanie and Rod are the children of the Pattons. Like any other American children, they were more interested in pursuing their own individual goals. Rod, for example, liked to exercise a lot and build his body as strong as possible so that he can get selected in the football team.

He comes home late at night and eats his dinner all alone. Melanie was also very much conscious of her body but did not pay attention towards her eating habits. So she is seen preferring the junk food to that of healthy and nutritious food prepared at home that often makes her ill. She is found emotionally disintegrated from her family and wanted her mother to pay attention towards her emotional needs, but surprisingly, she fails to tell her mother so.

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### 4.3 CRITICAL ISSUES IN *FASTING FEASTING*

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A close and critical reading of Anita Desai's novel, *Fasting, Feasting* brings forth many of the thematic concerns of the novelist. It is observed that Anita Desai is deeply rooted in the social structure around her. She keeps an open eye towards various issues that affect the lives of her characters, particularly her women characters. Therefore, it is essential to discuss the themes of her novel in order to understand why her characters behave in certain ways throughout their lives.

#### 4.3.1 Socio-cultural patterns in *Fasting, Feasting*:

Anita Dasai's *Fasting, Feasting* is a novel that deals with the lives of characters coming from two different social set-ups – India and America. However, most of them are seen following the set socio-cultural patterns of behavior and fulfilling the gender-specific roles assigned to them by their respective societies. According to these patriarchal social conventions, men and women are required to act as per certain set standards. In such a society man is considered to be superior to woman and is expected to engage in active external activities whereas woman is passive and required to work inside the four walls of the house. It is expected that man should work hard, earn the livelihood, and be independent and successful. Woman is expected to be submissive, dependent and engage in household chores including child birth and child rearing. And she is required to follow these social dictates without uttering a single word against them as Hardy says, "It is difficult for a woman to define her feelings in language which is chiefly made by men to express theirs.

Accordingly, most of the characters both men and women in *Fasting, Feasting* are found to be following these set social standards of behavior and playing their gender roles.

It is observed that Papa is the breadwinner of the family and controls every household activity including the education of the children, their marriages and their careers. He dominates the lives of all women - Mama, Uma and Aruna - and also the only son of the family, Arun. When his relationship with Mama is concerned, it is observed that Mama had almost no independent existence. She speaks the same language and expresses the same feelings as that of her husband. Mama, in fact, follows Simone de Beauvoir's words when she writes: "Man is defined as a human

being and a woman as a female - whenever she behaves as a human being she is said to imitate the male.”

She is not allowed to indulge in her hobbies. She unconditionally follows all the wishes, opinions and commands of her husband. She, in fact, has almost whole-heartedly accepted her subservient role and supports her husband in all his decisions. She has nothing else to say when Papa decides to discontinue Uma’s schooling and make her take care of the baby boy. Even in a way she consolidates Papa’s patriarchal views. It can be seen from her words, when she says, “In my day, girls in the family were not given sweets, nuts, good things to eat. If something special had been bought in the market, like sweets or nuts, it was given to the boys in the family”.

It was actually unfortunate for Uma as both of her parents think that the only option for Uma as a girl child of the family was to get married with a suitable man and lead a settled married life. But when Uma fails in her married life, they have the next role for her, i.e. to take care of her old parents. And that is what she is forced to do throughout her life.

The only thing that Mama dared to say in her life was expressing her desire to terminate her late pregnancy as she felt that it would be painful and also dangerous to her life. But her husband did not pay any attention to her and forced her to go through the ordeal. Without the knowledge of her husband, Mama was also seen visiting Mrs. Joshi’s house in the afternoon and playing cards, laughing loudly and showing the coy side of her personality. It doesn’t mean that Mama did not like to be independent and follow the desires of her own mind and heart. But she prefers to follow the set social conventions of her society which wanted her to forget her individuality, be subservient to her husband and follow his dictates without any complaint.

Mama’s similar attitude is again seen in her attempts to keep her husband happy and satisfied when he played tennis. Actually playing tennis was a kind of ceremony for Papa in which he wanted his family and servants to play an audience. Mama is seen exhibiting a lot of pride in his games and getting angry if his tennis suit hadn’t been washed perfectly or if his lemonade wasn’t ready as soon as the game was over.

Papa is also seen dominating the life of Uma. Though Uma wanted to attend the school and choose a career of her own, Papa discontinued her education and forced her to take care of Arun. He is seen worried about getting Uma married as he thinks that marriage was the only destination of a woman’s life. But when Uma failed to receive suitable marriage proposals, Papa blamed it to her being untidy and negligent. He became so desperate to get Uma married that he even did not enquire properly, when Uma received a proposal from the Goyals and paid the dowry in advance and got deceived by them. In his next attempt, he actually succeeded in getting Uma married but at the time of marriage it was found that the groom was an old man. After the marriage, it was learnt



that Uma's husband was already married and had a family in Meerut. He married Uma only because he was in need of money to save his business. So the marriage was broken and Papa brought Uma back home. Here Papa is seen following the set patriarchal social standards according to which 'marriage' is a must for a woman. Hence he forces Uma marry an old man and fulfill his duty as a father.

Actually, Uma's character is little rebellious. It is seen that Uma does not like to follow the societal norms laid down for a woman. As a girl child, Uma is often seen trying to resist to be bound by those norms. She likes her school more than her home. After the birth of Arun, when her parents decide to remove her from the school, she meets Mother Agnes and requests her to convince her Papa to allow her to continue her educational career. Even after she is removed from the school, we see Uma trying to remain outside the house as much as possible. She was not much worried about all the minute instructions she receives from her parents regarding various household chores. However, in her rebelliousness, she does not receive any support either from her mother or sister. In Gloria Steinem's words, Uma seems to have forgotten that "Any woman who chooses to behave like a full human being should be warned that the armies of the status quo will treat her as something of a dirty joke. She will need her sisterhood."

Aruna, the younger daughter of the family is seen playing the role assigned to her by the society. She takes care of her beauty and other womanly qualities and gets qualified in the social structure that considers beauty as an important quality for a woman. And so she receives many marriage proposals and selects the handsomest and wealthiest groom for her. After marriage she is shifted to Bombay and gets mixed up with the mannerisms of city life. Whenever she visits her parents, she is seen displaying those qualities. Even her children – Aisha and Dinesh – also follow their mother faithfully in this respect.

The decisions regarding Arun and his education are also taken by Papa. And since his early childhood, Arun is seen playing the role that his family wanted him to play as faithfully as possible. Being the only son of a magistrate, society expects Arun to excel in his studies and so all the facilities for the same like appointing tutors for all his educational needs are made available for him. Papa takes every care that he studies properly and applies to various scholarships. Accordingly, Arun wins a scholarship and gets admitted to the University of Massachusetts. Even when he was in America, he follows the instructions of his parents in staying with the Patton family, though he did not want to live in a family unit. As a child, the only expectation of his Papa that Arun could not fulfill is that he fails to exercise and remains a weak child.

In case of Anamika, she is observed following the family and social expectations by getting married with a man chosen by her parents. She completely submits herself to the demands of her parents and also of her husband and in-laws. But unfortunately she is abused by her husband

and mother-in-law who often beat her. When Uma comes to know about the suffering in Anamika's married life, she says that it would be better for Anamika to return to her parents' home to which her mother objects by saying that "How can she be happy if she is sent home? What will people say? What will they think?"

From Mama's words it becomes clear that society wanted Anamika to suffer silently at her in-laws' and should not think of coming back. This societal pressure ultimately leads Anamika to her death. Anamika's case can be considered as a female role model in Indian social context as most of the women in India are forced to lose their individual freedom and unconditionally submit to the familial and social expectations.

It is not only his own wife and children that Papa is seen dominating but he also tries to dominate the lives of Mira-Masi and Dr. Dutt, who actually represent the women independent of family and men. Whenever Mira-Masi visits the family, it is observed that Papa doesn't like her for being independent, indifferent towards the societal norms meant for a woman and following her own ways of living her life. Mira-Masi has her own views and principles and she never compromises them even though the society does not like them. Similarly, Papa doesn't like Dr. Dutt as she leads an independent life free of any social constraints.

Mr. and Mrs. Patton are also seen trying to fulfill their social roles. Particularly, Mrs. Patton attempts to play multiple roles of a wife, a mother, a host and also a woman belonging to a free American society. When Arun comes to stay with the Patton family during his summer break, Mrs. Patton is seen faithfully playing the role of a good host. As Arun belongs to an Indian vegetarian family, she provides him vegetarian food during his stay. Even she herself wanted to eat vegetarian food but Mr. Patton who does not believe in vegetarianism, makes her eat steak that he has prepared for all. Mrs. Patton takes Arun with her whenever she goes for shopping so that he can buy whatever he wanted. When the girl at the Cashier's counter comments about the looks of Mrs. Patton, she immediately becomes conscious of her body and starts to take its proper care. That is why, she is now often seen sunbathing. Mr. Patton and his son, Rod are also conscious of their bodies and hence they are busy in maintaining their physique by jogging and playing football.

Thus, almost all the characters in *Fasting, Feasting* are seen playing the gender roles assigned to them by their respective societies. Anita Desai has herself experienced these social norms from close quarters, hence she has succeeded in exemplifying how the men and women characters in her novel follow these social norms. At the same time she has also shown that there are also some people who nurture their own individual identities and try to defy the roles their society wants them to play.

#### 4.3.2 Institutions of marriage and family in *Fasting, Feasting*:

The institution of family is considered to be very important for the overall development of its members. It takes care of their needs and provides a kind of safe and secure environment that leads to their smooth natural development. Marriage is a social institution that allows a man and a woman to live together as per the socially set terms and conditions and is a pre-requisition to form the institution of family in any civilized society. Though there have been some differences in the meanings of the concepts of family and marriage in different ages, regions, religions, castes, classes and races, they are very subtle and do not affect much to the basic premises of these institutions. That is why, both of them are found to be present in one or the other form for hundreds of years in human society and have reflected in their arts and literatures.

In Indian context, marriage and family are very important social institutions that influence the personality development of all the concerned members. In fact, even today marriage is considered to be a must for a man and a woman to live together in Indian society. Though there have been stray instances of live-in relationships and though they have been legally accepted, they are not socially accepted by fairly large number of people in India. Naturally, Indians prefer to follow the traditional social norms of marriage to get united their children into marital relations. The same has got reflected in Indian literature.

Following the same line, Anita Desai has dealt with the themes of family and marriage in her novel, *Fasting, Feasting*, which is basically a story of two families – the family of a magistrate from India and the Patton family from America. Besides, there are also references to the families of Mrs. Joshi, Lila Aunty, Anamika, and Aruna.

The readers come across the family of Mama and Papa, which like almost all other families, follows the patriarchal norms in which the man is always dominant and takes the central position and rules his house and controls the lives of all other members. So Papa, the magistrate, is the centre of all activities and takes all the decisions. He is so dominant that his wife, Mama seems to have lost her self-identity as an individual and submits to all his expectations. The wife is so dependent on her husband that most of the times, Uma is seen using the word Mama Papa to refer to her parents. As a family, though Papa lives together with his wife and children, he considers himself to be responsible to take the decisions regarding the lives of all the members of his family. Mama has already lost her individuality to Papa and is always seen following his dictates willingly. As the head of the family, Papa removes Uma from school and makes her to take care of her younger brother, Arun. He considers marriage as an indispensable aspect of a woman's life and hence forces Uma to get married with an old man thereby spoiling her life. Papa also compels Arun and Aruna to behave as per his expectations.

The family of Lila Aunty and Bakul Uncle is also seen following the set norms. Their daughter, Anamika was a brilliant student and wins a

scholarship for Oxford. But for the parents, Anamika's marriage was much more important than her education and career. So they did not allow her to accept the scholarship and force her into a marriage that turns to be a disaster for Anamika. After her marriage, Anamika, like any other obedient daughter-in-law, tries her best to get adjusted with the new family. But her husband and mother-in-law treat her as a servant and beat her very often. Though Bakul Uncle and Lila Aunty come to know about the sufferings of their daughter, they do not interfere in her married life. Anamika, though, tries to cope up with the miseries of her married life, the atrocities increase day-by-day and finally she commits suicide.

Atmosphere at Mrs. Joshi's family is comparatively better than the other families in the novel. The readers are told that there was much love in the married life of Mrs. Joshi. Though as a newly married bride, she suffers at the hands of her mother-in-law, after her death, Mrs. Joshi takes the control of her house. She creates conducive atmosphere in her house that enables her children to grow in free air. It allows them to think independently and pursue the careers of their own choice.

Arunahas understood the value of marriage for a woman quite early in her life and so makes her ready for it by preparing properly. She takes utmost care of mastering all those qualities that make a woman fit for marriage. That is why she receives many marriage proposals. It is observed that Aruna's behavior towards Uma is changed when she comes to know that in place of Uma, she was chosen by the Syals to be their daughter-in-law. It makes her think highly of herself. But Aruna prefers Arvind, the handsomest and the wealthiest of all her suitors for marriage and gets shifted to Bombay and leads a happy married life.

Compared to their Indian counterparts, the members of the Patton family in America seem to enjoy more individual freedom. Mr. Patton, the patriarch of the family, controls the lives of his wife and children. Though he allows them individual freedom to certain extent, he sees to it that all of them perform to their fullest to achieve their goals. He believes that everybody is required to work hard for which non-vegetarian food is the must. He himself grills the steak for all but it is observed that not all eat it together. He forces his wife, Mrs. Patton, to eat the steak, who unwillingly munches it. His daughter, Melanie, prefers the junk food to his steak whereas Rod comes late and eats his dinner all alone. It seems that the family structure of the Pattons is not as closely knit as their counterparts in India. Yet, both Mr. and Mrs. Patton try to play their parents' roles as responsibly as possible.

Thus, it is observed from the above discussion that the novelist, Anita Desai has given prominence to the discussion of marriage and family in her novel *Fasting, Feasting* as both of them are closely related to the human life. With the help of the characters like Papa, Uma, Mama, Lila Aunty, Mrs. Joshi, Mr. and Mrs. Patton and others, Anita Desai has shown that the institutions of marriage and family are very vital in human life and they enable the characters keep emotionally connected with each other and also help them to grow in whatever way possible.

#### 4.3.3 Individuality vs. social constraints in *Fasting, Feasting*:

Human society for ages has been a place that takes care of all the essential needs of its members with the help of its social institutions like family, community, education, religion, etc. All these social institutions enable the individuals to grow by fulfilling their various personal, familial, social, and psychological needs. Even the members of the society are dependent upon these social institutions. Thus, both the individuals as well as the social institutions are interdependent and influence and in turn get influenced and changed by each other.

Anita Desai's novel, *Fasting, Feasting* is a good example where the readers come across the complex web of various social institutions that influence the development of the characters and their personalities. Family is perhaps the most important social institution that has been dealt with at length by Anita Desai in this novel. There are the families of Mama Papa, Joshis, Pattons, Syals, etc. about whom Desai has written here. Though it is believed that family takes care of all the emotional and material needs of its members and helps them grow, it is also true that it creates hurdles in the smooth and positive development of its members as they are required to follow certain customs and traditions of that family leading to the compromise of their individual freedom. The same is seen in Anita Desai's novel, where the family creates various obstacles in the growth of its members as they are not allowed to pursue their own individual freedom.

Uma, for example, in *Fasting, Feasting* is the eldest daughter of the family. Her parents, Mama Papa are seen forcing Uma to follow their instructions carefully and give up her own desires. As an individual, she is not allowed to follow her own heart and mind. After the birth of her brother, Arun, her parents force her to discontinue her schooling and take care of the baby. In fact, Uma wanted to continue her education. That is why, she meets Mother Agnes and requests her to convince her father to allow her to attend the school. But Papa is not convinced and Uma has to give up her passion for education.

Even afterwards it is observed that Uma is forced to compromise with her individual desires and follow the dictates of her family to fulfill its customs and traditions. It is seen with reference to Uma's views about marriage. As a young girl, Uma strongly believes that love should be the basis of any marriage. She was of the opinion that the marriage succeeds if both husband and wife respect each other's individuality, which was possible if there exists love for each other. However, for her parents, marriage was just a ritual and was to be performed as a social need. That is why, they keep trying to arrange Uma's marriage in a family which they think suitable as per their own social status. But when it becomes difficult due to Uma's growing age, they finally marry her off to an old man, who was already having a wife. Thus, Uma is forced to forget what she wanted from her married life for which she suffers a lot in her latter life.

Such kind of oppressive atmosphere at home has made Uma little rebellious from her early childhood. Actually, it was Uma's sense of individual freedom that makes her speak and act against her parents. Therefore, instead of meekly submitting to the demand of her father to remove her from school, she tries to convince him through Mother Agnes. Not only this but Uma's love for individuality and freedom can also be observed when she overlooks the instructions of her parents regarding how she should behave and work at home. Uma's affinity to Mira-Masi and Ramu can also be regarded her act of defiance to the dictates of her family as Papa does not like any of them. That is why, Uma is seen accompanying Mira-Masi and Ramu whenever they visit the family. Uma's acts of jumping into the river, her staying at an Ashram for almost a month, her desire to accept Dr. Dutt's offer of working in the hospital, and her going out with Ramu for dinner and drinking wine are some of the examples that show Uma's love for her freedom.

Mira-Masi, a widow, is also seen following her own desires by defying the social traditions that force a person compromise with his freedom. She has decided her own ways of behavior which she follows faithfully throughout her life. For her, Lord Shiva was everything and she keeps wandering from one place to the other in His search. It was Mira-Masi, who further enkindles the light of freedom in Uma's heart and takes her away to stay in an Ashram, where she thinks Uma can lead her life freely.

Similarly Ramu, the son of Bakul Uncle and Lila Aunty, is a person who prefers his own individual freedom to the likes and dislikes of his family and society. That is why, he is regarded as the black sheep of the family. To fulfill his desires, Ramu is seen venturing into the sea and visiting different places though his family does not like it. Dr. Dutt, an unmarried middle-aged woman, is one more character that loves her individuality more than the societal norms.

Like Uma, Anamika and Arun are also found caught into the web of societal expectations, who lose their individuality. In Anamika's case, it is observed that she meekly submits to the dictates of her family and gives up her individual choice of studying at Oxford, even she marries with a man of her parents' choice and pays for it by literally sacrificing her life. However, the sense of freedom and utmost individuality in American life and society changes Arun's outlook towards his own life. Till the time he was with his parents in India, Arun is found following the commands of his family as sincerely as possible. But once in America, he defies them and tries to live as he wishes. Even all the members of the Patton family in America are seen leading their lives as per their own likes as much as that it even affects their family life. Though Mrs. Patton tries to hold the threads of her family together, it becomes difficult for her as the sense of individual freedom seems stronger than the feeling of togetherness as a family.



In this way, it can be said that though the characters in Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting* are the products of the social institutions like family and community, many of them are found nurturing their individual sense of freedom and working to attain it. Though Uma fails to attain her complete freedom, her words and acts of defiance and her attempt to find her freedom in her loneliness present her as a person who is in search of her individuality and freedom.

#### **4.3.4 East vs. West in *Fasting, Feasting*:**

Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting* is set in two diverse backgrounds – India and America. Naturally, it represents Indian as well as American ways of life. India is a place where traditional ways of life are given more importance, whereas America is known for its modernity. Family, community, and society come first in India. America gives preference to individuality and individual freedom. So whenever these two opposite ideologies come together there is a conflict between the two.

At the beginning of Anita Desai's novel, the readers are introduced to various characters and their families in India. There are Mama Papa, for example, who belong to the traditional Indian society with its roots in rural background. Naturally they are found following traditional beliefs with reference to the concepts of family, marriage, social prestige, etc. That is why, for them Uma's education is not important. Uma was supposed to take care of her duties and responsibilities as a daughter of the family. So she is removed from the school and made to look after her younger brother, Arun. She is not allowed to follow her own desires and forced into a marriage with an old man.

Throughout the novel, it is seen that Uma is hardly treated as an independent individual having her own likes and dislikes. Uma's parents even did not want Uma to accept Ramu's invitation for a dinner in a restaurant because they feel that the city life might spoil Uma.

Aruna, the younger daughter of the family, has accepted her role as a woman and so she prepares herself for a marriage, the ultimate destination for an Indian woman. She is then married off with the person, who was rich and having social prestige. Similarly, Mama has also lost her independent existence and is seen obeying all the commands of her husband. She has become one with Papa and so the couple is usually referred as Mama Papa as if they were one person.

In America, there is Patton family, the members of which are seen following their own individual freedom and hence there are very loose familial ties amongst them. The free urban background allows them to pursue their own minds and hearts. They represent western life style. It is observed that they have their own food habits and all of them try to keep them intact. Though Mr. Patton, as a patriarch, tries to control the lives of the members of his family, it is seen that he does not succeed much. For example, he wanted the entire family to dine together and eat steak. But Mrs. Patton does not like the steak and prefers vegetarian food. Melania,

the daughter of the family, does not join them for the dinner and keeps eating junk food. Rod, the son, comes late in the evening and eats his dinner all alone. All the members of this family are seen following modern urban ways of behavior, which allow them individual freedom. All of them are very much conscious of their bodies. That is why, they are found taking utmost care of their physiques. Rod, for example, is seen jogging and playing football so that he will become strong. Similarly, Melania is also seen neglecting proper food and trying to be as slim as possible. Even Mrs. Patton is found sun-bathing as she was also conscious of her looks.

Thus, Mama Papa in India and the Pattons in America represent the eastern and western ways of life respectively. However, it has to be taken into consideration that there are no watertight compartments between the two. It can be observed from the gender roles assigned to the members of the respective families. For example, though Mr. Patton belongs to the western world, he plays the patriarch and tries to control the behaviour of his wife and children. For him, refusing to eat steak and preferring vegetarian food is not tolerable in his house. In this respect, he is more traditional than modern. Similarly, Mama Papa, in Indian situation are supposed to follow the Indian traditions but they tend to show themselves progressive by disapproving Arun's liking for vegetarian food. Like Mama, Mrs. Patton is also found playing a role of an ideal mother and does not approve Melania's behavior. Tradition-bound Mama Papa also try to show that they are educated and so progressive in their outlook. But they fail to approve free behaviour of Mira-Masi, who had remained unmarried and was roaming all over the country in search of her Lord.

Therefore, it can be said that though India represents old traditional ways of life and America stands for modernity, individuality and freedom, it is difficult to draw a line between the two. There have been overlapping instances in which the opposites are also true. But the gender roles are one similar aspect found to be present in both eastern and western societies. Males and females more or less play the similar gender specific roles in both the societies.

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## 4.4 QUESTIONS

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1. Discuss the theme of social expectations in the novel, *Fasting, Feasting*.
2. Do you think that society plays a significant role in the way the characters behave in the novel, *Fasting, Feasting*?
3. "Society and its traditions are the forces that drive the characters in the novel, *Fasting, Feasting* to behave in a particular manner." Discuss.
4. "Gender and social roles assigned to the characters in *Fasting, Feasting* show Anita Desai's overall attitude towards the society around *Fasting, Feasting* her."
5. Discuss marriage as a theme in *Fasting, Feasting*.

6. "Anita Desai deals with marital issues in her novel, *Fasting, Feasting*." Discuss.
7. To what extent is the theme of marriage successfully handled by Anita Desai in *Fasting, Feasting*?
8. "It seems that Anita Desai is preoccupied with the institutions of family and marriage in her novel, *Fasting, Feasting*." Discuss.
9. Discuss the theme of individual freedom versus societal constraints in Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting*.
10. "Though there are numerous obstacles in their ways, many characters are seen striving for individual freedom in Anita Desai's novel, *Fasting, Feasting*." Discuss.
11. Do you think that the character of Uma in Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting* is the embodiment of free spirit entangled in the net of her family? Support your answer with examples from the novel.
12. Discuss the theme of East vs. West in Anita Desai's novel, *Fasting, Feasting*.
13. "Anita Desai's novel, *Fasting, Feasting* is an attempt of the writer to show the diverse ways of Indian and American life." Explain.
14. "In *Fasting, Feasting* Anita Desai succeeds to prove that gender has its peculiar role in Eastern as well as Western society." Discuss.

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**CRITICAL STUDY OF SARADINDU  
BANDYOPADHYAY'S NOVEL *THE  
QUILLS OF THE PORCUPINE*  
(TRANSLATED BY SREEJATA GUHA)  
PART - I**

**Unit Structure :**

- 5.0 Objectives
- 5.1 Introduction of the novel
- 5.2 Mystery Novel, Crime Fiction and Detective Fiction: An Introduction
- 5.3 Saradindu Bandyopadhyay : Biography and Literary Contribution
- 5.4 Characterizations in *The Quills of the Porcupine*
  - 5.4.1 Major Characters
  - 5.4.2 Minor Characters
- 5.5 Adaptations for various Serials and Movies
- 5.6 Important Questions

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**5.0 OBJECTIVES**

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After studying this chapter, the students will be able:

- a. To understand Mystery, Crime, and Detective Fiction as popular sub-genres of the novel as a literary form.
- b. To know the literary merits of Saradindu Bandyopadhyay as a successful Bengali novelist.
- c. To acquire a critical understanding of the prescribed novel.

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**5.1 INTRODUCTION OF THE NOVEL**

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*The Menagerie and other Byomkesh Bakshi Mysteries* is a collection of stories written by Saradindu Bandyopadhyay and translated into English by Sreejata Guha. It contains four mysterious criminal cases solved by Byomkesh Bakshi : The Menagerie (*Chidiyakhana*), The Jewel Case (*Monimondon*), The Will That Vanished, or The Elusive Will (*Khuji Khuji Nari*) and The Quills of the Porcupine (*Shajarur Kanta*). This English interpretation by Sreejata Guha is skillfully done and she figures out how to catch the substance of contemporary Bengal. Her portrayals

make a psychological image of when life was not as confused and yet crime and culprits were similarly as shrewd as today.

*The Quill of the Porcupine* is a mystery novel written by Saradindu Bandyopadhyay in 1967. It is also called a *novella*, a short novel, due to its short length. It was first published in Bengali and later translated into English and other languages. The killer slaughters the three persons from the different strata of the society using the porcupine quills pushed from behind into the heart, three killed and one remains alive. This story was initially published in Bengali as *Shojarur Kanta*. It is a story composed in one hundred-odd pages and the secret accepts a backward setting or arrangement of the plot. Bandyopadhyay investigates the marital existence of a miserable couple where the spouse needed to run off with her lover. She faces difficulties in her adolescent life and later, the unbending nature of her family compels her to marry a man of her own family position. In the background of this 'Sentimental Mystery', we have a crazy person killing a Beggar, a worker, a shopkeeper, and later a half murder of a businessman.

*Shajarur Kanta* (The Porcupine's Quill) is adapted for movie and television serials and became famous in India. It is being directed by Saibal Mitra is perhaps a rare instance of a 'Byomkesh Bakshi' story. It is a perfect blend of murders and mystery with a triangular love story. Saibal Mitra says:

Besides, Byomkesh in *Shajarur Kanta* is sixty-plus and is drawn almost from voluntary retirement to solve a series of murders the police cannot solve. It is said to be Saradindu's weakest Byomkesh mystery but I really wanted to make it into a film.

The story is about a series of mysterious murders where the quill of a porcupine pierces the heart of the victims, killing them instantly. One victim does not die and Byomkesh is summoned to solve the mystery behind the murders.

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## 5.2 MYSTERY NOVEL, CRIME FICTION AND DETECTIVE FICTION: AN INTRODUCTION

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### A. Mystery Novel:

Mystery fiction is a kind of writing that centers on somebody comprehending a riddle or a crime. It is likewise normally alluded to as crime fiction. The genre includes novels and short stories that are written for a target audience who expects the writing with a standard of the genre. It includes a stunning and sensible plot with a twist of turns and wrongdoing, hinting proof, false leads, criminologist appearance, an unexpected rogue, a very late goal to the plot and a desire that the circumstance would work itself out.

From time to time, mystery fiction or stories have been separated into some of the sub-genres. Hardboiled secrets are those that are lumpy and vicious. Delicate bubbled mysteries are as reasonable as hardboiled, yet increasingly hopeful and silly, without violent subtleties. Comfortable mysteries are light and less rough, with novice offense solvers in little or tight-weave towns. Police Procedural mysteries dependably pursue an expert criminologist or cop who explains transgressions. Bolted Room mysteries appear to be difficult to have been submitted. The latest release to the class is the spine chiller or convincing puzzles where the hero is set facing remarkable chances that keep watchers on the edge of their seats.

### **B. Crime Fiction:**

Crime fiction is a form of writing that novelizes violations and offenders. What makes this type so animating is the psychological combat that follows among the author and pursuer. As the essayist uncovers information and works through the crime riddle, pursuers attempt to understand it for themselves before the criminal and it is uncovered toward the end of the story. Created in the mid-nineteenth century, crime fiction has become incredibly prevalent, and the class has needed to develop into numerous subgenres. A portion of the more typical subgenres is mystery fiction where the most widely recognized structure and pursuers are given pieces of information that in the long run uncover the criminal, legitimate spine chillers. Characters are normally legal counselors, cops, and a rearranged investigator who uncover the deeds of a criminal toward the start and after that, the story works back to it.

Despite the fact that each sub-genre has its tweak, all crime fictions share essential components. A critical crime is a way to any great crime story. The offense is the thing that impels the story forward. It is the thing that persuades the characters and the pursuers. The protagonist of the crime story is a detective by profession or a typical criminologist or the individual who attempts to fathom the secrets of criminal acts. The suspects of the crime story are important to the story's anticipation and interest. On the off-chance that the pursuers know who the criminal is from the primary sign. At that point, there is no reason for proceeding with the story. The criminal is a fundamental character to any great crime fiction. The criminal must be an all-around coordinated person against his or her adversary – the legend of a story. Additionally, a reasonable or conceivable story is important to make crime fiction worth reading.

### **C. Detective Fiction:**

Detective fiction is a subgenre of crime fiction and mystery fiction in which an investigator or a detective – either professional, amateur or a retired government official investigates a crime story, often murders. The detective stories began around the same time as speculative fiction and other class fiction in the mid-nineteenth century and have remained incredibly popular, particularly in novels. Some of the most famous detectives in fiction incorporate C. Auguste Dupin, Sherlock Holmes, Hercule Poirot and Byomkesh Bakshi.



In spite of the long history of detection in writing, detective fiction, as an undeniable class, initially showed up in the mid-nineteenth century in the detective stories. Specific political, social, and ideological powers exceptional to the nineteenth century are regularly referred to by such people as elements that add success to the development of detective fiction during this period. With the approach of average social orders, criminals in the famous creative mind, the notoriety of chivalrous radicals became seen as a danger by a social class keen on shielding its property. Simultaneously the police, viewed in the eighteenth century as an association devoted to securing dictators, rose in well-known regard. Once censured as specialists of degenerate rulers, individuals from the police power were currently esteemed for the assurance they gave, and the figure of the law implementation official turned into an adequate hero in writing. In the scholarly domain, the Enlightenment realized significant regard for the intensity of thinking, just as mind-boggling confidence in the capacity of science to take care of social issues. This made ready for the advancement of another abstract legend, the detective-researcher. These heroes have regularly refined men had such appreciated attributes as logical information and unrivaled insight, and they evoked a lot of excitement among nineteenth-century readers. In the twentieth century, the reading of detective fiction uncovered the class' unpredictability, alarming people of the class that these writings contained more than splendid scholarly capacity.

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### **5.3 SHARADINDUBANDYOPADHYAY: BIOGRAPHY AND LITERARY CONTRIBUTION**

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Sharadindu Bandyopadhyay was born in Purnea, Bihar on March 30, 1899, where his father was working. His familial home was in Baranagar in North Kolkata. He was destined to Tarabhushan and Bijaliprabha Bandyopadhyay at his maternal grandparents' home in Jaunpur. The family hailed from Purnia, Bihar, India. He joined Vidyasagar College in Kolkata in 1915 for his studies. While concentrating there, he published his first work, "Jaubansmriti", an accumulation of ballads at the age of twenty. He passed the B.A. examination in 1919. He completed his studies in Law in Patna and afterward committed his opportunity to compose. He was thirty when he surrendered his training and began filling in as an essayist. In 1928, Himangshu Roy welcomed him to Bombay to try his best in composing screenplays. Till 1952, he composed for movies, and after that settled down in Pune to seek an undeniable profession as an essayist.

Saradindu Bandyopadhyay's collection was shifted. He was similarly quiet with short and long stories. He created the character of Byomkesh Bakshimany decades ago who remained a famous detective in Indian Writing in English Translation. He is essentially known as the maker of Byomkesh Bakshi, the quintessential Bengali analyst in the hearts of Bengali pursuers and reached to them through interpretations, TV and films. The abstract brightness of his authentic fiction stays

unparalleled. Set in various times of Indian history, directly from the Pre-Aryan days to the Gupta, Mauryan period till the age of the Mughals, these are an extraordinary mixture of glimmering wanders aimlessly, of sentiment, experience, portrayals enlivened by a kind of figure of speech and vocabulary to suit the ethos of that former time.

Sunil Gangyopadhyay, an Indian poet and novelist in Bengali, rightly says about the literary merits of Saradindu Bandyopadhyay. He states how the taste of his writing has a variety altogether:

[...]Among contemporary writers of Bengali – nobody could write a historical fiction quite like him. Who can create that atmosphere, who else has the wit and humour...his prose had a different taste altogether – I am rather fond of it... (Gangyopadhyay)

Bandyopadhyay composed short stories, short novels, social books, sonnets, melodies, articles, and stage plays. He has also composed a few screenplays, some of which depended on his variety of works. Amusement, mind and parody are common elements in his literary writing. The fundamental subject of the majority of his works is sentiment. He was exceptionally specific and a stickler. He surrendered his ties with the film business in 1952 and moved to Pune to focus on writing more fruitful works. He composed a few phantom stories, authentic sentiments and youngsters' accounts in Bengali throughout the following 18 years.

Some of his novels in this genre are *Gourmalhar*, *Tungabhadra'r Teere*, *Kaler Mandira* and *Jheender Bandi*. Saradindu's books continue to be among the bestsellers in Bengali literature, primarily because of the unabated popularity of his detective Byomkesh.

Saradindudied on September 22, 1970.

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## 5.4 CHARACTERIZATIONS IN *THE QUILLS OF THE PORCUPINE*

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### 5.4.1 Major Characters:

- **ByomkeshBakshi:** When Saradindu Bandyopadhyay created his amateur sleuth Byomkesh Bakshi in 1932, there was not much of a homegrown tradition of detective fiction in Bengali or more broadly in the context of Indian writing. It was tended to be highly derivative of the western tradition of writing. Byomkesh Bakshi is an evergreen character of a Bengali tradition who represents Indian detective figures. He disdained "detective" to portray his profession yet rather preferred to consider himself a "Truth Seeker". Appearing in the story like Sherlock Holmes, he can be better called the Indian Sherlock in a clear and broad context.

Byomkesh Bakshi appears in the prologue of *The Quills of the Porcupine* where he is seen sitting at his home when Inspector Rakhalbabu enters the scene to discuss the serial murders that happened in the city by applying the porcupine quills as weapons. As a detective, Byomkesh has a different viewpoint to see towards each and every case. In this novel, he is seen resolving the cases of three murders and one-half murder. In the epilogue, he again enters the scene to investigate the matter. He, along with Rakhalbabu, talks with Dipa, Debashish, Nripati and his friends and the Mukherjees. To solve the case and catch the actual culprit, he spreads the news of uncovering the mystery behind three murders to kill Debashish. Probal Gupta comes with a threat that he would be caught, he decides to kill Byomkesh in the same way he committed murders previously. Byomkesh gets a fish in the net and applies a Bullet-proof jacket for his safety. He decides to meet Probal at Rabindra Sarobar and catches him red-handed. In this way, he resolves the mystery behind the serial murders where the quills of the porcupine were used as weapons.

- **Debashish Bhatta** – Debashish is tall, slim and fair-complexioned, with a handsome face. He is about twenty-seven years old. He is the son of an elderly man, Late Subhashishbabu Bhatta, who had built the house around five years back where he lives at present. He completed his M.Sc. degree at the University of Delhi. He is the owner of Butterfly Cosmetics Ltd. which is established by his father. Later he married Dipa Mukherjee. Usually, his evenings are spent up at home by reading the latest business magazines and texts on scientific subjects. He does not believe in match-making but stars stayed out of the equation to marry Dipa. He is smitten up by Dipa. His experience of women is virtually nil, but he likes the way she looks. He feels she would make him a good wife.

Along with amusement, Debashish textures a pinprick of surprise. The words struck a false note, quite unlike the natural coyness one might have expected from a new bride. It takes some time for the exact meaning of the words to sink in. Then the flames of joy and desire that have been burning in his heart are stuffed out one by one when he comes to know about Dipa's affair with another unknown man. He feels as though the electric lights in the room have dimmed gradually, casting him into the gloom that surrounds an oil lamp. His life has also been struck by a sudden calamity. He would have to keep his head and work out a reasonable solution to the problem. He behaves like a level-headed man and immerses himself in his thoughts.

Debashish's experience of women is very limited but he begins to feel that women are extremely selfish creatures. He comes to this conclusion because of his wife's selfish behaviour and affection towards her lover even after her marriage. According to him, they value nothing but their own interests, to the exclusion of all else. His life after marriage continues to run along the same channel which had been confined to during his bachelor days, the only difference being the addition of another member to his household, his wife Dipa. He starts feeling restless. He is a

thorough gentleman with a pleasant disposition. But unfortunately, Dipa does not love him but just marries him on the wish of her parents. It is hard to be blamed for it but he accepts it and continues to proceed in life with a hope of a glorious sunrise.

- **Dipa Bhatta** : Dipa is the wife of Debashish Bhatta. There was something appealing about her languidly casual look. She could be described as fair-complexioned and has an attractive face. She is a beautiful lady with the intellectual ability to handle the situation and act accordingly in an anticipation of expected results. Whenever alone at the house, she listens to music and leans back on the chair to spend her afternoons every day. She shares with her the strange conjugal life. She is a traditional Indian woman who prefers to eat after her husband just like her patriarchal habits. But she tries to manage herself to sit at the same table for dinner with her husband.

Dipa belongs to an old orthodox Bengali family which was wealthier and powerful in the past. At present, their circumstances are greatly reduced. She is the only one girl child in the family. She has cleared her Senior Cambridge Examination from a Girl's School in Calcutta. She is the finest example of a victim of patriarchal sufferings at her house as she has no freedom at all to go out of home alone. She stays at home and helps her mother with the household. In her spare time, she reads novels and listens to the radio. She does obey all the rules of a Bengali patriarchal family without such complaints but her heart remains despondent. In her patriarchal days, she is allowed to talk with her family friends under the supervision of her parents.

Dipa is a brave girl but her courage is shot with a streak of stubbornness. Her relationship with her grandfather is rather usual. She falls in love with a local boy and wishes to marry him but does not get permission from her parents so far. Her boyfriend is likely one of her brother's friends – Probal Gupta. Apart from Dipa, nobody knows the identity of her secret lover. Her slim form has a virginal quality that lent her a childlike innocence. But her face betrays a firm mind, the graceful features capable of expressing powerful emotions. Her feeling of apprehension originates less from her natural shyness than from being caught in a controversy created by unusual circumstances. Her life is caught in incredible upheavals.

After marrying Debashish on the wish of her parents, Dipa starts living with him as a mere formality. Nripati presents her with a gift – a gold wristwatch. Kapil offers her an expensive fountain pen. Kharga Bahadur gives her a kukri, the traditional dagger of Nepalese. Probal gifts her a few records of his own songs while Sujana presents her with a silver idol of the goddess Saraswati. Debashish's colleagues and factory staff also give the couple a variety of gifts appropriate for the occasion.

As soon as she enters her marital life with Debashish, Dipa becomes inactive because she is in love with a man secretly and wanted to

spend the rest of her life with her lover. She often sits at the place that belongs to her. As suggested by Debashish, she starts flourishing her interest in gardening art. But she is not at all fully interested in this. For the benefit of Nakul, she chats with her husband about her garden development activity to avoid any further suspicion of her mutual separation with Debashish even living together in the same house. She starts getting echoed her husband's words: "Dipa, you may not love me, but I have fallen in love with you". At the end of the novel, she settles herself with her husband when Probal Gupta gets into prison for three murders and a half murder of her husband.

- **Probal Gupta** : Probal is a friend to Nripati and a member of the Social Chat Group at Nripati's house every evening. He lives near Gol Park in an old, two-storeyed house in three rooms on the ground floor. He is the old tenant of the house, paying low rent. He is a couple of years older than Debashish. He is of medium build and has a muscular physique. His face is unexceptional but gives off an animal magnetism. His eyes betray displeasure. He is disorganized by nature.

Probal has a reputation as a gifted singer. He plays the piano in a desultory fashion and behaves like he is not related to Debashish. Some of his gramophone records have become popular and he is often invited to perform over the radio. His career in music is barely keeping his family afloat after his father's death due to a heart attack. His wife too dies of congenital heart disease. He prefers not to say anything about it to anybody, however, his sentiments are always visible to everybody. He merely comes to Nripati's house and plays the piano in such a manner that suggests he is completely lost in his thought. He keeps aloof from the crowd and tinkered with the piano keys.

Probal comes from an affluent family and the vagaries of fate, without warning, have reduced him to a state of penury. His plight has soured him. Of the seven deadly sins, two are intrinsic to his nature – greed and envy. Compounded by his dire financial situation, these two failings are instrumental in maddening him. However, those born to wealth go through untold suffering if they suddenly lose it. He belongs to this breed of individuals. After his father's death, he goes through terrible financial hardships and avaricious nature. He has been able to earn a decent living as a singer, but that brings little joy to his tormented soul. His life is further burdened by his marriage to a woman suffering from a terminal disease.

Probal always plans to elope with Dipa and marry her. But he does know that the old man, Dipa's grandfather, would not permit them to do so as per their aspiration. As an unsuccessful person, he tries to set a platform to kill Debashish and marry Dipa grabbing the property by killing three other people not related to Debashish or Dipa. Afraid of being caught by the police, he also tries to murder Byomkesh to close the file of serial murders. He is easily caught in Byomkesh's plan and he is finally

arrested by Inspector Rakhalbabu when he attempts to apply the porcupine quills in Byomkesh's chest.

- **Sujan Mitra:** Sujan Mitra is a twenty-seven-year-old man. Clean-shaven, bright-eyed, and exceedingly fair, he is blessed with features that would have put Apollo to shame. He is a rising star of the silver screen. With a couple of hits under his belt, he begins to make a name for himself. He is equally comfortable in serious and comic roles. What is particularly remarkable, however, is his level-headedness in the face of sudden fame and fortune. He is completely devoid of conceit. Little is known about his private life. No one knows about his origins nor whether he has any relatives to speak of. But it is clear from his choice of friends that whatever his origins might be, Sujan's tastes incline towards the educated, the well-mannered and the upper-middle class. He demonstrates no particular weakness for the fair sex. No one even knows about his marital status. He lives alone in a small house at one end of South Calcutta and mostly eats out every day. The house is a small one but it comes with an attached garage. His life is unremarkable and devoid of complexity.

Among the nubile actresses, there are many who are attracted to his handsome newcomer face. However, he evades them all by mastering the art of slipping away as skillfully as an eel. Outside the film fraternity, his social life is primarily focused on the friends he gets together with at Nripati's house for a social chat. He has been unlucky in love because the woman he loves has married someone else a year earlier.

- **Nripati Laha:** Nripati is a thirty-five-year-old who has lost his wife even before she could conceive. He is a widower. He does not focus on remarriage and prefers to stay in isolation. He is highly educated, with a string of university degrees to his name. His lineage is a distinguished one. He is an acknowledgeable man. But at present, he is the only scion of his family. He likes to spend his time in the company of books. After sundown, it is the tea session at his place which keeps him busy. He is very close to Dipa's brother Bijoy. After dinner, he welcomes Debashish regularly at his house for a tea and chat session. He satirically comments on the mindset of the Mukherjee family on the issue of finding a groom for their daughter from the community they belong. He is a master at matchmaking, deliberately broaches the topic of marriage negotiations while sipping his tea. He has a mistress with whom he occasionally arranges nocturnal trysts.
- **Bijoy Madhav Mukherjee:** Bijoy is Dipa's sibling who is five years elder than her. He is a Master in Sanskrit and decides to try a job in the teaching field. He is a forceful personality like his father who is nourished under the patriarchal school of his grandfather. He always enjoys with his friends at his house. He keeps an open eye on the movements of his sister, Dipa. One day after being reprimanded by his grandfather, he catches her sister heading towards the station of Ballygunge and takes her back to the house forcefully, and finds her



letter laying near the telephone about her elopement with her low caste lover. Then, he becomes a hurried brother for Dipa. He is a reluctant man and feels the shame of his sister's aborted elopement with a stranger more keenly than anyone else. His hunt for the right groom again begins in real earnest. He considers him as a good friend to Nripati and regularly visits his house for social chit-chat. He gives a task to Nripati to find out a suitable guy for Dipa. In the later part of the novel, he is in an inactive role.

- **Kharga Bahadur:** Khargais a Nepali by birth but his mother was Bengali. Therefore, his mother tongue is Bengali. He is about twenty-three years old. He is as tall as he is fair and very handsome. He lives in a tiny flat that is smaller in size but enough for his need for survival. The suggestion of the Mongol in his features is so slight that it is barely noticeable. He is a well-known football player by profession who represents the most famous soccer club in the city. It is true about his perfection in the game because a ball at his feet transforms him into a magician. Millions of spectators gather to watch him play. Yet, despite his skill, and his eminently respectable background, his manner remains unassuming. He has no truck of women. He is just a footballer and a gambler as well who is always defeated by his fellow partners in the game.
- **Kapil Bose:** Kapil Bose is a twenty-four-year-old and seems to be a person with a mind of his own. Clad in a suit, he is a handsome fellow with the stamp of refinement on his distinguished features. He is a good sort. His father is unimaginably rich, but he is not worthy of it. He does not have any serious vice. He is educated and spends his days on the tennis court and at the billiards table and looks through his telescope at night to count the stars. He has a flaw to refuse to get married. He lives in a three-storeyed building. The ground floor has been rented out to the branch of a bank. He along with his family lives on the two upper floors. He has a truck with no women. He is a man of ideas and his mind explores the sky more freely than it does the earth.
- **Nakul:** Nakul is a short and stout man with a strong built. He is a man of few words but his eyes are always wary and inquisitive. He serves the Bhatta couple as both cook and servant. He is with them for the last year. He gives his sudden opinion to Nripati to have a proposal of marriage to Debashish without wasting time. When he comes to know about the news of Debashish's marriage with Dipa, he cleans all the rooms as well and changes the sheets on the bed. On this auspicious occasion, he does not want to leave a single corner of the house untidy. He always prepares an elaborate breakfast for two of them. He has seldom done as much for Debashish when he was living alone.

An entire household chores fell to Nakul. He helps to initiate the new bride into the ways of his house, keep an eye on her meals and attend to her comforts. Since no women have lived in the house for years, it has fallen on Nakul to assume the responsibilities that are usually the lot of the

mistress. He explains to her how men and women sit together for meals every day.

- **Uday Madhav Mukherjee:** Uday is the grandfather to Dipa and the head of the patriarchal family. Once, he was the principal of a reputed college but the sudden onset of paralysis forces him to take early retirement from his service and sets himself in the four walls. He rules the family with an iron hand and shamelessly flaunts his family pride to the world at large. Even after staying at home, he always meets his professor friends at his house and still at the age of seventy, he manages to talk like a roaring tiger. He used to call his granddaughter as Dipankari instead of Dipa.

#### 5.4.2 Minor Characters:

- **Nil Madhav** – He is the father to Dipa and a college professor who is a strict man like his father, Uday Mukherjee. He has already heard about Debashish from Bijoy and has already made inquiries about the young man on his own. He feels that Debashish would be a suitable match for Dipa and has come to see for himself whether he is right. He studies Debashish keenly and then nods to Nripati to indicate his approval.
- **Subhra Ghosh** – Shubhra is a few years older than Dipa. She has got married last year. A plump and jovial young woman, she is with her good singing voice. She is a very close friend to Dipa who comes to the house of Debashish to meet Dipa first time after their marriage. She begins to narrate anecdotes about her own obsession with her husband as a newlywed. She tries to behave more friendly with Dipa to tell her life after marriage. She offers her to go on a movie which she rejects and leaves the house with a promise of meeting some other day.
- **Ajit:** Ajit is the brother of Byomkesh Bakshi. He does not play a big role in the plot of the novel. In the prologue, he has been shown listening to a conversation between Byomkesh and Inspector Rakhalbabu over the three murders and one half-murder in the city using the porcupine quills. He again appears in the epilogue of the novel when Byomkesh narrates each and every facade of investigation of the case and how he catches the killer by setting the net at Rabindra Sarobar.
- **Satyabati:** Satyabati is the spouse of Byomkesh Bakshi who appears only at the end of the story in the epilogue. She also listens to the investigation part of the murder case by Byomkesh Bakshi. She appreciates the way his husband handles the risks and catches the murderer. When Debashish reaches to invite the Bakshi family for a dinner to celebrate a new beginning of married life, he especially asks Satyabati to come and have a conversation with Dipa.

- **Dr. Ramprasad Dutta:** He is the senior-most chemist in the Butterfly Cosmetics established by Subhashishbabu, Debashish's father. He is in the factory since its establishment. He is of Dipa's father's age and his affectionate welcome in the factory put Dipa at ease. Debashish considers him as a real driving force of the factory since its establishment.
- **Dr. Surit Sen:** Sen is the physician to attend the Mukherjees. He comes to Dipa's house when Debashish fell sick and informs Dipa surprisingly that his husband's heart is on the right side of his body.
- **Gautamdev and Ramola:** Gautamdev is the oldest in the family. He runs the family business and is an aloof sort of person who consciously keeps away from domestic matters. His wife Ramola is however quite the reverse. She could not have been more than thirty, but she is bright, efficient in managing her household duties and very involved in anything that smacked of the domestic. Moreover, the hint of acid in her temperament persuades everyone to take pains not to rub her the wrong way.
- **Ashoka and Sainenbabu:** Ashoka is Kapil's sister who is approaching thirty. Her only son, a seven-year-old is at boarding school. To claim that she is a rich man's daughter and a rich man's wife is enough to sum her up. She looks upon most living creatures with disdain and distances herself from most people. Her husband Sainenbabu is partly animal-like who loves to hold forth at a gathering. He is inclined to be argumentative and, given a chance, he does not hesitate to offer unsolicited advice.
- **Dr. Gupta:** He is a middle-aged man of average build. He seems to be blessed with inexhaustible reserves of energy despite the battle he has been waging against death on behalf of his patients for the last twenty years. In fact, he looks stronger for it. He is a doctor at Rashbehari Hospital where Debashish is admitted by the three strangers. He informs Byomkesh and Rakhalbabu that it is a strange case he has been operating in his entire career. He tells them surprisingly that the reason for Debashish's survival is the place of his heart on the right side, instead of the left. He hands over the porcupine quills to the police for further investigation and cures Debashish very fast.
- **Dinanath:** Dinanath is a valet at Nripati's house who used to serve especially daily the discussion group every evening. He is loyal to his master. He knows that Nripati sometimes goes out for a nocturnal tryst but he keeps that with himself only. Even the other servants in the house are in darkness.
- **Ratan Singh:** Ratan is a valet and compatriot to Kharga Bahadur. He is short and stout with typical Nepali features. He lives with his master and works as a cook for him. He is quite famous for making excellent Sheekh kebabs which Kharga Bahadur likes very much.

- **Padmalochan:** Padmalochan is an elderly gardener who was appointed by Debashish to help Dipa in gardening work. He is an old hand at the job of gardening which is entrusted. One funny thing about him is he always refers to the bougainvillea as the 'baigonbilli'.
- **Faujdar Singh:** He is a watchman at the factory of Debashish whose face is selected to apply face cream to know the results.

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## 5.5 ADAPTATIONS FOR SERIALS AND MOVIES

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- The story was also adapted for a film named "Sahika Kanta" which was released in 1974.
- "Sahika Kanta" was an episode in the Hindi television serial *Byomkesh Bakshi* directed by Basu Chatterjee was broadcasted on Doordarshan during 1993 to 1997.
- A television serial named "Byomkesh" was broadcasted on Bengali channel ETV Bangla in 2014.
- The film *Detective Byomkesh Bakshi* was appeared in 2015 that was starring by the actor Sushant Singh Rajput

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## 5.6 IMPORTANT QUESTIONS

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1. Write a critical note on the literary merits of Saradindu Bandyopadhyay as a typical Bengali novelist in the context of *The Quills of the Porcupine*.
2. Critically comment on the characterization in Bandyopadhyay's novel *The Quills of the Porcupine*.
3. Write short notes on the following:
  - b. Byomkesh Bakshi
  - c. Debashish Bhatta
  - d. Dipa Bhatta
  - e. Prabal Gupta
  - f. Sujan Mitra
  - g. Nripati Laha
  - h. Bijoy Madhav Mukherjee
  - i. Kharga Bahadur
  - j. Kapil Bose
  - k. Nakul



## CRITICAL STUDY OF SARADINDU BANDYOPADHYAY'S *THE QUILLS OF THE PORCUPINE* (TRANSLATED BY SREEJATA GUHA) - PART-II

### Unit Structure :

- 6.0 Objectives
- 6.1 Plot – summary of the novel
- 6.2 Prologue in the novel
- 6.3 Epilogue in the novel
- 6.4 Symbolism in the Novel
- 6.5 Significance of the title *The Quills of the Porcupine*
- 6.6 Major Themes in the Novel
- 6.7 Important Questions

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### 6.0 OBJECTIVES

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After studying this chapter, the students will be able:

- a. To understand the plot structure of *The Quills of the Porcupine*
- b. To understand how *The Quills of the Porcupine* is a Crime and Detective Fiction.
- c. To know the prologue and epilogue introduced by Saradindu Bandyopadhyay as a successful Bengali novelist.
- d. To acquire a critical understanding of the prescribed novel.
- e. To elucidate the significance of the title of the novel.
- f. To elaborate on the symbolism in the novel.

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### 6.1 PLOT – SUMMARY OF THE NOVEL

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The prologue opens up the story in Saradindu Bandyopadhyay's short novel *The Quills of the Porcupine*. This novel comes under the literary subgenre of mystery or crime fiction. Therefore, this prologue is a kind of additional dropping cement to taste or read the novel with the climax elevated at the beginning. In the prologue, the readers have been made acquainted with the three mysterious murders and one half-murder at the crowded place of South Calcutta. The victims of the story were from the different strata of the society which stands as a kind of climax till the end of the novel. It informs the murders of Phaguram, an old beggar, a poor labourer and Gunamoy Das, a shopkeeper and a half murder of a

person from upper-class society, Debashish. The common thread in all these sinful acts was the use of the porcupine quills as a weapon to kill the people mercilessly.

The story is set in South Calcutta where Debashish Bhatta and his newly wedded wife Dipa live in a two-storeyed house, located in a tiny lane. They are married just two months before. This house is maintained by the Improvement Trust. It is a well-flourished house which is built by an elderly man, Subhashishbabu – the father of Debashish Bhatta, around five years back. His father is passed away.

Debashish and Dipa's married life is quiet and unhappy as it happens against the wish of Dipa. She always keeps spending her days listening to music and leaning on the chair while Debashish keeps himself busy in his factory work. Both barely spare time with one another. She prefers to have dinner after him. As soon as he finishes his dinner, Debashish leaves for Nripati's house where all his friends gather for a social chat session over a cup of tea.

Nakul is both a cook and only one servant in the Bhatta family and always takes care of the household very nicely. Dipa never shows interest in Debashish's thoughts and just insists on making yes / no formalities. She belongs to a patriarchal Bengali Mukherjee family which is controlled by her grandfather, Uday Madhav Mukherjee. He is forced to take a sudden retirement from his service as the principal of the college because of paralysis, but he rules his family from the four walls. Her mother is a simple woman busy with her household worries. Dipa always helps her mother as she does not have such freedom of going out and doing things as per her wish. Nil Madhav is her father who is a college professor. Bijoy is Dipa's only sibling who is a Master in Sanskrit and desires to try his best in the teaching field. All three male members in the family represent the patriarchal mindset. She is always available at the house to serve the family friends and guests all the time and mixes with them. She does obey all rules of the patriarchy but her heart remains despondent. She sits in front of her grandfather hoping her head in a paroxysm of appreciation and self-consciousness.

One day, Dipa gathers her entire strength and expresses to her grandfather that she wishes to marry a man of lower caste with whom she is in love. Irrespective of his roaring nature, she makes it clear to marry him if he (Grandfather) does not have any objection. Then, she is locked in a room as she has committed any serious offense. One day, she gets an opportunity to step out of the house and heads towards the station at Ballygunge. Unfortunately, Bijoy catches and brings her at home forcefully. He also finds a letter written by Dipa informing them about her elopement with a secret lover.

Bijoy, in severe tension, requests Nripati Laha, his friend, to find out a suitable groom for his sister. Nripati is helpful but satirically comments on the traditional mindset of the Mukherjees and compares



them with cockroaches. On the request of Bijoy, Nripati reaches to Debashish's house with a proposal of marriage because Nripati did know his father very well. He puts Dipa's proposal to him and invites him for a tea at his house the following evening. At the house of Nripati, Debashish meets Probal Gupta, a musician and Kapil Bose. The very first time, Probal declares his wife's death due to a conjugal heart attack last month. After listening to this sad news, Nripati and Debashish remain stunned. Debashish decides to take a leave and further promises to join them again the next day.

On the next evening, Debashish meets Bijoy where he finds Debashish a perfect match for Dipa. Meanwhile, Kharga Bahadur, a Nepali origin footballer, and Sujan Mitra, a rising star of the silver screen, come into the scene. Debashish seems happy. A few more evenings pass by in this similar manner. After exchanging their visits to one another's places, their wedding gets finalized after matchmaking.

After the wedding, the family friends and relatives present them with a variety of gifts appropriate to the occasion. Debashish seems in a mood to make their first wedding night memorable but he does not find any interest and response from Dipa. By gathering her strength, she expresses her love for another man in front of him. He feels a sudden electric current appears in his body and his entire dream world is shattered in a fraction of a second. She pleads with him to give her a corner of the house instead of throwing her out. He is a level-headed man and finds no interest in knowing about her lover. He roams around the garden to comfort himself. He suddenly encounters Bijoy and exchanges words about the happenings after marriage. Bijoy tells him that they thought that everything would be fine once she marries a wise man.

Debashish wants to settle down the problems and talks with Dipa by putting the three solutions one after another – first, divorce; second, to go back to her parents' house; and third, to continue playing the role of his wife publically. She agrees with the third option. He wants to even hide this separation from the eyes of Nakul and warns her to act accordingly. One afternoon, she receives a call from her lover who inquires whether she is acting as per his instructions or not and takes a promise to hide his identity. Meanwhile, Nakul tries to address Dipa about a tradition of the Bhatta family of eating meals together. Debashish also tries to take her for an outing that she refuses as per their (lover's) plan.

Debashish sees Kapil approaching him very hastily to find out his cigarette case and rushes to Nripati's house with him. Nripati asks Debashish about his newly married life which he could not answer from the bottom of his heart. Sujan Mitra arrives to join a daily discussion and asks Nripati whether he has read the news of the murder of a beggar, Phaguram near Gol Park or not. Everyone joins the discussion over the use of the porcupine quill as a weapon.

Debashish is worried about Dipa's strange behaviour with him. He insists her on the invitation from his employees to join the party on the occasion of their wedding. She agrees and reaches the factory where Dr. Ramprasad Dutta, a senior-most chemist and actual driving force of the factory, welcomes her. He sets her over the factory visit and on the dais where the function is organized. On the return journey, she gives a very casual reply to the question of Debashish. But she makes true use of the gifted roses to decorate the house by arranging them in the vases. He becomes surprised when he sees that. He appreciates her skill in flower decoration. All this while, she reserves an intimate form of addressing him publically. At home, she could address him formally.

Considering her interest in flowers decoration in her leisure time, Debashish steps forward to ask her to develop reading and gardening activities. He makes everything available including a gardener, Padmalochan. Without any interference, he observes her increasing interest in gardening but one call from her lover brings her back on the reality. Meanwhile, Shubhra Ghosh, her close friend, suddenly enters her house and pushes her to remember the days they had lived together. She asks her about a newlywed life experience and then leaves promising her to meet again. Dip's interest in gardening again increases as she shows her husband the development of gardening.

Sujan brings a piece of news again of the second murder in the city. The paltry labourer is killed this time using the porcupine quills. The discussion starts intensely where Nripati, Sujan, Probal, Kapil and Debashish also participate. On his return journey, Debashish catches himself in sudden stormy rain and the next day feels sick. After getting treatment by her family doctor Surit Sen, she decides not to keep everything on Nakul. Debashish also comes very close to Dipa these days and expresses his love for her. She becomes unanswered. One day, he invites all his friends for coffee and snacks at his house. They discuss the third murder in the city which is of a shopkeeper using the quills of the porcupine. When she sees Bijoy, her brother, she feels unease and goes to rest in her bedroom. Bijoy, with the permission of Debashish, asks Dipa forcefully to reveal her lover's identity and threatens her that he would kill her lover.

The story turns on to a highly exaggerated stage. Every man has two facets like day and night. The author here uncovers the masks of the characters by focusing on the duality. In the first story, Nripati, wearing his wardrobe and shoes, goes out at night silently. In another story, Probal who is a singer and an old tenant at Gol Park, goes out around eight-thirty and takes a bath in a lake and settles down there till midnight. The third story is about Kharga Bahadur who makes his way out by informing his valet about the arrival of three guests at his house to play cards. He insists on serving them a good quality breakfast and tells him that he would flow blood if he loses today in gambling. After losing in the game, he leaves the house at midnight, wearing his cowboy hat. In the fourth story, Kapil, along with his brother Gautamdev, his brother's wife Ramola, sister

Ashoka and father Sailenbabu, discusses his marriage. It is a deep and long discussion held among them. After this, Kapil wears his night suit and leaves around eleven-thirty with his telescope.

In the penultimate story of a particular night, Sujan is in his studio for a shoot. The focus is on the limitlessness of an actor's life. He is not an exceptional case for this. After the shoot, he always goes out for dinner and lunch at different locations. Then he comes to the house to take a sip of wine and gazes at a picture of a girl. He leaves the house at eleven-thirty. He settles down near a lake with an absent mind and heads back towards his car, commenting on women.

The final tale is about the bizarre life of Debashish and Dipa. She behaves well to hide the truth from Nakul. She also discusses her gardening work with Debashish. Both are aware of their fake relation. Sometimes he is shown behaving like a husband standing out of her room but suddenly heads towards his room. The entire story till now is a flashback and continues from the point when she refuses to go on a movie with him. Two months pass away after their marriage. He could not concentrate on reading and avoids to go at Nripat's house.

Dipa, that day, does not go to the garden but a sudden change in her behaviour is visible. He goes into Debashish's room and asks him for a cup of tea. He, surprisingly, gazes at her and nods his head. She herself prepares and serves the tea in the drawing-room. She realizes her mistake and again requests him for a movie which makes him happy. Suddenly, the telephone rings and he leaves the house at eight o'clock in the evening without informing her where he is going. After one hour, Dipa and Nakul seem tensed over Debashish. She receives a call at nine o'clock. It is from her lover to inquire about her husband's behaviour.

It is exactly nine-thirty, the phone again rings a third time. This time the call is from the Rashbehari Hospital and she is informed by the woman at another end that Debashish is hospitalized in the emergency ward. She, along with Nakul, rushes towards the hospital.

An epilogue continues the story where the prologue was ended. Inspector Rakhalbabu and Byomkesh reach the hospital. Dr. Gupta surprisingly informs them of the story of the half-murder. He explains that Debashish is lying in an unconscious state near Rabindra Sarobar, on a bench under a tree. He is brought to the hospital by three strangers and one of them is his employee. Dr. Gupta also astonishingly tells them that the porcupine quills are removed from his left chest. He is still alive because his heart is on the right side. He hands over the quills of the porcupine to them and continues telling the details. According to him, it is an attempt to kill Debashish.

Byomkesh and Rakhalbabu make an attempt to convince Dipa to go home and come back the following morning again as Debashish is out of danger. She refuses to leave him alone and requests them to let her be at

the corner of the hospital. Both of them reach the Mukherjee's residence and inform them about their son-in-law's hospitalization. Nil Madhav and his wife leave for the hospital to accompany Dipa. Bijoy gives information about his sister's aborted affair and suspects her lover for this attempt to murder.

At two-thirty, Debashish wakes up and informs Dipa that he wants to eat something. She sits with him on the corner of the bed which makes him happy. At ten o'clock in the morning, Byomkesh and Rakhalbabu enter the hospital and start inquiring from Debashish about the incident that happened with him. He tells them that Kharga calls him up there to lend him some money which he agrees. He informs them that as soon as Kharga leaves for another discussion, somebody enters something in his chest mercilessly while sitting at the bench. It makes him suddenly unconscious.

In the evening on the same day, all the friends congregate at Nripati's house. Byomkesh and Rakhalbabu enter to interrogate them all in a separate room about Debashish's case. They inform Bijoy to be ready with Dipa's notebooks the next morning for a special investigation. Both of them arrive at Mukherjee's house to find out certain clues in Dipa's room and Byomkesh quickly drops the personal notebook in his pocket and promises Bijoy that everything is set to arrest the culprit and leaves the house.

In a separate room of the hospital, Byomkesh and Rakhalbabu interrogate Dipa and ask a series of questions about her husband and his friends who gather at Nripati's house. Rakhalbabu declares concluding that she is innocent. Later on, Byomkesh alone visits Nripati's house in the evening and interrogates them all with his theory to catch the culprit. He expresses that the three murders from different strata of the society, using the porcupine quills, are just a move to escape from the crime. It is just a drama set to show Debashish's murder as a serial killer's job.

Inspector Rakhalbabu arrives at Byomkesh's house to give an update about a bulletproof jacket asked by Byomkesh. Rakhalbabu leaves and the phone rings. On another end, somebody informs Byomkesh to come near Rabindra Sarobar claiming to have a secret over the murders in the city. This call is expected by him and he tells Rakhalbabu that the fish has taken a bait. He tells Rakhalbabu that he will be there to meet that person and then he takes off his shirt to wear that bulletproof jacket. He meets that person at the bench located under a tree by the edge of the water. The man sitting in front of him makes him careless and tries to fix the porcupine quills in the chest of Byomkesh. Suddenly, the man becomes bewildered as he gets failed because of a bulletproof jacket. Byomkesh's iron fist hands landed on his jaw like a heavy-duty weapon and lays his face down. Rakhalbabu hastily appears and catches that man. He is none other than Probal Gupta.

A fortnight later at Byomkesh's house, Ajit and Satyabati ask him how he deduces that Probal Gupta is the culprit. He speaks in a leisurely manner that the keywords in this tale are 'the porcupine quills'. He explains that the actual target was Debashish Bhatta. He also narrates how he reaches the culprit by interrogating each and every member who visits Nripati's house. He explains how he fixes up his eyes on Dipa's lover. He understands the traditional mindset of the Mukherjees who don't allow an unknown to be mixed up with their female. So, he comes to the conclusion that Dipa's lover is among the friends of Bijoy and reads the line of a poem written and signed by Probal Gupta on her secret diary:

“In the lightening radiance of your eyes,  
Thunderous clouds flash in my heart.”

Byomkesh explains further the development in this direction. He tells that Dipa is fond of music like Probal Gupta. Both fall in love with one another and he wishes to marry the only daughter of the Mukherjee family to solve his problems. He tries to elope with her but Bijoy catches her red-handedly and brings her back. Probal knows that her grandfather would not allow them to marry as he is a low caste widower.

Byomkesh explains to Satyabati and Ajit that Probal wanted to kill Debashish and marry his widow in a simple way. He would be the king of Debashish's property and his queen as his own in one swipe. On the day when Kharga Bahadur calls Debashish for a meet at Rabindra Sarobar, Probal plans to kill Debashish using the porcupine quills which he always carries in his pocket. Unfortunately, he didn't know that the heart of Debashish is at right. He also explains his planning to kill him to prove him wrong and divert attention from his possible involvement by killing him. But he has no idea that he has laid the trap solely for his benefit.

At the end of the story, Debashish reaches Byomkesh's house to invite them all for a party on the occasion of his real wedding night. He requests Satyabati to come to the party and bring Dipa out of her self-consciousness. The story ends in the hope of happy days in the lives of Debashish and Dipa.

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## 6.2 PROLOGUE IN THE NOVEL

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A prologue is a preamble or an introduction or an opening to a story that sets up the specific circumstance. It also gives foundation subtleties, frequently some prior story that integrates with the principle one, and different incidental data. Saradindu Bandyopadhyay's short novel *The Quills of the Porcupine* begins with a prologue. This novel comes under the literary subgenre of mystery or crime fiction. Therefore, this prologue is a kind of additional dropping cement to taste or read the novel with the climax elevated at the beginning by the author.

This prologue serves as a kind of introduction that is required to understand the course of action through which the readers would be transported in the world created by Bandyopadhyay. It informs the setting of the novel or story that is South Calcutta. The author's intention here is to create awareness about the place and society which is used here to narrate the story. The setting is apt to describe an absolutely traditional Indian life of the working class. The prologue begins with the routine activities of the people near the crowded place – a tea stall where Phaguram, an old beggar, is shown on his usual activities.

In the prologue itself, the readers have been made acquainted with the three mysterious murders and one half-murder at the crowded place of South Calcutta. The victims of the story were from the different strata of the society which stands as a kind of climax till the end of the novel. It informs the murders of Phaguram, an old beggar, a poor labourer and Gunamoy Das, a shopkeeper and a half murder of a person from upper-class society, Debashish Bhatta. The common thread in all these sinful acts was the use of the porcupine quills as a weapon to kill the people mercilessly.

The author makes the readers acquainted with the central figure of the novel – Byomkesh Bakshi, a detective. In the prologue, Rakhalbabu comes to know the murders in the city and discusses it with Byomkesh to proceed further in the action with the clue of the use of a common weapon – the quills of the porcupine. And the actual detective story begins with this maiden clue for Byomkesh Bakshi.

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### **6.3 EPILOGUE IN THE NOVEL:**

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The Cambridge Dictionary describes an epilogue as “a speech or piece of text that is added to the end of a play or book, often giving a short statement about what happens to the characters after the play or book finishes”. It is said that a well-entwined plot must have a beginning, middle and end to make the text more effective. Epilogue serves as an operative ending for the texts.

Saradindu Bandyopadhyay's short novel *The Quills of the Porcupine* has a strong plot which is comprised of the prologue, the middle story and the epilogue. It begins with the prologue where Byomkesh and Inspector Rakhalbabu are shown discussing the series of murders in the city using the porcupine quills as a weapon. In the middle part, the author narrates the story of Debashish and Dipa along with the friends who gather at Nripati's house. This part ends exactly where the epilogue starts to continue the story started in the prologue.

Byomkesh and Rakhalbabu only appear in the prologue and the epilogue. In the epilogue, they continue investigating the murder case which has become a mystery in the city. To increase the level of tension and climax, the author narrates the other dark sides of the characters who



leave their houses at night including Nripati, Kapil, Probal, Kharga and Sujan. In the epilogue, Byomkesh and Rakhalbabu have a big role to play. They interrogate each and every member of the chat group and focus on tracing that the actual target was Debashish, other three people were killed to cheat the police and escape from the clutches of law skillfully. It was a deliberate act Byomkesh did to channelize the activities of the culprit. Finally, Probal Gupta, the culprit, does a mistake and decides to kill Byomkesh and Rakhalbabu catches him red-handed.

At the end of the epilogue, Debashish invites Byomkesh, Ajit and Satyabati for a small celebration at his house. An epilogue ends the sufferings of Debashish and Dipa and ignites a light of hope that would bring changes in their married life.

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## 6.4 SYMBOLISM IN THE NOVEL

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**a. The quills of the porcupine:** This is the significant title of the novel. From the beginning of the novel till the end, the climax raises over the use of the porcupine quills for all murders instead of the traditional weapons like knife or chopper. In the end, Probal Gupta was caught by Byomkesh and Rakhalbabu and the use of the porcupine quills was uncovered. An untraditional weapon like this is appropriately used by the author to raise the climax in the mystery novel.

**b. The South Calcutta City:** There were hordes of lunatics prowling the streets of South Calcutta. Although it was not at all usual in a city like Calcutta for people to live next door to each other and never meet. In these modern times, religion was spared little more than lip service. Places like Gol Park and Rabindra Sarobar have been highlighted with their specialties. These are the two places where all murders and one half-murder happened. The area around the main gate of Sarobar was fairly deserted; rarely did a bus or car whiz past along Southern Avenue.

**c. Nripat's House:** Nripat's house is popular in his locality for a tea and chat session. Bijoy, Kapil, Kharga, Sujan, Probal and Debashish are the regular members to gather at every evening. They discuss the current happenings in the city and express themselves with the knowledge they have. All the members were interrogated by Byomkesh and Rakhalbabu at this place after an attempt to murder Debashish using the porcupine quills.

**d. The Mukherjee Family:** The Mukherjee family was staunchly conservative in its ways and Dipa, the only daughter of this family, was not allowed to socialize with men who were not known to them. Uday Madhav is the ruler of this family who follows patriarchal practices. Every member of Dipa's family, including Bijoy Madhav, was obviously aware of her illicit love affair. They force her into marriage with Debashish with full knowledge of her relationship with the other man.

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## 6.5 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TITLE *THE QUILLS OF THE PORCUPINE*

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Saradindu Bandyopadhyay's short novel *The Quills of the Porcupine* is a suitable title to its theme. Throughout the entire story, the climax reaches its peak over the series of murders in the city, South Calcutta. The city observes the three murders and one half-murder in a row. These three murders and an attempt to kill were from the different strata of the society – Phaguram, a beggar; a poor labourer; a shopkeeper and an industrialist Debashish Bhatta. The killer kills the first three people to set the story to be shown as it's a job of a serial killer. But the actual target was Debashish. It was Probal Gupta, a rising singer and musician who was the secret lover to Dipa, who wanted to marry her. Dipa's family belongs to the upper-class. Therefore, it was not possible for Probal to elope with Dipa and marry her because he was a lower caste widower. For his own benefit, he decides to kill Debashish and marry his widow and grabs his entire property. It was his actual plan that he executes with the help of the porcupine quills as a weapon.

To kill Debashish, firstly, he kills three innocent people using the porcupine quills as a weapon instead of a knife or any other tools. And he also fixes the porcupine quills in the chest of Debashish but fortunately, he survives because his heart was on the right side. In the entire city, it was like a mystery that Byomkesh solves with the help of Inspector Rakhalbabu and arrests the culprit. The story narrates the ways why the quills of the porcupine are used instead of the traditional weapons easily available. An identity of a culprit is revealed at the end who uses the quills of porcupine intentionally which is a rare story. Therefore, the title of the novel is significant to its story.

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## 6.6 MAJOR THEMES IN THE NOVEL:

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**a. Marginalization of women in a patriarchal society**—Marginalization of women is a major theme highlighted in this novel. Dipa is the representative character who is a victim of the patriarchal mindset of the Mukherjee family. She was without any kind of freedom. She tries to pave the way for her freedom but is unfortunately caught by her brother Bijoy. Negligence of women's health is a kind of aspect of this marginalization. Maximum male characters are shown as widowers that shows the place of women in contemporary society.

**b. Dual Human Personas**—Duality is a human character is another major feature of the present novel. This duality is shown by the author highlighting the day and night activities of the characters especially males. Nripati, Probal, Kharga, Sujan and Kapil usually go out of their houses till midnight for doubtful activities. Therefore, the words like dark and light describe the duality in human personas. Even Dipa, who was secretly in love with a man, marries Debashish only for the sake of saving herself.

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## 6.7 IMPORTANT QUESTIONS:

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- A) Explain Saradindu Bandyopadhyay's short novel *The Quills of the Porcupine* in the light of a Mystery and Crime Fiction.
- B) Comment on the plot-construction in Saradindu Bandyopadhyay's *The Quills of the Porcupine*.
- C) Critically comment on the symbolism in Bandyopadhyay's *The Quills of the Porcupine*.
- D) Explain the marginalization of women in a patriarchal Society in Bandyopadhyay's *The Quills of the Porcupine*.
- E) Short Notes:
  - i. Prologue in *The Quills of the Porcupine*
  - ii. Epilogue in *The Quills of the Porcupine*
  - iii. Significance of the Title *The Quills of the Porcupine*
  - iv. Dual human characters in *The Quills of the Porcupine*

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## UNIT VII

7

### **CRITICAL STUDY OF SHORT STORIES BY BHISHAM SAHNI'S "PALI" AND VILAS SARANG'S "A REVOLT OF THE GODS"**

#### **Unit Structure :**

- 7.0 Objective
- 7.1 Introduction: Bhisham Sahni
- 7.2 Pali : Plot
- 7.3 Characters
- 7.4 Narrative Technique and Style
- 7.5 The Individual vs Fate
- 7.6 Religious Bigotry
- 7.7 Conclusion
- 7.8 Questions
- 7.9 Introduction: Vilas Sarang
- 7.10 A Revolt of the Gods: Plot
- 7.11 Characters
- 7.12 Narrative Technique and Style
- 7.13 Understanding Magic Realism
- 7.14 Magic Realism in "A Revolt of the Gods"
- 7.15 Conclusion
- 7.16 Questions

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#### **7.0 OBJECTIVE**

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The objective in the following unit is to develop a deeper understanding of the content, language and style of the two stories, Bhisham Sahni's "Pali" and Vilas Sarang's "A Revolt of the Gods," with reference to the important themes in the stories as well as aspects such as plot, setting, character, and narrative technique employed by the author in these short stories.

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#### **7.1 INTRODUCTION: BHISHAM SAHNI**

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Bhisham Sahni was born on 8 August 1915 in Rawalpindi in Pakistan. He grew up in Lahore and obtained a degree in English Literature from Government College in Lahore but settled in Delhi after

Partition. He was actively involved in the struggle for independence. As a writer, he is perhaps most well known for his novel *Tamas* or 'Darkness' (translated into English in 1988), a work that was highly acclaimed for its sharp critique of communalism as of the British policy of divide and rule. *Tamas* has been translated into a number of Indian as well as foreign languages, and has perhaps overshadowed all his other works. His other novels include *Jharoke*, and *Basanti*. In addition to being a writer, he worked in theatre, and was involved with the Indian People's theatre Association (IPTA). He is also the author of plays like *Hanusa* (1977), *Kabira Khara Bazaar Mein* (1981), and *Madhavi* (1982). During his stay in Moscow, he worked as a translator with the Foreign Language Publishing House rendering Russian works into Hindi, one of which included Leo Tolstoy's *Resurrection*. After his return to Delhi, he edited the literary journal, *Nayi Kahaniyan*, from 1965-67, and took up the post of General Secretary of the All-India Progressive Writers' Association from 1975-85. His famous collection of short stories include *Bhagya Rekha* (1953), *Pahla Patha* (1956) and *Nischar* (1983). He is the recipient of awards such as the Sahitya Akademi award (for *Tamas* in 1975), the Shiromani Writers award (1979), the Lotus-Writers award from the Afro-Asian Writers' Association (1981), the Soviet Land Nehru award (1983) and the Padma Bhushan (1998). He published his autobiography *Aaj ke Ateet* (Today's Past) in 2003 before he passed away on 11 July that same year.

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## 7.2 "PALI": PLOT

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Bhisham Sahni's "Pali" is a story of a four year old boy named Pali who gets lost while migrating with his parents and little sister across the border from Pakistan to India during the time of partition. Circumstances compel his distraught parents, Manohar Lal and Kaushalya, to continue their journey without him. Tragedy strikes a second time, and they lose their daughter too when their lorry is attacked by a mob. Manohar Lal then makes several unsuccessful attempts over the next few years to trace his son before he learns that Pali is with a Muslim family. Manohar Lal had no idea that Pali had been adopted by a childless Muslim couple, Shakur Ahmed and Zenab, and that he had been converted to a Muslim to satisfy the dictates of their Maulvi. When Manohar Lal finally finds Pali, now eleven years old, his adoptive parents and the Maulvi try their best to keep him from taking Pali until Manohar Lal pleads with Zenab on his wife's behalf who finally gives in. Unfortunately for Pali, history repeats itself, and he is reconverted to a Hindu to satisfy the Chaudhari and the extended community in the village. The story ends with Shakur and Zenab eagerly anticipating the time when they will see Pali again during the festival of Id.

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### 7.3 CHARACTERS

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**Manohar Lal and Kaushalya & Shakur Ahmed and Zenab:** Pali's parents, biological and adoptive, play an important role in the narrative. Both are represented as loving, caring parents. Where Manohar Lal and his wife Kaushalya are concerned, as individuals caught in the web of history, they give themselves up to their fate without questioning the unfairness of it all. They grieve for their lost children but meekly accept it as a sign of God's will. This fatalistic attitude becomes their way of surviving the unimaginable reality.

Pali's adoptive father, Shakur Ahmed, sells chinaware for living, and is similarly described as a god-fearing man. Both he and his wife Zenab are overjoyed when they find Pali, but as a Muslim couple that has sheltered a Hindu child, they remain constantly fearful that fate, in the form of the police, the Maulvi, or the neighbours, might snatch Pali away.

Both sets of parents display similar characteristics. On the one hand, they have immense capacity for love, and accept Pali for what he is – an innocent child. However, both succumb to the power of the religious community that takes control over Pali, and do not resist their attempts to refashion him to suit their convictions and beliefs. As such they show themselves to be weak and insecure, unable to protect their son from those like the Maulvi or the Chaudhari. They abdicate their responsibility as parents when Pali/Altaf needs them most, and sacrifice his happiness to maintain the status quo.

**Pali:** Pali, the four year old protagonist of the story, like a typical child of his age, is able to adjust to his new environment with the kind of ease that only children so young are capable of. However, he is paradoxically centralised and marginalised at the same time. He is completely bewildered by what is expected of him, and lives in fear of what will be done to him in the name of religion, something he knows nothing of. All he can do is cling to the parent he thinks will support him only to find that it was a futile hope. He emerges as a vulnerable, pitiful character unable to articulate his confusion, pain and shame at the public humiliation he is subjected to during his circumcision and later, his 'mundan'.

**The Maulvi and the Chaudhari:** The Maulvi of the neighbouring mosque, the Social Worker, and the Chaudhari of the village, represent the dark side of a world where religion is reduced to superficial customs and traditions, and where fear of the other results in the kind of victimisation Pali gets subjected to. Each of them is a bigot in their own way, and is seen exploiting the helplessness of a child to show their power and authority. Pali/Altaf is viewed as the son of a 'kafir' by the Maulvi and then as a 'Musla' by the Chaudhari. These derogatory labels applied to Pali are a far cry from what Pali is, a child first and last. Ironically, even the Social Worker, who one would have expected to be more sympathetic given her profession, is just as cold and harsh. Her gesture of throwing



away Pali's Rumi cap without any concern about hurting his feelings signifies her lack of empathy and sensitivity to Pali's plight. Where Pali's parents represent one side of the binary, the Maulvi, the Chaudhari and the Social Worker represent the other. One might find such characterisation somewhat simplistic and stereotypical, but it does reinforce the two poles that Pali's fate is controlled by.

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## 7.4 NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE AND STYLE

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"Pali" is set during the time of Partition and spans a period of about seven years from the time Pali is lost until the time he is found again. The narrative shifts back and forth in space beginning with Pali getting lost on one side of the border while with his biological parents and being found on the other side of the border by his adoptive parents, then being restored to his biological parents once again. This shifting narrative mirrors Pali's yo-yo like existence as he is shunted back and forth between the two sides of the border with two different sets of parents of two different communities.

"Pali" is a third person omniscient narrative, and the author makes good use of the opportunities this mode of narration allows to intervene and comment on the events and characters in the story. The author's intrusion in the form of philosophical observations, and the reflective, meditative comments create a sombre, melancholic mood and atmosphere befitting this grim partition story. A sense of weariness and disillusionment is introduced in the opening lines itself when the author writes, "Life goes on and on. Its ends never meet. Neither in the mundane world of realities, nor in fiction. We drag on drearily in the hope that someday these ends may meet. And sometimes we have the illusion that the ends have really joined." However, there is also a sense that while "Pali" is about what happened at a specific time in history, it is not to be limited to its historical context because it is ultimately a story about the vagaries of fate and of life in general. Several metaphors and similes punctuate the narrative to reinforce this idea. The author compares life to something akin to a thread with ends that do not meet, and later to a series of knots where another one appears the moment one is resolved. This idea of life as a thread reappears when the author compares Manohar Lal's efforts to find Pali to treading a path that "was like a single thread hidden in a tangled mass." Nature imagery is also used to reiterate the helplessness or elation of the characters as the case may be. Thus, the sky sometimes looks "mysterious" (as the refugees migrate in their respective lorries) and sometimes "resplendent" (when Zenab finds Pali) depending on the circumstances and the state of a character's mind. Kaushalya's distraught condition is likened to that of "a bird whose nest was being destroyed before its very eyes," and Manohar Lal's frustrated efforts are described with a metaphor that compares his life to that of a bird being torn apart by a hawk with its beak. The author's comments and the imagery effectively reinforce the sense of bleakness that characterises the mood of the narrative.

Tragic as the story of Pali is, it is also deeply ironic. The central irony perhaps lies in the discrepancy between what religion preaches and how it is practised by those who are supposed to be the moral guardians of society. What can be more ironic than the fact that an innocent child is subjected to cruelty in the name of religion, or that a humanising enterprise such as religion results in the kind of dehumanisation we see in “Pali”? It is just as ironic that an innocent child is perceived as a threat. And that where Pali is believed to be an outsider, he is quickly claimed as one’s own once he is suitably converted. The ease with which Pali is made a Muslim and then a Hindu again would be laughable if it were not so tragic. The Chaudhari’s outrage at the fact that Pali’s Muslim parents had “planted the poison of fanaticism in his mind” is perhaps justified but the irony lies in the fact he is so completely blind to his own fanaticism. He is indignant at the idea of “religious conversion” but only when it is done by others. And though Pali has been brought back by his own father, the Chaudhari implies, with no logic whatsoever, that he has been “planted” amongst them by Muslims. The Chaudhari’s paranoia signifies such a crippling fear of the other that everything seems like a conspiracy against the self.

The Maulvi and the Chaudhari are so blinded by their own self-righteousness that they remain blissfully unaware of how absurd and cruel they really are. The final irony lies in the fact that Shakur and Zenab wait for Pali in the belief that Manohar Lal will honour his promise to send Pali to spend Id with them every year.

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## 7.5 THE INDIVIDUAL VS FATE

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Sahni suggests that human beings are propelled forward by fate and a destiny not of their own making. At the very beginning, the author draws parallels between real life and fiction, claiming that both worlds are characterised by similar uncertainties. Whether in “the mundane world of realities” or in the world of fiction, whether in real life or in a story, the ends do not always meet, and neither do the “knots of life” get satisfactorily resolved.

Manohar Lal and Kaushalya adopt a fatalistic attitude and decide to be grateful that they still have one child. When they lose the other one too, they simply resign themselves to their lot by seeing their trials as the will of god. Their destiny had become inextricably linked with the destiny of the nation, and all they could do was look up at the stars in the night sky in bewilderment since “Fate had thrown a black curtain over across their eyes, and they could discern no ray of hope through it.” Another way of coming to terms with their tragedies is to compare their own fate with that of others who had to suffer a worse fate than their own. Thus, Manohar Lal and Kaushalya think of Lekhraj who had to see his three children killed before his own eyes, and feel comforted by the thought that they did not have to suffer in that way. A similar attitude is adopted by Shakur

when the riots break out. In the face of every violent act, he repeats to himself that all this was a sign of god's anger against humans.

The author never lets us forget that we are always at the mercy of forces beyond our control. And yet, "Pali" celebrates the resilience of the individual, whether a child or an adult. No doubt they remain scarred by their tragedies, but both Pali and his parents are shown as able to withstand their trying circumstances.

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## 7.6 RELIGIOUS BIGOTRY

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"Pali" eloquently illustrates the divide that separates self from other, Hindu from Muslim, all in the name of religion. At no point in the narrative do characters such as the Maulvi and the Chaudhari see themselves in terms of their national identity. They are Muslims or Hindus first and last; their communal identity becomes their *only* identity. The real problem, however, lies in the manner in which this identity is understood in exclusionary terms. There is no room for respect and acceptance for a religion other than one's own. The line that separated the two countries at the time of Partition had not been erased simply by dividing the nation into two. In the light of this sad reality, Sahni shows how the possibility of harmonious existence between people of different faiths is only an illusion. The other is to keep at a safe distance because the other is so strange and unfathomable. This attitude is best exemplified in the case of the Maulvi who is unable to see Pali as the child he is because he belongs to a different faith, and is as such, is "a kafir's polluted child". For the Maulvi, Pali can be accepted by the extended community only if he is converted to Islam. Circumcision, reading the kalma, wearing a Rumi cap, and a change of name - this is all it takes to make a Hindu a Muslim. Pali becomes Altaf in a matter of minutes. Later, all that the Chaudhari has to do to convert Altaf back to Pali is shave his head, give him a sacred thread and a dhoti and kurta to wear, and a few mantras to chant. Such cosmetic, superficial 'conversions' are enough to satisfy society into believing that the other is no longer a threat, and can be safely integrated into the self.

The superciliousness of the Maulvi and the Chaudhari is placed in opposition to the pure love that Pali's parents, biological and adoptive, show towards him. When the Maulvi refers to Pali as a "kafir's polluted child" and compares him to a snake, Zenab is found thinking to herself that neither did Pali look like the child of a serpent nor did there seem to be anything polluted about him. Despite being a member of the same religious community, Zenab is able to rise above a petty definition of what it means to be a Muslim, and see Pali for what he is- a frightened, lost child, not a 'kafir,' a snake, or a source of pollution. Manohar Lal is also found trying to protect and comfort Pali because he can empathise with his condition.

Unfortunately, Pali is denied agency over his life and his body since he is only a child. The decision to convert him is taken by the adults

whose control he is under. Pali's transformation to Altaf and then back to Yashpal reflects the power of the adult community to erase his identity and substitute it for another. Pali has no say in the matter. He must accept his new identity as meekly as the red Rumi cap the Maulvi gives him after the circumcision. Later, when he is refashioned as a Hindu, once again, his body is taken control over by the community. His hair is shaved off, he is given new clothes to wear, and a new name to respond to. We find that Pali is treated more like a wild animal that needs to be domesticated in order to live in a home as opposed to the jungle he came from. The parents are also guilty of communalism at times. When Zenab hears that Pali's biological father has come looking for him, she develops an outlook similar to that of the Maulvi, and feels that now that he is a Muslim, he belongs to her. When he returns to his childhood home, and the Chaudhari calls the barber to shave off Pali's hair, Manohar Lal does not protest. What does a child such as Pali/Altaf matter, in the larger scheme of things, especially things as big and as important as religion? What do children know of religion anyway? Such are the beliefs the author satirises in the story, raising questions about who are the real 'kafirs' or 'fanatics' in society. In fact, the Maulvi goes to the extent of bribing the police to prevent Manohar Lal from finding Pali, and presents this act as "a service to religion."

The story reaches its climax at the point when Manohar Lal finally comes face to face with Pali but must prove that Pali is indeed his son. Pali now becomes the point of contention between his biological and adoptive parents but, as the author notes, the matter acquires a different tone altogether with the focus on his religious identity: "It had become a Hindu-Muslim matter. Questions like "Whose child is he?" and "Who brought him up?" seemed to have become irrelevant." Parent and child become inconsequential in the larger context of religion but Pali/Altaf's parents do try to resist falling into the trap of religious bigotry. Zenab agrees to return Pali because her view of god tells her that she might incur his wrath for making Pali's mother suffer, and not because she gave him into the hands of 'kafirs'. Incidentally, the word 'kafir' itself, which means unbeliever or infidel, is itself ironic since the 'other' is labelled as such not because they don't believe in god but because they believe in another god. At a critical juncture in the narrative, Zenab sidelines the Maulvi and detaches herself from his dogmatic approach. She makes a pact with Manohar Lal to send Pali to them once a year on the occasion of Id to stay with them for a month. When Manohar Lal graciously agrees, it marks the final insult to the narrow-mindedness of bigots like the Maulvi. Later, Manohar Lal tells everyone how Shakur and Zenab had taken such good care of Pali all the time he was with them. And despite his embarrassment when Pali starts saying 'namaz' in front of all their friends and relatives, he pleads Pali's case. At every turn, we see Manohar Lal reminding everyone that Pali is only a child, something that surprisingly needs constant reiteration.

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## 7.7 CONCLUSION

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As a Partition story, “Pali” complicates the question of identity, and satirises the attempt to reduce religion and God to suit one’s cause. The story is deeply critical of how religion is exploited as a tool to divide the people of a nation. In fact, national identity becomes superfluous in the debate when the issue of religion enters the discussion. The Partition of the country is mirrored in the attempt to effect further ‘partitions’ between people, especially in the name of religion. Pali can be seen as a symbol of the nation itself, ‘partitioned’ into Hindu/Muslim just as the nation was. His parents find themselves torn between their dual identities, as Hindu/Muslim and as parents. In the process, they tear Pali apart, leaving him with no sense of his own identity. In “Pali”, Sahni demonstrates how the grand, public narratives of religion and history overshadow the more personal and fragile identities of people on the ground – mothers, fathers and little children – who are forced to operate as tools for furthering a communal agenda. Sahni’s vision, as seen in “Pali” is secular because he is just as critical of Hindus as he is of Muslims. It is also essentially tragic because it shows the ultimate victory of communalism and religious bigotry.

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## 7.8 QUESTIONS

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1. Comment on “Pali” as a Partition narrative.
2. Show how Bhisham Sahni exposes religious bigotry in “Pali.”
3. Discuss the objectification of Pali by the adult community.
4. Explain the binaries that operate in “Pali.”
5. How does “Pali” highlight the predicament of the individual at the mercy of fate and history?

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## 7.9 INTRODUCTION: VILAS SARANG

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Born in Karwar in 1942, Vilas Sarang was a bilingual writer of fiction, poetry and criticism in English and Marathi. He studied at Elphinstone College, Mumbai, and obtained his doctoral degree from the University of Mumbai before he moved to the Indiana University at Bloomington in 1971. Sarang held teaching posts at the University of Basrah in Iraq, the University of Kuwait, and the University of Mumbai. His stories have appeared in foreign journals such as *London Magazine*, *Encounter*, and *The Malahat Review*, as well as Indian ones such as *Indian Horizons*. He published two collections of stories with Penguin Books, *Fair Tree of the Void* (1990), and *Women in Cages: Collected Stories* (2006), the latter being a compilation of his stories written earlier together with some new ones. *In the Land of Enki* (1993) was translated from Marathi into English by Sarang himself in collaboration with Professor Breon Mitchell. His other works include *The Dinosaur Ship*, *Rudra*, *the Untouchable God*, *The Dhamma Man* and *Tandoor Cinders*. As is the case in his fiction, Sarang’s preoccupation with themes like

alienation and the divided self are evident in his collection of poems *Another Life* (2007). Sarang also translated important Marathi poets such as Bapurao Jagtap, Vasant Abaji Dahake and Bahinibai Chaudhuri. He edited the anthology *Indian English Poetry since 1950*, and also wrote a number of critical essays before he passed away in 2015.

Sarang was influenced by the modernist movements in English and Marathi literature. Authors like Gangadhar Gadgil, Vyankatesh Madgulkar and Aravind Gokhale from Marathi literature inspired him just as much as Western writers, especially the existentialists like Samuel Beckett, Albert Camus and Franz Kafka. His bilingualism and the influence of both Western and Indian literary traditions gives his work a distinctive flavour. Jai Arjun Singh points out in “Why are Indian Writers afraid of the Edge?” (April 3 2019, [www.sunday-guradian.com](http://www.sunday-guradian.com)), the content of Sarang’s stories can be quite unsettling, “even offensive, if you aren’t prepared for it.” However, they still make for a compelling read because they “provide powerful new perspectives on our cultural and social assumptions.”

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### 7.10 “A REVOLT OF THE GODS”: PLOT:

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Set in the city of Mumbai, at the time of Ganesh Chaturthi, “A Revolt of the Gods” begins with an introduction to the humdrum life of the narrator, a photographer who runs a studio. The narrative then moves abruptly into the realm of fantasy with an event that shakes up not just the narrator and the residents of his building, but all of Mumbai city. As the crowds make their way to the beach to immerse the statues of Lord Ganesha, the idols come to life and walk away. They continue to live in the city for a while, sometimes giving people a gentle blow on the head with their trunks. Even though the residents grow accustomed to their presence, they still remain uneasy and wary of the gods in their midst. After a few days, the narrator witnesses the gods immersing themselves into the sea, a vision that captivates as well as intrigues him. Though he later wonders whether he had imagined the spectacle, he decides to be content with having witnessed it, even if in a dream. The narrator then remembers an incident from his childhood where a crazy old astrologer had become convinced that the world was going to end. Even though no one believed him, he proceeded to take shelter on the top of a mountain that day but was found dead the next morning. Thinking back, the narrator wonders about how the old man had braved death for his belief. The story concludes with the narrator informing his neighbour, Mr. Kini, that the gods had left only to find that he goes back to his former habit of cursing the gods.

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### 7.11 CHARACTERS

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The narrative revolves primarily around the narrator but several minor characters do put in an appearance. We have Mr. Dalvi, who runs



the studio in partnership with the narrator. We learn that Dalvi is technically skilled, good at developing and printing, and spends much of his time working on negatives in the dark room. That Dalvi leaves early from work to witness the immersion of his household Ganesha, suggest that, unlike the narrator, he is probably a 'religious' man.

Some of the residents from the narrator's building make a fleeting appearance while discussing the coming alive of the idols on the beach. Each of these characters – Akshikar, Professor Matkari, and Subodh – express their respective views on the incident as the narrator merely looks on. Another other character who appears more than once in the narrative is the old blind man who makes a few futile trips to collect his photographs from the narrator only to find that they are not ready. And then we have the gods themselves, the real heroes of the story, but who are described very briefly. Much is made of their coming to life by their devotees, but they themselves say nothing in the course of the narrative.

The character we encounter at some length is Mr. Kini, the narrator's neighbour. An accountant by profession, Mr. Kini shares with the narrator a love for photography. Completely lacking in self-awareness, at no point does Mr. Kini realise how smug, pretentious and absurd he really is. He confesses that he had been cursing the idols of Lord Ganesha for quite some time now, and that he could be the reason behind the revolt of the gods. The contradiction between Mr. Kini's former statement that the gods were out to punish black marketeers and the like, and his subsequent confession about his cursing the gods reveals his superficial and hypocritical nature. Sadly, despite his sense of shame at his behaviour, he is unable to change. Awareness does not lead to repentance or any transformation in his character, and in the end, he simply goes back to cursing the gods like he always did.

The primary character in the story, the narrator is characterised as a man with singular tastes and habits. A loner by nature, he dislikes outdoor assignments that require him to manoeuvre amongst "noisy crowds" with his camera and other equipment. As opposed to outdoor assignments that require "crouching awkwardly to catch someone in a good pose," working inside the studio is far more appealing because it offers him greater control over his clients who can be made to "sit silently and meekly" even "if somewhat uncomfortably" while he does his job. Another facet of the narrator's nature is his fascination with shadows because they change "minute by minute." The narrator prefers shadows precisely because they are not fixed or stable, and because their ability to "change endlessly", allows them to achieve the "transfiguration" that human beings can only dream of. It is perhaps such traits that allow the narrator to value the magical dream-like vision he sees at the end and revel in the sight.

The narrator appears to have little or no interest in matters concerning religion and rituals. He decides to participate in the procession only out of idle curiosity since the idol from his building was also being

taken for immersion. Throughout the story, the narrator adopts the stance of a disinterested observer, and tries to maintain a pragmatic approach to everything, especially the “revolt of the gods.” He does not offer any opinion during the discussion amongst the residents of his building after the miraculous event. He looks for simple and plausible explanations for Mr. Kini’s habit of cursing the gods, and tries to be just as matter-of-fact about Mr. Kini’s fear that his behaviour might have brought on the “revolt.”

However, the narrator is not as rational or as immune to the irrational as he had thought himself to be. He does not find it difficult to discard his usual, rational approach to everything when he witnesses the gods returning to the sea. He is content with the fact that he had had the privilege of witnessing the sight; whether it was real or a dream becomes immaterial. It is to the narrator’s credit that he can abandon his usual pragmatism in favour of cherishing a miraculous vision that defies reason and logic. In this respect, he seems to have a greater, more genuine faith and reverence than all other characters who had much to say about religion but found themselves incapable of responding with joy and awe in the presence of their god.

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## 7.12 NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE AND STYLE

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“A Revolt of the Gods,” tells of a spectacular event that takes place during the Ganesha Chaturthi festival in the city of Mumbai. The narrative alternates between the extraordinary event – the idols of Ganesha coming to life just before their immersion – and the everyday life of the narrator. However, the story ends inconclusively since nothing dramatic happens after the “revolt.” The gods give a gentle blow on the head to some people once in a while before they return to the sea to immerse themselves. In terms of structure then, the story is characterised by a circular rather than a linear motion, since it does not move towards a climax. And since the gods disappear as suddenly as they had appeared, the story ends on an open, anticlimactic note, leaving the reader wondering about the point of the “revolt.”

A significant feature of the narrative style has to do with the magic realism mode which is affected in the story through the narrator’s point of view. His disinterested attitude enables him to see things through a fairly dispassionate lens, and narrate what he sees, ordinary or not, in the same matter-of-fact tone reserved for narrating the other events in the story. His typical down-to-earth, grounded, and secular attitude allows him to record events as they occur, in an unsentimental fashion and without making too many comments of his own.

The narrator’s profession as a photographer plays a crucial in “A Revolt of the Gods.” It is not a coincidence that the narrator prefers “observing shadows,” and that the appearance and disappearance of the gods takes place in the evening. Light and shadow are used effectively to

underscore the contrast between the clarity and opacity of human perceptions. The world of the dark room inside the studio is mirrored in the world of shadows that take over outside as the day turns to night. The narrator questions the next morning the spectacle he had 'seen' the previous evening, but already given to privileging the world of shadows, he decides to value the vision he had witnessed in the dark. In so doing, in symbolically rejecting the 'light' of reason and logic, he validates the 'truth' that shadows and darkness can illuminate.

Irony is deeply embedded in the narrative, and both verbal and situational ironies are found in the story. It is ironic, for instance, that the narrator, a sceptic by nature, has named his studio 'Gajanan Photo Studio.' The narrator's views about shadows are also ironic: as opposed to popular belief, he thinks that human beings are inferior to their shadows, and that shadows brighten up our lives instead of doing the opposite: "A man is nothing compared to his shadow. Without shadows, life would have been far duller." We could also consider the case of the old blind man who brings home the irony in the fact that a blind man who cannot see his own photograph still needs to have his picture taken.

Far more deeply ironic, however, is the case of Mr. Kini. We see him admitting his reluctance to kill the mice that have appeared all over his house because it occurs to him that they could be the ones that came alive along with the idols. It does not, however, occur to him that all mice (like every other living creature) belong to the gods who created them, as they always have and always will. If killing mice before the miracle was alright, why is it immoral now? However, the greatest irony of all perhaps lies in the attitude of the devotees to their god. When the statues come to life, the people run away in fear instead of watching in awe. The residents of the narrator's building, for instance, are more comfortable discussing god instead of worshipping him. After all, it is easier to venerate a statue in a temple than to face a 'real' god.

We could discern a subtle comic irony in the title since the idea of gods revolting is absurd. The word 'revolt' implies rebelling against something or someone, by those that believe they are being victimised. Moreover, revolting is a method humans use to seek justice. Thence, the very idea that gods might take to revolting is preposterous and comical at the same time. After all, who can be more powerful than god? And what worries do gods have that they might even want to revolt? And yet, there is a firm conviction amongst the general population that the appearance of the gods is, to all intents and purposes, a revolt because they assume that the gods have come down to punish them. As already explained, the conviction about the motive behind the gods' so-called "revolt" reflects the human tendency to make sense of the irrational by using rational constructs. More importantly, after trying to rationalise the 'revolt', and despite their conviction that they were themselves responsible for it, life goes on as before in the city. No one is touched by or "transfigured" by the presence of the divine in their midst. In this sense, even if the gods had

revolted, it was a futile revolt. The humans remain trapped in the same patterns of thought and behaviour as before, the “revolt”, having done nothing to renew them in any way.

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### 7.13 UNDERSTANDING MAGIC REALISM

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Magic Realism, also known as magical realism or even marvellous realism is a mode of representation in the arts as well as in fiction. In *Magic(al) Realism* (2007), Maggie Ann Bowers explains that the term is an oxymoron because it describes the “forced relationship of irreconcilable terms.” Magic Realism, she says, can be used to describe a non-scientific and non-pragmatic attitude in a world that relies too much on scientific truth and reality.

Magic Realism has also been perceived as “inherently transgressive and subversive.” As Bowers explains, magic realism is a subversive mode is because it alternates between the real and the magical using the same narrative voice throughout treating the magic as seriously as the real. Also, the magical and the real are integrated to create a new category, that of the “magical real.” Readers are then compelled to accept that even terms like ‘truth’ and ‘reality’ are not as rigid or certain as we have believed them to be. By representing non-logical or non-scientific ‘truths’, Magic Realism also undermines the authority of science and rationality. For this reason, magic realism can be viewed as an essentially disruptive mode since it collapses the distinction between the ordinary and the extraordinary, the real and the fantastic. Since the narrative brings into collision these opposing frameworks and fuses them into a single narrative, the magic realist mode also makes demands on readers to accept that the magical, the fantastic or the supernatural are not so very alien to everyday ‘reality’ after all.

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### 7.14 MAGIC REALISM IN “A REVOLT OF THE GODS”

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As is the case with most magic realist narratives, “A Revolt of the Gods” begins in a rather routine manner, and then takes off into fantasy without warning. The story begins as a realistic first-person narrative with the narrator’s account of his rather humdrum life as a photographer. The scene then shifts to the world outside the studio to the processions carrying the statues of Lord Ganesha for immersion into the sea. Just then, we learn that the statues have come to life. This juncture marks the most intriguing part of the narrative, the part where the realistic mode makes way for the magical. And yet, and this is necessary to note, at all times the extraordinary is narrated as if it were so very ordinary. The reader is naturally taken by surprise at this sudden shift, and it takes a while to come to terms with the unexpected event. But the sudden and momentous transition from the normal to the incredible demands that readers readjust their expectations of the narrative, and reorient their world-view itself. In the third and final section of the story, we learn that the gods vanish just as

suddenly as they had arrived. Once again, readers are left to interpret the events in accordance with their own ideas about matters such as faith, religion and the gods, or even the narrative modes of literature itself.

Let us consider how subversion and transgression could be operating in “A Revolt of the Gods.” For one thing, we find that irony is integrated into a narrative about the divine. In the discussion amongst the residents of the building, we see how rationality is invoked to understand religion and faith, which happen to be fundamentally non-rational constructs. Then again, we see how humans confidently project their own assumptions onto the divine. Mr. Kini is sure that Lord Ganesha got tired of swallowing the sins of the black marketers, smugglers, food adulterators and politicians. He even claims that he had known all along that something like this was going to happen. Akshikar tries to be more realistic, and asks how the guilty will be punished. Professor Matkari takes a moderate stand and dismisses the idea that the gods had come to punish people. Subodh, a physics student, argues that if the gods had wanted to punish anyone, they could have done it without miracles. Each character projects his limited, myopic views onto the divine, which can never be entirely understood by the human mind. As each one tries to rationalise the miraculous, they attribute to themselves the power of knowing the mind of the gods, believing they are omnipotent, gods in their own right. The fact of the matter remains, as the narrator observes, that when faced with divinity in reality, “scarcely anyone possessed the composure to watch this miraculous spectacle.” This lack of “composure” when confronted with the marvellous is what “A Revolt of the Gods” elucidates.

“A Revolt of the Gods” is subversive and transgressive also in the way it draws attention to the incongruity between faith as ritual and faith as a lived experience. No character in the story is transformed by his encounter with the divine, or as a result of having witnessed the miracle. Mr. Kini, for instance, despite his awareness of his wrong-doing, simply goes back to his cursing after the gods disappear. And though the gods reach out to the citizens by giving them a gentle “blow on the head,” it this only makes them all the more wary of encountering them, especially after it turns dark. Soon, the divine is almost forgotten and people gradually “calmed down and went about their business.” Is the author suggesting that the modern world has lost its capacity to react with wonder at the miraculous? Have we become so comfortable with merely venerating statues inside temples and with the mechanical performance of rituals that we remain frozen with a sense of disbelief when the gods actually come alive and take up residence in our midst? Magic Realism compels us to question our knowledge and perspective of the world through a mode of representation that invigorates the common and the everyday. A magic realist narrative fuses the unreal with the real, and expects the reader and the characters in the story to embrace the extraordinary, but in such a way that the magical remains magical, and does not become so ordinary as to be taken for granted. The transgressive nature of the story is also evident in

how the sense of wonder and awe is painfully missing amongst the devotees of Lord Ganesha.

Magic Realist narratives bring into sharp collision the rational and the irrational, and this is perhaps most clearly demonstrated in the discussion between Mr. Kini and the narrator about the sudden proliferation of mice. Mr. Kini confesses that where he thought nothing about trapping and killing mice before, now he is “appalled at the idea that the mice I was going to kill might belong to the gods.” When the narrator tells him he could simply drown them, Mr. Kini is very clear about the distinction between carrying “Lord Ganesha and his mice reverently to the sea for immersion, and quite another to drown mice.” The irony of his own lack of reverence for both Lord Ganesha and his mice is completely lost on him. The line that separates rationality and irrationality blurs considerably when Mr. Kini himself acknowledges that despite his happy life, and despite being raised to be polite and devout he finds that he has developed a habit of cursing his family god. And that he is unable to stop it, no matter what.

In contrast to the other characters in the story, Mr. Kini in particular, the narrator is able to respond appropriately to the spectacular. While the first miracle (the appearance of the gods) had not evoked much of a reaction from him, his response to the second one (the return of the gods) befits the magnitude of the spectacle. This time he watches “spellbound” and his mind, stimulated by the “unearthly sight”, begins brimming with a host of questions seeking to make sense of the scene unfolding before his eyes. But he soon realises the futility of trying to process the event cognitively. A miracle demands a different reaction, and the narrator rises to the challenge: he abandons his questions because he realises how “pointless” they were when compared with the sheer magic of “the sight before me.” It is at this point that the narrator remembers a story he had heard in his childhood about the old, eccentric astrologer who was so convinced the world was about to end that even though no one heeded his warning, he sought refuge on the top of a mountain. The climb, however, proved too much for him, and he was found dead the next morning. It is only now that the narrator realises that “braving the violent winds and the rain, the old man must have died in the conviction that he was indeed witnessing the end of the world.” Nothing more is said about the incident but it makes us wonder. Was the old man a fool for willing to court death for his conviction, or was he a hero for that very reason? Is he to be lauded because he did not care how others reacted to his theory, or is he to be derided for exactly that? Was he victorious because he died with his conviction intact, or defeated because the world did not actually end that day? This little narrative connects with the larger narrative about god and faith, or more specifically, our attitudes and perceptions about them, by illustrating how fiercely our beliefs take hold over us, and we let them make it our destiny.



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## 7.15 CONCLUSION

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Anu Kumar had noted that Sarang's work "was always an experimentation, where he constantly tried to define himself anew, to creating new worlds, blending time and worlds and space." The truth of this is more than evident in "A Revolt of the Gods," a story that defies attempts to 'decode' in one reading. The story also disturbs us because it raises more questions than it answers, and because it expects us to turn the spotlight, as critically as possible, on ourselves and our dearly held convictions.

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## 7.16 QUESTIONS

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1. Explain how Magic Realism operates in "A Revolt of the Gods."
2. Comment on the contrast between the narrator and the other characters in "A Revolt of the Gods."
3. What role does Mr. Kini play in "A Revolt of the Gods"? What does his behaviour illustrate about human nature?
4. Discuss the use of irony in "A Revolt of the Gods."
5. Comment on the narrative structure and the point of view in "A Revolt of the Gods."



## UNIT VIII

# 8

### CRITICAL STUDY OF SHORT STORIES OF GITHA HARAIHARAN'S "THE REMAINS OF THE FEAST" AND SHASHI DESHPANDE'S "THE AWAKENING"

#### Unit Structure :

- 8.0 Objective
- 8.1 Introduction: Githa Hariharan
- 8.2 Plot: "The Remains of the Feast"
- 8.3 Characters
- 8.4 Narrative Technique
- 8.5 The Relationship between Rukmini and Ratna
- 8.6 Themes:
  - 8.6.1 Society and Tradition vs The Individual
  - 8.6.2 Food
- 8.7 Conclusion
- 8.8 Questions
- 8.9 Introduction: Shashi Deshpande
- 8.10 Plot: "The Awakening"
- 8.11 Characters
- 8.12 Narrative Mode
- 8.13 Themes:
  - 8.13.1 Family
  - 8.13.2 Class and Gender
- 8.14 The Title
- 8.15 Conclusion
- 8.16 Questions

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#### 8.0 OBJECTIVE

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The objective of this unit is to enable an understanding of the two stories, "The Remains of the Feast" by Githa Hariharan and "The Awakening" by Shashi Deshpande. The relationship that the protagonists of the stories share with their respective families as well as the structural and literary aspects of the two narratives will be the focus in this unit.

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## 8.1 INTRODUCTION: GITHA HARIHARAN

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Githa Hariharan is an esteemed Indian novelist writing in English. She was born in Coimbatore, and grew up in Mumbai and in Manila. She took to writing after a career in editing, publishing and reviewing. Her touching stories, an effortless blend of ancient forms such as the epic with more postmodern modes such as the use of multiple, intertwined narratives, have made her a name to reckon within Indian Writing in English. Her very first novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* won her the Commonwealth Writer's Prize for Best Fiction in 1993. Her other novels include *The Ghosts of Vasu Master*, *When Dreams Travel*, *In Times of Siege*, *Fugitive Histories* and *I Have Become the Tide*. She also has to her credit a highly appreciated collection of short stories *The Art of Dying*, and a collection of essays *Almost Home: Cities and Other Places*. She has edited a collection of translated short fiction, *A Southern Harvest*, and co-edited *Battling for India: A Citizen's Reader*. Her vast repertoire also includes children's stories such as *Sorry, Best Friend!*, *Nasser, the Ferry Boy*, and *Nasira Begum and the Landlord*. "All my works look at power politics in some way or the other," says the author about her own work, and "The Remains of the Feast," (taken from *In Other Words: new writing by Indian Women*, edited by Urvashi Butalia and Ritu Menon) adequately illustrates the truth of this statement.

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## 8.2 PLOT: "THE REMAINS OF THE FEAST":

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"The Remains of the Feast" is a short story in which Ratna, the narrator, relives memories of her 90 year old great-grandmother Rukmini in the days before and just after her death. As the narrator reminisces those times, we get an insight into the kind of woman her great-grandmother was, the bond they shared, and how she sought to ensure that Rukmini was treated with the reverence and respect she deserved, after her death just as before it.

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## 8.3 CHARACTERS

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"The Remains of the Feast" focuses primarily on the relationship between the narrator and her great-grandmother but draws within the narrative two other characters, namely the narrator's parents, both of whom are described in unflattering ways. Her father, we are told, is "a cadaverous-looking man, prone to nervousness and sweating," a description that does not endear him to the reader in the least. The reference to the jar of antacids on his office- desk underscores his nervous disposition and his inability to handle stress. When the narrator tells us that her father is an employee in the kind of government-owned company that "never fires its employees," she implies that he was perhaps not a very efficient man. Taken together, these demeaning details suggest that Ratna has little affection and respect for her father.

The mother's character is etched in a darker hue, and though she is never criticised directly, the insinuations are difficult to miss. Like her husband, she seems to have resigned herself to doing for Rukmini the bare minimum they need to do to keep her alive. She believes she has done what was realistically possible to do in the circumstances, which is perhaps true. However, her image as a "dutiful daughter-in-law" is punctured by the narrator when she draws attention to how furious and exasperated she actually gets with Rukmini each time she makes another of her innocent but appalling demands. Her outrage at her demand for the red sari reveals how she values convention and propriety above everything, including Rukmini's happiness. In this respect, she is the antithesis of her daughter who believes that the happiness of the individual is more important than social traditions. Ratna's mother's decision to clothe Rukmini in the faded brown sari alienates her from her daughter as also from the reader because in so doing, she becomes a symbol of the society that tries to crush individuals under the weight of tradition and hollow customs.

The one other character who makes a fleeting appearance in the story is the young doctor called in to examine Rukmini. Initially angry at the family for ignoring the lump on her neck, he softens his stand somewhat on hearing her father's feeble attempts at justifying their neglect of Rukmini.

Coming to the two main characters in the story, we have Rukmini portrayed as an unusual 90 year old widow. The sudden change in her behaviour in the days before her death, her demands for taboo food items in particular, can be perceived as child-like and endearing or downright ridiculous and offensive depending on whose perspective we see her through. Rukmini's request, made on her deathbed no less, for the red sari and some more of taboo foods symbolises a final, valiant attempt to assert her right to indulge herself after years of conforming to societal expectations.

Ratna, the young narrator, 20 years old and preparing for a career as a doctor, finds herself constantly intrigued by Rukmini's quirks and her scant regard for social niceties. The narrator's indulgent attitude towards Rukmini is a validation of Rukmini's need to live how she wants, irrespective of how unorthodox her actions might seem to the world. At the end of the story, the narrator's act of putting her red silk sari over Rukmini's body, eating the things Rukmini had wanted to eat, tearing up Rukmini's old saris and replacing them with her shiny new books – each of these define her love for her great-grandmother, and her desire to restore Rukmini's lost dignity.

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## 8.4 NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE

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"The Remains of the Feast" spans a little more than a month. It is primarily a flashback narrative in which the narrator looks back at the

events that transpired, and this remembering and reliving, happens a month after her great-grandmother's death. The narrative unfolds in a chronological sequence as the narrator traces Rukmini's gradual descent into illness after her 90<sup>th</sup> birthday, and her death soon after. The narrative begins in the present with the narrator trying to reconcile herself with the empty room that Rukmini used to occupy, and ends with the narrator replacing Rukmini's dirty old saris with her brand new books after the burial rites have been completed to the satisfaction of her family. The narrative style allows the reader to experience time as it actually unfolded, and thus gives a sense of immediacy to the narration, and a sense of 'presentness' even though much of it relates to the past.

It makes all the difference to the story that it is focalised through the narrator's point of view, a point of view that is deeply empathetic and sensitive to the plight of a 90 year old widow who makes a brave effort to free herself of facile traditions. Where others are easily shocked by Rukmini's behaviour, Ratna admires her spunk and dare. Since the narrator is the only character who loves Rukmini unconditionally, and can see beyond her widowed status, the reader too, learns to admire Rukmini for her refusal to be cowed down by customs and tradition. The narrator's point of view is refreshing in comparison to that of her mother's sour outlook, and her sense of humour adds an additional flavour to the narrative.

In fact, the story develops an interesting texture on account of the mixing of registers – the sombre and the humorous. Even in the midst of recounting moments of sorrow, there is a comic strain that underlies the narration, reflecting the narrator's ability to see the funny side of things at all times. On the one hand, the sense of death and grief pervades the narrative from beginning to end. On the other hand, the ironic tone (bordering on the humorous) that characterises the retelling does not let the narrative become a morbid account of Rukmini's death or the narrator's grief. Rukmini's lack of concern about her disease and impending death in favour of a new found obsession with forbidden foods reminds the reader about how unpredictable people can be, and startles us into recognising that life can be absurdly funny in the most tragic of circumstances. To see it, however, one needs to develop a perspective that can unite the disparate, paradoxical, contradictory, usually incompatible aspects of human existence into one framework. The shifting of registers between the serious and the casual, the melancholic and the comic, between what is supposed to be and what is, is a distinctive characteristic of "The Remains of the Feast", and makes for one of its most appealing features.

Although the spectre of death hangs heavily over "The Remains of the Feast", the control the narrator is able to exert over her emotions while remembering her great-grandmother results in an appreciatively restrained narrative. The emotional texture of the story remains understated in every scene that could easily have become too sentimental, but the narrative still

remains an immensely touching tale, full of deep sorrow and of an even deeper love of a great-granddaughter for her departed great-grandmother. One of the reasons for this is the ironic humour that lends the story a comic touch without demeaning Rukmini and her suffering in any way. For instance, we learn that Rukmini would giggle uncontrollably in the presence of guests, or even “fart exactly like a train whistling its way out of the stations.” As the narrative progresses, her demands for all the kinds of food she had staunchly abstained from all her life makes for much of the humour in the story. Consider, for example, the section that describes Rukmini’s attempt at getting a taste of Coca-Cola, and Ratna’s mother’s reaction to it. Ratna’s reference to her mother as a “dutiful granddaughter-in-law” is especially ironic since the reader senses her barely concealed annoyance in the face of her helplessness to stand up to Rukmini and her bizarre cravings. These scenes acquire a comic tenor not so much because they are funny in themselves, as because they are filtered through Ratna’s point of view who is sympathetic to Rukmini’s shocking requests without actually being shocked by them, quite unlike her mother.

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## **8.5 THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RUKMINI AND RATNA**

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At the outset, the reader is introduced to the narrator’s great-grandmother as “Rukmini, an old Brahmin widow,” with whom she had shared two rooms located in one corner of their ancestral home. The mystery about the relationship between a 90 year old widow and the 20 year old narrator is only revealed in the third paragraph, when the narrator bluntly tells us, “She was Rukmini, my great-grandmother.” The narrator’s impersonal reference to her great-grandmother by her first name might mislead the reader into thinking she barely cares about her, but it soon becomes apparent that nothing could be further from the truth.

One gets a sense right at the beginning that Ratna shares a rather unconventional relationship with her great-grandmother. This should come as no surprise because Rukmini was quite an unconventional woman herself, a fact that Ratna reveals with barely concealed pride. While Rukmini’s complete disregard for social niceties and decorum greatly annoys the narrator’s mother, Ratna herself appears quite intrigued with Rukmini. As a teenager, one can well understand Ratna’s fascination with and tacit approval of Rukmini’s rebellion against authority and convention. However, the bond between the two goes deeper than just a common desire to rebel at a particular stage of one’s life, whether as a 90 year old widow or a 20 year old teenager.

Ratna’s love for Rukmini goes beyond a superficial fascination with her quirks and oddities. The deep emotions Ratna feels for Rukmini are most strongly reflected in the way she seems to have absorbed Rukmini’s being into her own: the smells associated with her great-grandmother have penetrated every pore of the narrator’s being, and are



the vehicle through which she remembers her. In fact, it is the narrator's memory of the smells associated with Rukmini that immortalise her: "The room still smells of her. Not as she did when she was dying, an overripe smell that clung to everything that had touched her, sheets, saris, hands. The room now smells like a pressed, faded rose. A dry elusive smell. Burnt, a candle put out."

Ratna's identification with her great-grandmother is also reflected in the manner in which she had internalised her world-view. Ratna would instinctively know what went on in Rukmini's head without her having to explicitly articulate her thoughts and feelings. Despite the age gap that separated them, the narrator's closeness with her great-grandmother was so intense that it gave her an almost clairvoyant ability to understand Rukmini's state of mind.

Ratna's affection for Rukmini is sharply contrasted with the rather callous her parents display towards Rukmini. Their lack of concern for her health is exposed when the doctor reprimands them for ignoring the "lump in her neck." It must however be noted that Ratna does not exonerate herself entirely, and takes a share of the blame for not giving Rukmini the care she deserved: "When the doctor left, we looked at each other, the three of us, like shifty accomplices."

Ratna does become an accomplice, but in abetting Rukmini's remarkable demands for forbidden foods. Their secret trysts bring them closer together, and Ratna's love for Rukmini is cemented during this period when she eagerly smuggles every single item of food Rukmini begs for. In so doing, Ratna takes on the role of an indulgent mother humouring a stubborn child. As a doctor-to-be and as a grand-daughter, Ratna assumes responsibility for fulfilling Rukmini's every innocent desire before her imminent death.

The desire to honour Rukmini's dying wish shapes the climax of the story. Just before her death, Rukmini made a shocking request to be clothed in a red sari, "A red one with a big wide border of gold," and asked for "peanuts with chilli powder from the corner shop. Onion and green chilli bondas deep-fried in oil." Despite her mother's overt disapproval, Ratna rushed to fetch "the brightest reddest sari I could find; last year's Divali sari, my first silk," and covered Rukmini's naked body with it. In so doing, Ratna refuses to let Rukmini become just another dead body to be disposed of after performing the necessary burial rites. The zest for life and the spirit that Rukmini had displayed in her last days cannot be allowed to die with her. The bright colour of the sari and its rich texture become symbolic of Rukmini's will to have the best that life had to offer even if it was towards the end of her life, and even if it was in defiance of established tradition. Ratna's fulfilment of Rukmini's desire signifies her determination to ensure that Rukmini does not become metaphorical food offered at the altar of custom and tradition. For this reason, even if Rukmini is ultimately clothed in "a pale brown sari", more suited to her

status as a widow, there is a sense of her having triumphed over the hypocrisy of a society that refused to look beyond her widowhood. The death of an old widow like Rukmini was not worthy of grief for most people, except for Ratna, who always saw her as Rukmini, an individual in her own right, instead of as a cranky old widow way past her prime.

Ratna's attempt to connect with her "sweet great grandmother" by continuing to eat the foods Rukmini had developed a love for in her last days testifies to what she had meant to her. Ratna's fierce determination to avenge what she saw as Rukmini's humiliation – her mother's refusal to dress her in the red sari Rukmini had asked for – manifests itself in her self-destructive attempt at making herself sick by deliberately eating things that give her diarrhoea after Rukmini's death. The narrator's barely repressed anger at the manner in which Rukmini, more specifically her body, was treated upon her death reaches a climax in her final act of opening out the windows and cupboards, tearing Rukmini's "dirty grey saris to shreds" and replacing them with her "newly bought glossy jacketed texts." The "dirty grey" colours of Rukmini's saris contrast sharply with the "glossy" books, and signify the narrator's attempt to replace the dullness that had been a part of Rukmini's life as a widow with the brightness of her youth. The simile that compares the shiny new books to "row after row of armed soldiers" standing "straight and solid" in what was once Rukmini's cupboard has a militant tone to it, indicating Ratna's desire to fight for her great-grandmother's dignity even if after her death. Rukmini endures and lives on in her great-granddaughter's act of retributive justice to compensate, in a small but significant way, for the injustice done to her.

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## **8.6 THEMES**

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### **8.6.1 SOCIETY AND TRADITION vs THE INDIVIDUAL**

Underlying the story is the unstated assumption that as individuals, we exist within a social framework with clearly understood social norms that must be respected. Rukmini's sudden rejection of the norms she had rigidly followed all her life, are undoubtedly strange, but what matters is how others react to her behaviour, the narrator's mother, in particular. Rukmini's innocent demands to taste all the foods she had denied herself is considered nothing less than scandalous, but only because it goes against conventional expectations of how Brahmin widows must live. On all three counts – as an old woman, a Brahmin, and as a widow – the norms are clearly understood by all including Rukmini herself. That she deliberately violates those norms (with the support of her great-granddaughter) could symbolise the victory of the individual over meaningless and restrictive customs, rites and rituals.

Since Rukmini is eventually clothed, not in the red sari she had wanted, but in a pale brown sari of Ratna's mother's choice, it might appear that Ratna and Rukmini have been defeated by centuries old traditions imposed on them in the name of respect for one's culture and

heritage. Ratna's mother's reference to Rukmini as a "sick old woman," and her tearing off the red sari from Rukmini's dead body "as if it had been polluted" expose her essentially conformist nature, and the scant regard she had for Rukmini. When Ratna tells us that "They burnt her in a pale brown sari," she draws attention to Rukmini's lack of agency as opposed to the power exerted by society (the unspecified "they") over the lifeless body of an old widow they no longer need to worry about. The placing of the prayer beads around her neck is the final insult since, as the narrator reveals, Rukmini had never been given to chanting prayers as was expected of her. The reader sees, just as the narrator does, the hypocrisy and pretentiousness of a world that seeks to impose their notions of propriety and piety onto a woman who cannot protest because she is dead.

But Rukmini *had* resisted when she could, and the narrator had been her ally in her battle against society. Together, they stood as one against the world, and their little acts of resistance mark their ultimate triumph over those who sought to subjugate them. Rukmini gets her way on account of her great-granddaughter's support, and the narrator herself, has the satisfaction of seeing Rukmini dressed in the red sari she wanted, if only for a while.

#### **8.6.2 FOOD:**

Food is an important trope in "The Remains of the Feast." For one thing, it becomes the vehicle for indulgence for Rukmini as well as the narrator. While Rukmini tries to satisfy before her death every possible craving she had denied herself as a Brahmin widow, Ratna binges on similar foods in an attempt to retain her connection with Rukmini after her death.

However, food acquires another kind of significance in the story. Rukmini indulges herself in unhealthy foods in spite knowing that it would most probably hasten her death, and chooses to throw caution to the winds so that she can experience the joy of tasting everything she had resisted all her life. This indulgence is symbolic of her defiance – it sends a clear message that she will, in her last days, free herself of whatever is expected of her. Eating all the forbidden foods religion and tradition had dictated she should not eat shows her determination to taste at least one kind of forbidden pleasure since her widowhood, to feast, if only in "the twilight of her life."

Food is also what binds Rukmini and the narrator – by making Ratna an accomplice in getting her the snacks she wants, Rukmini cements their relationship for posterity. For Ratna, it becomes a way of showing her loyalty to Rukmini as opposed to her mother, who disapproves of Rukmini's behaviour. It is therefore not surprising that the narrator tries to carry forward her relationship with Rukmini through food by doing exactly what Rukmini did before she died – indulging in unhealthy foods and making herself sick. Since food was the vehicle through which the

narrator could show her affection for Rukmini, it becomes the vehicle for retaining her connection with Rukmini even after death.

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## 8.7 CONCLUSION

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“The Remains of the Feast” is both, a deeply moving tale of a great-granddaughter’s love for great-grandmother, as also a sharp critique of the way society treats people as disposable objects, especially when they refuse to conform to the customs and traditions society imposes on them. Although the story is tragic in one sense, it ultimately celebrates the power of the individual over an entire set of established doctrines that try to ‘feast’ on the old, the weak, and the dead. Rukmini triumphs over everything including death, since she lives on in Ratna’s memories of her. Ratna is able to restore Rukmini’s dignity even if in a very small and private but powerful gesture of tearing her saris and filling her cupboard with books – a symbolic act in which the old is given a new life, and a loved one is immortalised forever.

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## 8.8 QUESTIONS

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1. Describe the nuances of the relationship between Rukmini and Ratna in “The Remains of the Feast.”
2. Comment on Rukmini’s sudden fascination for taboo foods in “The Remains of the Feast.”
3. Discuss the narrative technique and point of view in “The Remains of the Feast.”
4. Comment on the opposition between Ratna and her mother and their respective world views in “The Remains of the Feast.”
5. Show how irony operates in “The Remains of the Feast.”

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## 8.9 INTRODUCTION: SHASHI DESHPANDE

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Shashi Deshpande, daughter of the renowned Kannada dramatist, Shriranga Deshpande, is one of India’s most well-known authors writing in English. Novels such as *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980), *Roots and Shadows* (1983), *The Binding Vine* (1993), *A Matter of Time* (1996), *Small Remedies* (2000), *Ships that Pass* (2012), and *Shadow Play* (2013) have been appreciated by countless readers in India and abroad. Deshpande won the Sahitya Akademi award in 1990 for *That Long Silence*, and the Padmashri in 2009. Despite given to keeping a low profile, she not only criticised the academic council of the Sahitya Akademi for their failure to take a stand against the killing of Professor Kalburgi, himself an Akademi awardee, but also resigned from the membership of the Council in protest.

Shashi Deshpande has published several volumes of short stories, including *The Intrusion and Other Stories* (1993) and *The Stone Women* (2000), a collection of nine short stories based on characters from the

*Mahabharata*. Her children's books include *A Summer Adventure*, *The Hidden Treasure*, *The Only Witness*, and *The Narayanpur Incident*. In 2003, she published *Writing from the Margin and Other Essays* in which she discussed the craft of writing, the divide between English and the regional languages, the global market for Indian writing in English, amongst other issues related to writing and being a woman writer. In "Listen to Me" (2018), her autobiography, she traces her journey as a wife, mother and writer, fiercely attacking the marginalisation of women writers by the literary canon in the West as in India, in the past, as in the present.

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## 8.10 PLOT: "THE AWAKENING"

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"The Awakening" tells the story of 17 year-old Alka, and her struggle to accept life in a chawl. Alka's intense dislike of her family and her extended neighbourhood erupt explosively when she is informed that she must take up a job as a typist to increase the family income. On the verge of passing her SSC examination, her dreams for a better future come to an abrupt halt when she learns that she will not be allowed to pursue her studies. Already suffering in the belief that the pressure to take up the job has "ruined" her life, things take a turn for the worse on her father's sudden death. Firmly convinced that his complacent attitude was responsible for a life of poverty and deprivation, her bitter resentment against him prevents her from shedding a single tear on his death. However, her accidental discovery of a letter written by him offers her a much needed reprieve, and marks her transformation from an unhappy, frustrated teenager to a more sensitive and mature adult.

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## 8.11 CHARACTERS

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The story is set in a chawl and revolves around the protagonist Alka, and her family. Her father, the first member of the family we are introduced to, is focalised through Alka's point of view, and her resentment towards him becomes apparent when she describes him as a man who produced more children than he could provide for. Her siblings are casually and fleetingly described in one sentence: "a daughter to be married, a son stricken by polio, another daughter yet in school." As for her mother, Alka harbours an intense dislike towards her because she favours her son over Alka, and for her insensitivity to Alka's misery. She is neither an ardent supporter of women's education nor independence, and for this, Alka believes she deserves as little respect as her father. Alka's resentment against her family colours her perception of everything they do and say, and the reader is led to believe that they are a lowly, inferior lot. Alka is particularly exasperated with her sister Rekha because she appears content with her lot in life; the prospect of marrying a clerk and becoming a wife and mother just like her own mother, which seems such a terrible fate to Alka, does not bother Rekha half as much. The contrast between the sisters becomes evident in the moment when Rekha

reminds Alka that clerks are also people, and Alka argues that they represent a “type” she detests. In short, every member of the family is cast in a negative light but only because they are filtered through the consciousness of a protagonist who is outraged at having to share her life with people she believes are far too insignificant and trivial to deserve her affection or respect.

As opposed to Alka’s mother and siblings, who are relegated to playing minor roles in the narrative, it is her father who is accorded a significant part in the narrative because as his daughter, Alka’s fate is inextricably linked with his. And his failure to prevent her from becoming a typist, the last thing she wants to be, becomes the focal point of her anger towards him. But even before Alka’s negative views change dramatically at the end of the story, readers can well see that he is not the “unthinking, unfeeling, walking zombie” she thinks he is. When we see him pleading with Alka to understand why she is being forced to take up the typist’s job, and trying to defend her when her mother taunts her, we realise that, in opposition to Alka’s view, he is a mild, patient and sensitive man though helpless and powerless to change things for the better.

Only two outsiders are featured in the story: a young boy who resides in the same chawl, and “the girl at the bus stop.” The two characters, minor but important nevertheless, symbolise the two poles that characterise Alka’s life: while the boy reinforces the harsh reality of Alka’s life in a chawl, the girl at the bus stop, with her hair tied up, with her glasses, and her “crisp, ironed saris” represents the person Alka dreams of becoming, and of the life she would like to be living. One denotes her intolerable existence in the present, the other, her hopes of a glorious life in the future. The boy and the girl at the bus stop embody the two worlds Alka finds herself oscillating between: her actual physical environment, as opposed to the dream-world she carries around in her head.

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## 8.12 NARRATIVE MODE

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The story is narrated in the first-person mode but it also makes substantial use of dialogue. On the one hand, the first-person narration helps the reader develop an intimate understanding of the protagonist. On the other hand, the use of dialogue allows readers to ‘see’ and ‘hear’ the other characters in the story for themselves, leading to a more objective perspective that balances out the subjective responses of the first person narrator. At the end of the story, Alka’s father’s letter is reproduced directly for the reader’s benefit, lending a touch of immediacy since readers feel that we too are reading the letter just as Alka is.

The first-person narrative mode gives the reader an insider’s view into Alka’s thoughts so that we perceive the protagonist’s life from her point of view. It makes for a close identification with and greater



sensitivity towards her perception of her suffering, and we can empathise with this young, frustrated dreamer, determined to make her own destiny but unable to do so only because of financial constraints. All that Alka thinks and feels but cannot or does not want to reveal to the outside world is known to the reader because we are made privy to what she really thinks and feels. Hence, though readers might be critical of her lack of empathy for the members of her family, or her negative perceptions, we cannot help but be sympathetic because we see her life on her terms. But while she considers herself superior to the youngsters in her immediate environment, we also learn that she is battling a negative self-image. Once again, this aspect of Alka's interiority only comes to light because of the first-person narrative mode. The reader's access to the innermost recesses of the narrator's mind also brings to light the other paradoxes that characterise her state of mind – how, for instance, she feels old despite her youth: “I am seventeen and feel a million unfulfilled dreams old.” Or how she is compelled to be a realist and envision her dreams reduced to fragile little bubbles, “like the ones children blow out of soapy water.” Finally, her regret on learning her father's feelings towards her concludes the play is a sensitive and sentimental note.

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## **8.13 THEMES**

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### **8.13.1 FAMILY:**

“The Awakening” operates within the framework of Alka's immediate family at the level of the microcosm while the extended community that lives in the same chawl functions as the macrocosm of her life. The room she lives in opens out into the chawl, and as far as she is concerned, there is little difference, if any, between the two zones. The two levels - the room she lives in and the chawl, her family and the neighbourhood - intersect in Alka's perception of the chawl and its inmates as a larger version of the “zoo” that is her home, implying that they are more like animals than human beings..

The story delves into Alka's anguish at being trapped in the single room she inhabits within the confines of the chawl. While her lack of familial love is made apparent from the very beginning, it becomes most evident in Alka's reaction to her father's death. To her, his death only reinforces her long-standing belief that he was a man who achieved nothing in life or in death, and is therefore, undeserving of her grief. Her stubborn refusal to mourn him can be viewed as a reflection of the emptiness within her, as much as a sign of the kind of apathy and emotional vacuum that a life of poverty and deprivation can cause in a human being. The family that was to have fulfilled her needs, supported her dreams, and soothed her pain, does nothing of the sort, leaving Alka to wallow in self-pity. No wonder she likens her family to animals and their lives to living in a cage, or worse.

But then again, while Alka's relationship with her parents and siblings is clearly troubled, one is not sure how much her overt dislike of

them stems from the kind of individuals they themselves are and how much from her frustration at being compelled to live with them in a chawl. Having to share a room with five other people is one of the things she cannot bear, and it takes a toll on her relationship with her family, sorely testing the limits of her patience with them. The lack of privacy plays a crucial role in the conflict between Alka and her family. For Alka, life in a chawl is nothing short of living in “hell”: “Where you open the door and everyone, anyone can look inside. Where nothing is private, not even your thoughts.” Compelled to live not only in a limited space but to live a limited life as well, it is perhaps not surprising that Alka’s emotions spiral out of control at the least provocation, or that her barely repressed anger is often directed towards the members of her family, her father, in particular.

And yet, not everyone rails against their fate the way Alka does; and despite the lack of privacy, the common toilets and the smells that remind her of a sewer, most people in the chawl seem to have accepted their dismal environment. This is something that Alka herself notes when she observes that the others looked “complacent and satisfied as if life could offer nothing better”. Ironically, their stoic acceptance of their wretched lives only enhances Alka’s disgust and contempt for them. Alka is a dreamer, and quite determined to do whatever it takes to change her destiny.

We learn that Alka’s frustration is magnified by the fact that she had been exposed to a much better life when they had lived with her grandfather in Poona. This dream run ended abruptly when her grandfather died, and the contrast between the life she could have had, did have, and the life she is forced to now live becomes too much to bear. Having had a taste of paradise, how can she resign herself to eternal life in hell? The foretaste of a utopian existence and the crushing realisation that she will never have it, appears to have greatly aggravated her resentment against her parents, her father, in particular. Every unfulfilled dream is projected onto him, and she remains firmly convinced that he was the prime obstacle to her happiness.

The hostile relationship between Alka and the members of her family could be the natural result of her desire for rebellion against authority as a 17 year old teen, but the author seems to suggest that it is just as much a product of a dehumanising existence that stems from a life of poverty. The familial environment becomes ridden with conflicts because the struggle for economic survival leaves little room for the possibility of redemptive love between parents and children, or between brothers and sisters. The narrative leaves us unaware of what goes on in other families in the same chawl, but if we consider Alka’s family as representative, then we could presume that similar clashes and vexations would plague the other families too.

### 8.13.2. Class and Gender:

Alka and her family of six share one room in a chawl, a fact she is painfully aware of at all times. Her suffering, then, appears to be the direct result of her lower class life. Her potential and her dreams must remain unfulfilled only because of financial constraints. Without a university degree, the prospect of acquiring a good job and marrying into a more prosperous family are also next to impossible. Class, then, is the insurmountable barrier that comes between Alka and her dream job, dream marriage, and dream life. Without money to pursue her education, she will languish forever in her bleak and cheerless existence like a rat trapped in a hole, typing for a living. But escape can come in only two ways – marriage or career. But without education, a girl's marriage prospects are severely limited, and marriage into a similar social class will result in her living a similar life. Alka is not wrong in thinking that higher education is her passport to success and happiness, as it is for all those who come from lower socio-economic backgrounds in our country. And it would have been for Alka too, had it not been for the cruel twist of fate in the form of her father's death. When Alka taunts her sister about how she will end up marrying one of the clerks her parents would select for her, and eventually find herself living "in a chawl just like this all your life and have three or four children" little does she realise that like Rekha, she too will never escape the double bind of class and gender.

Alka's double marginalisation – on account of her class and on account of her gender – is evoked in the scene that describes her interaction with a boy from her chawl. The only reason Alka smiles back at him is because "You can't antagonise anyone in a place like this. Specially boys". Alka's is powerless to convey her sense of shame, embarrassment and anger when he leers at her, unabashedly staring at her breasts. She is not able to protest or resist such an overt and openly demeaning objectification of her body because her economic status necessitates her submission. Trapped within the twin elements of gender and class, she must be realistic and resign herself to being treated like a sexual object because "what can you expect when you live in a chawl?" In spite of her idealism, Alka must come to terms with the limitations that gender and class place on her subjectivity.

Alka is troubled by more than just the class factor. As a young girl, she is uncomfortable with her body, and is convinced that she does not fit the traditional stereotype of the beautiful feminine woman in the Indian context, with her "dark complexion", "long nose" and "flat figure." The resulting low self-image creates further anguish because of the contrast with the girl at the bus stop, whom Alka desperately wants to be like, but who represents simultaneously the dream and the eventual failure of that dream.

Alka's situation causes an almost existential angst in her, young as she is. We see her alienated from her family, and incapable of empathy, filled with contempt for her neighbours, and wallowing in her own anger

and misery. Unable to accept her dismal life, Alka tells herself that she has no right to dream, and that she must keep her feet not just on the ground, but “on the cracked cement floor of this dirty chawl. Where I belong.” Trying to come to terms with her troubled economic and gendered status, Alka cannot empathise with her mother after her father’s death: “Even now that stolid, sullen woman would break down into the most shaming, heartbreaking hysteria.” Alka’s reference to her mother as “that woman” instead of “my mother” indicates how distanced she is from her. No one is more aware of how insensitive she is, or has become, than Alka herself: when she comes upon the contents of her father’s briefcase after his death, she cannot help but admit to herself that that “wave of pity” that overcame her was only the “indifferent pity of a stranger for another stranger.”

Alka’s shattered hopes fill her with a sense of meaninglessness, and result in her estrangement from her family, her own self, and even God. She rejects the conventional belief in a “benign, bearded god” who will set things right. Her shattered hopes result in a nihilistic perspective on life: “All nonsense. There’s no God. Only us.” Aware that her life will never be like the “rainbow coloured, ethereally beautiful” bubbles that go up in the air, she must be prepared for what happens bubbles leave behind when they burst— “nothing.” As a resident of a dirty chawl, trapped in a bleak existence, Alka loses faith in herself, in her future, her family, and in the idea of a benevolent god who will make things right. It is in this state of wretched desperation that she comes across her father’s letter, which restores, at least in some measure, Alka’s confidence in all that she had given up on.

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#### **8.14. THE TITLE**

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When Alka is on the cusp of despair, she receives the crushing news of her father’s unexpected death, but it only confirms her belief that he had failed them in life as in death. Alka’s reaction to the shocking news is nothing short of callous and insensitive. As a teenager whose dreams of a better life had been cruelly thwarted by fate, she is unable to rise above her dejection, and see her father for who he really is - a sensitive man and father who knew that he had let her down, and was himself deeply disturbed at his inability to help her fulfill her dreams. This aspect of her father’s personality is poignantly brought home to Alka in the letter she accidentally discovers in his “battered briefcase”. The letter reveals her father’s guilt at having destroyed her hopes for a better life, his great regard for her, and his faith that she would triumph over the obstacles in her life. Never having had an inkling of her father’s respect and love for her, Alka is as astounded as she is ashamed of herself for having him judged him so harshly. The letter effects a catharsis that manifests itself in the tears she finally sheds for her father. Alka’s breaking down symbolises the breaking down of the final barrier, a release from all the anger she had directed at her father. This epiphanic moment effects her transition from an insensitive teenager to a more mature adult since it restores and affirms her faith in a loving father, though it also brings with it a deep sense of

sorrow and regret at the lost opportunity to have had a better relationship with him. The “awakening” happens at several levels – awakening from her immaturity; from her belief that she was misunderstood and underestimated, and from her perception that her life was one of unmitigated suffering and disappointments. The title indicates not just an emotional but also a moral release: her unabashed weeping on reading the contents of the letter signifies a reversal of her former convictions, and also anticipates a sense of hope for the future. She is now both humbled and empowered by the knowledge that she *was* loved, and this knowledge delivers her from her existential angst and despair. However, while Alka’s tears suggest a ray of hope, the words “bitter, salty and painful” remind the reader, as they remind the protagonist herself, that the transition to adulthood is not easy. Painful though it is, Alka is ready to take her place in the world as a responsible adult, and survive on the basis of the comfort she derives from her father’s letter.

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## 8.15 CONCLUSION

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In her interview with Manpreet J. Singh, Deshpande claimed that she prefers to write about individual women who “are not representative of anything, they are their own selves” (160). If we take the author’s word for it, “The Awakening” should be read as a story that highlights the specific sorrows of its female protagonist, not as a story about other young girls like Alka, struggling to cope with life in a chawl, and all that it entails. But then again, Alka and her story can be seen to signify more than just her individual self or life despite the specific nature of her problems and her reactions to them. The author herself put it best when she said that “the ability of a novel to transcend the particular and go to the universal is what makes for a good novel” (160 Singh). And it is what makes for a good short story too.

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## 8.16. QUESTIONS

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1. Explore the significance of the title “The Awakening.”
2. Comment on Alka’s lack of agency in terms of both, class and gender, in “The Awakening.”
3. Discuss Alka’s relationship with the members of her family, her father in particular, in “The Awakening.”
4. Describe how Alka’s life in a chawl affects her perception of her family and the world at large in “The Awakening.”
5. Explain the symbolic significance of the boy from Alka’s chawl and the woman at the bus stop in “The Awakening.”

